

Once Again 281

Chapter 281

The shoot was delayed by 20 minutes. As such delays were quite common, no one was in a fluster or anything.

"It's good that there's no one picky this time."

Sooyeol spoke with a comfortable expression as he sipped some coffee. Joohyun nodded her head. The moodmakers of the set were not the staff that made up the majority of the people present, but the director and the actors, who were the minority. The air would become very volatile if one of the actors, especially if he or she was popular with the public, started becoming annoyed. If there was an actor that could even suppress the director, then the atmosphere on the set would change according to that actor's mood at every moment.

"Senior Joojin was quite something when he was still around. He always got into fights with the director and whimsically said that he'd quit or whatnot. The assistant director from back then always drank some bile juice, and he told me that it was in order to live."

"I've heard of the rumors. I've never done something together with him, so I've never seen him do it in person."

Joohyun closed her script. Someone made an okay sign from the set.

"The director told me to say that you should prepare for the rehearsal," a person from the production team ran up to her and said.

As she was aware, she just nodded and walked into the set. Two rooms were created for the two daughters next to the living room and the kitchen set. Suyeon's room was flamboyant, and Yoojin's room looked like a typical girl's room.

"Well then, let's get going."

Director Joonggeun stood at the entrance of the set house with the storyboard in hand. Joohyun took off the blanket on her shoulders and put it on her chair before standing next to the director.

"Okay then. The camera is on that side. Sooyeol, your movement goes like this. You'll start from the entrance and end in the kitchen, that's one cut. Then, we'll move the camera to this side and have a two shot with the two of you. It's supposed to be a happy family, but make it look like the wife is in power."

"What do you think of my makeup?" Joohyun asked as she moved her head right and left.

"Try standing in front of the reflector."

She stood in front of the reflector that the lightings team brought. The director groaned for a moment before making an okay with his hand.

"It's good. Let's just leave it at that since it's one of the early scenes. Make it darker as we do later shots. Oh, and, hey! Bring the ring!"

The props team brought over a ring. It was a small ring with a diamond in the middle. It was nothing fancy, but it felt elegant.

“Wear this for the ring.”

“Paid promotion, is it?”

“Yeah. Suyeon, Yoojin, come here as well. Suyeon, you wear this watch, and Yoojin, tie your hair up with this hairband.”

“I don’t get anything?” Sooyeol smiled as he spoke.

All he got back was a ‘you got a suit’ from the director.

The number of paid sponsorships changed according to the background of the movie. For movies with famous actors and famous directors, there would be all sorts of sponsorships, big and small. This was business after all. Joohyun looked down at the ring on her finger.

“Is it cubic zirconia?”

“No, it’s the real deal. It’s worth 8 million won so be careful. We have to give it back.”

“Phew.”

Joohyun shrugged her shoulders. There were snacks and drinks within the house. Although some of them were necessary for the story, most of them were there because of sponsorships. The labels of those snacks were exposed to the camera in a way that didn’t disturb the scene. If it was too obvious, it would make the audience feel animosity towards the product instead, so it had to be captured in a natural light as much as possible. Although new actors did not know the meaning behind the positioning of the products, people like Joohyun took notice of those first.

“Suyeon shouldn’t be a problem. Yoojin.”

“Yes!”

“Just do the basics. I’m expecting a fresh high school student from you, so don’t be too nervous. Try calling Joohyun ‘mom’ from time to time. It should stick to your mouth.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Good. Let’s go over the cut one more time and start the rehearsal right after.”

A light was put up to simulate daylight and the camera was put on rails. The camera director checked the angle several times before signalling standby.

Sooyeol first entered the door and said his line. Joohyun, who was in the kitchen, started chopping carrots. A rehearsal was no different from the real deal. A mistake in the rehearsal was very likely to continue into the real shoot after all. She controlled her emotions. The situation here was that she was preparing dinner for her husband who came back from work, but inwardly, she was very annoyed because of her father-in-law. Joohyun reminded herself - why do I need to take care of my father-in-law? What is my husband thinking? Does he think it’s easy to look after the elderly? No, in the first place, that old dude isn’t dead yet?

As she immersed herself into the role, her hands became filled with annoyance. The carrots that she cut were out of shape. Meanwhile, she still became more and more absorbed in her role and became more emotional.

Eventually, she saw her husband who approached her as he took off his tie. Joohyun felt angry inside, but did not get annoyed at him immediately and just welcomed him.

“Welcome home.”

Then,

“Good. Let’s keep that going. We can record the chopping board sound afterwards so you don’t have to try to make the noises!”

Hearing the feedback from the director, Joohyun heaved out a deep breath. She put down the knife and looked at her two daughters. They were giggling on the sofa. Suyeon looked natural. Thanks to her young-looking face, she didn’t look out of place despite wearing a school uniform. Yoojin was doing good as well. Her arm looked a little stiff, but it wasn’t that noticeable.

She felt that this was why she could be at ease around people that have experience acting. There were a lot of new actors who came straight to dramas and movies, but watching them made her feel sick. Their pronunciation was all over the place, and most of the time, they weren’t looking at the right places either. She didn’t know what kind of backing they had so that they came straight to dramas, but working with them tired her out endlessly.

Meanwhile, those that had theater experience had the basics down. It wasn’t that surprising since theaters did not allow for use of mics and they had to do everything with raw voice, so pronunciation was not a problem for those people. They were generally aware of how to use their bodies so most of the time, they wouldn’t get stiff in front of the camera.

After Joonggeun’s cut sign, Joohyun went behind Yoojin’s back and started massaging her shoulders lightly. Yoojin was startled and quickly looked back.

“You’re a little too stiff. It’s better if you loosen up a little.”

“Ah, okay.”

Yoojin took a deep breath before breathing back out. Her stiff left shoulder relaxed slightly. Joohyun nodded and told her that she was doing good.

“There there! Let’s roll the film. The audio and the lights are good. Let’s get this done in a single shot.”

Joonggeun clapped as he spoke.

It was time for the real deal.

* * *

“Thank you for your work.”

Yoojin took a deep bow. As a new actor, greeting everyone was key. It was like that regardless of the industry. No one disliked people who greeted them, but the opposite was true. Sometimes, problems would arise due to not greeting people.

“Well done today.”

Yoojin couldn't hide her smile when she heard Joohyun compliment her. She was happy that she was able to shoot with an actress she respected, but now, she was complimented as well.

“Your pronunciation was good. I was surprised.”

“That's the one thing I'm confident in.”

“That's a good weapon you have there. I actually had a hard time because of my pronunciation.”

“You did?”

Yoojin blinked several times in wonder. Joohyun had become a superstar through a one-act play and she seemed flawless back then. Even when she came back after pausing her career for a while, she showed flawless acting skills and swept various prizes. Such a person actually had a hard time because of pronunciation?

“What?”

“I thought you were a perfect superwoman.”

“If I was perfect like you said, then I wouldn't be in all the controversy. Even when I look at myself, I can find many flaws. Above all, I have a foul mouth.”

“Ha, haha.”

“Don't live like me. It feels refreshing when you say it, but the aftermath is a hell to deal with. These days, it's so easy to see bad comments on the internet as well.”

“But I want to live with dignity like you.”

“I don't recommend it, but I guess I feel thankful when you put it like that.”

Yoojin was happy since she felt that she had gotten closer to Joohyun. She thought that it would be even better if they could act like sisters privately as well.

At that moment, Joohyun put her chin on Yoojin's head, saying that she was exhausted. Yoojin felt that Joohyun was really tall. Sooyeol was 180cm tall, but she didn't seem that much smaller when she stood next to him. Although wearing heels should have something to do with it, she should be somewhere around 170cm even without wearing heels.

“Does that bother you?”

“Not at all!”

“Really? You're cheerful. I like it.”

Her head felt a little painful, but she decided to endure it since Joohyun was acting nice towards her. Just as she was about to leave the set in search for her manager, she saw Suyeon walking together with a man. She sneakily held his arm and the man immediately pulled out, startled.

“Looks like she doesn’t get tired of that. Yoojin.”

“Yes?”

“A woman’s body is a master key that works on all men in this world. It’ll be really easy if you decide to use it to your advantage.”

“....”

“Once you grow up and start working in this world for real, you’ll realize how hard and cruel the land of Korea is to women. You’ll have a hard time, and if you keep going, you’ll find yourself in a situation where using your body will make your life much easier.”

“I will never do such a thing,” Yoojin spoke determinedly.

“I like that attitude. But sometimes, your refusal isn’t enough to overcome that hurdle. They’ll say that you’re just trying to act coquettish. If you do end up in such a situation....”

Joohyun moved out a little before doing a knee kick towards empty air. Yoojin slacked her jaws when she heard the sharp sound.

“You should give them a kick like this. Then, I’ll take care of the rest.”

While they talked to each other, the man and Suyeon disappeared from sight. Yoojin thought that Suyeon was really the woman true to her rumors.

“I don’t want to live an easy life,” Yoojin spoke as she followed Suyeon with her eyes.

At that moment, Joohyun put her hand on Yoojin’s head and made a faint smile.

“It’s not always like that. There’s no such thing as an easy life. There’s a life that looks easy, but if you look close enough, you’ll find that it isn’t.”

Patting on Yoojin’s head, Joohyun continued speaking,

“Do you want to go grab something to eat with this unni?”

“May I?”

“If you aren’t busy.”

“I’m not busy!”

“Then let’s go. I don’t have any schedule either. It should be fine to talk with the juniors like this from time to time.”

Yoojin followed Joohyun who walked up front. As she did so, she told her manager that she could have an early leave.

Joohyun sat on the driver's seat. Yoojin carefully opened the door and sat on the passenger seat. She wondered about the presence of Joohyun's manager.

"I go around without my manager for nearby places, because I like driving."

Yoojin faintly smiled because she felt like Joohyun had read her mind.

Looking around the neat car, Yoojin saw a small framed photo on the top of the dashboard. Inside the photo was a younger-looking Joohyun and a woman she didn't know. Although it was an ordinary photo, Yoojin couldn't take her eyes off it for some reason. It wasn't because of Joohyun, but due to the woman with a faint smile next to her.

"She's the reason I became an actor," Joohyun spoke just then.

"The reason you became an actor?"

"Yeah. I developed my dream while looking up to this person. She's the only one that I respect and at the same time, she's the only one that gave me despair. I told you that no one is perfect, right? Actually, there is one. There is a perfect person when it comes to acting. She was too perfect that she earned the jealousy of the heavens...."

Joohyun's eyes looked too bitter as she talked about the woman in the photo, which made Yoojin unable to speak. Although Joohyun didn't say it, Yoojin intuitively realized that the woman was no longer in this world.

"The fact that I could meet her was a blessing of my lifetime, but at the same time, it was a net that bound me. That was because I could never be satisfied with my own acting after looking at hers. Anyone would feel like that. This unni was just... the best."

Joohyun turned her head around and smiled. Yoojin had a look at the woman in the photo again. An actress admired by the actress that she admired. She had never met this person nor knew her name, but for some reason, she felt admiration towards her. What kind of acting did she do? What was the world of emotions that she showed others?

"Jung Haejoo. That's her name. She's the best nameless actress."

Joohyun rolled down the window. The strong winds blew away the name Jung Haejoo from the car. Yoojin became silent for a moment. She had a moment of mourning.

Chapter 282

People looked like ants. Suyeon looked down at the streets while putting her hand against the window. She was just staring at a yellow bin that a street cleaner was dragging around when,

"What are you doing?"

A cold hand touched her lower stomach. The palm was filled with calluses. After stroking her stomach for a while, the hand slowly climbed up towards her chest. Suyeon grabbed the hand and took it off her body.

"It's about time we leave."

“Already? Let’s stay for a little bit more.”

“I have work to do.”

Suyeon put on the bra that she hung on the chair as though she was hanging laundry.

“I wonder when we can meet again.”

“I don’t know either.”

“I think it’ll be quite good if we can meet more often.”

“I thought you had a person that you’re seriously going out with. Looks like I heard wrong?”

Suyeon put on her blouse and reached into the back of her blouse to take out her hair. The man on the bed gave her the skirt which was on the floor.

“She’s a good woman.”

“There you go then. As for us, we’re just a business relationship, aren’t we?”

“A woman that clearly draws the line isn’t that charming, but you’re different.”

“Maybe that’s because the women you’ve met until now didn’t know how to draw a clear line.”

The man put his arm around Suyeon’s neck and tried to kiss her. Suyeon put her fingers between the two pairs of lips.

“Don’t bring bed labor outside the bed.”

“You consider that labor?”

Suyeon smiled instead of answering. The man made an empty laugh before stretching his arms out.

“Who else do you meet other than me?”

“Oh, my. You’re asking a lady that? You’re an impolite one.”

Suyeon took out some cosmetics from her bag and put them on the dressing table. She drew her eyebrows and put on some lipstick. Just then, she heard a flint sound from a lighter from where the man was.

“You aren’t meeting me once I get married, I guess, right?”

“I don’t want to pull out another woman’s hair on the streets like in dramas. I’m a law-abiding woman, you know.”

“Geez.”

“You should get married soon and find a place to call home, producer. How long are you planning to be a migratory bird?”

“I guess. The woman this time is kind and above all, likes me.”

“She fell for you?”

"I think so."

"That's good then."

Suyeon stood up with the bag in hand.

"I'll be leaving first then. Please take care of the checkout."

She put on her shoes and pulled down on the door handle slightly when the man hugged her shoulders from behind.

"I think it'll be good to live with you, too."

"You're a bad guy."

"She's a kind woman, but she's no fun. I feel like she'll raise the kids well, but at the same time, I feel like she'll make my life dull."

Suyeon sighed and turned around. The man was standing there with a grin on his face and she grabbed him by his stuff. The man groaned and flinched back.

"I've never considered myself as a clean woman. I'm dirty and underhanded. If people knew about me, they'd insult me. But still, I don't cross the line. We had fun, didn't we? You put in your energy for me, and I shook my ass for you in bed. I told you the first time we met, didn't we? That we shouldn't put any emotions on the line."

Suyeon loosened her grip. The man stepped back with a stiff expression.

