

Once Again 221

Chapter 221

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The first thing he saw when he woke up was the tie that he hung up on the clothes hanger. He had hung it up next to his door. This was his girlfriend's first present to him with significant meaning. It was clear that it would bring him luck.

'May today be filled with luck,' he wished to himself.

When he took a shower, he saw his father, who had gone out hiking, at the table. He was reading the newspaper with a very heavy expression. Maru had a peek and saw that it was the cartoon section.

"To think it would end like this..."

He seemed to be an avid reader of that cartoon, as he seemed very disappointed with the ending. While his father went to the bathroom to wash himself, Maru had a simple breakfast.

"Oppa, you going out?"

"Yeah."

"Where are you going?"

"Seoul."

"Seoul?"

Leaving behind his sister, who waved him goodbye with a yawn, he left his house. He was wearing ordinary clothes just as Geunsoo advised him to. A grey t-shirt and a pair of jeans. However, he had prepared a red hat.

- There will be many people attending the audition. The managers can't remember every single one of them. That's why most of them try to remember each individual's traits. 'The guy that wore green', 'the guy wearing a red hat', 'the one with a mantis bite on the nose' - like that. Bring with you something that makes you memorable but not something that makes you stand out. Also, since the audition will take place right after the interview, you should use the same clothes to attend the audition. Only then will the managers remember you.

When he asked back 'what if the managers changed?', he got the reply 'that's just your luck'. It was a reasonable answer, so he accepted it. On his way to the bus stop, he checked on his attire in a mirror. There weren't any flaws.

On his bus trip to Seoul, he blankly stared outside the window. Many things happened during the past year and it was now the new year, but even though the year had just begun, he felt as though there were going to be a lot of things this year. If he managed to pass the interview, he would have to do the audition. If he passed even that, then the filming would begin.

'A film, huh.'

The word felt too distant for him right now. A film was something to be watched, not something he could participate in. Although his appearance would amount to a few seconds at most, just participating in this film would be a huge opportunity for him to study. A hundred words couldn't be compared to real experience. His horizons would be widened if he was able to experience the world of pros.

The bus stopped after moving along the wiggly roads of the city. Maru got off the bus and looked around him. There were huge skyscrapers on each side of the road. He walked down the road and stopped in front of one of the buildings.

There was a revolving central door and automatic doors on the sides. Above it was a relief carving that read 'JA'. Although this was his second visit, he still wasn't used to the pressure the building gave off. There were many people who entered through the revolving door. And the majority of them were young.

Maru walked through the automatic door. On his front was the first floor lobby. On the left side of the huge pillar that seemed to support the entire building was the company entrance guarded by a security guard, while on the right was the coffee shop that took nearly a third of all the space on the first floor. The comfy round sofas in the cafe were occupied by many people. On their necks hung rectangular plastic ID cards.

There was a bank next to the coffee shop, but it was closed since it was a Sunday.

'It feels somewhat affectionate', he thought.

He was somewhat relieved since it reminded him of when he was a salaryman. As this building had an entertainment company inside, he thought that everyone here worked in that industry, but the building actually contained many different companies of many different businesses.

Maru got into the elevator and pressed the button for the seventh floor. His destination today, JA Productions, was on the seventh floor. Just as the door shut half-way, he heard a voice shouting "Wait!" from afar. He saw someone shifting through the crowd towards the elevator. As there was still time, Maru pressed the open button.

"Phew, thank you very much," thanked a boy around his age. He was wearing a blue check-patterned shirt, which suited his distinct facial features.

That boy looked up at the buttons to press the floor he wanted to go to, but did not press anything once he saw that the 7th floor was already lit up. It seemed that he had come for the interview as well. The door slowly closed and the elevator started moving. An awkward silence flowed.

Just then,

"Uhm, you're here for the interview too?"

Maru wondered who the boy was talking, to but realized that he was the only other person here, so he replied.

"Yeah."

Since the boy didn't sound formal, he decided to use informal speech as well.

“Oh really? Nice to meet you, I’m here for the interview as well.”

The boy extended his hand out like it was nothing serious. Maru blankly stared at the hand in front of him. While he was somewhat confused by this gesture, it was hard to ignore him since the boy had a bright smile on his face.

‘Someone that asks for a handshake on the first encounter, huh. Are kids these days all like this? Did I become too conservative?’ He wondered.

“It’s getting a little embarrassing, so can you shake my hand please?”

The boy awkwardly laughed to himself as he raised his hand.

‘Oh?’ Maru didn’t hate his straightforwardness. He shook his hand.

“Let us both pass, yeah? For our dreams and the future.”

“...Work hard.”

This guy was rather strange. Maru thought that he shouldn’t get close to this guy. He had his fair share of eccentric people around him. It was getting to the point he missed people with actual common sense.

“I’m so excited. An interview before the audition. Perhaps this is what it feels like to be a pro?”

Indeed, excitement could be felt from his voice as well. Maru tried his best not to look at the boy. It was obvious that things would get annoying if he met the other guy’s eyes.

Fortunately, the elevator was fast and soon arrived at the 7th floor. As soon as the door opened, Maru left the elevator. He felt a soft sensation from his feet. It came from the carpet on the floor. In front of him was a huge glass window, which allowed him to look inside. Maru walked to the right along the long glass wall. At the end of the corridor was where he turned in his application form.

“I visited this place last time, but man, this place is huge.”

The other guy had already caught up. Even though all they did was have a brief conversation and a handshake, it felt like the two were long time buddies already. It looked like he would put his arms around Maru’s shoulders at any moment.

The scary part was that his sociability didn’t warrant any repulsion. In fact, it was the opposite, Maru felt more sociable towards him. He had no basis to judge this person at all, yet somehow, he thought the boy was a decent person.

Maru stopped walking and let the blue-shirt go ahead of him. The blue-shirt exclaimed while looking at the scenery around him before coming back to him.

“Aren’t you going?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why?”

“It’s not like we’re here together.”

“But we came here together. I got on the elevator thanks to you. Isn’t that what you call fate? Damn, now that’s what I call fate.”

He was even shaking slightly as he said that.

“Sure.”

At that moment, the blue-shirt looked at one corner of the corridor before walking towards the place. Perhaps there was someone he knew?

“You shouldn’t litter.”

The blue-shirt picked up a piece of tissue. He then started walking towards the trash can which was far away. Maru walked to the end of the corridor in the meanwhile. When he turned left at the end of the corridor, he saw many people. They were all sitting in seats lined up in the corridor, and were looking at the door that faced them with heavy expressions.

There were around thirty of them. That was a big number considering that it was still 10 in the morning. As far as Maru knew, the interview would continue until late afternoon. This meant that people would be arriving as time passed. He was surprised to see that so many people remained after the profile review.

“Hey, you went ahead of me.”

The blue-shirt had already caught up and spoke as he put his chin on Maru’s shoulder. It was a really annoying gesture, but it strangely didn’t annoy Maru that much. It perhaps had to do with his blinding smile of his. This guy had a peculiar ability to make those around him feel better.

“Wow, that’s a lot of people. Will I be able to pass?”

Maru looked at the blue-shirt, who clearly seemed capable of having a conversation by himself. Most people would get frustrated and no longer talk to him by this point, but this guy just didn’t seem to care.

“Wow. That girl over there is really pretty. Will I be able to work with her if I pass the audition?” The blue shirt spoke as he looked at every person here.

Maru decided to ignore him since dealing with this guy seemed like a pain. He sat down on an empty seat at the end and waited. The only notification he got was a message that he was going to hold a simple interview. Since the audition would happen later, the interviewers would at most look at his first impressions and voice.

It was just as he was waiting calmly for his turn. He saw a lady with a cart full of cleaning supplies. She seemed to be a janitor here. The lady pushed the cart very carefully so as to not disturb anyone here, but made a grim expression seeing that the corridor was packed with people. The people around seemed to have noticed her presence, but did not take any action at all. Everyone seemed so occupied with themselves that they didn’t have any leisure to care for other people.

Someone stepped in though. It was none other than the blue-shirt.

“Lady, do you need to go to the other side?”

“What? Oh, yes, I do.”

“It’d be nice if you can get there directly, but the people here are waiting for an important moment in their life. What’s the way round?”

“If I want to take another route, I’ll need to take the stairs....”

The business-only elevator seemed to be in maintenance. So it would be really difficult to drag the cart up and down the stairs. The lady’s predicament could be felt.

“I’ll help.”

“W, will you be alright? Aren’t you here for the same reason as them?”

“I can come back right after this anyway.”

The blue-shirt stood in front of the cart with an expression that told the lady not to worry. The lady was still worried that he might screw things up because of her.

“Let’s go.”

The blue-shirt started pushing the cart. Maru watched as the two walked away. He thought that while he was a good guy, his good nature might make others take advantage of him one day.

“Mr. Yoo Jiseok?” Someone came out from the interview room and called a name out. However, no one amongst the interviewees made a move.

“Mr. Yoo Jiseok from Film, are you not here?”

Maru had a look at the corridor. The two had disappeared. He felt a bad premonition. He scratched his eyebrows.

‘Now then, what do I do,’ he wondered.

“Excuse me, can I have a look at his photo? There’s someone that urgently went to the bathroom just now.”

“Oh, okay.”

The application form that the lady showed him indeed had his face on it.

“He’ll be back soon, so why don’t you continue with someone else?”

“But his number...”

“He was here just before, and he left just now. If you had told him beforehand, he wouldn’t have left.”

Hearing that, the lady looked inside the interview room. The people inside looked at her and asked what happened.

“The next interviewee went to the bathroom.”

“The bathroom?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. It’s not like we told him his order. Put him at the end and call the next one.”

“Yes.”

The lady put his application form at the bottom. Maru had a look at the corridor in the meanwhile, but there were no signs of him.

“How long does it take to take those stairs over there to go to the other side?”

“The stairs? Since today’s a Sunday, no one’s allowed into the office on the eighth floor, so you’d have to go to the 9th floor, so it would take some time.”

“...And please excuse me, when is my turn? My name is Han Maru.”

The lady spoke after flipping over the application forms.

“You’re last.”

“Then everyone here should be before me, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, thank you,” as soon as he heard the answer, Maru started walking down the corridor.

‘Consider yourself lucky.’

Maru wouldn’t have moved if his profile wasn’t at the bottom. However, now that he knew that he had some time, he didn’t want to just ignore it. He didn’t hate the blue-shirt’s straightforward kindness that much. Although the world was one where kind people were taken advantage of, only when there were such people in the world was the world not so frustrating. He thought that he should help out when he could.

“Where are the stairs?” Maru asked people for directions before hurrying.

Chapter 222

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Walking up the stairs to the 8th floor, Maru was able to catch up with the blue-shirt, Yoo Jiseok, who was struggling to pull the cart up the stairs.

“Why are you so late?” He asked with a flushed expression.

“Jeez, you’re a strange guy.”

“Speak later and help me pull this up the stairs. I somehow managed to pull it up here from the 7th floor, but I reached my limit.”

It seemed that the loaded cart was rather heavy for Jiseok, who was 170cm tall and quite skinny. He probably only got here with the help of the lady who carried the contents of the cart up the stairs by hand.

“Careful. You’ll get hurt.”

The lady came down and spoke, her expression full of worry.”

“It’s fine. We can pull this up the stairs in one go if we felt like it. Right?”

He didn’t sound that convincing since he was panting heavily. Not only that, since when were they on such close terms? Maru clicked his tongue and stood next to Jiseok.

“I’ll pull from the front. You push from the b...”

“Nah, get out of the way. It’ll be dangerous for a rookie to be at the front.”

“This thing is heavy, though.”

“That’s because you aren’t using your strength the correct way.”

Pushing Jiseok aside, Maru grabbed the bottom of the cart and put the weight against his waist and thighs.

‘It’s within my limits.’

In his new life, his physical body was more developed than his previous one. Exerting strength into his lower stomach, he started pulling the cart. The wheels rattled against the stairs, slowly climbing.

“Whoa, you’re strong!”

“Don’t just cheer for me, push a little from the back.”

“Got it.”

With someone to push from the back, it was much easier to pull for Maru. Maru pulled the cart all the way onto the corridor of the 9th floor in one breath.

“My, my. Thanks for all your help. There’s a supply room on this floor so I’ll be fine by myself.”

The lady bought the two of them some canned coffee from the vending machine. As this matter ended much earlier than Maru expected it to, the two had enough time to drink.

“They shouldn’t have called my name yet, right?”

“Probably.”

It would be a pain to explain, so Maru decided to pretend not to know. The interview continued and it soon became Jiseok’s turn.

“I’m going off first, then.”

As soon as Jiseok went in, people flooded out from where the elevator was. It was over 11 o’clock right now. They seemed to be the next set of interviewees. As Maru had expected, they were all very young. The interview was only 2 to 3 minutes long. Some even came out as soon as they entered. Jiseok also left the interview room after around 5 minutes.

“Wow, you were waiting for me?”

Ignoring Jiseok who came towards him with a big grin, Maru walked into the interview room.

“Han Maru.”

“Oh, yes. Please go in.”

The lady made way for him. Maru went into the interview room, quietly closed the door and stood next to the chair. In front of him were 3 people, of whom, 1 he knew.

The person in the middle was a very large middle-aged man. He asked after looking at Maru’s application.

“Han Maru?”

“Yes.”

“Sit down.”

He sat down on the metal chair and sat upright. He pulled his chin inward and gazed at the middle-aged man who seemed to be asking the questions. The middle-aged man glanced at Maru over his glasses.

“Are you in high school?”

“Yes.”

“And you read the original work?”

“Yes, I have.”

“What role do you want to be?”

“The delinquent.”

“Every. Single. One of you wants that role.”

The middle-aged man tapped on the chair with the pen in his hand. He looked towards his left as though he had no more questions to ask. The man he looked at was likewise middle-aged, but unlike the middle man, he was well-built.

“You might not be able to go to school once we start filming. Is that fine with you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Depending on the location, we might go somewhere far, and in those cases, we might take some time. It might not end in just one or two days, and you might be stuck in the location for a long time without a good reason if we decide to reshoot scenes. If something happens during the shoot, the filming might get delayed and you might stay there without shooting for the entire day. That might have an impact on your studies. Is that fine with you?”

