

Once Again 291

Chapter 291

"I hope summer vacation comes early."

"There's not even a month left now. It'll come soon."

"Did you already get the permission to go to the concert?"

"I don't think mom will ever allow me if I told her honestly. Like I said, we should just say that we're just going to hang out. The concert starts at five on Saturday and since it's 3 hours long, it should be eight when it ends, right? I don't think she'll say anything if I just tell her that we're just going to hang out together."

"Right? Then what do we tell her?"

"The obvious choice is the theme park."

"That's a good one. A theme park, huh. We went there last year, so I don't think mom will be suspicious."

Bada giggled with her friends. They were talking about TTO's concert for the past few days. When she first talked about the ticket, her friends did not believe her. However, when she showed them the six tickets that her brother gave her, she was treated like a hero. Ever since then, they spent weeks devising the 'perfect plan to go to the concert' every time they met up.

"But hey, where did your brother get those six tickets? It shouldn't be easy getting any tickets, much less six in a row."

"Oh, I didn't ask, so I don't know."

"Really? Well, what's important is that we're going to the concert. Still, your brother's amazing."

While Bada's friends talked about what clothes they should wear to the concert, Bada pondered about that question. Just how did her brother get his hands on the autograph and the tickets?

"How much does an R seat cost?"

"I heard from my cousin that she spent 160 thousand on an R seat ticket when she went last time."

"160 thousand?"

"It's actually 100 thousand, but she couldn't get the tickets in time, so she had to buy it second hand. I heard that R seat tickets are really hard to get unless you buy them second hand."

Bada thought of the six tickets that she left at home. 6 tickets that cost 160 thousand won each, after calculating in her head, she blinked several times due to the absurd number. She didn't think about it that much when she received them since she was so happy, but now that she thought about it, she thought that she shouldn't have accepted those tickets so easily. She was aware that her brother saved up some money during vacation doing a part time job, but would that be enough to get his hands on something that cost nearly a million won?

'Now that I think about it, there's the credit card as well.'

She was spending around 100 thousand won every month with the card that he gave her. It had been around 10 months since she started using the card, so that would add up to another million won. In total, it would be around 2 million won. Also, Maru only worked for one month at the petrol station during the summer, and he was hospitalized throughout winter.

"Can you earn 2 million won by working at the petrol station for one month?" She asked her friends. One of her friends who worked at a fast food restaurant said that it was impossible.

"My hourly wage is 2,300 won, so if I want to save up 2 million with that... Nope, not happening. I can work all month and it wouldn't be anywhere close to that figure."

"Is it hard?"

"Yeah. If I could earn 2 million won per month doing a part time job, I would love to do it. But why do you ask?"

"Nothing, just curious."

When the bell rang, the group split up and went back to their seats. Bada took out a pink wallet from her pocket and had a look at the card inside. Just where did her brother get so much money? He wasn't doing anything shady, right? - she wondered.

Perhaps it was related to him leaving during the weekend saying that he had a read-through or something. Now that she thought about it, he even stayed the night out around half a month ago. He said that it wasn't due to club activities, but that he was going to a shoot, and he seemed so laid back about it so Bada didn't think much about it.

'Wait, a shoot?'

Maru once said that he was going to read the script with some actors. At that time, she thought that it was a joke. Bada groaned in a low voice before putting the wallet back inside her pocket. What if her brother was not joking back then? What if he was really shooting a drama or something?

"No way. That can't be right."

Bada chuckled. She went too wild with her fantasies. Maru did change from his middle school days, but him, an actor? He didn't have a bad face objectively speaking, but nor did his face suffice to become a celebrity. She was aware that he liked acting to the point that he injured himself but still....

Just as her thoughts reached there, she remembered the faces of the people that she met when she went to visit him at the hospital. She met Suyeon-uni there, an actress that only appeared on TVs. Her brother didn't seem to like her that much, but considering that she came to visit him in the hospital, the two were probably on close terms.

'It's curious that he managed to get an autograph from Sungjae-oppa as well.'

Perhaps he was actually doing a shoot with known celebrities?

"Open your textbooks."

That was the first thing the teacher said when he entered the class.

For now, Bada stopped thinking about it. She could just ask her brother during break. What if her brother really did work in the entertainment industry?

No way, that can't be... right?

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"Didn't mom tell you that I signed a contract?"

-It's real?

"Yeah."