"If you know someone good, then go to her. Don't bring emotions into business. Well, then, producer. I had fun until now. I hope you can greet me nicely when you see me on set. If you invite me to your wedding, then I'll attend. If you don't, then well, that's that."

Suyeon waved her hand before leaving the room. As she walked towards the elevator, she took out her phone from her bag. The first thing she did was to erase the messages she exchanged with that producer. Her bodily relationship with him was over, but she might meet him again with business matters, so she left behind his number.

"Now then, what do I do?"

Although she said that she had work to do, she was free for the next two days. She would get busy once she started shooting a drama starting next week, but she wasn't that busy until then. She thought about going to Busan for the next two days by herself, but she soon changed her mind.

She hummed as she called Geunsoo.

-Yes. This is Hong Geunsoo speaking.

"My name should pop up on your screen. There's no need to answer so stiffly, don't you think?"

-Yes. This is Hong Geunsoo speaking.

"Sheesh, you really are cruel. So then, Mr. Geunsoo."

-What is it?

“Wanna go on a date?”

-Hm, I do, but I have something to do.

“It must be my mistake for thinking that that something to do just came up seconds ago, right?”

-Fortunately, it's scheduled work. I can be at ease since I don't have to come up with excuses on the spot.

“What work is this?”

-Being a driver.

“What?”

-There's a shoot away from Seoul, as you know. I have the important mission of taking a treasured actor to the shooting location.

“A treasured actor? Do you mean Sir Moonjoong?”

-No.

“Then who is it? Senior Taeho?”

-No

“Then who is it? You can tell me that much, right?”

-Maru.

“...You're driving him there?”

-Yes, I owe something to him and I want to check something with him as well.

“Are you taking him to Mt. Juwang again?”

-Well, no, but it is located in the same province. Oh, I'll hang up now, we have to get going soon.

“Wait a sec.”

Suyeon put her phone in her other hand and hurriedly continued speaking.

“I guess there's an empty seat at the back right?”

-What?

“I said there should be an empty seat at the back.”

-Well, no, we have to take air with us as well.

“I'll tag along then.”

-Hanging up. See you later.

“I’ve already decided that I’m following. I’ll be obedient if you take me, and if you make me take my car there and meet at the set, I’m going to cling to you for the whole day. What’s your choice?”

A groan of hesitation could be heard over the phone. At that moment, there was a small voice that said ‘let me take it’ before a bunch of noises could be heard. After that, a new voice talked to her.

-There’s nothing beneficial for you there. Why are you trying to follow us?

“It’s been a long time, Maru. How are club activities going? I’ll be going starting next week so look forward to that.”

-Don’t change the subject on me. It’s a little far to be considered a walk in the park, so why are you trying to come with us?

“Why, you ask? Because I have nothing to do. And Mr. Geunsoo is going there too, isn’t he? I’m telling you this beforehand, but I have a car, okay? We’ll be meeting on set anyhow. If you leave me here, then I’ll annoy you for a lifetime. It’ll be fun if I make some jokes in front of the others, right?”

-Why don’t you try becoming an adult instead? I heard that becoming mature is the trend these days.

“I am an adult. I became one a long time ago.”

After a moment of silence, she was notified to come to Suwon station. Suyeon smiled as she took the elevator to the first floor lobby.

* * *

“To think that you’d have to drive five hours for a single scene. That’s the sadness of rookies for you.”

Maru looked back at Suyeon, who was in the back seat. She took off her sandals and was half-lying down across both of the seats.

“Who told you to join that pain?”

“It’s fun to do so. Isn’t it, Mr. Geunsoo?”

“No, not really,” Geunsoo replied as he tilted the wheel slightly. It had been two hours since they got on the highway. There were two hours to go until they arrived at their destination.

“Since it’s getting boring, should we do a word chain game?”

As soon as Suyeon said something, Geunsoo opened the windows. The wind was very loud since the car was going at 120km/h. The loud noises made Suyeon, who was chatting non stop from the back seat, become quiet with a dumbfounded expression.

Maru raised his thumb up at an angle that Suyeon wouldn’t be able to see. No matter how loud the wind was, it wouldn’t be as loud as a woman’s chatter. After driving across the wind for a while, Geunsoo pulled out to a service area.

“I skipped breakfast so I’m getting hungry. Let’s have our lunch here.”

Geunsoo left the car. Maru followed him out. They entered the service area building while talking about the set. As this was the weekend, there were quite a number of people.

"I'm going with Sanchae-bibimbap."

"I'll take that as well."

"Should we order a bowl of ramyun as well?"

"Sounds good to me."

They put an order in and got back a meal ticket. They grabbed a table and waited for a while before a number signifying their ticket flashed on the noticeboard. Maru stood up from his seat and got the meal in place of Geunsoo who went to the bathroom.

Just as he grabbed his spoon to start eating, he felt a hand grabbing his shoulder. When he turned around, he saw Suyeon, wearing a baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses.

"...Are you a celebrity?"

"Yes, despite what you think I am. But you really didn't wait for me, huh. Where's mine?"

"One should take care of their own meals."

"What's that then?"

"It's senior Geunsoo's."

"Really? One should take care of their own meals, huh."

Suyeon smirked before pulling the tray over to her side. She picked up the spoon with a happy expression and mixed the contents of the bowl before scooping a big spoonful and eating it. Geunsoo, who just came back from the bathroom, saw what was happening and went to the ticketing booth to get another one as though nothing had happened. Seeing Geunsoo come back with another tray of Sanchae-bibimbap in hand, Suyeon thanked him by saying 'thanks for the meal'.

They continued on with their meal as they talked. Most of the time, it was Suyeon chatting, and Maru just asked Geunsoo some things he was curious about from time to time. Just as they finished off their meals, Maru caught something strange. He found some men who were looking at them with some hesitation.

"I think they noticed who you are."

"Me?"

"Yes."

Suyeon turned around a little. The men brightened in an instant and approached her quickly.

"Uhm, excuse me. Aren't you Miss Kim Suyeon?"

One of the four men, who seemed to be in his mid twenties, carefully asked. Maru saw that Suyeon had a kind smile on her face and inwardly thought that she was an actress after all. She could switch to her actress mode in an instant.

"Ah, yes. I am. You know who I am?"

“Wow! I was right. Ah, I’m a fan of yours, Miss Suyeon. I’ve never missed an episode of ‘Blue Spark’.”

“Really?”

Suyeon became shy and put her hand above her chest and twisted her body. That shy gesture made the men smile subconsciously.

Maru looked at Geunsoo and shrugged his shoulders. Geunsoo smiled back at him. Thanks to the four men causing a fuss, other people in the building started gathering around Suyeon.

Returning his tray, Maru spoke,

“She’s a celebrity alright. Many people recognize her.”

“She’s an actress that’s making a name for herself after all. Her mini series did well too. And there’s that new drama that she’s doing with Joohyun-noon. It’s a work that’s receiving a lot of attention, so it’s not that surprising that people recognize her.”

“Oh, you mean the one that was supposed to be done last winter but delayed because of an accident?”

“You know about it?”

“I remember hearing it from a friend of mine.”

Maru had heard that from Yoojin. She said something about how she was dejected because a drama she was looking forward to got delayed.

“She looks busy, so let’s just go by ourselves.”

“I want to do that, but I’m scared of the consequences. You know, she’s a scary woman.”

“That’s true. Oh, senior. I’m asking this just in case, but you aren’t actually interested in her, are you?”

“I don’t have that much luxury. I’m really busy these days, you know? I’m told to prepare for the next movie, leave some time for an interview, and that’s not the end of it.”

“It looks like the president is really making the most out of you.”

“Don’t even start. I’m working away like a slave since the moment I joined JA Production. You’ll be in my shoes in a little while. You should get ready for it. Senior Junmin really does make you earn back the money he paid you.”

“That, I can agree on. Rather than that, I wonder how long she’s gonna stay there. Oh, we’re eating out of the same pot now, aren’t we?”

Suyeon was struggling to escape the people who were asking for autographs. She was signalling for help from time to time, but neither Maru nor Geunsoo wanted to run into that crowd.

“Let’s get some rest in the car. She should be here soon enough. She’s a famous actress after all.”

“Sure.”

Maru bought three canned drinks from the convenience store before going back to the car. Geunsoo and he spent around 20 minutes talking about Geunsoo when they saw Suyeon limping towards the car

from afar. She greeted her fans that followed her for one last time before getting in the car. Getting in the car, Suyeon undid her top button on her blouse before lying down.

"I can't keep this up anymore. I should have just gone with the unapproachable image," she grumbled as she fanned herself with her hand.

Maru tossed her a drink.

Geunsoo started driving again. There were still two hours to go until they arrived at their destination. The sun would start setting once they arrived, and that would be when the shooting began.

Maru stretched out his arms with his hands locked. He felt nervous already. The tingle behind his neck made him smile subconsciously.

"You should get some sleep."

Hearing Geunsoo's words, Maru closed his eyes. Geunsoo told him that it would be better to preserve some energy since the shoot may continue late into the night.

Closing his eyes, Maru pictured that scene once again in his mind.

with wild vegetables("sanchae")

Chapter 283

Thump! A violent shake woke Maru up. He stared at the golden-colored skies for a while before turning his head to the right. He saw children holding their mothers' hands as they were going home. They were also holding a balloon each as though today was a special day. It seemed that they had exited the highway.

"You woke up?"

"Yes. Where are we? Have we arrived?"

"We're in Yeongdeok. We're almost there."

Maru had a look at the clock. It was 5:12 p.m. He stretched his neck out.

"You're hungry, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I just woke up after all."

"You'll be able to eat something once we arrive. The contracted food company this time makes some good food."

Geunsoo smiled as he opened the window.

"You said Yeongdeok, right? Are we near the sea then?"

"Cross that mountain then you'll see the sea."

"Then I guess the scene at the sea will be taken here too, right?"

“We can’t keep switching filming locations so they’ll probably shoot that scene here. Guess the elder will kill me in two days time with a hammer.”

“Hahaha.”

Geunsoo grabbed the wheel with one hand and started massaging his own shoulder with the other. He had been driving for more than five hours. It was natural for him to get tired.

“Should I drive?”

“Do you want to?” Geunsoo asked as he took his hands off the wheel.

Maru grabbed the wheel with his left hand. It had been a long time since he felt the touch of leather from the driving wheel. As they were not in an area where people lived, they didn’t have to worry about sudden appearances of people. The only thing in front of them was the endless expanse of fields as well as street lights. It was a straight road ahead, so Maru just had to adjust the wheel straight.

Just then,

“Are you crazy! What the hell are you two doing?” Suyeon woke up from sleep and screamed with a tired face.

“Well, driving, of course.”

“I was getting a little tired, so Maru’s been driving in my stead.”

Suyeon sighed in defeat because the two men sounded so calm about it.

The car slowed down. The road was narrowing due to the fields getting closer. It was barely enough for a single car to go through. Maru had a look at Geunsoo. Until now, the road was straight, and he pretty much didn’t have to do anything to the wheel, but narrow roads like this required him to put in more effort. He thought that Geunsoo would naturally take over the wheel, but Geunsoo instead just locked his fingers, put his hands behind his head and started whistling.

“What are you going to do if we fall off?”

“If we fall off, then we fall off. That’s nothing bad. In fact, I’m kinda looking forward to it because I feel like something fun is about to happen.”

Hearing those words, Suyeon started screaming at Geunsoo, saying that he should take over the wheel immediately. Meanwhile, the car had not stopped and they entered the narrow road. Geunsoo smiled and just controlled the pedals.

“Can I really do it?”

“Sure.”

Hearing such a calm answer, Maru just chuckled and made minute adjustments with his left hand. He had literally driven until he died in his previous life. He watched the roads as he controlled the wheel. Meanwhile, his foot was pedalling on virtual accelerator and brake pedals. In about five minutes, the road widened again.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have to call the tow truck,” Geunsoo grabbed the wheel as he spoke.

Suyeon, who looked worried all this time while looking outside the window, had become pale and was silent. Maru remembered Miso calling Geunsoo a lunatic before. She said something about how he did incomprehensible stuff from time to time, and he had to agree after seeing this. They say geniuses have a screw loose inside their heads, and it seems that Geunsoo, who is supposed to take over the movie industry by storm, wasn’t a normal person either.

“Looks like they’re gathered over there.”

They were now in a countryside village where they could see a row of old houses. Most of them seemed ghosted, but one of them had lights on. Underneath the light were a lot of people gathered round, and most of them were eating. They didn’t seem to care about a car approaching them and just busily moved their spoons without giving the car a single glance.

Geunsoo parked the car a little away from the vehicle holding the props. Maru opened the door and left the car. Although he couldn’t see the sea, he felt like he could smell the sea in the air. He looked to the opposite side of the setting sun and walked towards the film set.

“You’re here.”

The staff welcomed Geunsoo. Some of them seemed close enough to stand up and give him a high five. Meanwhile, Suyeon smiled at them and just brushed past. The staff also just greeted Suyeon with nods.

“Aren’t you supposed to be here in two days?”

“I should come early. I’m bad at acting, so I’ll be hated if I’m late as well.”

“Who says our dear actor Hong has bad acting?”

“The director does. Are you speaking to him on my behalf now?”

“Uhm, I need to keep earning money, so....”

As they laughed, Geunsoo waved at Maru. Maru walked and stood next to Geunsoo.

“He’s a new member at my company. He’s a smart kid, so please look after him. It’s his first day here today, so do forgive him for any mistakes. Maru, these are people from the lighting team. They’re from a company called Illumination and they’re quite well known in this area.”

“Hello, everyone. My name is Han Maru.”

Maru greeted the three men. Among them, the oldest-looking man offered a handshake.

“Nice to meet you. From how Geunsoo is taking care of you, it seems like you’re a promising rookie. I hope to see you more on sets. I’m Kim Jinhwan.”

“Hwang Junggoo here.”

“And I’m Oh Jihoon.”

Maru remembered the three people from the lighting team. Every relationship started with remembering the other party's name. Not remembering their names the next time he met any of them would give him a bad image so he had to be cautious about that.