“Yes. It’s not like I study well enough that missing a few days will impact my grades much.”

“Damn kid. You speak well.”

The man in the middle spoke.

“Please, mind your etiquette.”

“Well, he’s younger than me.”

“Obviously. But being older isn’t something to boast about.”

“Oh fine, I get it. I’ll stay quiet, so you do whatever you want. You might as well be the director. Why don’t you write the script, do the filming and do the editing all by yourself?”

The man in the middle became quiet, but he was clearly pouting. The one on the left shook his head and told Maru not to mind him.

“Is it possible for you to do a role other than the delinquent?”

“I’ll try the audition and accept whatever outcome you give me.”

“Haha, that’s asking us to let you pass the interview.”

The man on the left nodded his head and stayed quiet. Maru then looked at the man on the right. Was he supposed to act like he knew the guy or what?

Just as he was contemplating, the man spoke.

“You have quite a peculiar name. Han Maru. What does it mean? Your name Maru shouldn’t be the maru meaning floor, right?”

“It means the sky.”

Hearing that, the man in the middle clicked his fingers and spoke.

“That’s a good name. The sky, huh? Man proposes, heaven disposes! Looks like having him on board will greatly increase our luck. Hey you, come to the audition. That’s it! We’re finished. Let’s eat. I’m dying from hunger.”

“There’s still around 150 people left.”

“What? 150 people? Are you kidding? What about food?”

“Make do with some bread. We don’t have any time.”

“This is why I wanted to do this interview in groups. Jeez, this guy just doesn’t have any leeway.”

“Can I tell that to the producer?”

“...Do you want to never see me again?”

The man in the middle was rather grumbly, while the man on the left was very strict. Maru looked at the two of them before greeting the man on the right with his eyes. The greeted man, Gwak Joon, faintly smiled.

“Thanks for coming. You may leave.”

“Yes.”

Maru stood up and left the interview room. It seemed that this interview wasn’t intended to filter out people with bad personalities. This meant that the interview was intended to see if the candidates

matched the character in the story in regards to body shape, expression, and voice and other external factors.

“Fuu.”

Despite that, Maru seemed to have been a little nervous as he sighed in relief after leaving the room. He walked along the long corridor before carrying himself onto the elevator. He pressed the first floor before closing his eyes.

‘Since I’m in Seoul, should I look around a little before I go back?’

Thinking that, he stepped out of the elevator.

“You’re done?”

Someone ran towards him while waving his hand. It was Jiseok. Behind Jiseok were five others around the same age. All of them were looking his way. Perhaps they were Jiseok’s friends who came to cheer him on.

‘Wait, friends?’

Maru squinted and had a closer look at those people. Although they were all sitting on the same sofa, they clearly looked very awkward. Maru walked up towards them and asked.

“Who here knows each other?”

All five of them shook their heads at the same time.

“We can get to know each other from now. We are one, we are friends. Where else would you find people like this? Right? We’re at the same age, and we’re here for the same audition. Now that’s a drama in itself.”

Jiseok was practically blessing this meeting. Maru left him to speak and asked the five other people.

“Who here feels awkward?”

When he asked that, all five of them raised their hands. There was no way that Jiseok’s personality was something that they could get along with easily.

“You can go then. Our ancestors were never wrong when they said not to hang out with crazy people.”

Leaving behind Jiseok, who was clearly very excited and was making exaggerated motions like punching the air, they left the building. The five others followed Maru out and separated after wishing each other luck. Maru was also about to leave before the annoying guy followed him, but that guy wasn’t ordinary.

“What, you’re leaving already?”

He was going down the stairs to get the bus, when the excited voice called out to him from behind. Maru kept walking while making a ‘I don’t know this crazy guy’ face, but Jiseok got close without minding that at all.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Aren’t you going home?”

“We just met, so it would be a pity if we separated, right? We’re all colleagues around here so we should get together and do something big, yeah?”

“What colleagues. If you have so much energy, then why don’t you go run a lap around the park and go home and sleep?”

“You’re so cruel. But, that cruelty makes you charming. You’re the type that’s popular with the ladies.”

“Oh, and you can see that?”

“A little?”

This guy never ran out of things to talk about. Maru knew that this guy didn’t have any malicious intentions. He was a cheerful guy. It was just that his wave of cheerfulness assaulted others around him. As someone relaxing on a lone boat amidst calm waters, this guy was a catastrophe.

“I’ll give you an irresistible offer!”

Saying that he pulled out two tickets. They were rather familiar.

“This is all the rage these days.”

The tickets he pulled out were for ‘The Lottery Dream’.

“As an actor, you can’t miss out an opportunity to watch a field manual play like this, no?”

“Do you even know what a field manual is?”

“I do. My brother is in the military.”

He grinned as he said that. It was the same ticket as the one Miso gave him to watch with the rest of the club. He already made an appointment to watch it next weekend. Although it was worth watching the play twice, Maru wondered if it was really worth watching the play once again with a guy like this.

“You can go watch it by yourself.”

“Why!”

Jiseok blocked Maru’s way with puppy eyes. This guy... he was a strong enemy. Even Maru, who was adept at resolving human relationships, couldn’t easily get this guy off him.

“You don’t have any friends?”

“I don’t.”

“.....”

“I moved around a lot. I was in Busan just a while ago. I do have friends, but there’s no one I can meet right now.”

“You’re making me feel sorry.”

“You feel sorry? Then let’s watch it together. Today’s the last day. It’ll be a waste to not use it.”

“Haah.”

Maru took out his phone. It was 12:11. Since the play started at 3, there would be plenty of time even if he ate lunch and went to Hyehwa station afterwards.

“Did you have lunch yet?”

“No.”

“Then let’s go get something to eat first.”

“...I don’t have any money though.”

“Then I’ll treat you so shut up for the next three hours. Not a bad deal, right?”

“Then I’ll skip.”

Maru felt a headache. When he walked while pressing on his head, Jiseok followed suit. In his mind, he was thinking, ‘They wouldn’t do the audition together right? They wouldn’t both be picked for the role, right? It would be a real pain if that happened.’

“Oh yeah,”

Maru glared at Jiseok, who poked at his side.

“What was your name again?”

‘So he’s asking that now?’ Maru shook his head and walked forward.

“Hey! I’m asking what your name is!”

Jiseok’s voice reverberated in his ears.

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“To think that you’d show up for picking a minor role, the apocalypse must be approaching.”

Choi Joonggeun spoke as he glanced at the director, Park Hoyoung.

“That’s how serious I am about this. Joon, you should receive a glass from me.”

Hoyoung poured a glass for Gwak Joon.

“Thanks everyone for today. It’s over now. The manhunt is going well, and the team is awesome. Now, all that’s left is to get a good picture.”

“We didn’t hold the audition yet though.”

“I don’t want to put that on my mind. The pros will do something about it. How about you, Joon? Did you see anyone you like?”

“I found a few.”

“There you go. Let’s reflect on the original author’s opinions as much as possible.”

Clang! They toasted with the soju glasses.

“Let’s do this. I should leave behind something big during my megaphone life.”

“7 million is not enough for you?”

“It’s definitely not enough. 10 million. That’s my target.”

“Silmi-do already hit that though.”

“Then 20 million!”

“That’s a big dream.”

“I can do it, I know I can!”

Hoyoung put down his soju glass and started drinking from the bottle.

“Stop! I’m not dealing with you drunk again.”

Joonggeun restrained him. Meanwhile, Gwak Joon just flipped over the grilling meat after giving a glance at the two.

In Korea, 'field manual(FM)' is similar to being 'classic', 'textbook'. I was going to use the word textbook, but the lines after it gave me no choice

Chapter 223

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“Thanks for the food!” Said Jiseok as he left the restaurant.

“This is the first time I tried Seonji Gukbap (Blood pudding soup & rice), but it was unexpectedly good. It has a unique charm to it that’s different from Seolleongtang (Ox bone soup).”

Although Jiseok didn’t look like it with his skinny body, he actually ate quite a lot. He quickly finished his own bowl of Seolleongtang that he ordered and eyed the Seonji Gukbap that Maru ordered. As he was practically drooling, Maru had no choice but to order another bowl of Seonji Gukbap, and Jiseok started gobbling away as soon as it arrived. Seeing him eat reminded Maru of a farmer hurriedly doing away with his meal to work. If he was given some makgeoli (rice wine) to drink, he might have exclaimed out loud after finishing it in one gulp. Even after finishing his second meal, Jiseok stared at the menu. He was always hungry for more in life, quite literally.

“Let’s be friends from now on. Someone that treats me to a meal will never be a bad person.”

“Who told you that?”

“My dad.”

“Now that’s a very dangerous perspective of life he has there. Remember that the one that treats you food is the most dangerous person.”

They walked towards the subway station while chewing on the mint candy that the store had as dessert. Their destination was Hye-hwa station. Since it came to this, he decided that he wanted to just enjoy the play. As soon as the two got on the train, Maru walked away from Jiseok. He didn't want to pretend like he knew this childish guy who took both of his hands off the handle and acted cool as though he wasn't affected by the movement of the train.

"Perhaps this is what it feels like to skateboard."

"Yeah right."

"No, I'm sure it would feel like this."

Maru thought that this guy would probably do well even on an uninhabited island. Perhaps he might name a volleyball "Wilson" and play with it joyfully until his death. This guy was definitely more than capable of doing that. After watching him for a while, they soon arrived at Hye-hwa station. As today was Sunday, there were a lot of people. There were students who came to watch plays, as well as couples of various age groups that came on dates. The weather today was perfect for a picnic. Though, Maru felt rather depressed since it wasn't her that was by his side today.

"We have time to look around."

The time was 2:27. Since the play started at 3, they still had some time left. Since it was Sunday, there were a lot of street performers as well. Many of them were skilled and it was a pity that they were performing for free. When Maru took the chatty Jiseok for a stroll around the Marronnier Park, around 20 minutes had passed. It was about time. The two went towards the theater. There was a long queue outside and they were all people waiting to enter the theater that Ganghwan and Miso were actors at.

"I knew this was a popular play," said Jiseok excitedly as he made a victory pose. After that, he tip-toed to peek inside the entrance. This guy liked plays too much.

"Do you like plays that much?"

"Rather than the plays, I like the people, I mean, the actors that bring out their all on the stage."

Maru nodded his head since the reply was unexpectedly normal. The queue soon started moving forward until they reached the person that checked the tickets.

"Oh!"

Someone unexpected was checking the tickets.

"It's been a long time, noona," greeted Maru.

"Han Maru, it's been a while."

She was the actress Hanna that he met while commuting to the practice room in Suwon. The person that acted as a bridge between Maru and her.

"I heard a rumor that things went well between the two of you after that."

"Thanks to you, noona, we're going out."

“Wow, you didn’t miss the opportunity, huh. Now that’s what I call a man,” She sounded as cheerful as she always did.

“So, what stage have you gone to? The one after the kiss? Tell me, tell me,” and she still liked to make sexual jokes.

“We’re taking it slow.”

“You sly wolf.”

“Rather than that, how is it between you and Suchan-hyung?”

“What can there be between me and that romanticist? Last winter, we went to Jeongdongjin together and even booked a room, but he never touched me. I told him not to cross the line I drew, and he really never did. He’s worse than a beast. I might as well assault him after drinking three bottles of Soju.”

“...Please don’t harass him sexually. He’s too pitiful.”

“Heheh, don’t worry about that. He won’t feel any pain,” said Hanna with a devious smile. As she did, she showed Maru the ring on her ring finger.

“At least he proposed to me.”

“He proposed? Are you two getting married?”

“Not yet. We don’t even have a house yet. It’s more of a proof that we’re each other’s. I was so frustrated so I threatened him to propose to me. I got this a while after that,” said Hanna as she proudly showed off her left hand. She looked very happy.

After she checked the tickets for the two, she returned them after slightly ripping the ends of them.

“Are you in the play as well?”

“I’m in as a double cast. Only, I’m a little sad because Miso-unni’s popularity is so high,” said Hanna as she pretended to sob.

“Anyway, have a good time. And you too, the one next to Maru.”

“Yes!” Replied Jiseok as he took a step forward.

“Uhm, if it’s not too rude of me, can I give you a hug? I really enjoyed ‘Your Story’ from back then.”

“Huh? That’s R-19 though, so you shouldn’t be able to watch it.”

“I passed because my face looks a little old.”

“You... you just caught my fancy.”

Hanna lightly hugged Jiseok. This was just a scene where a strange woman recognized a strange guy. Maru quickly entered the theater in fear that he might be affected by the weird energy that these two gave off.

“Don’t keep going ahead. You’re making me feel bad.”

Jiseok soon caught up and sat down next to Maru. He hadn't visited small theaters for quite a while. The facilities here were quite nice and he was able to stretch his legs. Some old small theaters were cramped to the point that his shoulder would be touching the person next to him.

"Are you acquainted with that noona?"

"We practiced together for a while. I was the actor, and she would give me tips from time to time."

"Wow, you must be quite capable!" Jiseok's chatter continued until the audience lights dimmed. Only signs that hinted the existence of stairs were still lit, and the theater darkened. Some of the people in the audience that were chatting also quietened down. Although there were more than a hundred people in this small space, not a breath could be heard. Maru liked the silence that he could feel just before a play. He was able to feel the silence even when he was behind the stage, and that silence stimulated the tension around his body. It was the coziness that told him that the play was about to start.

"Phew."

He heard a short breath next to him. When he looked around to see Jiseok's expression, Maru groaned slightly. Jiseok's eyes had changed completely. His usual easygoing smile had turned into something completely foreign. There are times when extreme focus induces fear into the ones observing, and the air around Jiseok was exactly like that right now. With his chin resting on his hands, he was staring at the stage. It was as though he was saying that he would not miss a single thing that was about to occur.

Maru didn't feel that Jiseok would reply even if he tried to talk to him. Not that he had any intention to. In any case, he thought that he would have some peace when he appreciated this play. Soon, the play began, starting with the narration.

- Next up, the first prize for the lottery has broken its previous record. The first place prize is 8 billion won. And there is only one winner.