-Then why didn't you tell me anything about it?

"Did you ask?"

-...That's absurd. Then when you said that you were going to a shoot a while ago, did you really go to a shoot? As in, like, standing in front of the camera, and having photos or videos taken of you?

"That did happen."

-What is it? A drama?

"It's a movie."

-A movie? It's not a drama but a movie? Which movie is it? Who's on it?

Maru frowned and took his phone off his ears. He felt annoyed because his sister was shouting at him non stop. He did feel uneasy when her name appeared on his phone screen as well. Maru looked at the phone with a sour face.

"What are you doing?"

At that moment, he saw Dowook come back from the school cafeteria. Maru grinned and handed the phone over to him.

"Here, take it."

"Who is it?"

"Just take it."

He handed the phone over to Dowook and calmly watched him. Dowook, who received the phone with a suspicious gaze frowned after listening to the voice over the phone. Maru thought that he would throw the phone immediately, but Dowook unexpectedly continued the call. After replying with short answers, Dowook hung up after saying 'okay'.

"Both of you siblings are just... urgh, forget it."

He threw the phone at Maru.

"What did you talk about?"

“Shut up. I have a headache because she was too loud. Why does she have such a loud voice?”

“I don’t know. But rather than that, you seemed rather obedient. I knew it, there must be something going on between you...,” Maru did not finish his sentence because he saw that Dowook was glaring at him while holding his mechanical pencil like he was about to stab him.

“There you go again. What is it now?”

Daemyung, who appeared with a piece of bread in his hands, took the mechanical pencil away from Dowook’s hands.

“Had I not received that guy’s help, I would have beaten him up already,” saying that, Dowook then put his face against the desk.

Maru shrugged before accepting the bread from Daemyung.

“You should really stop teasing Dowook. Now that I think about it, you’re only doing it to him as well.”

“Consider it the feelings of a brother caring for his sister.”

He saw Dowook flinching. Maru smiled and switched the topic.

“The date for the acting competition is out, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s at the end of July. If it goes like how it went last year, then ours will be in early August.”

“So the acting competition is here, huh.”

“Yeah.”

Maru glanced at Daemyung. He was looking at the clock with a serious expression.

“How is it? Can you see it?”

“See what?”

“The prize. We got the gold prize last year, so we must win the grand prize this year, don’t we?”

“Th- that’s not that easy.”

“But you know you want it.”

“Yeah, sure. After all, it’s the biggest competition you can participate in as a high school student.”

Maru nodded his head. Daemyung definitely had the desire to win. That could be seen from just how he asked the first years if they could stay for thirty more minutes in practice, when he was someone who hated inconveniencing others.

“We’re busy since there aren’t as many members as we had last year, but honestly speaking, I think the skill level this year is better. The first years are following us well and Dowook is doing well, too.”

“That’s true.”

As the control tower did not waver like last year, there was no disharmony. Compared to last year, where there was distrust between members as well as that event, this year's acting club was really unified.

"When we started 2nd year, we weren't in a position where we could want something. After all, we were talking about shutting the club down back then. But now, everyone's doing so well, and I now want to present them with the prize. The grand prize might be impossible, but just a gold or a silver prize is fine. The feeling of receiving a prize on stage is just..." Daemyung did not finish his sentence.

He seemed to have remembered what happened last year. During the award ceremony, Maru was watching from the audience seats.

"Let's get one together this year," Daemyung smiled as he spoke.

"Then it looks like we should be getting into the final spurt then. Instructor Suyeon is coming this week, right?"

"Yeah. She said she's coming tomorrow."

"Then I guess we have to get as much as we can out of her."

Maru wanted to give this friend of his the grand prize. He didn't have any schedule until the acting competition, so they might actually be able to aim for the grand prize if they practice enough during this time.

"Should we do that?"

"Do what?"

"The thing Miso-seonbae taught us."

"She didn't teach us just one or two things."

"I mean the café. Do you remember? She drove us there."

"...Oh, you mean that place? Of course I remember. How could I forget?"

Last year, Miso drove them all to a café and had them all do a monodrama. It was great at improving instantaneous responses to unfamiliar environments, watching out for pronunciation according to different spaces, as well as understanding what a stage was.

"I think it'll be good if we do it, but..."

"Then let's make a call."

"To Miso-seonbae?"

"Yes."

"Should we? I would feel sorry if she's working right now."