"How about dinner?"

"We haven't had any since we were planning to eat here. The food truck this time is from Flourish Food Truck, isn't it?"

"Yeah it is."

There were people gathered where the middle-aged man was pointing at.

"Let's go, Maru."

Maru followed Geunsoo to the food truck. Suyeon, who had been following them all this time, had disappeared from sight. As she wasn't someone that he missed, Maru did not look for her.

A man wearing a chef hat for hygiene purposes greeted them with a smile. In front of him were various delicious-looking foods. Maru picked up a round plate and started putting stuff onto it. They definitely looked and smelled good.

As there wasn't an empty table, Maru sat down on the floor like many others. He leaned against a big tree and waited for Geunsoo to come.

"Nice spot," Geunsoo sat down on the floor as he spoke.

"Have a nice meal."

"You too."

Maru took a bite off the sausage buchim before looking around. It seemed that the actors were eating somewhere else as he couldn't find any of them around. There was a blue tent on his left, and he predicted that the actors were in there.

"Are the three people from last time all there is in the lighting team?" He asked as he continued to eat.

There were many heavy-looking lighting devices gathered around. The three of them wheeled all of those lighting devices?

"No way. Those three from just now were the A team, and the B team is over there. You see that car over there? That's the generator car, and the one next to it is the crane truck that holds the lights up in the air. The car next to that holds the equipment. All of that combined is called the lighting department."

"So that's how it works."

"But while they're called 'teams', they're just hired part-time workers most of the time. The three that you saw last time will hire people for shooting a movie and they'll scatter once the movie is over. It's a hard job, so many people quit midway. It's rare to see someone you see on one set appear again on another set."

After speaking, Geunsoo started eating his meal with a happy expression.

“So many people for just one movie.”

At a glance, more than a hundred people seemed to be having dinner right now. There were people who were laughing and talking, and there were also those that just ate quietly. They had all gathered here to finish a movie that would be around an hour and 20 minutes long, or at most 2 hours long.

“Well, with screens, more people work in the background than in the foreground.” Geunsoo put down his spoon as he spoke.

“The first thing that people do before every movie is to have a meal together with the staff like this. Only then do they realize that there may be 30 to 40 people appearing on camera, but there are at least 10 times as many people working in the background.”

Geunsoo had a serious expression. It was even disconcerting how he was so different from the prankster Geunsoo that let Maru have the wheel on the road.

“Looks like screwing the movie up will have consequences.”

“Hmm, no. Normally, the staff isn’t in a bad position even if the movie fails. They get their pay regardless of the success or failure of the movie. But sometimes, like what you just said, there are producers that screw up so hard. They’re trash who shoot movies without any budget. Because of those kinds of bastards, there are many people who get into debts unwillingly,” after saying those words, Geunsoo made a bitter smile.

“That’s why we have to do our best to make this movie successful. To do that, we need to put our best effort in... no, we need to do the best act possible so that the stage these people created for us doesn’t go down the drain. That’s the duty of those that live on guarantees.”

Duty.

Maru nodded his head. If he did a half-assed job just because he had a minor role, it would be the equivalent of being impolite to all these people. Rather than the best he could, he had to do the absolute best. This wasn’t a high-school acting club, but a proper movie where actual money was involved. People valued results more than the process, and fruits more than effort.

Just as he was about to finish his meal off with some cherry tomatoes, he saw people leaving the tent. The staff checked the time on their phones before starting to clean up.

“It looks like the filming is about to resume. It’ll be your scene once this scene’s over.”

“I should have one more look at the script then.”

“Rather than the script, you should look at the storyboard. Those have the camera angles, so it’ll be easier for you to draw the picture. Although the director will explain it to you during the shooting, not knowing and knowing is worlds apart even when you do listen to the explanation.”

“Okay.”

Maru started flipping through the storyboard that Geunsoo handed to him. The shooting location started becoming noisy.

“Hey! We need to readjust the level!”

“The jimmy jib is shaking though.”

“Get the wireless mic.”

“Check up on everyone’s clothing!”

Although noises could be heard from everywhere, it didn’t look that messy. After a short while, the noises died down. Then, the lights started coming on one by one. The surroundings became brighter a bit.

“You should make your greetings before it starts.”

Geunsoo dusted his pants as he stood up. It was obvious who he had to greet so he didn’t ask. He walked towards the tent along with Geunsoo. He avoided the people moving busily and poked his head inside the tent.

Moonjoong was sitting next to a gas heater with a pot on top of it. There were many actors around him.

“I’m here, sir.”

“Oh, you’re here.”

Moonjoong closed his script and welcomed him. Maru bowed to greet him back.

“I’m also here, elder.”

“Yes, yes. So I finally get to see you on the scene. Wasn’t it tiring getting here?”

“Sir, I’m really sad. I’m the one who drove him here,” Geunsoo shook his head as he spoke.

“Haha, that’s right. You must be tired, Geunsoo. Did both of you have dinner?”

“Yes.”

Maru greeted the actors sitting behind Moonjoong as well. There were actors he hadn’t seen before as well. He presumed that they either had minor roles or were just extras like he was.

“Please get ready for the rehearsal.”

Someone entered the tent and spoke in a small voice. The actors all stood up.

“Well then, Maru. See you later.”

“Yes, elder.”

“Geunsoo, if I remember correctly, you appear the day after tomorrow, right?”

“Yup. In two days, I’ll be beaten to death by you. Please go easy on me.”

“Oh no, I can’t do that. I’ll have to put all my strength into it. Please die realistically, haha.”

“You’re so cruel. I’m your son, you know?”

Moonjoong left the tent with laughter. Maru carefully followed him. He greeted some of the staff that he met on his way and soon, the shooting began.

Seeing Moonjoong under the light, Maru became silent. He heard the cue sign from the director amidst the faint sounds of machinery.

“Pathetic, how pathetic.”

A depressed voice filled the surroundings.

Maru started focusing on Moonjoong’s acting as he embraced the air of the location.

Chapter 284

A moth flying under the light slowly fell down. Like a dried-out leaf, it rose into the air with a gust of wind before falling down again on the hair of a staff member holding the camera. Even though the cameraman must have felt something landing on his head, he kept looking into the camera. The moth that had fallen on his hair, started flapping its wings again and flew upwards. Maru looked away from the moth and looked in front of him. Moonjoong finished his conversation with the director and started walking towards the cardboard scraps again. The camera, which was on rails, kept a constant distance from Moonjoong. Moonjoong, who was standing amongst scrap pieces of paper gestured that he needed more time. Maru saw the director nodding.

Will it get the okay sign this time? From what Maru saw, the director seemed satisfied with what he got. The problem was that Moonjoong wasn’t.

“Looks like it’ll take a long time today as well.”

“Well, this is not the first or second time that happened.”

“Give me a chocolate bar. I’m starting to run out of sugar.”

“It hasn’t even been that long since dinner. Why are you running out of sugar already?”

The staff started taking out their snacks and sweets. It was past 10 o’clock at night. Since the shoot started in the morning, they had been working for more than 12 hours now.

Maru grabbed the chocolate bar offered to him. It was given to him by Geunsoo.

“This should be the last time.”

“The last time of what?”

“The shooting. They’ll probably go to the next scene after this one.”

Geunsoo sounded no different from saying ‘the sun will rise in the morning’. He had that much conviction when he said those words. Just what did he base his thoughts on? Maru had a look at Moonjoong, who was around 10 meters away from him. Moonjoong was looking up at the sky with his hands behind his back, Maru couldn’t read anything from him. It wasn’t that much different to the previous four times he shot this scene.

“You’ll see,” Geunsoo said.

‘You’ll see’ - Maru nodded his head. Maybe masters had signs that only masters could recognize. As a mere mortal, he would never understand what it is no matter what he tried, so Maru decided that it would be better to keep watching. He watched Moonjoong as he rolled around the thick caramel of the chocolate bar inside his mouth.

Just then, Moonjoong raised his left hand. The director gave the staff a sign and following that, the slate made a clapping sound. The camera started rolling and Moonjoong started his act. Although Maru was quite far from the scene, he couldn’t hear Moonjoong’s voice, but the pitiful expression on his face as well as the way he walked was enough for him to understand the emotions behind his actions.

“It’s quite long.”

“This is a long take scene. It’s two whole minutes long. It makes me feel nervous just imagining that the camera will follow the back of my head for a whole two minutes,” Geunsoo looked at Maru as he said that.

“Do you even know what it feels like to act by yourself for a whole two minutes without a single cut?”

“Honestly, no. Considering the runtime of this movie, 2 minutes is definitely significant, but I don’t really understand the difficulty of filling those two minutes.”

2 minutes. In everyday life, two minutes wasn’t long at all. It was an amount of time that would pass by just gazing at the sky. However, two minutes out of 80 in a movie was a different story indeed.

“You’ll see how absurd two minutes are once you get used to shooting movies. The most scary thing is getting an NG at a minute and 58 seconds. That’s the fun part of a long take. You’ll have to start over those two minutes from the beginning. Phew, that sounds horrific.”

Geunsoo shook his head as though he was the one in front of the camera.

Maru followed Moonjoong’s back with his eyes.

Moonjoong, who was staggering, ended up leaning on a wall before collapsing down on the spot. Having fallen down, Moonjoong covered both of his eyes and started crying. The faint weeping sounds could be heard over the wind. He had curled up like someone in pain and made a disturbing vomiting sound. The neatly piled scrap papers fell over with Moonjoong’s struggles. Amidst that, Moonjoong started wiggling around. He painted a picture where the old man was crying so loud that it couldn’t be voiced through the human vocal cords, and plowed his way through in solitude. He fell, stood up, then fell again. Moonjoong acted as a man that was thoroughly collapsing from the inside out. Under the dusk, he made a path of sadness and despair until he eventually looked around. Under the faint light, Moonjoong’s expression looked complex and indescribable. His face was covered with tears, yet it looked sharp; was scary yet sad like a cracked piece of glass. He expressed the instability of his emotions while shifting between strong-minded and feeble until he suddenly picked up a small hammer amidst the pile of scrap paper. After staring at it for a while, Moonjoong raised it above his head. Pf, pf, pf. The unpaved road was dented with a deep sound. After smashing down with his hammer for a while, Moonjoong started crying again. It was a wail deep enough to put anyone listening to shivers, just like that of a wild beast.

The whispers between the staff had died down to naught. Everyone was focusing on Moonjoong. Maru could see that everyone's eyes were following the violent smashes of the hammer. It was freakishly silent.

Amidst the silence, Moonjoong continued to act. He was sweating as though his face was sprayed with water. The hammer fell out of his shaking hands. Everything stopped as though time stopped flowing. The freaky silence continued for another three seconds before Moonjoong stood up with a long sigh. Then he stared into the main camera with emotionless eyes.

Maru, who was in Moonjoong's line of sight, felt as though Moonjoong's eyes were looking at him. The frightening gaze, captured on the camera, will make the audience gulp, he thought.

"Okay!"

That voice sounded more cheerful than ever. Moonjoong's cold expression only loosened at that moment as he spat out a deep breath. One person, that seemed to be Moonjoong's manager, quickly ran up to him and looked over his body. Everyone at the scene started applauding.

Maru did the same. The emotions he harbored deep inside him sublimed into his applause. It was a form of etiquette towards an actor that showed brilliant acting, and also an applause of self-loathing because that was the only way to evaluate such an act.

"Haha, he's breaking the spirits of his juniors too much," Geunsoo spoke as he applauded.

Maru could see passion in his eyes. His respect towards Moonjoong, as well as his challenging spirit had to be boiling inside him. Maru also realized that something similar was happening inside himself as well. He started yearning for something supreme that existed beyond the horizon.

"Now that I think about it, this scene is the one right after my scene," Maru, drenched in appreciation, suddenly came to himself and spoke.

The scene Moonjoong acted just now was the scene immediately after the elder hears harsh words from the delinquent.

"That's because we have to shoot in an alleyway, and it would be difficult to do so if there are people passing by. That's why most scenes are filmed during the night. It would be great if the scenes could be filmed according to the progress of the story, but reality isn't that easy. The staff do their best to line up the order of events, but most of the time, reality doesn't allow it. This is why there are many times where the ending is shot first then the beginning. It's an annoying matter, but what can we do about it? That's what being a pro is."

"...Being an actor doesn't sound easy."

Moonjoong had to forget his boiling emotions and go back to being a feeble old man. It wouldn't be easy to do so. Moonjoong returned to the camera and started monitoring the scene. It was just as Geunsoo had said. It seemed that that was the last take.

"Hey! Han Maru, you're here!"

Hearing a voice behind him, Maru turned around. Jiseok, with a thick smile, was waving at him.

"I came here ages ago."

"Really? Why didn't I get to see you then?"

"Because I was with the staff."

"Oh that's where you were. Oh, senior Geunsoo. Hello there."

Jiseok looked as cheerful as ever. After returning Jiseok's greeting, Geunsoo spoke again,

"You two should rehearse together. You'll be in the next scene after all. I'll go ask the director something."

Maru told Jiseok that they should switch places. They couldn't start practicing amidst the staff members. They went back to the tree where Maru ate dinner.

"Wow, so this is what it feels like."

Jiseok looked at the shooting location, where lights were scattering, with an excited face.

"How did you get here?"

"Me? Mom drove me here."

"Is she still here?"

"Yeah."

"Looks like I should greet her. Where is she?"

"She said she was tired and went to get some sleep. I told her that I can take the bus back but she was worried about me. Geez, no one can stop her," Jiseok smiled as he said that.

"Rather than that, you didn't call me even once, huh."

"What am I supposed to say to someone who declared that he'd do better than me? And also, no news is good news," Maru shrugged as he said those words.

"You have your way with words as always. Rather than that, did you see senior Moonjoong acting?"

"I did. But I probably shouldn't have. My confidence is hitting rock bottom right now."

"Me too. You definitely feel that he's on another level, don't you?"

"He is on a different level. Now I feel how pressuring it must be to be on the same scene as him."