After the news commentary, a person hurriedly entered the stage from the wall on the left of the stage. A man wearing baggy clothes. He was none other than Ganghwan. He looked restless as he looked around him as though he had stolen something. Not long later, he took out a piece of paper from his chest pocket.

"I, I won! I actually won!"

He shivered in glee, but soon, he regained his calm expression and continued to look around him. At that moment, another actor rushed out from the other side of the stage, panting. The light shining on Ganghwan dimmed a little before it brightened on the other person. It was Miso, with ruffled hair and wearing training clothes. As this was the first time Maru saw Miso acting on stage, Maru felt rather unfamiliar and weird.

"This isn't a dream right? I actually won right? The heavens have finally given me an opportunity, right?"

Miso too took out a piece of paper and shone it against the sunlight. She kowtowed towards the piece of paper as though she was some priest giving prayer. Soon, she too became wary of her surroundings.

The lights then focused on both of them before some others started walking past them. Ganghwan and Miso acted as the 'completely suspicious person' with all of their bodies. Soon, the two of them bumped into each other in the middle of the stage. Both of them dropped the paper in their hands on the floor, and both of them screamed at the same time.

"NO!"

"MY MONEY!"

The lights faded out. The stage changed in the darkness. When the lights turned on again, there was a pojang macha (street stall-like restaurant). Ganghwan and Miso were inside, sitting around a table. On the table were numerous empty bottles of soju.

"How are you going to compensate for this? Mine was a 1st place prize!"

Ganghwan acted like a drunkard. His slurred speech was so natural that he really sounded drunk.

"That's what I want to say. How are you going to compensate for my 1st place lottery ticket?"

"Hey, woman. That's a bold lie you have there."

"You and your bullshit!"

Both of them glared at each other. However, they didn't seem to have any energy to fight and just sat back down and started drinking again.

"If I had that money then I'd..." Ganghwan abruptly stood mid way. The lights changed and his soliloquy began.

"First, I would be able to buy a house. An extremely large one at that. Also, the sofa must be big. Big enough for me to lie down on it and still have some room left over!"

After that, the actors walking around at the back of the stage quickly came out and cleared out the stage before setting it up with a sofa. Looking at that, Maru realized how this play was unfolding. Ganghwan lay down on the sofa and picked up the remote control for the TV. Then, he continued the play, his drunkenness gone.

* * * *

Along with a round of applause, the curtain call began. The play was a romantic comedy with a story of two people, who discussed their dreams after losing the lottery tickets, eventually becoming lovers. The imaginations of the two people in the pojang macha was recreated on stage, and as the story progressed, their imaginations changed from completely unrealistic to somewhat realistic. The ending was a rather stereotypical one where neither of them had actually won the lottery, but the play was so interesting that the ending didn't matter at all. The nonchalant acting of the two people on stage as well as the side characters restlessly changing the props on the stage induced everyone to laugh.

This was a very enjoyable play, and it was also one that was easy for people that found plays difficult to enjoy regardless. It was worth it for Miso to hand out the tickets herself. There should be no better play to watch for the first years than this. It was both interesting, and the acting of the actors were good. It

had no profound depth to it, but it had the magic of making the audience forget the flow of time, so it was overall very splendid.

The actors came to the stage and took a bow together. What came next was something exclusive to small theaters like this - a time where the audience got to interact with the actors. Ganghwan and Miso sat down on a chair and wiped off their sweat. They answered the questions that some members of the audience asked, and took photos with people that told them that they were fans.

“Miso-noon! I’m a fan of yours!”

Jiseok, who was also seriously watching the play went to the stage and stood next to Miso. Maru felt good to watch him be so happy. After returning to the seat, Jiseok boasted to him that he took a photo with her.

“You should take a photo with her too. This is a great opportunity.”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Why!”

“I’m good.”

“No. I can not allow you to miss this opportunity as your friend.”

After photo time, the audience left the theater one by one and by that time, Jiseok grabbed Maru’s arm and took him to the stage. The staff of the theater respectfully told them that it was time to leave. As Maru didn’t want to disturb people, he was going to abide when a voice from the stage stopped him in his steps.

“Hey! You should at least say hi if you’re here!”

Miso was waving her hand at him with glee. Maru saw that Jiseok was staring at him, his jaws agape. Maru hated those eyes. Those eyes were asking him to explain what this was about. Maru smiled bitterly and went to the stage.

Chapter 224

* * * *

“I very much enjoyed your performance.”

“Too late for that now. You should at least say that before I called out to you. Why did you try to leave without saying anything? Do we amount to just that?”

Maru replied to that while evading the jab that Miso threw at his chest.

“There’s a saying that people will get bored of one another if they see each other too much. I think there is a need for us to distance ourselves a little.”

“Ugh, you and your retorts again. It would be good if you showed your obedient side a little more.”

“I’ll consider it if you become quiet, Miso-seonbae.”

"I should just..." as Miso approached Maru with a death glare, Ganghwan also waved at the audience one final time before walking over.

"I thought you'd be visiting with your friends at the club, but surprisingly, you're here with someone else."

Hearing that, Maru corrected him immediately.

"He's no friend. He's more of a foodie. I saw him for the first time today."

"Yeah?" Saying that, Ganghwan had a look at Jiseok. Even though he was supposed to feel ashamed, Jiseok asked Ganghwan for a handshake with a bright smile.

"I decided to become friends with Maru starting today. Friends aren't friends for a reason, right? Maru is avoiding me because he feels embarrassed, but I don't mind at all. And also, if it's not too much to ask, can I ask for your autograph right here?" Asked Jiseok as he took off his blue shirt and showed Ganghwan the back of it. Ganghwan seemed a little taken aback. Maru shook his head when Ganghwan gave him a glance.

'That thing is a rare species. Do as you see fit.'

"An autograph is nothing special. But this is a permanent marker. Is that alright with you?"

"Actually, I'm glad that it is. It wouldn't get erased from washing the clothes. Also, I want your autograph too, noona. Is that alright with you?"

"Sure."

Receiving the autographs of the two people, Jiseok put on the shirt with an expression of complete satisfaction.

"That's one energetic friend you have there."

"He's too energetic for his own good. And I'll say this again, I'm not friends with him," after saying that, Maru gave a glance to the people moving busily behind Miso, who had a smile on her face. They were the ones who changed the stage layout during the play.

"Are all of them actors?"

"Them? Yeah they are. They're idiots who keep doing this job even though they know that this industry has zero stability."

Although her words were harsh, her gaze as she watched them was warmer than ever.

"I'll help out as well!"

Jiseok spoke as he walked towards the stage. This guy must think that staying still is a sin. Although the others found him awkward at first, they soon started giving him tasks to do. Really, his sociability was top notch.

"But really, who is that guy?"

"I met him at the interview. He's a little... I mean, very strange."

“Why is your evaluation of him so low? I think he’s alright from what I saw so far,” Ganghwan spoke. It seemed that he took a liking to Jiseok. Ganghwan was no less peculiar than Jiseok, so those two would probably get along well. No, actually, it was obvious that putting those two together would be the cause of something huge, so they had to be separated no matter what.

“What about the interview?”

“I did well.”

“Well, from your confidence, I guess you really did do well.”

“Actually, all that happened was a simple round of greetings and a few lines of conversation, so I couldn’t have done bad.”

“There are plenty of people who can’t do those ‘few lines of conversation’. In that regard, your nonchalance is a gift from heaven.”

“I guess you’re right in some sense.”

Maru smiled hearing those words. ‘Gift from heaven’ wasn’t entirely wrong. The fact that he was able to restart with his experiences intact was thanks to god’s interference.

‘No, to be exact, I guess it’s thanks to her?’

The grandma that gave her opportunity at reincarnation up to him. Now, he wasn’t able to remember what she was like since all of his memories after his death were blurry, but he could still make out the figure who was smiling warmly towards him. The experiences he had were his, but the fact that he could start over was thanks to her.

“Since you’re confident about the interview, I guess you should prepare for the audition now.”

“Even though I’m trying to, I don’t really get what I should prepare. Free acting and script acting. That’s all the information I have about it.”

“They want to know how you would act in that situation. Also, they get to see the range of your acting. Don’t get nervous just because it’s the audition. There’s nothing more ugly than an actor getting nervous in front of the audience,” Ganghwan patted Maru’s shoulders as he said that.

“Well, you’d probably do fine on your own.”

“You don’t have any tips for me?”

“To tell you something, my picky disciple, don’t standardize the character you’re acting and try to force yourself into being that character. A film director will have an image of what the character should be like in their heads, but more often than not, that image would change during the audition. A friend of mine who auditioned for a murderer role wore a suit to the audition and spoke his lines like a british gentleman. He got that role in the end. ‘isn’t there anything more boring than a psychopathic murderer that screams like mad?’ - that’s what he told me after that interview.”

“He shouldn’t have been picked if acting like a gentleman was all he did, right?”

“Of course. When he took the audition, there were four judges, and he only gave a glance to one of the four. Everyone said that he was no good, but that one person said that he was the one. This is actually quite a famous story in this field. In the end he was picked for the reason that ‘that dude might actually stalk someone in the middle of the night and stab someone’.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or an insult.”

“It means that he was that good at acting.”

“Did he become famous?”

“Unfortunately, the film was cancelled and he quit being an actor. He’s running a cafe in Hongdae (Hongik university region) now.”

“Why is the ending to such a good story so depressing?”

“If it had a sweet ending, it would be a drama. It’s bitter because it’s life.”

“It’s a little too bitter.”

“Should I sprinkle some sugar?” Just as they were conversing, Jiseok came back, sweating profusely. This guy really had poor stamina. One of the actors that moved around the stage props brought him a cup of water with a pitying expression.

“Th, thank you.”

Jiseok drank the water while panting.

“Are you aiming to become an actor as well?” Miso asked Jiseok.

“Yes. My dream is to become an actor.”

“It’s tough, you know? It’s better to give up right now.”

“If it was something easy, I wouldn’t have tried. It’s because it’s hard that it’s worth challenging. Now that I heard something like that from someone who’s actually working in the industry, I want to do it even more. Haha!”

Miso seemed to like that answer. Maru looked away when Miso looked towards him with the ‘this guy is pretty decent’ gaze.

“Why are you trying to become an actor? There should be some trigger that made you think that way, right?” Miso asked once more.

“I can make my name known to other people. I can be remembered. I was envious of that. When I thought about how many people would remember me, I felt really excited. That’s when I decided. ‘Oh! I will become an actor’.”

“So the conclusion is that you want to become famous?”

“Hm... it’s a little different than that, but it is true that I do want to make my name known, so it shouldn’t matter.”

That was rather unexpected. Jiseok's smile wasn't the clueless smile that he showed since morning. There was a thick hint of sorrow in his smile right now. It disappeared immediately, but it left a deep impression inside Maru.

"Uhm, can I ask you to shine the stage lights on me?" He asked Ganghwan after returning to his usual easygoing attitude.

"We still have some time until the next performance, so there's no reason that we can't."

Ganghwan signalled towards a small window on the opposite side of the stage. A silhouette showed up behind the window of the control booth and the audience lights soon turned off.

"Wow. It sure is different. Even the air is different."

Ganghwan and Miso went to the audience seats. They sat in the front row and watched Jiseok. They seemed to have taken a liking to this rather bold junior.

"Why don't you do something? This isn't an opportunity that comes every day, you know?"

Hearing Miso say that, Jiseok walked towards the center of the stage, where the spotlight was. Maru made room for him and watched him from the side. Amidst the spotlight, Jiseok waited for a moment, before sitting down on the ground. No, he even lied down slightly. Then, he started saying his lines while pretending to hold something in his hands.

"Man, the sea looks good. Seas are the best when it comes to summer."

He stood up abruptly, and continued his act by pretending to pick up the phone. Maru exclaimed out loud after seeing that scene. The scene Jiseok was acting out right now was from the play they just watched. His lines were very fluent as though he had memorized most of the lines already. Of course, his act wasn't exactly the same as the one in the play. There were clear differences, but it strangely looked similar to how Ganghwan acted. Maybe it was the impression. Jiseok's impression became faint, and he started giving off the traits of Ganghwan's impression. Walking circles within the spotlight, he kept acting like Ganghwan until he abruptly stopped. After about 3 seconds of silence, he scratched his head with a clueless smile.

"I forgot what came next!"

"Geez," Maru ended up smiling. This guy's usual appearance was drastically different to when he was acting. He became dead serious when it came to watching a play or acting, but the moment he escaped that zone, he turned clueless as though all of it was a lie.

"That's amazing! Today was the first time you saw the play, right?"

"Yes."

"To think that you could recreate that much after seeing it just once... you're lacking compared to me, but you did pretty well," Saying those words, Ganghwan raised his thumbs up.

"Maru, why don't you do something?" Said Miso as she looked towards Maru with crossed arms. She had a thick grin on her face. Maru was about to refuse, but he ended up going on stage due to her grin as well as Jiseok's pleading eyes.

“Hm.”

After thinking for a little, Maru sat down on the spot just like Jiseok. Since it came to this, he decided to play along with them. He had seen two instances of Ganghwan’s act. Maru lied down on the spot and picked up a virtual remote control.

* * * *

“Come around from time to time,” Ganghwan said to the two as he saw them out.

“Yes. I definitely will. I mean it.”

“We’ll take our leave then.”

The two started walking towards the station after their greeting. Jiseok looked back several times while walking, and Maru dragged him by the neck every single time he did so.

“Those two are an unexpected combo,” Miso spoke.

“They say opposites attract.”

“That’s true. The fact that such a graceful woman like me is hanging out with a madman like you is precisely because of that reason.”

“By that logic, the teacher dating you is also a madm... alright, fine. I’ll shut up so please put your hand down,” saying that, Ganghwan grabbed Miso’s raised hand and forced it down. This woman’s boyfriend must be built like a tank. Otherwise, there was no way he was capable of enduring this woman.

“Rather than that, how was it?”

“How was what?”

“Although they were improvisations, they both imitated your acting. Why don’t you give me your impressions?”

“Hmm.”

When Jiseok asked if he could stand on stage, Ganghwan thought that he was just a fearless little brat, but his thoughts changed after seeing him act.

“That Jiseok kid brought out the feel very well. His lines and movements were different, but his atmosphere was definitely similar to mine. On the other hand, Maru’s gestures and lines were surprisingly similar to mine. It was as though he had practiced for a long time.”