Maru opened the script in his hand. He only had two lines. The direction of the movie was simple. He would approach Moonjoong, who was lying down on a bench, drunk, and steal his wallet. While he did so, Moonjoong would wake up and he would just say his two lines. That was it. Once he left the frame, the delinquent would no longer appear again in the movie.

"That's why we must do well," Jiseok said as he pointed at the script.

"When I had a look at it, I discovered that we were chatting to each other, what do you think we should talk about?"

“Let’s talk about how we stole a motorcycle.”

“Do you have experience stealing a motorcycle?” Jiseok widened his eyes as he asked.

Maru hit the back of Jiseok’s neck.

“If the director doesn’t have anything in mind for us, then I’ll just say that I stole a motorcycle because I was pissed while doing a delivery job. You can take care of the rest.”

“Let’s make it so that we’re going to Haeundae to pick up some girls.”

“That’s good. It sounds like what an immature kid would say.”

“And it also sounds like what a delinquent would do.”

“Before we go on set, let’s make the lines. It’ll be impossible for us to make one up on the spot.”

Maru started writing the lines with the pen he stuck inside the script. The original novel mentioned nothing about the delinquent’s age, so Maru decided that they were around high school age since both he and Jiseok were in high school. The general character buildup was that of a moderately violent, restriction-hating, debauchery student.

“The delinquent probes around the elder’s body looking for a wallet. Getting the wallet in his hands, he raises it in the air and starts smirking. The smirk has a hint of childishness in it. At that moment, the elder wakes up. He looks at the delinquents around him and mistakes them for people that came to help him. He starts smiling. He feels that the world was still warm.”

Jiseok read the text out loud.

Maru had read over that bit several times in the past, yet the words felt incredibly unfamiliar to him today. An ominous thought that he might end up making a mistake flashed through his mind.

“Wow, I’m getting nervous.”

Jiseok started hopping on the spot. He looked different from usual. It seemed like even he could get nervous.

“It’s even more unnerving because it’s short. This is crazy.”

“Stop saying nervous. You’re ticking me off.”

“How else am I supposed to put it? Maru, do you have any calming pills with you? I heard that those work pretty well.”

“You’re young so you don’t need any of that. Rather than that, let’s try going through it. We should rehearse it even if it’s by ourselves.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

The scene was very short, but conversely, everything had to be compacted into that short moment. It was only a single scene in the movie, but it was the moment that changed the flow of the movie, so he didn’t want to hear that he did a bad job.

He might not receive any applause, but he didn't want to drag everyone down either.

Not the best he could do, but the best possible.

"I wish we could get an okay sign on the first run," Jiseok spoke just then.

"They say you shouldn't dream of the impossible. Let's think about this realistically, yeah?"

"Then how many times?"

"Let's end it within five tries."

"That's pretty unrealistic as well."

Just as they were drawing the picture inside their heads according to the script, the film set started becoming busy again. Some of the equipment was being reset. Geunsoo, who was talking to the director, came back to them and said,

"You ready, little ducklings?"

Chapter 285

"We'll move over to the next shooting location!"

Along with the assistant director's shout, everyone started moving. The next shooting location was a street filled with shops and was located ten minutes away from where they were by foot. As the street was small, vehicles couldn't get in and all equipment had to be carried by hand. Hand carts started appearing from nowhere, before they were filled with all sorts of equipment. Even shopping carts were used to carry things.

"It feels like a military march all over again," Maru spoke at the back of the trail. It was past 11 at night. When he looked up into the sky, he could see stars everywhere unlike in Seoul. He suddenly remembered seeing the Milky Way while doing a night march during his military service.

"Camera director, over here!"

Equipment started finding their spots according to the chubby director's instructions. The lights that had been turned off started lighting up again one by one, and brightened up the street that was absorbed in darkness. People from the PR team started going around talking to the local residents that came to have a look.

"Is someone shooting a movie here or somethin'?"

"Dunno."

Due to all the commotion, the locals started flocking towards the filming scene. Some of the staff members started approaching them and told them not to approach the shooting set.

"We can't take pictures, right?"

"You can't."

One girl, who seemed to be in middle school, put her phone inside her pocket with pity. While the staff asked the locals for their understanding, more people started appearing and started peeking into the set. The staff had more work to do now. Although the night wind was chilly, the staff members' necks were filled with droplets of sweat.

Maru passed a bottle of water he was holding to a staff member. The staff member thanked him before going around restricting access to this place again.

"Security is one thing, but we can't have any accidents happen," Geunsoo spoke.

Maru nodded his head. As most of the equipment here ran on electricity, there were all sorts of cables on the ground. It was highly likely that some equipment might fall over if someone got their feet caught up, consequently collapsing on a person standing nearby. As such, there were even some staff members specifically tasked to look over the cables.

"Are the lights ready?"

"Yes they are."

"Recorder?"

"He went to the bathroom."

"Dammit, does this guy have a hole on his ass? Who's the youngest member there? Go get him."

Maru looked at the assistant director that was giving instructions. While the director was organizing his thoughts while looking at the scene, the assistant director was giving out instructions.

"Looks like the assistant director is the busiest one here."

"Well, that's how it is most of the time, the person right under the megaphone has it the busiest. If the director is the artist, then the assistant director is something like the person that readies the paint, brush, canvas and the like. There are times where the director handles everything, but that's just not efficient."

The assistant director, who was calling someone over the phone, suddenly started frowning and walked up to a man wearing a red baseball cap. He seemed very agitated.

"Doesn't it look like they're about to fight?"

"Maybe. Producing a movie requires the cooperation of many people, right? As there are many people, there are just as many opinions and conflicts as well. As everyone here is an expert in their own area, there are many times where they get into conflict. For example, the audio engineer and the generator engineer. The generator is quite noisy, while the audio engineer is sensitive to sound. For the audio engineer, it is excruciating to pick up the generator sound all the time."

"That sounds like how departments within the same company aren't necessarily on good terms."

"That's a good analogy. Yes, a movie is like a company. It's one that uses a huge amount of money. The people gathered here will all do their best to earn a salary from that money. Everyone wants the company to do well, but there will always be conflicts between different departments. That's why the

director and the assistant director have important jobs. They're the people that have to lead the whole company."

"Conflicts between departments, huh."

After talking with the red-capped man, the assistant director raised up his thumb. His agitated face had disappeared.

"Rehearsal is starting!" The assistant director shouted.

Geunsoo pushed Maru's back, telling him to do well.

Maru walked towards the assistant director along with Jiseok.

'It's hot.'

The heat from the lighting right next to him was immense. Next to the assistant director were many people. They were people that had tired looks on their faces. They were the extras.

"Okay then, listen. We're now going to do the shoot. As notified before, you just need to walk the streets as naturally as possible. Also, please, I beg you to not look at the camera directly and don't be stiff. I know everyone's tired, so I hope you can cooperate so that we can end this quickly. The five of you can start walking from that side of the street, and the couple should stand in front of the standing signboard. Let's get moving for now."

The assistant director started placing the extras according to the director's instructions. The camera director had a look at the video feed and signalled an okay sign. Following that, Moonjoong appeared. It seemed that he had been taking a rest until now.

A trash can was put next to the bench in the alleyway and some trash was littered around. When a messy-looking alleyway was complete, Moonjoong laid down on the bench.

"It looks good. Senior, should we proceed?"

The director crouched in front of Moonjoong and started explaining the scene to him. Maru and Jiseok followed the assistant director until they reached half way through the alley.

"You see the director over there?"

"Yes."

"You walk up to that spot and do your lines. Don't mind the camera and just focus on actor Yoon as you act. The three of you without lines can just follow these two here. As long as your eyes don't look somewhere weird, it won't look that bad so watch out for that, okay?"

The assistant director patted the two's shoulders before going over to the next set of extras. Maru greeted the three people he hadn't seen before today. They talked a little as they waited, and they turned out to be students from around the area. They weren't professional actors, but were just here because some of their elders introduced them to jobs here.

"Do you two have lines?"

"I have a couple."

"Okay."

The three nodded with an expression that said 'that's not much'. The director, who was talking to Moonjoong at the bench, slowly walked up to them.

"Listen, we're gonna go with two cuts. You guys will walk to that side while talking about something non-productive, and start probing around the elder lying down on the bench while watching out for other people. Here, follow me and try acting."

The director started walking backwards and signalled the two to walk towards him. Maru glanced at Jiseok. Jiseok smiled and looked back at him.

'Well, it's the rehearsal now.'

They started walking as they said the lines that they decided to do before. The three behind him just had to walk with their hands in their pockets without saying anything, so they didn't really need a rehearsal. When Maru said his line, Jiseok replied with his. Jiseok's overly arrogant attitude was put on full display.

It wasn't a conversation that would be picked up on camera, so they were at ease when they said those lines. It was like talking to a friend. They even used some indecent words as they walked up to the bench.

There, Jiseok walked up front. He gave Maru a glance before pointing at Moonjoong. Maru signalled the three to keep watch and started to rummage through Moonjoong's pockets.

"Good. That was good just now. Did you two make that up?"

"Yes."

"Do the exact same thing during the actual shoot. Also, once you find the wallet, the camera will point at the elder once before pointing at you. That's when you do your lines. Who's delinquent 2 again?"

"I am," Maru spoke.

"Ah, that's right! You! Your name was... Maru! That's right, you're Han Maru, aren't you? The director has high hopes for you so keep up your act from last time. Well then, get ready! Let's finish this quickly and get some sleep!"

The assistant director was told to go back to his position.

"Phew, it starts now," Jiseok spoke as he smiled excitedly.

Maru also shook off his hands as he smiled. With the camera in front of him, all of his nervousness suddenly disappeared. He didn't shake at all compared to how he imagined he would do in front of the camera.

"Don't screw up."

"Don't worry about me," Jiseok said confidently.

Eventually, they heard the word 'ready?' from afar. 'Roll' followed up before 'action'. Moonjoong, who had been wailing merely thirty minutes ago, was now a feeble man without any energy inside him. After staggering his way to the bench, drunk, he fell on top of the bench. A self-loathing laugh could be heard time to time. The camera, which was shooting Moonjoong's whole figure, closed up on Moonjoong's torso. It was probably closing in on his face.

"Cut! That was good."

An okay sign fell on the first shot. The camera started approaching them. The camera director, the assistant cameraman, as well as the assistant director and some staff members stood side by side. The director was looking into the main monitor from afar.

-You guys ready?

The director's voice could be heard from the walkie-talkie that the assistant director was holding. Maru nodded his head while Jiseok cheerfully replied with a 'yes'.

-You can do the cue sign.

That was the end of the director's message. The assistant director hung the walkie talkie on the strap on his shoulders. At the same time, the man with the slate stood in front of the camera.

"Ready," the assistant director signalled.

"35-dash-2-dash-1," the staff member spoke as he opened the slate.

Following that, the camera director spoke,

"Roll."

With that, the cameras started rolling.

Maru felt his shoulders tensing. The black camera that did not reflect any light felt as though it was about to suck him whole. The lights on either side of the camera also got on his nerves. Even the cables on the ground made him feel stuffy.

Just when was the 'action' coming? He kept staring into the assistant director's mouth.

"Action."

The sign finally fell. At that moment, Maru felt as though all the restrictions on him were lifted. His vision suddenly became brighter, and he could see everyone's expressions. The sound of the camera pleased his ears, and the lights from the reflector felt nice. Jiseok's breathing sounded affectionate. The cables lining up on the ground seemed adorable.

He felt excited. His heart, no, his entire body started vibrating as though there were little dwarves hopping around inside his heart. It was a shaking that was completely different to something that stemmed from nervousness. That resonance had a beat and it was like a bell that woke up every single cell in his body.

For a brief moment, he couldn't hear anything. In compensation for the lost sound, every scenery around him seemed much clearer to him. The colors became more vibrant and everything became much sharper. The moment the echoing 'action' couldn't be heard anymore, Maru turned his eyes to Jiseok.

Jiseok started speaking with a confident expression,

"I told you I had dibs on that motorbike."

He said his line at the perfect time. Maru wouldn't be human if he couldn't react to that.

"That's my line. I found that bike for you."

They were walking naturally. The assistant director and the camera director were pulling out, but Maru couldn't see them. He had no recognition of the camera either. His gaze was directed at a place beyond the staff. What he was seeing now was the bench and Moonjoong that he was picturing in his mind.

They started acting with the lines they previously agreed on. Maru shoulder-bumped Jiseok and spoke foul words. He smiled subconsciously and felt excited. So this was what it felt like to act with someone that matched your rhythm.

No, they were doing too good to the point that Maru no longer thought that this was an act. The rehearsal was short, and they didn't expect great results, yet somehow, they were like cogwheels that were completely in sync like people that had been practicing together for a long period of time.

Jiseok's face filled his vision. His smiling eyes, his twitching nose, his lips. He was acting like a nonchalant high school boy.

He couldn't get left behind by his partner. Maru excited himself as he walked. For a brief moment, he had nothing in his mind but Jiseok who he was talking to. Whenever he said something, Maru would naturally reply back to him. While they said the lines that they made beforehand, they arrived at the bench.

The moment he checked that the camera director had finished setting up on his left, Jiseok gave him a glance as though he was waiting for that moment.

"I think he's wasted."

They had gone through this part several times. With an evil smirk, Maru gestured at the three people behind him. The three started keeping watch.

Jiseok started probing around Moonjoong's clothing.

"Hey gramps, you'll croak if you sleep in a place like this."

Jiseok grinned as he stood back up. He said that line with a wallet in his hands. Maru also made an expression as though he had found something good. He was really happy. He even thought about what to do with the money inside.

"Cut! Okay!"

He flinched when he heard the cut signal. Ah, it was over for now. The assistant director waved at him to walk away. Maru and Jiseok walked away from the bench.

“We’ll continue just like this.”

Chapter 286

Moonjoong’s act began soon after. The camera shot Moonjoong from above. It seemed that the camera was shooting in the perspective of the delinquent. Maru watched Moonjoong’s act from up close. Up close, Moonjoong’s act was something that he could not describe with words.

The encouraging words they exchanged just now seemed insignificant in front of this scene. Maru turned around to look at Jiseok. He had a bitter smile on his face as though he was thinking the same thing. Although they weren’t saying anything in fear of being picked up by the microphone, Maru wanted to sigh if he could make a sound. He thought that he could do better. However, the okay sign fell, so he, who was just a minor role, could not ask to reshoot that scene.

“Do well. I’ll nag you if you don’t. You took the role I wanted to do, so you have to do well.”

Jiseok smiled and patted Maru’s shoulders. He didn’t have to say it for Maru to know that. He had prepared everything for this scene. He participated in the movie precisely to do these two lines. If he could not show the best, he might go crazy from the frustration.

At that moment, Moonjoong, who was lying on the bench, stood up and came to him. He had deep eyes as he spoke,

“I’ll receive anything you throw at me so go ahead and show me all you got. Make me make a mistake because of you; hurl all your emotions at me. Doing things moderately is something I hate. Do you understand, Maru?”

“Yes, elder.”

Moonjoong sat back down on the bench with a soft smile. Maru received encouragement. He was also told not to hold back. All that was left now was for him to throw everything he got.

He had to ram his underhanded, evil, yet pure emotions that feel that his life is still okay compared to the old man’s into a single line.

Maru closed his eyes to adjust his breathing. He breathed out very slowly in order to slow down his heart rate. He felt relaxed somewhat. Now that he had become calm, it had become much easier to make a cold smile.

What was left now was for him to forget himself. He had to immerse himself in his role. He had to become a rotten delinquent. He had to say his line with a lot of malicious intent so it won’t just make the people here frown, but the audience in front of the screen frown as well.

‘Do I say the words slowly? No, I think I should do it a little fast.’

Maru edited the line he had been practicing for all this time on the spot. He put himself down. His ultimate objective was to make the character have a personality to himself, but right now, he had to focus on representing the character perfectly. He could be greedy, but too much greed was no good. Maru was aware of what he could and what he could not do. He had to reach that line just slightly. He couldn’t cross the line and overdo it, nor could he be so lacking that it would make him look weak.

He had to stand on that border. As for the character's personality, that came later.

The assistant director signalled for him to get ready.

Maru stroked his face before standing upright. Jiseok stood next to him while the three others had their back to him. He looked at Moonjoong lying down on the bench. The elder had gotten into his acting mode again and his eyes were shaking. Sympathy welled up inside him subconsciously as he looked at an old man at the end of his rope, but Maru killed that emotion immediately. What he needed right now was not sympathy but self-satisfaction from trampling on such a feeble man.

After Moonjoong's cut ended, the camera was set again. This time, the camera took a lower angle. This time, the camera was looking up at the delinquent from the elder's view. This was the last cut of this scene. Once he turned around after saying his line, his contribution in this movie would end there.

Retarded old man. What was he doing here at his age? He's drunk and wasted at a time like this? What a waste of a life. What a meaningless life. If you're gonna die anyway, then donate your wallet to us at least. Wouldn't it be better to give your money to a promising youth? You moldy old man.

He inwardly said those words in his mind. His lips twitched subconsciously. Although the camera wasn't rolling yet, it didn't matter.

What a complacent old man. What a tragic old man. What a disgusting old man.

Heh, a loathing laugh escaped his mouth. He could feel the director looking at him, but he didn't mind it that much. He knew that all the emotions he built up would collapse the moment something else got on his nerves. Right now, it was the moment to immerse himself.

"...Good, let's just go like this. Don't make a loud noise with the slate. Don't interrupt him. Just like that, yes. That's it. That expression, that twisted mouth, just like that."

He could hear the director's words in his ears, but he did not listen to any of them. It just went in one ear, and out the other. He forgot about everything except the word he was waiting for.

He felt a series of words ready to roll out of his mouth. Not yet, he couldn't say it now. He had to say it after that word.

"Action."

That word was small.

Maru abruptly raised his head and looked at the camera with an arrogant gaze. No, to be exact, he looked at Moonjoong, who was behind the camera with his arms crossed. That was the place. That was the place he had to round up every last bit of his emotions and spit it out to. Moonjoong nodded his head slightly. To Maru, that seemed like the director's cue sign. Just like an arrow leaving the bowstring, Maru uttered the line he had repeated in his head hundreds of times on top of his loathing smile.

The thick lump of words passed through his throat. The words were then sharpened by his insinuating tongue, passed through his teeth, brushed past his dull lips as it was uttered out loud.

The words of a delinquent that was immature, violent, and one that sought an unreachable ideal.

The quality of words uttered once is different to the quality of words uttered a hundred times - this line came up in his subconscious. If so, then was he satisfied with the words he just uttered now?

The words he uttered came back to his ears. He inwardly savored the words that entered through his eardrums. He wasn't satisfied easily, but the lines he just uttered were at an acceptable level. He would be able to look at the video footage and not be embarrassed about it.

He looked at the camera lens and closed his mouth. He did his line. He did not make any mistakes. At that moment, he became absent-minded as though the factory that was his brain had stopped functioning. He was vaguely aware that he had to turn around and leave, but he had forgotten about it because he was focused on the words too much. The words he uttered just now were the best he could do. Anymore was impossible, and if this scene ended up being no good, it would be extremely difficult to put himself back into the state he was in before. Just as he thought that it was about to fail,

"It won't be funny if you tell the cops on us, understand?"

Jiseok waved the wallet and pulled on Maru's arm. Thanks to him, Maru was able to turn around naturally. When he took his feet off the ground, he saw what he had to do. Turning around, Maru slowly walked away from the camera.

At the same time, he heard the director shouting 'cut!'

"That was a nice help from me, wasn't it?" Jiseok said with a smile.

"...Yeah, thanks," Maru said with a sigh.

If Jiseok didn't grab his arm, he would have stood there like some dumb idiot. He was feeling thankful to Jiseok who had noticed that and acted in accordance.

Strength left his body. He collapsed on the spot and turned around. He saw Moonjoong nod at him with a thick smile.

"Well done. I couldn't have done it as well as you."

Jiseok gripped Maru's shoulders. Maru smiled and stood back up again.

That ended his first, and his last scene in this movie.

* * *

Joonggeun rewinded the camera. The camera was supposed to be doing a knee shot, but it was doing a shoulder shot instead. The camera director, who took the shot, sucked his cigarette.

"I thought this would look better."

Hearing those words, Joonggeun stroked his chin.

He had told the camera director to fix the camera on the knee. That was because it was more suitable for Moonjoong to be looking at the overall scene, not just at one single delinquent. However, the camera director had ignored his instructions and zoomed in on Maru's torso.

Usually, this would mean a retake. It was natural for his motivation to not use that cut in the actual film since it wasn't in his plans, but... the new picture was so good that he couldn't just throw it away.

"He's a good one. Just look at his eyes. He's looking beyond the camera. He has depth in his eyes. Are you sure he's a rookie?"

Joonggeun nodded his head when he heard the camera director's words. It was a good shot. He didn't have the confidence to take a better shot than this. Even if he asked the young actor to do this again, he wouldn't be able to make those same eyes again. It was the perfect moment. Despite the camera director having disobeyed orders, the impression left behind by that young actor was very deep.

"It would've been better if it was a tilt shot instead."

"You know that it's nearly impossible to retake the shot. This fella, he'll never be able to make the same expression again even if we told him to."

"That's why I find it a pity. Give me a drag."

Joonggeun stole the cigarette that the camera director was smoking and sucked in a deep one.

"Should I have a look as well?" Moonjoong suddenly approached and spoke.

Joonggeun told him to go ahead as he pointed at the monitor. Moonjoong watched the video feed with serious eyes.

"I think we should go with this."

"We're thinking the same thing. Rather than that, you taught that kid, didn't you, senior?"

"Nah, I did nothing. I just brought him around with me a couple times."

"That's considered teaching. That fella, he'll definitely become big if he meets the right work."

"So, you want him?"

"As a minor role, yes. He's still too young. He does feel like an adult, but due to his childish looks, there's a limited range of roles he can take. He has no choice but to wait for the right opportunity if he wants to shine in the movie industry."

"High school kids are plenty grown up though."

"Well, I guess that's true since kids grow up really fast these days."

Joonggeun tossed the cigarette he was smoking on the ground and put it out with his shoes. The camera director told him that that was his last one, but Joonggeun simply ignored him.

"Well then! Thanks everyone for working late into the night! Let's pack up and get some sleep!"

Joonggeun said in a loud voice. It was past midnight already.

"Clean up so that there isn't any trash left behind. After that we'll go to the lodging!"

The assistant director's words echoed around.

Joonggeun stretched his arms out, feeling refreshed. Nothing felt better than getting cuts that were beyond what he expected. He thought that he should have some soju when he got back.

“Director, you can’t drink tonight.”

The assistant director approached him and spoke with scary eyes. Joonggeun clicked his tongue and pouted.

“Yeah yeah, I get it.”

* * *

He didn’t do anything much, but he felt exhausted. The nearby elementary school was their lodging for the night. The elementary school had closed down and it was used as a gallery. As the only place they could wash was the toilet, it was impossible to take a shower.

“Here, take some wet wipes.”

Maru and Jiseok received wet wipes from Geunsoo. Maru wiped around his neck thinking that it felt similar to the military.

“Well done, both of you. The director was all smiles.”

“That’s good. I was worried about it.”

Maru spoke as he laid out the blankets. He could hear bug noises outside.

“You must be tired, go get some sleep. Thanks for all your work today.”

“You did the work, senior.”

“You should get some sleep as well, hyung-nim.”

Maru lay down next to Jiseok. He could smell wax from the wooden floor. It felt nostalgic to him. The lights turned off and the classroom, which was devoid of any light, turned dark in an instant. Just as they were gazing at the stars outside,

“You sleeping?” Jiseok asked.

“I am.”

“Then answer me while you sleep.”

“I said I’m sleeping.”

Maru scratched his head and sat up. He felt tired, but for some reason, he didn’t feel sleepy. Even though he felt like he had exhausted both his body and his mind, he just couldn’t fall asleep for some reason.

“How was today’s shoot? Were you satisfied?” Saying that, Jiseok also sat up.

“For now, I don’t have any regrets. It might not have been perfect, but I think I did a decent job.”

“What the, I wanted to console you, but I guess my consolation skills won’t come in handy.”

“You told me I did good, what were you going to console me about?”

“Then console me. I feel frustrated.”

Maru looked at the side of Jiseok’s face. He was smiling, but he looked bitter for some reason.

“You did good. You made me feel fortunate for not getting your role.”

Jiseok swung his pillow. Being hit on the head, Maru just shrugged.

“If you’re so frustrated, then you should’ve done better.”

“Urgh, you’re so cocky.”

Maru grabbed Jiseok’s shoulders and forced him to lie down. Then, he lied down as well. Jiseok, who was smiling, closed his mouth. Soon, Maru heard a regular, calm breathing. Maru faintly smiled as he looked at Jiseok who fell asleep easily. This guy was really unpredictable.

“Thanks.”

Maru closed his eyes.

The cries of the insects could still be heard. Jiseok’s laugh could be heard amidst the noise as well, but Maru smiled and pretended not to have heard it.

Chapter 287

The cold winds blew. Maru opened his eyes when the cold winds brushed past his face. He could see the dawn sky just before sunrise out the window.

‘It looks like I’m not going back to sleep.’

His cold body refused to go to sleep. He stood up and crossed his arms. As this village was near a mountain, the air was really cold. Perhaps the cold also had something to do with the nearby sea.

He looked next to him and saw that Jiseok was snoring as he slept. He had kicked away his blanket, and it was beneath his feet. Maru covered Jiseok back up with the blanket before getting up.

He quietly opened the classroom door and came out to the corridor before taking out his phone. He didn’t have the time to check his phone last night.

“Whew.”

His mother, whose philosophy in raising children was to let them be, had messaged him three times. It seemed that she was worried about her son, who was going far away for the shoot. Maru had a look at the clock on his phone. It was 5:54 in the morning. It was still too early to make a call, so he sent a text message instead. Before, he was a cute son that used emojis in his texts, but after he got older he could never get himself to do that.

[Don’t worry about me. I’m doing well.]

Before he sent the message, Maru sighed before adding a smiling emoji. He could use endless amounts of sweet words when sending messages to his girlfriend, but it was hard to do so with his parents. He really thought that he was a bad son.

He had also received a text from Daemyung as well. He thanked him before going out to the school field. The air around him was still chilly, but it wasn't an unpleasant chill. He breathed in a batch of fresh air. Any sleepiness remaining inside him disappeared and his mind cleared up a little.

"You're up early."

He heard a hoarse voice from behind. When he turned around, he saw a man wearing a red baseball cap, tying his shoes. He was the man that got into a quarrel with the assistant director yesterday.

"The cold woke me up."

"This place is a little chilly."

After the man tied his trainers, he stood up. He was around 160cm tall. In front of the man wearing a baggy t-shirt and a messenger bag was a large microphone. From how the microphone cable was leading into his messenger bag, it seemed that the electronics were inside.

"They say the morning is early since this is a countryside village. Do you know why?"

"Because they're hardworking people... that's not the reason is it?"

"It might be, but normally, it isn't. In this village, the market opens at seven in the morning, and people start shopping at that time. The reason is simple. It's because all the residents of this village are old. There aren't many young people around. They all escaped to the cities. In this village, where only the elderly are left behind, the clock starts early."

The man sniffed before raising his head. Maru saw the man raising the mic up in the air.

"Shh," said the man as he put his index finger against his mouth. Maru became quiet and watched the man. The man narrowed his eyes and looked around before putting the mic down and starting to walk towards a tree in one part of the school grounds.

Maru followed the man.

"Do you hear it?"

The man asked as he looked at the tree. Maru faintly nodded his head. There was a high-pitched chirp that seemed to be from a small-sized bird. The man raised the mic up. He smiled and swayed his head as though he was listening to music.

"Yeah, that's the sound I'm talking about," the man spoke as he put down the mic. Then, he put on the thick pair of headphones hanging on his messenger bag. After not talking for a while, the man took off his headphones and spoke.

"Do you want to have a listen as well?"