“I felt that as well. I keep thinking this, but that guy’s smarts is just nuts.”

“That’s true.”

Miso crossed his arms and asked conspicuously.

“So, who do you prefer?”

“I don’t prefer any of them. They’re both worse than me.”

“Sure, Mr. I-am-the-best.”

“But to decide who’s better among those two, then it would be Maru considering the circumstances. He stuck to the basics. However, if both of them were given enough time to practice, then Jiseok might leave behind a deeper impression.”

“Though, he still can’t be compared to you?”

“Duh. Do I have to repeat myself?”

“You sound so narcissistic, but it feels even worse because it’s true.”

“It would be good if they could talk to each other.”

“Today was their first meeting, wasn’t it? Moreover, Maru didn’t seem to like the kid.”

“Tsk tsk. This is where men are different to women. Women frequently hang out even if they don’t get along. But men don’t. If Maru truly didn’t like that kid, he wouldn’t have brought him here in the first place.”

“Oh? The women you know must all be strange people.”

“You’re the one who’s too cool about everything. Let’s be honest, the second part of your resident registration number starts with a 1, doesn’t it?”

“Hey, do you really want to smell incense from inside a portrait today?”

“Oh no, I’ll call your soon-to-be husband. I’ll tell him about the threats of domestic violence.”

“I think you need a beating right now.”

Ganghwan ran with all his might, away from Miso, who was cracking her fingers as she walked towards him. That teacher was so pitiful. How did he end up with a girl like... Ganghwan shook his head due to the sudden wave of sorrow.

* * * *

Time passed, and it became Saturday the week after the interview. Maru received a text message as he was going home after practice at the club.

[You have been confirmed for the audition. Please come to the 7th floor of JA building at 11 tomorrow.]

He crossed the starting line without problems. Not long later, Jiseok texted him as well.

[You passed too, right? I did. If you didn’t, I’ll try my best to make up for your share.]

“This guy doesn’t know what consideration is at all.”

Smiling, Maru texted back the word ‘passed’ with confidence. Despite all that, he felt good that they were doing the audition together. This guy’s personality was really bad like a cocker spaniel, but he ended up smiling subconsciously when exposed to that positive energy of his, so he couldn’t hate him.

“The audition, huh. Won’t they let me pass through some back door or something?”

Personal connections were for times like these, but since those people were all professionals, using personal connections probably wouldn't work at all. Taking the easy route if it was possible was the best option, but in this scenario, he had no choice but to 'try his best', his second best option. Maru closed his phone and put it inside his pocket.

Tomorrow.

Eleven.

Audition.

Thinking of those three words. Maru's eyes sunk deeper than ever.

In Korea, the resident registration number (something similar to the social security number in the US) consists of two parts. The first part consists of 6 digits that represents your birthday, and the second part consists of 7 digits. The first digit represents the sex, 1 being male and 2 being female. There are other factors that decide the rest of the numbers, but that's not relevant here, and it can also be changed later on in life. Ganghwan's question is basically asking 'you were actually born as a boy, weren't you?'

Chapter 225

* * * *

It had been a week since his last visit to the JA building. Since this was his third time, he felt quite used to it. The time was 10 in the morning. Since the audition began at 11, there was still around 1 hour left. He visited the brand-name coffee shop on the right of the first floor and bought a café mocha. The sweetness of the chocolate eased the nervousness of his body. Not too long later, people started entering through the rotating door. There were a lot of age groups. They were all wearing casual clothes. It was very likely that many of them had come for the audition. Sipping the coffee, Maru had a look at their faces. There was a college girl who clearly seemed nervous, a youth lazily looking around as well as a couple of men in their 40s greeting each other as though they were acquainted. Many of them seemed to be high schoolers as well.

'How many people are they planning to pick?' Maru wondered.

The main roles, the supporting roles as well as the extras. The audition today was known to be for picking extras. As the original work of the movie was already revealed, the ones attending the audition today should all have read 'Twilight Struggles'. A movie adaptation of the book should definitely have some differences to the original, but it was very likely that the existing roles wouldn't be changed. Among them, the delinquent, although it was a role that only appeared in a single scene and only spoke a few lines, the importance of that role was no less than that of any of the main roles. That was because that scene would change the atmosphere and flow of the movie as a whole. The original author, Gwak Joon, also said that he rewrote the scene several times. Maru was also very shocked when he read the part where the old man's rage was expressed through the delinquent. This scene where the protagonist, the old man, encountered the delinquent would be handled very importantly during the filming. Just from the words from the man in the middle during the interview was enough to tell that there were many people aiming for the delinquent role. Everyone knew which extra role had the most impact in the story.

“It’s Lee Hyuk.”

“That’s him.”

People started whispering all of a sudden. The people gathered at the lounge were all looking towards the entrance. Maru also looked towards that place. A man wearing a blue-toned, semi-formal suit was walking inside while slightly bowing towards the people who recognized him. He was a person Maru knew. That man was an actor he saw a few times on the newspaper adverts. Next to him was a lady who seemed to be his coordinator.

“I heard that he was signing a contract with JA productions, it seems that it’s true.”

“Have you heard that most of the prominent actors are joining JA?”

“If JA decides to put their mind to it, the oligopoly of the three companies should collapse in no time.”

Maru was getting free information sitting still. If he was to work in this industry in the future, his social skills would become of importance as well as his acting skills. It was good to get his hands on more information, no matter how trivial they were. He focused on other people’s conversations. The important bit was the power struggles between the entertainment companies. They were talking about how companies were using all sorts of means to sign a contract with actors that reached the end of their contract period. This actor named Lee Hyuk seemed to be a popular target. The appearance of the actor heated up the lounge. Everyone here was aiming to leave behind their name in the movie. Their motivation seemed to have surged after seeing a successful actor. Maru put his empty coffee cup on the counter before looking at the time. It was about time to go up. The people loitering around in the lounge started heading up as well.

‘I see some competitors,’ Maru thought to himself.

It was likely that people of other age groups were aiming for other roles. However, it was extremely likely that people in their late teens to early twenties were aiming for the same role. This was a world where simple logic reigned supreme - one role couldn’t be shared and only the winner would get the role. The atmosphere changed as soon as he got on the elevator. It was quiet, but it wasn’t tranquility, but a fearful silence just before the eruption of a war. Everyone was likely of the same mind. If one didn’t prey, then they would get preyed upon instead.

‘Someone who is in possession of something is bound to kick those beneath him.’

There didn’t exist many win-win scenarios in this world. The majority of systems required competitions. No matter how well the teams were packaged, in the end, there was a winner and there were losers. The winner got the trophy while the losers drank in defeat. Everyone strived to be the winner, but the majority of existing places were reserved for losers. Winning the role meant pushing the others off a cliff. Maru knew this very well. That was why he never used the words ‘competition in good faith’. A competition ‘in good faith’ was an oxymoron in itself. There was only the will to overpower others.

Along with a ‘ding’ sound, the elevator opened. Today, there was no need to walk down the corridor. They entered through the glass door right in front of them. The waiting room allowed the participants to look outside through the gigantic window. In front was the audition room. The lady from the interview was moving around busily, checking attendance.

“Mr. Kim Jinsoo. Is Mr. Kim Jinsoo here?” She called out a name.

If no one replied after calling out twice, the callee’s profile was sent to the back. Maru wondered if that person was moved to last place, but that wasn’t the case. The profiles of the absentees entered the paper shredder in one corner of the waiting room. The papers were shredded with a machine sound. Seeing that, everyone present gulped.

Not long later, the elevator arrived once again before spitting out a man. The man, who was clearly panicking, didn’t even seem to notice that his shoes were untied.

“I’m Kim Jinsoo.”

The man said towards the lady. Since the man’s profile was just shredded to dust, the lady seemed to be stuck in a dilemma.

“I apologize, but people late to the audition cannot attend.”

“What? I was late by only 3 minutes. Only three minutes! It wasn’t that long!”

The man showed his watch to the lady. The lady was taken aback and took a few steps back. The man seemed desperate, and the lady didn’t seem to know how to handle this angry faced man. Maru crossed his arms and observed. Although the audition was getting delayed, it didn’t matter to him. In fact, he was thankful since he now had more time for image training. However, the youth sitting next to him clearly didn’t think the same.

“Excuse me, is it okay that the audition is getting delayed?”

The youth eventually decided to participate in the war between the man and the woman. Maru shook his head. The situation was about to get worse.

“What’s your problem!”

And just as he had expected, the man changed his target. Since he was desperate, nothing seemed to matter to him anymore.

“You’re taking everyone’s time here.”

“It’s just three minutes! It’s not even that long! And what did I do?”

The two men started quarrelling. Maru had a look at the others. Everyone didn’t seem to care about the quarrel and focused on themselves. It was as though they had no time to waste on something like that.

‘He screwed up his own mental state.’

Maru understood that he did it because he was in urgency, but did not consider the consequences of his actions. The lady tried to stop the fight, and the youth soon came back to his seat while panting. From his agitated face, Maru doubted that this guy could restrain his emotions properly. If his free acting was related to anger, then it might help, but if he had prepared a smile-related acting, then it would definitely have a negative impact. Maru cycled through the three to four free acting scenes he had prepared in his head. Around 5 minutes later, the elevator opened once again. Two people stepped out. They were Junmin, wearing a beret, as well as the man sitting on the left during the interview.

“What is it?”

Junmin asked the lady. The lady explained the situation as though she finally found a way out. Meanwhile, the man named Kim Jinsoo expressed that he was wronged with all his body.

“Mr. Kim Jinsoo.”

“Yes.”

“It was me who ordered the staff to put the documents of late applicants into the shredder. I apologize, but you’ll have to leave.”

“Wait. it is definitely my fault that I was late. But I hope you can watch my acting just once. I’ve given up a lot of things for this audition. I’ve also prepared a lot for it. If you see my act, you will definitely not regret it.”

“Mm...,” Junmin groaned in a deep voice. However, it didn’t sound like he was contemplating. Maru saw a deep crease in Junmin’s brows. It was a sign that he was a little angry.

“Mr. Kim Jinsoo. Please look at the people around you,” Junmin pointed at the people waiting in front of the audition room.

“Watch them carefully,” saying that, he raised right hand.

“Please raise your hand if you gave up absolutely nothing in order to participate in this audition.”

No one raised their hand.

“Then, please raise your hand if you prepared a lot for this audition.”

As soon as his words finished, everyone raised their hand, including Maru.

“And finally, please keep your hand raised if you don’t have any confidence in your acting skills.”

Everyone put their hands down.

“Thank you for your cooperation.”

Junmin turned around to look at the man named Kim Jinsoo. He was clenching his fists, with his lips shaking. Even a little child would have understood what was going on.

“I am very well aware that you must have put a lot of effort in and prepared a lot for the audition. However, that’s pretty basic for the people gathered here. How am I supposed to interpret that you want special treatment for doing the basics?”

“But...”

“I’m sorry, but it’s rather difficult for me to look at you as someone worth investing my time. If you were a splendid actor, then I would of course have allocated my time. However, I fail to find a reason to keep listening to you when you have nothing special about you and are even late.”

“Please, I know that I’m acting shameless, but if you please give me an opportunity...”

The man was almost about to kneel. Perhaps this audition was the man's last opportunity. Maru sympathized with that. Everyone has their last opportunities. That servile attitude of his was an indicator of how important he considered this audition to be.

However,

'You should at least look at the person in the face when they're talking.'

Maru clicked his tongue and looked away. Junmin's expression was that of when he was insulted. As the man was looking down at the floor, he was completely oblivious of that fact. Eventually, Junmin grabbed the man by the shoulder.

"Mr. Kim Jinsoo. Please leave while I speak soft words. If you are a man that knows shame, that is."

That left no room for further discussion. The man seemed to have felt that and turned around while swaying. After he disappeared, Junmin stood in front of the people. He continued speaking as though nothing had happened.

"I'm Lee Junmin, one of the judges for this audition. This fellow next to me is Park Hoyoung, the film director. Usually, I don't do introductions like these, but somehow I am doing one today. Then, I'd like to notify you once again before the audition. You have up to five minutes to do free acting, and again, up to five minutes for the script acting. As this is a camera test, you'll have to look at the camera as you do your acts. When you come in, tell us your name and the company you belong to. Since most of you should have experience doing auditions, I think I don't need to explain any further."

The two opened the door to the audition room half way when Junmin spoke again.

"Oh, I'll say this beforehand. Since many people have applied for the same role, you may be grouped together."

Maru shrugged his shoulder when Junmin looked towards him when he said those words. Junmin smiled slightly and entered.

"As you just listened, you should do your acts as you were told to once you enter. Don't forget to look at the camera. Also, please pin your number plates on the left side of your chest."

The lady handed out number plates with numbers on them. Maru checked his number. His number was 27.

"Then please enter the audition room in the order I call you out."

Since he was 27, Maru believed that he had some time. He sighed slightly and looked at the cold-looking skies outside the window. The next moment, a crisp voice entered his ears.

"Numbers 4, 11, 18, 27, 34. Please enter."

'...Geez.'

Maru stood up.

Chapter 226

* * * *

Although he felt unlucky when he picked the number four, he never realized that he would be one of the first to be picked. Thinking about how numbers 1, 2, and 3 would be sighing in relief and laughing at him, he felt a headache. Unlike his name, Gwangseok, which was a manifestation of his parents' wishes for him to grow up brightly like the light (Gwang, 光), and sturdily like a rock (seok, 石), Moon Gwangseok's expression was very dark.

'Since it's like this anyway', Gwangseok decided to think positively about it and opened the door to the audition room. What he saw were two men sitting behind a long table, as well as a monitor and a camera that stood next to them. He was expecting that much, but the people behind the two men weren't something he expected at all. There were people who were staring at him with their lip sealed.

'Wasn't there supposed to be two judges?'

"Number four, step forward and the rest of you may wait behind," Hoyoung, who introduced himself as the film director, spoke. He gave off a heavy pressure. Junmin, who spoke softly outside the room, also looked very serious. Gwangseok felt his legs go limp.

"Stand on top of the x mark and get ready."

He stood on top of the spot marked x with duct tape. He felt like going crazy right now. This was the first time he stood in front of so many people in an audition. Gwangseok's first audition was more of self-introduction for someone else's graduation project, and the one after that was for a short film and only the director was present during the audition. However, over five people were staring at him along with Lee Junmin, who was a famous producer.

'This is a minor role, why are there so many people here?'

He gulped subconsciously. He felt a tingle behind his knees. His lips felt dry. It would be over if he got nervous here. Gwangseok remembered about his parents who were fully supporting him and faced his fears.

"Don't mind the camera and look wherever you want. You can look at the camera, or you can look at us."

"Y, yes!"

"Don't be too nervous. If you get nervous, we will get nervous as well. Just drop all your worries."

Hoyoung acted quite nicely. Gwangseok cheered up and took deep breaths.

"Once you're ready, you can begin."

Gwangseok introduced himself with a "I'm number four, Moon Gwangseok from Star Academy," and started his free acting. The short skit he prepared was ditching after school self-study sessions and persuading his friend to join him.

"Hey, let's go. Even if we do get caught, it'll only be a few hits. But if we ditch, we'll get to play with the girls from the girls high school next to us. What's youth about? Is it staring into a textbook? Of course not. Youth is when a man and a woman of age share passionate love. You know. The teachers always tell

us, don't they? That there's something more important than studying. Today's that impo...,” He spoke up to this point when someone interrupted him.

“Stop,” it was Junmin, who had never spoken a word until now.

“Do you know why I told you to stop?”

“N, no.”

“Come here.”

Gwangseok walked towards the table and had a look at the monitor, which Junmin was pointing at. Right now, the monitor only showed empty space. When Junmin pressed a few keys, the video rewinded. Soon, his own skit started rewinding. Junmin stopped and resumed the footage. When Gwangseok watched his own skit, he couldn't help but frown and bite his lips.

“We're not an academy. I don't even have time to tell you what you did wrong. But you should at least have something to earn from this place, right? You see what you did wrong, don't you?”

“Yes....”

“Go and wait on the side.”

“Yes.”

He wasn't able to ask if it was over for him. He did poorly according to what he saw in the footage. His expression was stiff like a rock and lacked vitality, and his gaze was all over the place. When he pondered to himself about why he did so, he realized that he was too conscious of the people behind the judges. Above all, his actions were terrible when viewed through the monitor. He mistook that the camera was taking a bust shot and did not control his hand movements properly. Gwangseok grieved when he saw that he was fidgeting to himself when he was acting.

‘I was too conscious about the camera.’

Hyoungh definitely told him not to mind the camera. Gwangseok closed his eyes and went back in line with the rest.

‘It's over.’

He didn't even fill the five minute time limit and only spent 20 seconds. As for his script acting...

“Next,” a cold voice sounded out. Gwangseok looked downwards in dejection.

* * * *

Although he expected it, it really wasn't easy just like what he thought. The two people sitting in front of him weren't looking for students for a school festival musical but a proper actor. Meaning, they would not forgive any mistakes. If there were a few people applying, then they might have given him another chance, but there were a lot of people waiting outside. It would take an extremely long time to go through their skits one by one, so there was no way they would give another chance to someone who missed their opportunity. They were extremely rational and cruel. Junmin's eyes as he looked at the rest

of the participants contained no hint of affection. He was looking for just skills, just character, and just creativity. The fact that he signed a contract with Junmin was useless here.

'In fact, it might be a disadvantage.'

Junmin was a clever man. He would give full support if it seemed like something or someone profited him, but immediately cut all connections if he deemed otherwise. If someone became close to him, then he might change his mind, but right now, there was nothing like that between Maru and him. In fact, Maru had the obligation to prove his worth to him.

"Next, number 11."

"My name is Park Jintae. Please take care of me."

"That's what I want to say, and you're supposed to do well."

"Yes, sir."

"Stand on top of the x mark and begin once you're ready," Hoyoung spoke as he had a look at the monitor and the person alternately. He looked like a completely different man from the interview. His casual impression was gone and his eyes contained a hint of sharpness. His eyes were fiercely looking at the candidates. If one was pressured, then they wouldn't be able to bring out even half of their skills. Taking lessons from the first candidate, the second person did better. This boy, named Jintae, acted a delinquent. His swaying motion looked very good. It was just that...

"Wait," Junmin raised his hand and stopped him. It wasn't a 'stop' but a 'wait'. The boy immediately stopped his act and stood upright. Then, he looked at the judges.

"If you keep fumbling your words like that, the boom mic won't pick up anything. Try again."

"Yes."

The boy seemed to have understood and started over, but as his rhythm was interrupted once, his actions started becoming awkward. As Maru watched from the back, the swaying motion now seemed to stem from injury rather than from being a delinquent. Jungmin gestured for him to stop. However, before he could say anything another voice sounded out from behind.

"Let's have him try the lines."

It was a man wearing a baseball cap. His voice was quite deep. Junmin nodded his head and passed a script onto the boy through another person.

'Is he an actor?'

Due to the baseball cap and the script in the man's hands, his face couldn't be seen. Maru predicted that the man was in his forties from his voice.

"Page 48. You see Gyushik's son's lines, right?"

"Yes."

"Have a close look at the stage directions and begin once you're ready."

After having a look at the script for a while, the boy took a short breath before going through the lines.

“Father, I’ll be off then.”

“Yes, be careful. Oh, don’t you need any pocket money?”

“I don’t. You gave me some not too long ago.”

“You can stop there.”

The boy gave back the script. Junmin wrote a few lines on the boy’s profile. The boy expected that he was going to do more, but it was over. He came back. The boy, Jintae, didn’t look too good. His expression contained deep disappointment as though he could show them more than what he did now.

“Next.”

Maru felt like he was in a canned tuna factory. He was a canned tuna who went through processing, and the people in front of him were quality assurance personnel evaluating his quality. If he did average, then he wouldn’t be picked on, but nor would he be elected. He would just become any other ordinary canned tuna. He had to be different from the rest. Whether in a good way or in a bad way, he had to catch the eyes of the people in front of him. It had been ten minutes since the audition began. Despite that, the people in front of him clearly had bored expressions. This was a very dangerous sign. From the fact that the people in front of him had dozens of other people to see, this stale atmosphere had to be changed as soon as possible

However,

“I’m number 18, and my name is K, Kim Joonmyoung. I’m from G, Gangnam actor.”

This candidate was the worst possible candidate to change the atmosphere. He seemed like he was a patient with an anxiety attack. The atmosphere became even worse. Maru found that the people seated behind the table as well as the people standing behind them had disdain in their eyes.

“Go on once you’re ready.”

Despite that, Hoyoung and Junmin looked at the boy in front of him. They had the mindset of professionals to not miss any potential candidate. It would have been good if their passion for work worked positively for the boy, but the boy named Joonmyoung seemed to be heavily pressured by their gazes.

“Uhm... uh... uhm....”

Maru found him pitiful. This boy should have prepared a lot for this. However, the audition was where one needed to show results. After watching for about 10 seconds, Junmin sighed and shook his hand. The boy standing on the x mark didn’t even see his gesture and stood still.

“Well done. You can go back,” only after Hoyoung spoke out did the boy come to himself and step backwards. The boy did not have any expression as he stepped back. He looked dazed.

“Next.”

Maru heaved a deep breath before standing up. Although he had prepared a delinquent act as well, it seemed that it was better for him to change it for something else. It was used too much before him. If he did the same, he would probably get lower scores. He had plenty of lessons from the people prior to his turn. His breathing was normal, and he had just enough tension. The x mark. That was the stage. Thinking of it as a stage, he became a lot more relaxed. He even felt a little excited. He even had something like an uncontrollable urge to spill all of his emotions to the people in front of him. However, Maru suppressed those urges temporarily. The skit he was about to do was not something that required him to express his emotions violently. What he was about to do was to show a thin strand of his emotions flowing out from his suppressed emotions. Perhaps what he was about to do was not acting, but a confession.

“May I use a chair?”

“Sure,” Hoyoung replied as he pointed at the chair next to him. Maru placed the chair on top of the x mark and sat on top of it.

“I’ll start once I get ready.”

After checking Hoyoung nod, he closed his eyes for a moment. What he was about to say now was the cold hard truth. Though, a little technique would be added.

If acting was about imitation, he was going to imitate himself.

He heaved a deep breath.

“I got to know love at an age too young to discuss love. I met someone I wanted to take responsibility for while I was still insufficient. That person was a foolish person who looked after other people more than herself. She was courageous, devoted, and above all... pretty,” Maru smiled as he reminded himself of her smile. There was no need to proactively think about ‘making a smile’. Just thinking about her made him smile subconsciously.

“Naturally, I had a lot of competitors. There aren’t many men who can leave a girl like her alone. I became close to her due to a coincidence, but I couldn’t be relieved. That’s why I stuck to her. So that other men couldn’t approach her. Perhaps due to that, she accepted my proposal. Oh, of course, it didn’t happen so easily. There were a lot of hurdles. In any case, we got married and moved into our own house. Although we had to get a loan, it was a cozy home for us.”

He shrugged his shoulders before continuing.

“Those days didn’t contain that many hardships. Sometimes, we fought because our opinions didn’t match, but those fights didn’t last long. I know well that I can’t win against her. Every day passed without a hitch. Those were ordinary days with laughs and annoyances. And amidst those ordinary days, the two of us became the three of us.”

He combed through his memory. He couldn’t remember much, but the faint smell still lingered in his mind.

“The baby had the smell of happiness. It was very similar to the smell of that person. The baby grew every day and when I came to, she was walking with her two feet. Her first words were ‘papa’. Yes. It was definitely papa.”

His voice was very tranquil. The faces of the judges flashed in front of him, but he did not see their expressions. The audience of this monodrama was himself after all.

“The baby grew, and eventually she reached the age where she rebelled with a straight face. Geez, she made me so dejected. That feeling you get when the little daughter telling you ‘you’re awesome’ changes to ‘you should lose some weight’ is just... Phew, but that was still good. When I opened my eyes in the morning, my beloved was next to me, and when I left my room, there was the child I loved even more. That seemed like an unbreakable, eternal happiness. At least, I thought so.”

Maru heaved a long sigh. Then, he progressed with his thoughts. His relaxed body started getting goosebumps. That moment became vivid in front of him. The large lump of metal stomped on his chest.

“It was an accident. Yes, that was an accident. I laughed. The sweetness of happiness still lingered within me, yet I was dying. I thought about a lot of things. At the same time, I resented enough to kill.”

Creak! He gritted his teeth. His heart whispered to him that it was time to let loose a little of his reason. He abruptly raised his head. Then he glared at the camera.

“That happiness wasn’t something that was supposed to end there. That person and my child weren’t supposed to sink into sadness like that. I resented the heavens. I cursed god. If I could, I wanted to rip them apart and drench myself in their blood! However... even that frustration died down soon. The moment I realized I was dead, my rage became empty. What remained, was just worry.”

He spat out the stale breath stuck at his throat before sitting back down again. He was extremely agitated because he reminded himself of that event, but his eyes were surprisingly looking at the clock. He felt that his tranquil reason was acting in contrast to his emotions. It felt somewhat new. Before, it was one of the two. He either suppressed or released. Right now, it was neither. He felt as though he could get hot again and cold again within moments. However, that feeling soon disappeared. Reason and emotion started their territorial fight again and Maru started calming down.

“That’s the end.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“I think there’s more.”

“A story only attracts interest when it’s cut mid way through the fun part.”

Hearing that answer, Hoyoung burst out laughing. Maru calmly looked at the mood amongst the judges. For now, he wasn’t stopped mid way. This could be considered that he succeeded half way. At that moment, the man wearing the baseball cap voiced out.

“Let’s have some more look at that fellow.”

Chapter 227

* * * *

The man wearing the baseball cap stood up from his seat and walked forward. Maru got to have a close look at the man's face. His beard wasn't shaved, and his hair, from what could be seen below the baseball cap, wasn't neat at all. The shirt and jeans he was wearing looked like he picked them up from a street stall. Despite that, Maru wasn't able to take his eyes off him. This man was an actor he knew too well. He was a little confused at first due to the beard and the voice, but now that he saw him up close, he was able to confirm.

This man was Park Taeho. The man who won the leading actor's role award in the Daejong awards last year. Maru pondered if this man was cast in this movie as well.

"Please give me a script."

Taeho got a copy of the script from Hoyoung and handed it over to Maru.

"Go to page 78."

Maru did as he was instructed. Amidst the rows of lines written, there were three characters that caught his eyes: delinquent 1, delinquent 2, and delinquent 3.

"Here, read this part. Don't put any emotions in."

The part Taeho pointed to was delinquent 2's line. It was a line that Maru had read several times in the book. 'Man, your sorry ass has achieved nothing even after all these years. What kind of shit life have you been living, gramps?' was there, without a change in wording.

"Man, your sorry ass has achieved nothing even after all these years. What kind of shit life have you been living, gramps?"

"I like that dry tone of yours. Then follow the stage directions and say that line disdainfully."

Taeho took a step back. Maru focused on the word 'disdainfully'. He pondered if he should mix in a bit of a disdainful smile. He first changed the tone and said the line.

"Hm, you're a total beginner. You don't attend an academy or something like that?"

"I don't."

"Really? That's weird. Hyung-nim. This dude is really strange. The lines he just did gave him away as a newbie, but that soliloquy before was actually totally awesome. He even sounded mature. Is, is this even possible? I just don't get it."

"If you're done, then get out of the way. There's still one more."

Hearing Junmin's words, Taeho nodded his head and sat back down.

'Did I do well?' Maru thought as he stepped back. The last candidate went forward and did his free acting skit. Then, he went on to do the script acting without a hitch. Then, it just ended without a hitch as well.

"Thank you all for coming," Hoyoung spoke as he put all the profiles to the side. The audition was over. Guided by a lady, Maru exited the room and turned in his number plate.

“Thank you for coming, and we’ll notify you whether you’ve passed or not individually. It should arrive by Thursday next week, so please be patient.”

Maru watched as some people entered the audition room with nervous expressions before turning around. He didn’t know whether he did well or not. He had nothing to go by to make any predictions. Like what the lady said, he had no choice but to wait with his fingers crossed.