Maru received the headset. The moment the soft cushion sponge covered his ears, a faint white noise could be heard. Just as he wondered what it was and concentrated on that sound, he heard some insect

noises. The faint cries of the insects with the touch of morning dew could be heard. If he was asked how he knew about the morning dew, then he would only be able to say that the sound sounded damp.

Maru looked at the man in front of him. He smiled back at him as though to gesture to him that he should continue. Then, he proceeded to control the device inside his bag. He then heard the bird sound that was recorded just now. There was also the faint sound of the wind as well as the sound of small grains of sand and stone being crushed. It was the sound of the school. It was the sound that made Maru imagine this school without even looking at it.

Maru took off the headphones. The remnants of the sound still tickled his ears.

“You were good at acting yesterday. What academy?”

Maru replied that he wasn’t attending one as he passed back the headset.

“Really? That’s strange. How long has it been since you started?”

“It’s been about half a year since I really started.”

“Half a year? Whew, there’s a reason why director Choi took a single cut. How is it? Is acting fun?”

“Yes, it is.”

“That’s good. There’s nothing more horrific than doing something you don’t like.”

The man lifted his baseball cap a little before putting it back on again with a smile.

“Are you the audio engineer?”

“Me? I’m the recording engineer for now. I’m the one that does the mixing once the post-production starts.”

“Then what are you doing so early in the morning?”

“Because this village starts its morning early. I have to wake up early to get the ambience.”

The man, who seemed a little over forty, took out a chocolate bar from his pocket and started eating it.

“Want some?”

“I’ll gladly take it if you give me one.”

“You don’t know restraint.”

A chocolate bar was flung at him.

“But what is ambience?”

“What is ambience, you ask?”

Hearing that question, the man told Maru to close his eyes. Maru closed his eyes as he said. Then he stood there doing nothing for one minute.

“What do you hear?”

“The wind, a faint car horn, and some bird chirping.”

“That’s the sound you can only hear at this place, right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s ambience. It’s the sound of nature, and sometimes, it’s noise from various places. It’s the base of the movie as well.”

“Then are you going to the alley we shot last night?”

“Yeah. We don’t just have a night scene, and there’s a morning scene as well. I have to get the sounds now so it would make my life easier during post-production. It will also make working on the foley a lot easier as well.”

“What’s....”

“It’s the sound effects. Artificial sounds, you can understand it that way. But hey, are you interested in this kind of stuff? Most of the time, kids just reply yes before walking away.”

“One of my friends wishes to work in production. So I’m wondering if it might be of help to him,” said Maru as he thought of Daemyung.

“A friend huh. Hey, I’m taking a liking to you. Do you want to follow me and watch how I work?”

“Can I?”

“Sure, why not. But take some of my luggage, deal?”

The man pointed at a black box at the entrance of the school. For a moment, Maru thought that the man talked to him just for this moment. Maru smiled and carried the black box. Nothing was free in this world.

Just as he stood next to the man with the box in hand, the man put a business card on top of the box.

“If that friend of yours ever becomes successful, give this to him and tell him that there’s an amazing sound designer that’s expensive. I’m not cheap, but I do a good job. That’s what I’m known for around here.”

The name on the business card read ‘Moon Gyungtaek’, and above that was ‘Studio M’.

“My name is Han Maru. Sadly, I don’t have a business card.”

“Is that so? Then gimme one once you make a cool looking business card.”

Gyungtaek left the school gates with a thick grin. Just as they were heading to the village, Gyungtaek told Maru to open the box and take out the stand. When Maru opened the box, he found a microphone stand that looked just like a camera tripod. After Gyungtaek installed it and the mic as well, he signalled Maru to wait. Soon, a tractor started coming on the road that wasn’t paved yet.

“You know? Tractors don’t make this kind of sound on top of asphalt. I need to get sound sources like this early on or otherwise, it would cause me a world of trouble.”

After the tractor passed by, Maru put away the equipment again.

“You’re quite quick to action.”

“I’m the one learning here, so that’s natural.”

“Whew, you really are a likable guy. If we finish getting the sounds, I’ll treat you to breakfast.”

They hurried towards the market of the village. It was the place they filmed last night. The market at night was very different to the market of the day.

“There’s quite a lot of people.”

“Today’s the day of the market that comes every five days.”

So this was why they hurried. The busy sounds of the morning could be heard everywhere. Although this was a small village, it was filled with vitality, perhaps thanks to the presence of the market that was held once every five days. Gyungtaek raised the mic above his head and walked into the crowd. Then he started recording. Seeing Gyungtaek focusing with his headset on, Maru thought that he was a real pro. Maru also perked up his ears and focused on the sound. He heard a sound that was different to the markets he had heard, where people would be bustling around. He heard a sound that was unique to this market alone. When a trailer full of scrap cardboard passed by, Gyungtaek crouched and recorded the sound that it made as it rolled across the asphalt floor. He followed the elderly that was dragging the trailer quietly so that it wouldn’t disturb him. After walking for around a minute, he returned with a satisfied smile on his face.

“That’s a good start. If I can’t get a decent sound during the film, I can just use this to overwrite the sound. Good, good. Everything’s going well.”

He had a joyous smile on his face. It was a smile that wouldn’t be there unless he really liked doing his job. Maru also followed him with a smile.

“This time, we’re going to that gukbap restaurant. Did you know that every cauldron makes a different sound when their contents boil?”

Gyungtaek seemed very excited. Maru ran after him since he moved so fast.

* * *

“Where have you been?” Jiseok came up to him and asked with a puppy face. Perhaps some dog chew will shut him up? Maru just replied that he took a walk before taking a seat. He walked around the village with Gyungtaek for two hours.

“Are you going to go home now?” Geunsoo asked.

It seemed that he took a wash as there was a towel around his neck.

“Yes. I’m going to get the first bus home.”

“How long does it take by bus?”

“The bus departs at 9:40 and it’ll arrive in Suwon by 5, so it’ll take around 7 hours.”

“That sounds freaky.”

Geunsoo told him to be careful on his way home as he left the classroom.

“Are you going home now?”

“Yeah I am. Even if I start going now, I’ll arrive in the evening. How about you?”

“Mom’s coming to pick me up in the evening.”

“It must be tiring for her since she’ll be driving for a long time.”

“Yeah, you tell her. I told her I can go home by myself, but phew.”

“That’s because she’s worried about you. Then see you later. I’ll be off first.”

“Be careful on your way home. And call me from time to time.”

Maru replied that he would never do such a thing as he waved his hand. Having left the classroom, he climbed up the stairs to the 2nd floor. The elder was staying in a classroom on the 2nd floor. He carefully opened the door and peeked inside. He saw the director, who was sleeping with his t-shirt all rolled up. There were bottles of soju all around, and it seemed that they had been drinking late into the night. Even the assistant director, who told the director not to drink, was sleeping next to him.

“Uhm, elder.”

He approached Moonjoong, who was reading his script as he leaned against the wall.

“Oh, yes. Maru.”

“I’ll be taking my leave.”

“You’re going already?”

“My work here is done, so I should get going.”

“I guess that’s true.”

Moonjoong faintly laughed.

“How was your first shoot?”

“It was exciting, worrying, and I gained a little confidence as well. I feel fortunate that I didn’t leave behind any regrets.”

“Yes, that’s enough then. You’re doing plenty well right now, so you can just take slow steps without hurrying. Watch out not to take a step in the wrong direction.”

“Yes, I’ll bear that in mind.”

“How about breakfast?”

“I had mine already. Have you?”

“It’s about time I eat. Tsk, I was planning to eat with you, but I guess that’s not happening.”

“I’ll go see you once the shoot is over.”

“Then let’s do that. Let’s have a gathering with a few people like last time and have some barbecue.”

“Yes.”

Moonjoong patted Maru’s shoulders saying that he did a good job. Maru bid farewell for one last time before leaving the classroom. Since he said goodbyes to everyone he needed, he just had to leave now.

He put his backpack on and left the school building. Looking at the empty school field, he felt like the shoot last night was a lie. Maru smiled faintly as he started walking. He had taken the first step.

Just as he left the school gates, he saw a black van climbing up the hill. As the roads were narrow, the van wasn’t able to come up all the way, and people left the van after it stopped. The man who left the van seemed like a model. Perhaps he was an actor as well from how he was walking towards the shooting location.

Maru stared at the man that walked past him. The man also looked at Maru. For a moment, Maru felt that the man was familiar, but he couldn’t quite pinpoint him exactly.

“Sungjae, I’ll be right there after I park the van.”

Someone peeked out from the driver’s seat and shouted. Sungjae. It turned out this man was the idol that Bada liked. The idol, who met eyes with him, made a refreshing smile at him and greeted him. Maru greeted back as well.

“Is this the shooting location?”

“Yes. Everyone’s gathered around the back.”

“Looks like I’m in the right place. The GPS navigation wasn’t working properly. Do you live around here?”

“No, I have a minor role in the movie, but I’m going home now since my part is over.”

“Really? That’s nice. I’m participating in the movie as well.”

The idol started climbing the hill after saying ‘be careful on your way home’. Maru stared at his back before speaking to him.

“Uhm, excuse me, but if it’s not too much to ask, can I ask for an autograph?”

“An autograph? Ahaha, yeah, sure.”

Maru took out a notebook and a pen from his bag. The idol received the notebook with a smile.

“What’s your name?”

“Bada.”

“Bada? That’s a pretty name.”

“It’s my sister’s.”

“Aha, your younger sister?”

“Yes.”

“Wait a moment.”

Sungjae signed the autograph and even drew a little character next to it. Maru felt good since the autograph looked like it was made with a lot of effort. It could be seen from the autograph as well.

“Thank you.”

“Tell your sister I said thanks for liking TTO.”

“Okay, then I wish you luck in the movie.”

“Thanks.”

The idol then turned around and started climbing the hill again.

Maru thought that he was a decent person. He didn't have the arrogance of people that became stars at an early age. Maru thought that he might be biased about such people. They had to be hard-working to be so successful at that age, after all.

“That was a nice bonus.”

Maru put the autograph inside his bag while imagining his sister jumping around in joy. Since she was depressed that the signature was stained, she might become happy again with this.

‘Phew, rather than that, seven hours, huh.’

Maru sighed as he thought about the hours to come.

Chapter 288

The school was painted beige. Sungjae looked around the school before going inside the building. He planned to wait for the manager, but he couldn't just awkwardly keep standing in the school field. He entered the door and saw that people were walking in the corridors.

“Oh? Mr. Sungjae?”

A woman with short hair approached him. Sungjae knew her and quickly greeted her with a smile.

“Hello there.”

“You're shooting in the afternoon. You're quite early.”

“I didn't have any schedule for the day, so I came early. I wanted to have a look at the set too.”

“Really?”

Wait a moment - she added before looking around. She was the woman Sungjae met when he met the casting director. She was one of the people that cooperated with the managers of the actors to manage their schedules.

“Would you like to come this way?”

He followed the lady into an empty classroom. He took a seat and waited for a while until the manager and the woman came back.

“You should’ve waited for me.”

“Sorry about that. I was in the school field, but people were staring at me, so I couldn’t just stand there.”

He smiled back at manager Dongwoon before looking at the woman.

“Please take this for now. It must have been tiring coming all the way here.”

The woman offered Sungjae and Dongwoon a canned drink each. They talked over the drink. They were looking forward to Sungjae’s acting performance, many people here are fans, you look much more handsome in person, and stuff like that. Just then, someone entered the classroom. He was a middle-aged man with a chubby belly, and Sungjae knew that that man was the director.

“Hello, director.”

“Aah, that’s right. Mr. Ahn Sungjae?”

“Yes. I’m Ahn Sungjae, a new actor.”

“Alright, alright. Your shoot was today?”

“Yes, it is, sir.”

“Then see you in the afternoon. I’ll be looking forward to it. But hey, you really do look good. You must be popular with the ladies.”

The director left after a handshake. Sungjae smiled at him, but was bitter inside. In contrast to the fact that the director came all the way here to see him and told him that he was looking forward to his actions, the director’s eyes looked uninterested. Sungjae knew that the president of his company invested a lot of money into this movie. Would he be able to greet the director like this without his title as TTO? Probably not. Normally, minor roles weren’t even remembered by name by directors, much less greeted.

“We’ll start shooting at 7. Until then, you’re free to move around. The actors are on the 2nd floor. If you find anything uncomfortable, then please call me. Well then, please excuse me.”

The woman stood up. Sungjae thanked her for guiding them before sitting back down again.

“Wow, it looks like they have high hopes for you, Sungjae. The director came here to see you in person.”

“No, I don’t think that’s right, hyung.”

“Really?”

He didn’t come here because he had high hopes for me, but to thank me for the investment - he inwardly swallowed those words. The manager, Dongwoon, was a good man, but he was bad at noticing other people’s emotions. The other members of TTO agreed with Sungjae that he was a little frustrating to talk to.

“You must be tired, hyung. There’s a blanket here so get some sleep.”

“I’m fine. I’ll be back to normal once I drink some coffee.”

Despite saying that, though, he looked extremely tired. Sungjae laid out the blanket on the floor and forced Dongwoon down.

“No one would need sleep if coffee was all you needed after driving throughout the night. Get some sleep for now. I’ll wake you up if I need you.”

Dongwoon, who was saying that he was alright, fell asleep in less than a minute. Sungjae watched over him for a while before leaving the classroom. Although he had finally arrived at a movie film set, he wasn’t feeling as happy as he thought he would be.

‘I knew this was gonna happen, didn’t I?’

There were three types of reactions from people that looked at him. One, those that didn’t recognize him at all and just walked past; two, those who greeted him nicely after recognizing him; and three, those that gave him a strange glare even after recognizing who he was. The overwhelming majority belonged to the third group of people. The glares from the people were sharp enough for him to feel pricked. They smiled at him up front, but there were people who clicked their tongues as soon as they turned away. Hearing people say tsk, Sungjae had the urge to go pick a fight with them, but the only thing he could do was smile back at them.

He couldn’t just start shouting at them that they shouldn’t be so differentiating against him, and to not look at him with such eyes. He had no qualifications to. Although idols were becoming widespread in the drama industry, the evaluation was not good at all. With that being the case, Sungjae thought that telling them to respect him was being complacent and underhanded without proving himself first.