“Yes, teacher. I made a few mistakes.”

“I’m done for. I’m in big trouble.”

The people who took the audition with him were busy making calls. Their calls continued into the elevator.

“I don’t know. I think I didn’t pass. There were too many people. Moreover I wasn’t the only one doing the audition.”

“Mom, I think I failed. I don’t think I need to wait for the results to know.”

“Where’s my next audition again?”

Maru gave them a glance. Whenever his eyes met with another’s they glared back at him.

‘So, I have a high chance of passing?’

Even the guy that managed to do the script acting without a hitch had a worried expression on his face. It seemed that these guys had something to base their predictions on that Maru didn’t have.

“That was hard,” Maru spoke in a low voice. If everything was about numbers, he would be able to predict the results once the process finished. The first quarter achievements were such and such so the second quarter results should be such and such. Since the currency exchanges are such and such, the raw materials cost should be around such and such. In such a world, there weren’t that many variables. Numbers were always clear cut. However, in acting, no such thing existed. There was no absolute standard for anything, so he wasn’t able to discern whether he did well or not. If it was about self-satisfaction, he wouldn’t need to mind about the evaluations at all, but if he was to do this for a living, he would have to know the basis of evaluation. Junmin, Hoyoung, and Taeho. How were those three people going to evaluate his acting? Listening to Geunsoo’s advice of not conforming himself to the role, he sort of forced his way through the first part, but whether it was a good thing or not, he did not know. Perhaps he should have stuck to his original plan and have played the delinquent.

‘They’re infecting me with their negativity,’ he felt as though his thoughts were going the wrong direction due to all the gloomy voices around him. Maru stepped out of the elevator as soon as the doors opened and got far away from the others.

“I did my bit, the rest is up to heaven.”

He showed all he could. It was better for him to leave the rest up to heaven for him to have some peace.

* * * *

Junmin faintly smiled as he watched the monitor. He was reminded of when that boy asked him for three hundred million won. He thought that the boy was crazy, but decided to play along after listening to the rest of his story. A year had passed since then. It seemed like the boy was going to show him something using his little high school club, but he sunk all by himself due to an injury. Junmin made a visit thinking that the boy must be very disappointed, but he was casually reading a book. Junmin did not know whether the boy was insensitive or bold.

Boys at his age could be compared to a small sailboat. With a little wind, they would sail in the direction of the wind very quickly. Many people say that the growth speed of child actors and actresses is frightening; and that a child actor with a smooth sail would smoothly become a popular actor. However, once the wind blew in the wrong direction, then they would capsize on the spot. The lack of weight caused that problem. The reason many child actors and actresses turn into ordinary students was because they could not endure that hurdle.

Before, the criticisms usually came from people close to them, but with the development of the internet, people stabbed with knives known as words on the internet. There weren't many viewers who were lenient simply because someone was young. Horrible acting was met with insults. The important part was that people went too far. Even adults were stressed out by them, so naturally, children had it even worse. This was why acting academies and schools did not teach just acting. They also taught humanities subjects so they could achieve mental maturity. Despite all their efforts, though, children were still children. Their emotions were much more fragile than that of an adult's.

Meanwhile, Maru was like a giant cruise ship. He wasn't shaken by others to the point that he reminded Junmin of a large ship. A wind strong enough to sway a sailboat would be nothing more than a gentle breeze. He had a stability like none other. That was Maru's strong point.

However, that strong point was also his weak point. Not being shaken meant not prone to change. While others changed, whether it be progress or regress, it was likely that Maru would stay unchanged. He couldn't be considered insensitive to external stimulation. If he was poked, he would get angry to some extent, and if someone crossed the line, he would solve all his problems cleanly. The problem was that his way of doing things was too tidy. There were no ups and downs.

Until a while ago, Maru was a ship that would never raise its sail. He would maintain his position no matter how strong the storm was. Junmin was wary about this point. Regress didn't just refer to going backwards. In the perspective of progress, staying still was also a form of regress. As such, Junmin decided that he would estimate Maru's potential through today's audition once again. He wondered what kind of preparations Maru made as well as what kind of potential he would show him once again. If Maru wasn't up to his standards, he planned to no longer allow him free reign and give instructions. After all, he did spend 300 million won to buy 3 years of his high school period. He even considered having him take acting lessons with a schedule that would affect his school.

However,

"I was worried for nothing, huh."

Maru's release of emotions that he saw through the screen was very different from the Maru he knew until now. In terms of technique, he was still lacking. The shaking of his eyes, the direction of his lips, his hand gestures. All of these still gave him away as a newbie.

However, his glare when he looked at the camera as well as the sadness and frustration his voice made all that irrelevant. His acting made the audience empathize with his emotions unconditionally. The overwhelming transfer of emotions made all acting skills irrelevant. That was because the ultimate objective of all techniques was to transfer emotions to the audience.

“Although it was for a brief moment, he released it. I’m sure of it.”

It wasn’t that he gave his emotions total free rein. What he did was different to that. He released his emotions to the limits under the state where he knew what he had to do. He didn’t over exaggerate things. An actor crying didn’t make the audience cry with him. This was a problem that all actors faced. It was a homework that all actors had for the entirety of their career. An actor capable of making people cry without crying himself; one capable of making people laugh without laughing himself; one capable of making people angry without becoming angry himself.

Using one word to describe Maru in the footage would be ‘frightening’. His emotions pierced through the screen and hit solidly in the hearts of the viewers. It was to the point that he thought ‘this is it!’. The reason why Taeho stepped forward despite this being an audition should have been related to that as well.

The sail that had been folded until now finally unfurled. It was getting ready to receive the wind. He shouldn’t have made such a change voluntarily. Someone else’s words should have triggered him to make that change. That could be seen from how he released his own emotions freely without him knowing.

“Han Maru, he’s good.”

Hearing that voice, Junmin turned around. A woman with purple hair and a foul mouth stood there. It was Joohyun. Due to some scheduling issues between the director and the actors, all the main actors had been called. Joohyun was also here for that reason.

“You know him?”

“I do. I met him once. I got a feeling when he retorted to everything I said - that this kid is an interesting kid. That’s why I told him a few things.”

“Like what?”

“I told him to get to the bottom of his emotions. I also told him a few other things, but from what I saw just now, he seemed to have ignored everything he deemed unnecessary. What a cheeky kid. He acted as though he didn’t ever need any advice. He’ll become a good politician once he grows up,” saying that, Joohyun turned around as she sipped on her coffee. Junmin inwardly smiled. Ordinary wind couldn’t shake him, so this meant that the wind that shook him was that strong. Someone like Joohyun would be a hurricane. She had plenty of power to shake a cruise ship.

“So he’ll only open his ears to someone of that level, huh.”

He was a cheeky guy indeed. That made him all the more interesting.

“Perhaps he might become an extra who will overpower any ordinary minor role.”

The scene where the delinquent appeared was very brief, and because it was brief, it was strong. Junmin wrote 'pass' on the profile. Two of the three delinquents were finalized. Since these two were the only ones who had lines to say, he could just make compromises on the final one.

"Well, then. Who do I give the trigger to?"

Junmin grabbed two profiles in his hands. One had the name 'Han Maru' on it, while the other read 'Yoo Jiseok'. His eyes were filled with joy as he looked at the two profiles.

* * * *

"You brought nothing?"

Tossing a slice of cake to his sister, he returned to his room. He felt tired despite not having done much. He felt as though he released all of his piled up energy. Maru closed the curtains, turned off the lights and laid down on his bed. He thought about calling her, but felt drowsiness overwhelm him. He thought that he should sleep first.

As his eyes closed shut, he saw the faintly glowing glow-in-the-dark sticker. It was a half-moon. Even though it shouldn't be capable of giving off its own light, the moon was shining by itself right now.

After he closed his eyes, Maru saw that dream stage that he saw once before. There was a man wearing a mask that was a messy mixture of black and white. Back then, only that man was on the stage, and he was watching from the audience seats.

However, right now, Maru was looking at the man on the same stage as him.

"You got closer," the man spoke with a smile.

Maru shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, things happened."

"Yes, things happen to everyone," the masked man spoke once again.

Chapter 228

* * * *

"I don't think I made it."

Daemyung heard those words in the morning and started sighing endlessly, without knowing what to do. He didn't expect Maru to pass easily. After all, many capable people should have attended the audition. Maru said that as well. However, seeing Maru declare that, Daemyung felt like there was no hope. He was sure that something happened during the audition. It was very likely that Maru had made a big mistake.

'So even someone like Maru makes mistakes.'

Maru was usually flawless, but he was the same age as the others after all. Daemyung thought that Maru became nervous at a critical moment which cost him the audition. Well, it wasn't exactly

surprising since he would be competing against many others who take professional lessons. Daemyung wondered how he should console him.

He peeked behind him. Since maths was over, Maru was sleeping at his desk. Today, though, that calm side of him made him look pitiful instead. Perhaps he was pushing himself so that others would not worry about him. It was more than likely for Maru to do so. After all, he wordlessly endured the insults of many people from the acting club a year ago.

'When else would he need consolation if not now? We're friends.'

He was always on the receiving side. For today, he wanted to be of Maru's help. Maru's body shook for a moment before he sat up while yawning. It seemed that he wasn't getting sleepy today.

'I knew it. He must be feeling anxious.'

"Hey, Maru," Daemyung called out.

"Yeah?"

"Wanna go to the school cafeteria?"

"The cafeteria? What, you hungry?"

"No, well, I was wondering if you wanted to eat anything."

At that moment, Dojin, who clearly didn't read the mood, interrupted. It was very rare for Daemyung to glare at someone, but today was that day. Dojin flinched and started fidgeting.

"What, you guys had a fight?"

"No, it's not that."

Daemyung stood up from his seat and grabbed Maru's arm.

"Let's go first. I'll buy you some bread. Maybe some ice cream too."

"What's up with you today? I thought you were running out of pocket money."

"It's fine, so let's go already. Lesson break will be ending soon."

Daemyung dragged the supposedly dejected Maru to the school cafeteria. Fortunately, there weren't many people around. They lined up and reached the front of the queue after a short minute.

"What do you want?"

"I'm not that hungry though."

"You should eat regardless. Only then..."

He stopped. He thought that bringing that topic out might hurt Maru's feelings. Maru was a strong man, but he was still just a man. Daemyung thought that he should be considerate.

"W, well. It's somewhat awkward for me to eat alone."

"You should've come with Dojin then. He looked really hungry."

"I can buy him something later. Take your pick. A drink is fine too."

"Did you pick up some money in the middle of the road? Why are you in such a hurry to spend it?"

He urged Maru to order something. He ordered coffee milk. Daemyung received the bread and coffee milk and took a seat close to the cafeteria entrance.

"Here, yours."

"Well, thanks. Though, I don't know what you're up to."

"Uhm, Maru."

"Yeah?"

"You should tell me if you're worried about something. I may not be able to help, but I can always listen."

"Hey... do you have something to ask of me? If it's like that, don't beat around the bush and give it to me straight."

"I'm not going to ask you for anything! I'm just saying that I'm always here to listen to you as your friend. For example, you might be pretending to be completely fine even though you aren't... and things like that," saying that, Daemyung smiled and took a bite on his bread. He thought that he did a fine job not making it obvious. Maru, though, was looking at him with squinted eyes.

"Are you sick?"

"Huh? No, I'm not sick."

"Then are you worried about something?"

"No, not at all."

"Then why do I feel so awkward? I couldn't be any more awkward drinking this milk. You're being really strange right now."

"T, there's no way, right? I'm just... willing to hear you out if you're willing to say things, yeah, that's right. Tell me anything if you feel worried or something. Should we go to the noraebang(karaoke) together?"

Maru tilted his head sideways and stared back at him. Daemyung thought that Maru was acting like this out of embarrassment. After all, he had always shown his unshakable side of him to everyone else. Showing his weak side must be very foreign and awkward for him. However, what were friends for? A friend must be ready to accept any side of the person, right?

"Cheer up!"

Daemyung didn't say much. He thought that Maru should have understood what he was doing.

* * * *

"Hey, Dojin."

“Yeah?”

“Did something happen to Daemyung?”

“No, not that I know of. Oh, he’s gained a little weight. He’s already overweight, but he gained even more. I think he needs to go on a diet,” Dojin said as he yawned before resting his head against his arms on his desk. Maru deemed that Dojin was clueless. Maru then poked Dowook’s waist who was blankly staring at the chalkboard.

“Ow man!”

“Don’t see no owl man around here. Hey, have you heard anything from Daemyung?”

“What the heck is that about.”

“Like, for example, maybe he ran into some problems recently. Or that you saw him all worried by himself.”

“Nothing like that happened. You poked my waist for something like this?” Saying that, Dowook stood up from his seat, grumbling. Daemyung was not adept at lying. If something happened, then these two must have noticed something. If these two didn’t know, then it meant that Daemyung had no problems.

“Maru.”

Daemyung returned. In his hands was a canned drink. Following yesterday, Daemyung was gleefully handing out snacks. When Dojin asked him for one, he flinched and shook his head. Maru didn’t know what this guy was up to.

“Here, drink this.”

“...Ooo...kay?”

At this point, Maru was weirded out as well. This was the first time Daemyung’s kindness freaked him out. His eyes especially - those eyes that looked at him with pity made Maru look around him in wariness. Perhaps he saw something around him that he himself couldn’t. A ghost with an attachment to this world, for example.

“Maru. You know, right?”

“Know what?”

“That everything will go well in the future. Failure is the mother of success. Isn’t it?” Daemyung had a satisfactory smile on his face as he said those words. Maru became seriously worried now. Maybe, this guy didn’t have a physical problem but a mental one...

At that moment, something popped up in his mind. Daemyung started acting strange yesterday. He was completely fine before the morning homeroom, and Maru believed that Daemyung turned strange after talking with him. No, he was sure of it.

‘What did I tell him again?’

He didn't think he said anything strange. Maru put his hands on his chin and had a look at Daemyung. He found it a little pity that he wasn't smart enough to remember trivial conversations. At times like these, it was better to ask the person in question.

"Daemyung."

"Yeah?"

"Did I say something wrong to you yesterday? You've been acting strange the past couple days. Tell me anything that's keeping you occupied. Let's set things straight."