He wanted to be acknowledged by the people here for his skills, not as a popular idol. He wanted to break the bias that idols had horrible acting skills, and wanted to tell them that there are aspiring actors who became idols out of necessity.

‘Right now, the only thing they value about me is my face, but I’ll show them that that’s not the limit of my skills.’

After taking a deep breath, Sungjae clenched his fist once. This was like a ritual for him. He shook off his nervousness and made a comfortable smile. He couldn’t keep waiting forever. The first movers were the ones to create their image by themselves.

He immediately went up to the 2nd floor. He greeted everyone that he passed by. One of the iron rules he had in the television media was to greet anyone and everyone that he passed by. There was no need to be embarrassed about greeting his juniors as well. In fact, it would be a funny episode in itself, and he could give a good impression towards his juniors as well. That’s why too much greeting was never a bad thing.

He greeted back and accepted all requests for autographs as he climbed up to the 2nd floor. Unlike the busy 1st floor, the 2nd floor was definitely quiet. He could hear a voice from one of the classrooms. There was an agitated voice and a calm voice. Sungjae realized that the actors were doing a read-through in an instant.

He carefully opened the door to the classroom in which the read-through was happening. Inside were the actors that he saw during the get-together.

“Oh, you are...”

An elderly actor with a lot of white hair frowned as he spoke. Sungjae greeted the actors politely.

“I’m Ahn Sungjae, a new actor. I’m here to greet everyone.”

When he greeted, the classroom fell quiet. Sungjae made a smile, albeit barely. The air here was heavy.

Someone made a discontent coughing noise. Sungjae tensed his lips as he tried to control his facial expression. They were much more direct compared to the staff members. He thought that he wouldn’t become nervous since he had experienced such things already, but he was clearly wrong. He was shaking as though he was at the audition. He was afraid that the actors would look at him with hostility and looked down at the floor.

Sungjae shot three drama series. He started off as a nameless extra and eventually ended up taking the role of a side character with quite a lot of appearances. In dramas, numerous idols were being cast and their evaluation wasn't that bad either. To be exact, it wasn't good, but no one expressed it so openly. A symbiotic relationship had clearly formed. Ever since the viewing rates of dramas with idols in it rose by around 5%, the producers cast idols like it was the norm. In morning dramas loved by many housewives, they created meaningless roles for idols just so that they could cast idols.

‘It’s different here.’

Dramas and movies. They were the same in regards to the fact that a piece of work was being created through the acting of actors, but there was something akin to an invisible wall between the two. Top class actors did not do dramas - that was one of the popular sayings in this industry. It represented the pride of movie actors.

This felt different from the disdain he received in dramas. He was too complacent. The movie industry was like a sanctuary untainted by idols. An idol had appeared in such a place, so what would the actors think?

Moreover, this movie was receiving a lot of attention and support, but it was closer to an independent movie that did not belong to the mainstream media. It was funny how this movie, with its immense investment, was comparable to an independent movie, but it was indeed somewhat hard to package this movie as a commercial movie since it portrayed only the dark sides of society.

Yet, there was an idol here wanting a piece of the pie, so it was not surprising that they didn’t like it. Sungjae felt his face become hot. He had long since forgotten about his fantasies about the public after being disappointed in them, but he did not lose his respect for the actors in the industry.

The people sitting here were those that pursued acting alone without taking the easy route out. He had resolved himself that he would accept whatever criticisms they had of him.

“Are you coming here from Seoul?”

Although the voice sounded old and hoarse, it had power. Moonjoong, who he had greeted alongside with the president of his company, had a kind smile on his face.

“Y-yes.”

“You must be tired. Hm, should we rest a bit as well?”

Moonjoong slowly stood and spoke. The other actors all nodded.

“You were Sungjae, yes?”

“Yes. I’m Ahn Sungjae.”

“How are you? Let’s take a walk outside.”

Moonjoong crossed his hands behind his back and left the classroom with slow steps. Sungjae bowed towards the remaining actors in the classroom before following Moonjoong out. When the two came down to the first floor, many of the staff members greeted Moonjoong. What was surprising was that Moonjoong called each of them by name.

Wasn’t it cold last night? Have you had your meal? What happened to your son’s fever?

He remembered each detail of those people and Sungjae felt touched. The ideal actor was right in front of him.

Sungjae followed Moonjoong out to the field with a cup of coffee that the staff gave him.

“This was originally an elementary school for the residents, but it’s closed now since there aren’t any children anymore.”

Sungjae nodded as he followed Moonjoong. The scenery of the field, the mountain behind the school, as well as the quiet village. Moonjoong talked about those things with a quiet voice. Sungjae did not know why he was saying such a thing, but he soon started listening without caring about the reason.

After following him for a while, Sungjae raised his head. In front of him was a large tree. Moonjoong sat down under the shade.

“Take a seat.”

“Yes.”

He sat next to Moonjoong feeling nervous. The wind blew. The empty field gave him a feeling of loneliness, but Sungjae didn’t have the luxury to feel that way. There was a superstar right next to him, so he did not dare turn his eyes away.

“Don’t you feel tired smiling like that all the time?”

“Wh-what?”

“I mean this,” Moonjoong pointed at his own lips as he spoke. Sungjae only then thought of the shallow smile on his face. A smile was engraved into his face just like how his hands became riddled with calluses. The smile that he subconsciously put on his face was practically a mask now. He didn’t have to consciously smile for there to be a smile on his face. That was what being an idol was about.

“You know, actors don’t smile falsely. If they smile, they are really happy, and if they cry, they are really sad. So don’t smile anymore if you don’t feel happy. It’s pitiful to look at it.”

Those words hit Sungjae hard. His lips twitched. It was awkward and difficult to remove the smile from his face forcefully. He made an awkward 'expressionless' face. He didn't even remember the last time he made such an expression.

"Now you look more like a person. I was really uncomfortable with your expression from the first time we met. You're supposed to act realistically, yet lies are written all over your face."

"...I'm sorry."

"Is it hard?"

"Being an idol, or whatever it was. Is it hard being one?"

"No, it's not hard at all."

"Be honest with me. You know? I find it really hard being an actor. Sometimes I want to run away because it's so hard. I felt that yesterday as well. I had to break a sweat. I'm not some crazy person, but I had to cry, then smile, then become angry. I can't say that I don't find that hard."

Moonjoong's eyes were calm. Sungjae could not lie when he saw those eyes.

"I... became used to it. The hard things, the painful things, all of it. It is hard, but I'm okay since I'm loved just as much."

"There you go again."

"Eh?"

He looked back at Moonjoong absent-mindedly.

"I mean this. It's appearing out of habit again," Moonjoong once again pointed at his lips. Sungjae subconsciously put his hand against his lips. There was indeed a smile on his face. He felt like he had sinned. Even though he thought that he was honest, it had already passed through a filter without him knowing it. Perhaps watching his words became a force of habit. Sungjae lowered his head. He felt apologetic.

At that moment, a rough hand touched the back of his neck.

"Why don't you take a hike with me?"

Chapter 289

The mountain was actually much tougher than Sungjae expected. Sungjae's estimations on its difficulty based on its looks, was off by a large amount. The roads were rough without any signs of human passage. If he was wearing shoes instead of trainers, he would have gotten tired easily.

"This is what's good about going to a mountain."

Seeing Moonjoong climb the mountain without a hitch, Sungjae was flabbergasted. An elderly man nearing his seventies was much more energetic than him. Just like a professional mountain climber that had conquered numerous mountains, Moonjoong walked up the mountain in steady steps. Sungjae clenched his teeth as he tried to follow. He didn't want to get left behind. Although he was panting

heavily, he forced himself forward. This was a different kind of tiring than when running on a treadmill machine. He felt like he was lifting himself up the mountain with each step.

"I fell in love with this place when I came here to check out the place last time."

"I-is that so?"

"Is it hard?"

"N-no."

Sungjae wiped off his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Endure just a little more, we're almost there."

This place is quite slippery - added Moonjoong as he pointed at a tree root. Sungjae took off the cheque-patterned shirt. When his sweat was exposed to the wind, he felt a little better.

At some point, he stopped questioning why he had to climb this mountain. He just climbed without thinking. He was watching Moonjoong's back as he did so. That continued for ten minutes when, surprisingly, his breath calmed down and he started looking around at the scenery. Purple-colored flowers filled his vision. Sungjae wondered when he arrived at such a place. He looked back. The mountain flowers had blossomed at the bottom as well. Even though there were flowers all the way since the start, he kept climbing without even noticing them.

"We're here."

Hearing that voice, Sungjae turned back around. Moonjoong was waving at him for him to come from the top. He heaved out a deep breath before climbing up to the top.

Soon, he was standing next to Moonjoong.

Unlike their way up to the top, the peak of the mountain didn't have any trees that blocked out the skies. Thanks to that, he could see much further. After looking at the clear sky for a moment, he threw his gaze at the village afar. He thought that it would be a countryside village with houses built very randomly, but now that he was looking at it from afar, he saw that it was actually very well spaced and well planned. When he had a look closer to the mountain, he saw the school, where they started off. The empty school field was now filled with more people.

"Please excuse us," said Moonjoong suddenly from behind him.

Sungjae turned around wondering what it was. He saw a pair of graves. Only then did Sungjae understand why there were no trees around. It was a grave. Sungjae also clasped his hands and paid his respects.

"Do you know why people like mountains?"

"From what I heard, it's because they can clear their minds...."

Moonjoong smiled and nodded.

“People filled with worries climb mountains like this. It’s an escape in a sense. It doesn’t solve the problem they’re facing, but they can stop worrying. Where do you get the luxury to worry when you are busy? Don’t you think?”

Moonjoong sat down and tapped the place next to him. Sungjae immediately sat down.

“Becoming an entertainer at an early age is a good thing, but is also extremely exhausting. I don’t know much about idols since I’m at the age I am, but I do know that people like you receive a lot of love.”

“Love, you say...,” Sungjae said.

He was aware that he was receiving a lot of attention from the public. After all, wherever he went, there would either be a camera or a hand that wanted a handshake from him. However, was that love?

“I don’t really know if I’m receiving love or not.”

“Why do you think that?”

“At first, I thought that it was love. But recently, I’m a little scared. When there were a few fans, they always said good things to us. Do your best, we’re cheering for you, congratulations, and the like. But after we became popular, we started receiving more bad words than good. I know, there isn’t an entertainer that is loved by everyone. I was prepared to face it, but since it’s getting stronger by the day, I flinch back. A while ago, our oldest member almost ended up drinking poison. After that, the public, which should be a target of appreciation, became more scary to me.”

After that incident, Sungjae started looking at the public not as a target of appreciation, but a tool he could use. How was he supposed to love a fan that gave him poison just because he didn’t reply to a fan letter? If such a thing was called love, then misery might as well be charity.

“You sound like you have more to say, so go ahead. I’m the only one listening,” Moonjoong spoke as he looked into the distance.

Sungjae bit his lips before speaking what was in his mind: that the public had no interest in acting prowess but just wanted popular people.

“There’s a person I used to do acting with when I was young. He was someone that was really good at acting, and no one around him doubted that he would become successful. However, when I met him on a coincidence one day, he was barely getting by as an extra that couldn’t even leave his name on the ending credits. It was then I felt that people don’t want to see actors that are good at acting, but that they want to see the people they like do acting.”

Sungjae smiled bitterly as he remembered that moment.

“Honestly speaking, I was happy when I met him. I became successful. I, as an idol, had the role of a minor character with a lot of appearance. I felt superior just based on the fact that I got to a place he couldn’t. But at the same time, I felt very empty. After all, no matter how much reputation I gain as an actor, it is all thanks to the fact that I am Ahn Sungjae the idol.”

Sungjae then looked down at the ground.

"That's why I tried the audition for this movie. It was in order to escape that bias. When I received the notification that I passed, I had faith. But a while ago, I found out that my cast in the movie was already decided beforehand due to a deal between companies. In a few days, there will be news everywhere about how I, Ahn Sungjae, was cast in a movie through my own skills. When I found out, I couldn't even lift my head due to embarrassment, but a few days later, I felt better. At that time, I became scared again; not of the public, but of myself. So this is how I become more and more dull; this is how I make a tool of myself. I even ended up thinking that my skills doesn't matter and it will work as long as I appear on camera..." after saying those words, Sungjae became quiet.

He had spoken too much because he was caught up in the mood.

"An actor cannot be free from money. No, it's not just actors. Who in this world can be free from money? We can just be thankful that people like us and that they are looking for us."

"...Aren't you angry about that, sir?"

"Angry?"

"Yes."

"Why would I?"

"Because a kid like me participated in this movie, even though there must be better people than me out there."

Hearing those words, Moonjoong started chuckling.

"Do not underevaluate yourself too much."

"Eh?"

"Do you know the producer of this movie?"

"If I am correct, it is president Lee Junmin."

"Yes, he's in charge of most things. Casting the actors is up to him as well. And he's not a pathetic person that puts a lacking actor in his work just because of money. If you were chosen, then it's because you have the skills that fit your role. Money is secondary. He's not lenient enough to pick people without the proper skills."

"..."

"Also, it looks like you became timid because the actors didn't greet you properly, but that's not because you're an idol."

"Then why..."

"It's because they're tired."

"B-because they're tired?"

“They drank late into the night. You came in just at the moment they were going over the lines to exercise their necks a bit. It’s not that they had any malice towards you. It’s actually because they didn’t have the energy to greet you properly.

“Then the cough....”

“That guy must’ve had a sore throat.”

Moonjoong patted Sungjae’s shoulders as he stood up.

“The people gathered over there are all foolish people. Most of them came to the acting industry despite the instability of their jobs just because they liked acting. Because they’re such people, they will not look down on people that are doing acting with them without reason. In fact, they will cheer for those people. Just like me.”

Moonjoong started climbing down the mountain in the same leisurely manner that he climbed up. Sungjae stood up, feeling complicated. At that moment, a rather chilly voice entered his ears.

“But conversely, if you do not show your skills during the real deal, then you’ll receive the cold shoulder immediately. That’s why I ask of you to please, do well. These people are the best of the best. If your resolve is something that shakes just because of a few glares, you’ll have a hard time here. Even people younger than you grind their blades here. If you lack the skills, then you will lose your role. I’ll be the one who will say that I can’t work with you.”

Moonjoong, who seemed like a kind man until now, spoke such sharp words. Sungjae felt a chill behind his back.

“Childish whines will only be accepted on the first day. This isn’t a place for amateurs after all. We’re here to show results.”

Sungjae gulped. He was reminded of the words that his president said to him before he came here. That he could not make a mistake this time. Although she said such words all the time, from how serious she sounded this time, it was likely that she didn’t have the final say around here. He would lose his role if he wasn’t good enough. It wasn’t a warning, but a declaration.

“If you have the luxury to think about how people look at you and worry about your position here, then you might want to think about the fundamentals of acting again. First up, you should try fixing that mask on your face and be honest with your emotions. If you are truly an actor, it won’t take long for you to realize how and fix yourself. If not, then the only words you’ll hear at the set today will be ‘again’ or ‘edit him out’.”

The person in front of him was not an elderly that listened to a child’s worries, but someone who was responsible for his work. Sungjae realized just how pathetic and meager his worries were. The public? Popularity? That was secondary. Right now, he had to put everything into his acting. Moonjoong was teaching him that the filming wasn’t lax enough for him to mind about other things.

“I don’t want this movie to do badly.”

Sungjae nodded heavily.

“Then let’s go down.”

Moonjoong returned to his kind self again.

* * *

“Senior, did you scold that fellow?” Joonggeun asked as he pointed at Sungjae from afar.

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s because that kid looked like his mind was boggled with unnecessary thoughts, but his eyes look clear now.”

Hearing Joonggeun’s words, Moonjoong chuckled.

“I just said a few things to him so that he could bring out his skills.”

“I knew it. How did you notice what I was thinking and do the thing that I wanted to do? I love and respect you, senior.”

Joonggeun then stuck close to him.

“Why don’t you mature a bit if you’re at the age you are? You’re no kid.”

“Again with that! Ah, rather than that, that kid, uhm so... Maru, Han Maru, that’s it. Did he go home?”

“He did.”

“Rude brat. I was planning to compliment him since he did good, but he ran without even greeting me?”

“How was he supposed to greet someone who’s drunk and sleeping? He came in the morning, but I told him to go.”

“Aha.”

“But why do you need Maru?”

“Oh, a producer the camera director is acquainted with is starting a drama. They’re looking for high school students, and I was planning to recommend him.”

“You? Recommend someone? What’s up with you? You hated doing that because the producers don’t like such things.”

“I should have him be indebted to me when I have the chance to, so that I can use him later when I want. Consider it an investment in a promising youth. And also, I don’t think anyone would dislike a guy like him.”

“Geez.”

“He’s under Junmin-hyung, right?”

“Yes.”

“Looks like I should give him a call later. Rather than that, he’s supposed to be the producer of the movie, but he’s not shown himself even once. Isn’t a producer supposed to do what I was just doing?”

“You won’t get anything from saying that to me.”

"I'm saying that we should talk bad about him together. I know you know what I mean."

Moonjoong told the chuckling Joonggeun Maru's phone number. An opportunity like this would ease Maru's growth into a big actor.

'Experiencing many things will widen your horizon.'

Moonjoong made a joyous smile as he thought about Maru and his calm expression.

Chapter 290

-How could you not give me a call even once?

"Well, I'm doing that right now. Did you have your meal yet?"

-That's the only thing you're interested in, isn't it?

"Well, it means that you're healthy," Maru spoke as he watched the guardrails that flashed by.

"Are you practicing even now?"

-Obviously. I have juniors now. I have to teach my juniors so that we can take the grand prize again this year. I also want a personal prize as well.

"Aren't you being too greedy? If Myunghwa high school wins this time around, it's the 3rd year in a row, isn't it?"

-No, it's the fourth.

"Then it's about time you hand it over to us. Let's have a symbiotic relationship."

-Hell no.

"How cruel."

-If you want it so much, win it from us.

A fufu laugh could be heard over the phone. Maru smiled as he imagined her with a satisfied smirk.

"Then you don't have any time during weekdays?"

-I don't. Sorry.

"There's nothing to be sorry about. How about the weekend?"

-I can do Saturday.

"Then let's meet then. Aren't we seeing each other too little even though we're students?"

-Well, we would've been able to meet yesterday but a certain someone had to go somewhere else for shooting a movie.

"...Fine, it's my fault."

-How was it? Did you do well?

"I think I did a decent job?"

-You don't sound so confident. Are you sure you won't be edited out?

"I guess I have to pray for that to not happen."

The express bus slowed down and entered a service area. The driver got off the bus as he told everyone to visit the bathroom.

-Are you on the bus?

"Yeah. I'm going up to Suwon right now."

-When are you arriving?

"I think there's still 3 hours to go. I think I'll make it home before six."

-Isn't it tiring?

"I'm doing nothing but sitting still. Rather than that, don't you need to get going? I think I hear something."

-Yeah, we just resumed practice, I need to go.

"Be careful. Watch out for your stamina. Don't forget to stay hydrated."

-Yeah, yeah, sure. Don't worry about me and worry about yourself instead. Also... congratulations on your debut. Let's go look at it together once it's out.

"Okay."

-Let's hang up then.

"After you."

Silence continued for a moment before the call ended abruptly. Maru stretched his arms out as he stood up. He got off the bus and entered the convenience store in the service area. He bought some bread and milk as lunch before returning to the bus.

"We're departing. Please check if your companions are here."

The bus left the service area and entered the highway again. The scenery was unchanging and it was quite a boring ride. He was looking at the cars passing by outside the window as he was folding up the bread packaging. At that moment, his phone started ringing. He took out his phone from his pocket and checked the name. The name said Kim Dongwook. It was quite an unfamiliar name, so it didn't come to his mind immediately. He was pondering as he put his thumb against the call button when he remembered the entertainment journalist he saw during the read-through.

"Hello?"

-Is this Mr. Han Maru's phone?

"Yes, it is, journalist."

-Aah, yes, that's right. Your voice sounded so mature, so I was wondering if I got the wrong number. Where are you right now?

"In a bus to Suwon."

-Damn! I guess we missed each other.

"Miss each other?"

-I'm driving to Yeongdeok right now. Because of work.

"Oh, work. It's about the movie then?"

-Yes. Oh, and also, why didn't you tell me back then?

"Tell you what back then?"

-Stop pretending to be ignorant. I'm going to Yeongdeok to collect news. I already talked with your president.

"Oh, I see."

-Oh, I see? I did feel this back then, but you really are quite something. You belong to JA and you didn't tell me anything about it. I'm kinda sad, you know?

"Well, that was because I didn't see the need to. But what do you mean when you said that you already talked to the president?"

-We're helping each other out now, is what I mean. Your president, though, he's quite a scary man. He first investigates me in secret, and then he tests me out in secret as well. Though, I do like him for it.

Dongwook started speaking about that event as he laughed.

* * *

"Geez, looks like I took a hit this time. I thought it was a good fish I can chew on, but it turns out it was bait to fish out a man," Dongwook spoke as he looked at Lee Junmin, who was in front of him.

"It's natural for an employer to look into the abilities of a potential employee, no?" Junmin replied as though it was only natural.

Dongwook smiled bitterly as he remembered about the youth named Yoo Sooil from a while ago.

The information that youth indirectly told him was actually just bait. The evidence that JA is planning to make a big move was a huge news topic in the entertainment industry, so it was very valuable to those that worked in news outlets.

Dongwook pondered what to do with that information. If JA was preparing to list its stocks, there would be a prior notice about it to gather potential buyers, so that wasn't much of a big news at all. However, Dongwook believed that JA wasn't going to list itself so hastily. No, on the surface, JA didn't pass the requirements to be listed, so he believed that they would keep being unlisted. This meant that this info was only valuable to the shareholders of unlisted stocks. Being unlisted didn't mean that it wasn't free

from market logic, if JA decided that it wanted to grow in size, the price of JA's over-the-counter stocks would rise.

Currently, JA's over-the-counter stocks were currently being traded at around 2000 won, though it differed from place to place. It was worth around 1800 won before the movie production news hit the internet. In such a situation, what if the news that they recruited several actors with potential became known? The power of the name 'Lee Junmin' wasn't small in the entertainment industry, so the stock prices would definitely rise.

The important thing here was when to release this information. Dongwook pondered deeply. This was a precious piece of information that might fill his fragile wallet again, so he had no plans to release it hastily. He was thinking about what to do when he received the call -

From none other than Junmin, that is.

It was rather unexpected, but at the same time, the timing was rather awkward, so Dongwook had to get prepared before he went to meet him. After exchanging greetings, Junmin didn't go over the formalities and straight out asked why he stayed quiet. He tried to feign ignorance once, but he revealed all of his thoughts when Junmin looked like he knew everything and when he mentioned Yoo Sooil. That was when he found out that his encounter with that kid was planned from the start, by none other than the man in front of him.

"I was planning to ignore you without hesitation if you decided to sell your investigations to others for immediate profit. We can just hold off the listing until later and the stock price bubble will burst sooner or later."

"My wallet is not in a good situation right now, so I was holding on to it thinking about how to sell it at an expensive price."

"That's why I feel good about you. As a journalist, finding out the truth is important, yes, but knowing the right time to release the info is important as well."

Junmin spoke as he drank a sip of his red tea. Dongwook also drank his coffee. He grasped the overall situation, but he did not understand what Junmin was saying completely. He put down his empty coffee mug and spoke,

"But you mentioned something strange just now."

"About what?"

"You said something about looking into the abilities of a potential business partner. What do you mean by that?"

"I mean just that. Just like the information you painstakingly put in the effort to get, my company is about to start doing public activities. This means that we'll have to look for people to write articles about us, as well as respond to public opinions."

"You're saying..."

"Your current company, Mint News, was it? What's the pay like over there?"

Dongwook was flabbergasted rather than angry when Junmin asked for his salary numbers. It was like a pleasant provocation.

“What do you think?”

“Less than what you used to receive when you worked for a public media outlet, based on the fact that your current residence costs 300,000 per month and 10,000,000 won as a deposit. It’s sufficient for a single person, but isn’t it hard commuting to work every day? It’s a bit far from the subway station.”

“Geez, when did you look into that?”

“You were investigating us, so we couldn’t sit still.”

Dongwook made a bitter smile.

“How about twice?”

“What?”

“The type of work shouldn’t be that different to the work you’re doing now. You just need to exclusively do interviews with actors belonging to our company. That’s what we’re going to do about our news. If you want news about JA, then go through Kim Dongwook - or something like that.”

“That’s it, and I receive twice my current annual salary?”

“Yes. Oh, and I’ll be providing you with a residence near the company, as well as a car for work. Petrol fee is company-provided as well. You can eat all three meals at the company as well. The food here is good, so you won’t be dissatisfied.”

Junmin took out a contract form from his bag. Dongwook was flabbergasted and just watched him as he did so.

“I only work with people that can become the best of the best. As for you, journalist Kim, you have already proven your skills. Oh, and I don’t mean what happened recently. I’m referring to your experiences during the time you worked for public TV. I was planning to look for others if your senses had dulled, but they didn’t become dull at all.”

Junmin spun the contract form 180 degrees on the desk so that Dongwook could read it. His elegant movements seemed to be evident of the fact that he hadn’t done this just once or twice.

“It’s about time you receive proper treatment for your work. Don’t you think so, journalist Kim?”

“Proper treatment, you say. That’s something I haven’t heard in a long time.”

Seeing Junmin with a faint smile on his face, Dongwook shook his head. At the same time, he took out his phone. He called the president of his now-former company that always told him to just copy and paste articles from other news outlets.

“President, no, I mean, Deokbae. I have a letter of resignation inside the top drawer of my desk. No, don’t get angry and listen to me. You paid me dirt-cheap, so you can do that much, don’t you think? Anyway, please handle that for me. Put the severance pay in my account. As for the take-over, you can just use the kid that sits next to me. I hope I never see you again.”

He hung up before grabbing the pen in front of him and signing the paper.

* * *

-Understand? We're one family now.

"Sheesh, way to go, president, I guess."

-My words exactly.

"Anyway, congratulations. Your pay suddenly doubled."

-I feel awesome. It felt like everything was going well after I met you, so I was planning to treat you to a meal, but you just had to be going home at this time.

"Treat me in Seoul once."

-Alright, alright.

"Then I guess in the future, all the news about the movie is going through you, sir?"

-Yeah. And also, one more thing. Our dear president Lee is preparing a lot of things. He told me that he'll be releasing a magazine.

"A magazine?"

-A magazine talking about news in the entertainment industry. The base will be a women's magazine, and the sprinkling on top is fashion. I'm the editor-in-chief for that as well.

"That's more work for you, then."

-It's still in the early stages, so I'll have to look into more things. That leads to the question, I heard that you were close with Gwak Joon, the writer?"

"How did you find that out?"

-Through the president.

"Geez."

-Anyway, I need you to be the middleman between him and I. A magazine needs its columns, right? And Gwak Joon is hot and popular these days.

"Well, I'm not sure if that hyung is into that stuff."

-You never know. He might unexpectedly like that kind of thing.

"Alright. I'll try asking him. But don't expect anything. He's the type of guy who lacks time writing his own stuff."

-Let's not be so pessimistic before we even try. We need to try it out first before expecting results. Oh, that's right. Were there any journalists in the filming scene?

"No. When I arrived, I didn't see any cameras other than the ones used for the film."

-Really? Then I guess people will start flocking starting today. Hey, I'm hanging up for now, okay? Be careful on your way home, and see you later.

"Okay. Please be careful while driving."

That call was quite a rollercoaster. Maru heaved out a deep sigh. It seemed that Junmin was getting ready to do a lot of things in places he didn't know about. This was probably how the foundations for Geunsoo's rise to dominance in the movie industry and Ganghwan's rise to power in the theater scene was being created.

'I guess I shouldn't have a problem living if I join them now.'

Maru looked outside the window with a satisfied smile.