"...Oh, uh, no. It's not like that."

Daemyung's expression completely betrayed what he said though. Maru put his hands on his chin and stared at Daemyung. He noticed that Daemyung's eyes contained something beyond just pity. In the past, they came across a dog drenched from the rain, whimpering. Daemyung's eyes when he looked at that puppy were precisely the eyes he was using to look at Maru right now. Maru thought about reading Daemyung's inner thoughts, but he didn't want to use such a strange power to someone on close terms with him.

'Well, it doesn't seem to be a big problem, it should be fine after a couple days.'

* * * *

"You guys aren't fit to be friends!"

Dowook looked at Daemyung with an expression that said 'what kind of BS is this'. Those were the first words that came from Daemyung's mouth after calling Dojin and him out. He left out any sort of context. Dowook frowned. Daemyung flinched and took a step back.

"Hey, make it so that i can understand."

"S, so... you guys aren't even worried about Maru?"

"About Han Maru? What about him?"

"How can you be so ignorant? Dojin, you didn't notice anything either?"

Hearing that question, Dojin also stood there saying nothing. He was clearly clueless. Daemyung sighed.

"You two do know that Maru did an audition, right?"

"Yeah."

"It seems that he didn't make it in that audition. That's why he didn't have a good expression this whole week."

"Are the results out?"

Dowook hadn't heard that the audition results were out yet.

"No, but from the nuance that Maru's words gave me, I think he made a big mistake during the audition. That's why there's no hope of passing at all."

“So?”

“What do you mean, ‘so’? That was a really important audition for Maru, you know? He should be depressed right now. He’s not showing it to us, but he must be feeling very sad,” Daemyung sounded desperate. Dowook tapped Dojin’s shoulders.

“You notice anything?”

“Not at all. Maru’s just as usual.”

Dowook nodded his head in agreement. Maru was practically sleeping throughout the day. What disappointment could he possibly have? In the first place, Maru wasn’t the guy who would be feeling agonized because of something like that. From what Dowook knew of this guy named Han Maru, if the class decided to bully him, he would bully the entire class back and get the entire school to bully his class. He was the guy who silently ‘took care’ of all the delinquents in the school. Such a guy was worried? Disappointed? He was surprised that Daemyung could associate Maru with those words at all.

“That’s just crazy. Hey, you’re overreacting. Him, disappointed? Pfft. Yeah, right.”

“Hey, don’t speak like that. Maru should have a delicate side to him. We should console him and help him cheer up.”

Daemyung was quite serious. At first, he was going to laugh it over, but when he thought about it, Maru was just an ordinary high school student. Who knows what he was thinking behind his adult pretense? As Daemyung said, he might really be having a hard time right now.

“Maybe this is real?” Dojin pondered worriedly. With even the ever-nonchalant Han Dojin worried, Dowook became a little worried as well. Thinking about it, Maru really did not say anything about the audition. Maybe he really was feeling agonized due to disappointment. Dowook thought for a moment before speaking.

“...Should we take him to noraebang, or maybe a mixer?”

“A mi, mixer?”

“Maybe he’ll feel better if we hang out with some girls.”

“No. Maru has a girlfriend.”

“So what? They are girl-friends, and you are a boy-friend. Alright?”

“S, sh, should we really do that?”

“Hey. When your head is in a mess, screaming your lungs out in a noraebang is the best med. Wait while I call some people.”

“I, I’ll pass on that,” Daemyung replied, clearly flustered. Dowook didn’t accept that though.

“You’re the one who brought this up, so you aren’t going anywhere.”

“I, I’m not good around girls.”

“You should get used to it. Just wait. Dojin, you’re coming too, aren’t you?”

“...Huh? Me? I don’t think I can make it, Iseul won’t be...”

“Dude, your friend is in trouble.”

“I might actually die if she finds out.”

Dojin tried to back out. Dowook headlocked him so that he wouldn’t run.

“Then you can die for all I care. Anyway, that makes it the four of us.”

Since it was a Friday, no one should have any problems timewise. He made a few calls and the plan was set with four girls. Maru should cheer up after riding roller blades for a time and scream his lungs out in a noraebang.

At that moment, Maru returned to the classroom.

“What. Aren’t you guys going home? There’s no practice today, is there?”

Maru was about to leave again after getting his bag. Dowook quickly called out to Maru.

“Hey, Han Maru.”

“What is it?”

“Let’s go to noraebang with some girls. This bro will show you what it means to play.”

“Nah. You guys can go by yourselves.”

“Why?”

“I need to go to Seoul again tomorrow because of the audition. I don’t have any time.”

“Wh, what? I thought you didn’t make it.”

“Who the hell told you that? I got notified that I passed yesterday. But they told me to visit again due to assigning roles.”

Dowook turned around to look at Daemyung. This wasn’t what he heard.

“M, Maru. You told me that you thought you didn’t make it.”

“Huh? What?”

“I asked you and you told me that you thought you didn’t make it.”

“That’s because I need to think like that to feel less sad if I actually do end up failing. Isn’t that common sense? Anyway, do restrain yourselves when you go out. Don’t drink alcohol and go home early. If you feel like you’ll be late, you should call your parents. Don’t make your parents worried, okay?”

Maru waved his hand at them before leaving. Dowook felt his lips curving up. He suddenly felt really annoyed. As to where he would vent his anger, it was pretty obvious.

“Daemyung.”

“Y, yeah?”

“I think you need a beating.”

* * * *

It was Sunday morning. Maru ignored his sister’s words asking him if he was going to Seoul again. If he continued that conversation, it was obvious that she would ask him to buy her something. Maru got onboard the bus and had a look at the notification message.

‘I did pass, but now it’s assigning roles, huh.’

Perhaps there were some adjustments to the delinquent roles. Well, he would find out once he arrived at JA building.

Chapter 229

* * * *

Coming to work on a weekend - that was how Maru felt as he entered the rotary door. Unlike last week, there weren’t many people in the lounge. That made him feel that it was actually Sunday. The appointment was at 11, and the clock was pointing to 10:50.

‘I came at a suitable time’, thought Maru as he took the elevator to the 7th floor. Getting off, Maru looked left and right. He was wondering where he had to go this time.

“So you’re here,” Maru heard a voice from his left. He saw Junmin and Jiseok standing there.

“Hello,” greeted Maru, as he walked towards the two. There was a mug in Junmin’s hands, and the thick fragrance of red ginseng could be smelled from it.

“I’m taking care of my health these days. I don’t have a wife to look after me, so I can only take care of myself.”

“You aren’t thinking about getting married?”

“Your words have thorns in them even though it’s the morning. What, did I ever let you down or something?”

“Of course not.”

Taking light jabs at each other, they changed locations. They walked past the automatic glass door and went to the place where the audition took place. Maru wondered if they were going to use that room again today, but Junmin led the two to the room opposite of that room. All four walls of that room were made of glass. It was possible to see the corridor from the inside.

“Have a seat and wait a while. You can drink some tea if you want.”

After Junmin left, Jiseok came closer and asked,

“Are you acquainted with him?”

“Somewhat.”

“Are you two close?”

“Why would we be? We’re in a business relationship. Rather than that, why are you here?”

“I don’t know. The text message told me to come because of assigning the roles, but I haven’t heard the specifics yet. Rather than that, I never knew that this entire building was that man’s possession. If I knew, I wouldn’t have signed a contract so early.”

“A contract? You have a company you belong to?”

“Yeah, I do. You don’t have one?”

“There’s no way I...,” Maru said up to that point and stopped. He was in a contract relationship with Junmin, so perhaps he could be considered a member of JA productions. Or, maybe it wasn’t like that since the contract was an individual one. Thinking back, the contract was a huge one involving 300 million won, but the contract paper was nothing more than just a few lines on a napkin.

“What’s that? Do you have one or not?”

“I don’t have one. Probably.”

Maru made some green tea with the tea bag and drank a sip. He sometimes saw people walking in the corridor over the glass wall. However, those people only gave the two of them a glance but didn’t actually enter. He wondered if anyone was coming at all.

Meanwhile, Jiseok was talking non-stop as though he would not allow a moment of silence. Even the merciful buddha would give him the cold shoulder for being a blabbermouth, and Jesus might actually step down from the cross, move the cross elsewhere and go back on it, all while saying ‘dude, you’re noisy’. Since this guy wasn’t someone that would stop talking just because someone told him to, the only option was to ignore him outright. Maru only smiled at Jiseok. It would be for the best if he got tired of talking and quietened down a little, but the chances of that seemed pretty slim. He ended up drinking three cups of green tea with the mindset of going through a trial.

“Looks like I made you wait,” Junmin entered at that moment. Even though this was the weekend, he seemed busy. Even in the short moment between him entering and sitting down, he was messaging someone on his phone.

“It’s always like this before the filming begins. Producers have to clean up after a lot of people. Others bring their troubles to me even when I stay still. It’s a very enjoyable position to be in, I must say,” said Junmin with a loathing smile. He looked very tired. It seemed that drinking red ginseng extract wasn’t just to take care of his body. Perhaps he was taking them to keep up with all the work.

“As you probably know, both of you will be assigned to a role. Although these roles are extras without many lines in the story, do not ever think about doing things half-heartedly. This is a movie you’re appearing in. The filming will be strict as well and we’ll reshoot each scene as many times as it’s necessary. I said that it is okay to waste as much film as they want so we’ll probably be shooting for an extremely long time.”

Although he stated that as though it was a matter of fact, the contents were something to be taken seriously. Junmin was in charge of the production of this film. If the film director was in charge of filming the actual scenes, the producer was in charge of setting up the environment that allows for the filming. He was the one in charge of finances, and he said the words ‘it is okay to waste’ film. This meant that

there would be no cutting corners to decrease the production cost of the film, and it also meant that the actors will be squeezed out of every last bit of their energy.

“Isn’t 35mm film quite expensive?”

“It costs around 300 thousand won. Oh, and that’s per roll.”

“How long can we film with that then?”

“It’s around four and a half minutes, but if you consider cuts and rejoins. It’ll be around four minutes.”

“So that means, if we re-shoot...”

“We would be donating 300 thousand won to the ground every 4 minutes. Isn’t that exciting?”

Maru heaved a deep sigh. Concrete numbers made him nervous. The pressure from other people as well as heavy occasions were things he could endure through deep breathing. That pressure did not result in actual, physical harm. However, this was different. Every NG(no good) scene he caused meant 300 thousand won vaporized into nothing.

“Since it’s confirmed that you’re casting us. We’re getting paid too, right?”

“Of course.”

“How much?”

“It’s quite good. You’ll get 100 thousand won each. The scene where you two will be appearing in will end in a single day, after all. Though, you might get paid more once it gets late into the night. You aren’t thinking that you’re not paid much, are you? In other places, you’d at most get 70 thousand won for being an extra and 30 for just appearing. 100 thousand is actually quite a good deal. What, you think it’s not much?”

“Not at all. It’s more than I expected. But... it doesn’t seem like a lot after hearing the price of a film roll.”

100 thousand won. Right now, one would be lucky to get paid 3 thousand won per hour. Maru also received 2600 won per hour when he worked at the petrol station. His wage increased by 300 won midway thanks to his excellent work, but even that didn’t reach 3000 won an hour. In this era, 100 thousand won for a single day was a lot, especially considering his status as a high school student.

‘But one slip-up means 300 thousand, huh.’

Every slip-up from an actor would burn cash to nothingness. Leaving aside the film costs, just the labor costs with all those people at the scene must be extremely high. This wasn’t a movie involving just one or two people. There would be actors, their coordinators, managers as well as people related to the actual production of the movie. Most of them should be salarymen receiving monthly wages, but there should also be freelancers who would get overtime pay if they worked hours past their contract. The phrase ‘time is money’ also applied to movies. It was extremely easy to see that.

“Wow, I guess we can’t slip up,” said Jiseok as he widened his eyes.

“If we get an okay in one go, the mood at the scene will be very good. However, if the filming time increases by 10 or 20 minutes due to some newbies, they’ll start turning very strict.”

Junmin put down a pile of papers - they seemed to be the script - before continuing,

“Oh yeah. Consider insults something ordinary once the shooting begins. The only people that can get humane treatment on the scene are those that do their jobs properly. Newbies are treated worse than pebbles on the sidewalk so hold yourselves together.”

“Will we get a lot of insults?”

“You’ll listen to more insults than what you’ve heard in your life combined.”

“Wow, they say being insulted increases your lifespan. I might be able to achieve what Qin Shi Huang couldn’t.”

Jiseok smiled. Junmin laughed when he heard those words.

“Looks like you’d do well. Rather than that, it’s a pity. If you met me earlier, I would have given you a contract right there and then.”

“You tell me. I also wanted to sign a contract with a good company like this.”

“Can I tell that to president Bang?”

“Nope. I want to maintain my business ethics.”

“Then why don’t you come after your contract is over?”

“I’ll come if the president doesn’t want me to extend the contract. He did look after me, so I can’t just betray him. A man must fulfill his duty, don’t you think?”

“Duty, huh? That’s right,” Junmin looked at Maru as he said those words. Maru coughed awkwardly and looked away. Junmin was basically saying ‘it’s your duty to do your money’s worth, isn’t it?’ with his eyes.

“For now, I want to know why we were called here.”

Maru switched the topic.

“Oh yes, there was that.”

Junmin pushed the pile of papers towards him. The top page had the words ‘Twilight Years’ on it. It was as he had expected, the script.

“We decided that we’ll cast delinquent 1 and delinquent 2. The rest will be supplementary extras.”

“Who’s 1 and who’s 2?”

“That’s what we’re deciding today. It’s an important scene after all.”

At that moment, Junmin raised his head and looked outside the glass wall. Maru followed his gaze. He saw a hooded man.

“I’m here.”

The man, giving off a thick smell of cigarettes, was Taeho. He was wearing slippers and when he sat down next to Junmin, he started grumbling.

“Hyung-nim. I’m feeling so tired these days. I’m not doing much, but I feel powerless.”

“I told you you need to quit gaming. You should be taking care of your body since the filming begins soon.”

“I might not look like it, but I am taking care of my body. I’m gaining all the weight that I painstakingly lost because the author told me that the first son had to give off a chubby impression. I’ve been eating, sleeping and gaming. I’ve gained 15kg in the past two months. Urgh, just thinking about having to lose it again after the movie makes me want to vomit.”

“Stop complaining. I know you’ll lose that weight like nothing once you’re told to.”

“Do you think I’m made of rubber? Jeez, those who get to order people around don’t know the difficulties of the people doing the actual work. So buy me some food. I’m hungry!”

After that, Taeho kept saying ‘I’d like some kkanpunggi(spicy garlic fried chicken)’ without stopping.

This man showed a tidy appearance in a suit during the annual awards at the end of the year, but his actual appearance was that of a chubby man in his 40s. As far as Maru knew, his mother also liked this actor. It would be quite a sight to see if he took a picture of him right now and showed it to her later.

“Aren’t you embarrassed in front of these kids?”

“An actor must throw away all shame, hyung-nim.”

“I get it already, so get up already. How the hell are you becoming more immature as time goes?”

“It’s all because I went through suffering in my early years. Hey! You two! Go play around while you still have the time. If you grow old doing nothing but work, you’ll turn into a horrible guy like me. Though, I’m still more humane than this hyung-nim right here. Do you know how scary this guy is? Let me tell you a story. This guy, before he....”

“I’ll order whatever you want so please shut up already.”

“Thanks, hyung-nim!”

This was the first time Maru saw Junmin give in to someone else’s wishes. Moonjoong was someone who worked in this industry much longer than him and was someone he respected, so he didn’t count, but this time, it was towards a man who looked at least a decade younger than him.

“Hey hey. You two should order something too. Jjajang(black bean sauce noodles) or jjamppong(spicy seafood noodles)?”

“I want jjamppong,” Jiseok replied immediately. Then, the gaze was gathered on Maru. Maru sighed slightly before speaking in a low voice.

“I want japchae-bap(rice topped with stir-fried glass noodles).”

* * * *

“The chinese restaurant at the front really has some good food,” Taeho said as he made some coffee with stick coffee. Junmin left mid way after getting a call and never came back.

“Well then, now that we ate, let’s get things done since you guys must be busy. Since we just ate, let’s do some exercise so open the scripts that you received. That’s the script of the movie on which your name will be on in the ending credits,” Taeho said while tapping on his belly. Maru slowly flipped over the script. The script was definitely different to a script for a play. The stage directions were much more detailed and the scene numbers were marked with ‘#’s. Not only that, each of the lines clearly showed the personality of the scriptwriter, and they were much shorter than those of plays as well.

“So the whole thing is only 80 pages long?” Maru asked after checking the very last page. It was very short. He wondered how this short script would make up a 90 minute long movie.

“Short, isn’t it? But once it’s made into a movie, you’ll feel that it isn’t short at all. It’s short but you’ll feel like it’s an eternity. Once the film director starts nagging, the whole thing just falls into an infinite loop. To make a 80 page-long script into a movie, you’ll need two months at least. It’s excruciating. It’s not something a man should do.”

“Yet you’re an actor.”

“What a bold question. I like you.”

Taeho burped before replying.

“That’s the addicting part about a movie. It feels horrible during the filming. It’d be better if we do scene by scene from the beginning, but circumstances don’t exactly allow for that. No matter how well things are planned out, it will always go wrong. Sometimes there’s a need to do scene #34 after scene #1. What pisses people off is that sometimes that scene #34 is set in a place like Jeju island. I’ve never seen a movie that’s filmed according to the initial plan. Not even once. But you know? The thing is, once that crappy stuff is all out of the way and you look at the final, edited movie, you forget about all the pains. Then, you go participate in the next movie and repeat the whole process. This is really addictive. Once you get into it, you have no choice but to continue doing it.”

Taeho emptied the coffee in one gulp.

“Well then, since you read the script, let’s get to work then, shall we? Page 30, scene #44. You see? Read through that part. Imagine the scene in your head too. Delinquent 1 and delinquent 2. I’ll decide on the roles after you guys try them out. Delinquent 2 obviously looks like he’ll have more screen time, right? He gets to talk to the main character at the end after all. Both of you probably want that. Since you’re going to appear in a movie, you’d want to appear longer, right?” Taeho said with a thick grin. His appearance right now was completely different from just moments ago where he was picking his tooth with a toothpick, giggling. His eyes were calm and his entire atmosphere was different.

“Let’s try them out once, analyze the characters and decide after that. I’m doing this because senior Moonjoong asked me to, so be sure to concentrate. My pride is also on the line as well. I’m not putting someone half-assed in front of the senior after all. Well, then. Shall we have a go?”

Chapter 230

* * * *

“Scene 44. Outside. Street. Dawn. The sound of drunkards could be intermittently heard from the back alley. Doksoo is lying down on a bench. A delinquent approaches Doksoo, who’s curled up, groaning,” Taeho read the stage directions out loud. Doksoo was the main character of the movie ‘Twilight Years’.

“Well then, since we don’t know the precise location, we’ll go with a stereotypical setting. Imagine. You’re in a street with a lot of bars. The time is early dawn. Since it’s not the weekend, there aren’t many people who are drinking this late. You can intermittently hear sounds of drunk people. Now then, what is the reason for you two, two high schoolers, to be in such a place?”

“We must have had fun with friends,” this was Jiseok’s answer.

“We must be looking around for bars that we can slip through with our faces,” Maru replied while stroking his chin.

“Good. You might be having fun with friends, or maybe trying to slip through to a bar. Anyway, you guys are delinquents so you must be quite pissed all the time, right?”

Taeho then looked at Jiseok,

“Try saying the next line.”

Jiseok had a look at the script before saying his lines with a chuckle,

“Gramps. Oi, gramps. You’ll croak if you sleep ‘ere you know?”

“Good. That was very delinquent-like. Next, you.”

Maru had a look at the script. Before the line was a bit of stage directions that said ‘while grinning towards friends’. He could vaguely picture the scene. The delinquents had come across a drunk old man and was probing his state. He then thought that it would be better to say the lines worriedly. After all, it was important to see if he was awake or not. Maru first lowered his voice and spoke as though he was waking up a sleeping man.

“Grandpa. Hello? Grandpa? You’ll die if you keep sleeping here, you know?”

“Oh? Yours is different. Why did you do it like that?”

“I think this is much more realistic than approaching with a wide grin.”

“Okay, I get it.”

It was at that moment. Taeho slapped the table hard with the script. Maru narrowed his eyes and looked at Taeho.

“I get that you’re smart. I’m not saying that it’s bad to deduce things like that. But I’m angry. Do you know why?”

“Is it because I didn’t follow the script?”

“Correct. You know that this movie is based on a novel, right?”

“Yes.”

“That novel. It was written over a span of a year and a half. After that, it took another half a year to produce this script after discussing non-stop with a script writer. They went through several iterations before they produced this.”

Taeho raised the script up high.

“Every comma and every period contains the intentions of the writer. They don’t just randomly write (with a grin) on the script without thinking. Of course, you might be right and your method might be a better method. But like that, there will be no end. Someone has got to set the standards, and this script is that very standard. This is an agreement. It is something that people involved in this movie must abide to, especially the actors. Don’t ever try to change it by yourself. Understood?”

After saying that, Taeho returned to his usual smile. His expression just before was quite frightening. It wasn’t just a condescending senior jealous of a boastful junior, but a rebuke from an experienced person to a newbie. Maru accepted it immediately. Taeho’s words were very easy for him to understand.

“I’m sorry.”

“Once is a mistake, but twice is intentional. You must first digest the things that you’re given. Give your opinion after you digested the whole thing. That is the proper order of things. Though, I doubt that the director will listen to your opinions. Anyway, next.”

The script contained the intent of the writer. It wasn’t just any intent either, but a deep meaning they spent several months to even several years working on. It was definitely arrogance on Maru’s part when he decided to change it after reading it just once. Maru thought that he should go back to the basics. The priority was to understand the script itself.

“Well, then. Let’s have a look. There aren’t any lines, but you get the picture, don’t you? Doksoo, lying down on the bench, is thinking that the world still has hope - that there are still youngsters looking after the elderly; that people still have affection for each other. However, reality is that these youths are thieves aiming for his money. This is the scene where he loses what little affection he has of this world. Senior Moonjoong must be having a hard time because of this scene as well. There’s not a single line here. And it’s not like we can add narrations like a documentary. The joy of looking at people approaching him, a slight bit of happiness, the following despair from the violence, as well as the frustration. He has to show the audience all of those emotions with his eyes, expression and actions only.”

Taeho put his hands against his chin and leaned forward.

“You two are saying your lines and acting in such a situation. The camera angle should be an over-the-shoulder shot. After capturing your faces for a brief moment, the following scenes will capture the senior’s face from behind you, over your shoulders. Imagine. In front of you is the god of acting. The pressure is no joke. In front of you will be an elder who thanks the world for human kindness then vents his anger against the world. It will freak you out. After all, he’ll then glare at you as though he’s about to kill. You two are going to have to act in tandem with the senior under such circumstances. You know what that means? It means that you’ll be wasting several rolls of film with the slightest of mistakes. You

do know the saying that you need two hands to clap, right? No matter how good the senior is at acting, the end result will be nothing if you guys slip up.”

“So we just need to do well!” Jiseok replied to that as though there were no problems at all. His face was filled with a smile.

“Yes. You need to do well. I’m not saying this to frighten you. I just want you to know. You guys might be side characters without many lines, but the weight of your roles are definitely not light. Of course, I get that you two aren’t total beginners. I did feel that you guys are different to those people who boast their career.”

Taeho leaned back on the chair and looked at the script.

“Then let’s do the important line then. What was your name again?”

“Yoo Jiseok, sir.”

“Yes, let’s start with you Jiseok. Doksoo struggles not to get his money stolen. However, he is eventually robbed of all his money by the delinquents. Doksoo rolls off the bench. He glares at the delinquents as they walk away. Well then, cue!”

“Man, your sorry ass has achieved nothing even after all these years. What kind of shit life have you been living, gramps?”

“Good. I like how you’re absolutely shameless. I want to slap you right now. Hey, are you like this at school too?”

“Me? I’m more on the side of the bullied.”

“I doubt that.”

“Hahaha.”

Taeho turned around to look at Maru.

“Should I give you a cue sign?”

“No, I’m okay.”

Maru followed the script to the tee this time. He had done plenty of research on delinquents so he didn’t find anything difficult. They say poison becomes medicine if used correctly, the now-expelled Changhoo’s nasty speech came out of his mouth naturally.

“Man, your sorry ass has achieved nothing even after all these years. What kind of shit life have you been living, gramps?”

“What was your name again?”

“I’m Han Maru.”

“I think you must have made quite a few kids cry as well. Are you two both actually delinquents?”

“I’m quite the trash, yes.”

“Oh?”

Taeho stood up from the seat and started walking around within the glass room. He seemed to be in deep thought.

“Both of you are okay, but that makes it harder for me to decide,” Taeho talked to himself as he looked outside the glass wall. After a while, he made a ‘tsk’ noise before sitting back down.

“From your looks, Maru looks more nasty, but Jiseok is also okay with his immature face too. The film director also said that both of your faces are okay, so it’s up to me to decide, huh,” Taeho kept mumbling to himself as he spun around on his office chair. This man was quite frivolous unlike his serious-looking face. He was like a gentleman when he shaved and tidied up his hair. Maru thought that actors were really eccentric.

“What role do you want?”

“Delinquent 2,” Jiseok replied without hesitation.

“What about you, Maru?”

“I’m the same.”

“Greedy brats. Any thoughts on yielding?”

To that question,

“No.”

“Not at all.”

They replied at the same time. Maru glanced at Jiseok. He was smiling brightly yet his eyes were saying that he would not yield at all. He liked helping others out, but it seemed that he had no intentions on giving up on his desires. Maru liked him that way. He didn’t like people who sacrificed themselves for others.

“Ah, fine. An actor must have some greed. Good, then write what this line feels like on a piece of paper. Write what you think, not what’s written on the script. Show me how you would express the lines if you were that character.”

Taeho gave the two of them a pen and a piece of A4 paper each. Maru stared at the paper for a bit before writing his feelings with the pen.

“I’m really bad with things like this.”

“Just write what you think. Are you giving up?”

“Of course not!”

Jiseok groaned but started writing. Maru put down his pen and pushed the paper towards Taeho. He had done plenty of character analysis while reading the novel. The only role he could possibly fit in the novel was the delinquent - was his mindset as he read it. Although it was a side character with only two lines, that character would have a life of his own once he dug deep. It was just not captured on camera.

This meant that he would have to dissolve the character's entire life into those two lines, life being equivalent to philosophy.

A delinquent's philosophy.

There was no background information given. After all, it was just a delinquent passing by even in the novel. In the end, it was all up to imagination. There was only one assumption - what if it was me. The life of the character that he had been thinking of many times these past months.

"I'm done."

Jiseok pushed the paper towards Taeho as well.

"Let's have a look then."

Taeho picked up the papers. Thanks to the two papers, Taeho's face was hidden. After reading the short texts with an expressionless face, Taeho smiled.

"I think I'll have to give the character to the crueler one. The protagonist, Doksoo, will only be emphasized more the more pathetic he becomes. The more drastic the contrast, the better the scene will look through a camera."

Maru did not avoid Taeho's gaze as he looked towards him.

"Han Maru. You're delinquent 2. You're going to have to act like a real trash. Alright?"

"...Yes, sir."

Just like that? Maru felt rather unreal, but he smiled when he understood the situation. He got what he wanted, there was no way he didn't feel happy.

"Ah, I guess I didn't get it."

Jiseok said with pity. However, he smiled and acted as though nothing happened to him.

"Maru, since you won, you should buy us some congratulatory drinks. I want cappuccino. Senior, you should have him treat you too."

"You're buying? I'm not the shameless guy who rips off of his juniors, but I'm also a big hearted man who does not deny people's goodwill. I want americano, then."

The two of them looked towards Maru with a satisfied grin. They really got along well. Some might mistake them for brothers who are far apart in age.

Though, he was completely fine with treating them on an occasion like this.

"Senior. I'll be going downstairs for a bit then."

"Sure. I want iced!" Taeho said with a hearty laughter.