"Don't worry about that. She doesn't have a job for the foreseeable while. It's very likely that she's sleeping now as well. Or, she would be bashing her head against the wall thanks to a hangover."

“How do you know that?”

“Well, I belong to the same company as her.”

Hearing those words, Daemyung pondered for a moment before coming to a realization. Maru took out his phone immediately. If they could borrow that café area to do that training again, it would definitely help the first years out a lot, especially for Jiyeon, who was shy around strangers. It was also a great opportunity for Dowook, Aram and Bangjoo to experience what it feels like to act in front of strangers.

Maru immediately called Miso. It was nearing one in the afternoon. Normal people would receive the call, but there was a chance that Miso, who had her night and day swapped around thanks to recent work, might not receive the call. When he called her last time to say hello, Miso was sleeping at 2 p.m.

Just as he was thinking that it was no good, someone picked up the phone.

-...What.

Her voice sounded hoarse and monotone. It seemed that she just woke up. Just as he was about to tell her that it was time to wake up, a man’s voice could be heard over the phone.

-Who is it?

The voice belonged to no one other than Park Taesik, the teacher in charge of the acting club. Maru scratched his head and fell silent. Miso made an awkward laughing sound as she started speaking gibberish. Maru did not bat an eyelid as he listened.

-Uh, eh, hm, uh, Maru? Hello? Hey, I said hey! It’s not what you think it is. It’s not! I’m telling you, it’s not! Hey! Say something!

“Yeah, yeah. I understand perfectly. I get it so please spare some time for us.”

-Time? What time?

Miso replied immediately since she didn’t want to talk about that topic anymore.

“I’m really sorry for asking this all of a sudden, but do you remember the café you took us last time? Can we go there again?”

-...Aha~ahn. That place, huh?

She seemed to have caught on already.

“Yes.”

-It’s my cute junior’s request, so there’s no reason I can’t.

“Thank you.”

-I’ll give you a call once it’s ready. You guys get ready as well.

“Alright.”

Maru didn’t forget to add before he hung up.

"I prefer Galbi-tang over noodles. My congratulatory gift will be 50 thousand won. Congratulations, you two."

He heard a shout saying 'hey', but Maru quietly closed his phone.

"Wh- what is it?"

"Adult business."

"What?"

"Kids don't need to know."

Maru made a suspicious smile.

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So, this is related to wedding customs in Korea. The organizers of the wedding prepare a banquet for the guests to celebrate the happy occasion. In the early days, people used to eat noodles, to signify that they should have a 'long lasting relationship'. Then, it changed to Galbi-tang, because it's seen as a luxury food back when that custom began. These days, it's replaced with a buffet most of the time.

Also, there's the custom of 'gifting congratulatory money' to the newlyweds. Though, these days, more and more people consider it as the 'price for the meal ticket for the buffet'.

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He was told that he actually cried a lot when he was young. He cried while eating the candy that their grandma gave him, suddenly cried while playing with friends, and even woke up in the middle of the night crying, which made his mom worry about him a lot. But curiously, he did not cry when he was with his sister. His eyes turned red and looked as though he was about to cry, but he never showed his tears.

Bangjoo was vaguely aware of the reason. His grandma and mom were people who he wanted to spoil him, while his sister was a target of admiration.

During elementary school, his grandma's health worsened dramatically. The house was always covered in a gloomy atmosphere and his grandma's thick coughing sound was mixed in with that gloomy atmosphere. Bangjoo cried whenever he heard the violent coughs. Whenever he did, his grandma would forcefully tell him that she was okay with a cheerful voice. Bangjoo cried even more since those words were obviously a lie, and whenever that happened, his sister would come and scold him.

Bangjoo held in his tears between his grandma who told his sister to stop and his sister who told him that he should understand grandma a little more. He had no choice but to hold them in. Bangjoo knew. He knew that his sister always cried without a sound. His sister, who liked grandma more than anyone, wasn't crying, so he couldn't cry in front of her.

Not long after, his grandma went to Jeju island saying that she's going to a place with cleaner air, and his parents went down with her to look after her. It was around that time that his sister started going on stages. Bangjoo grabbed his sister's hands and visited many theaters. His sister, who acted under the spotlight in a small theater looked so cool to him that he couldn't help but stare at her, and that made Bangjoo dream of becoming an actor as well.

He watched the popular movies at that time that featured Jackie Chan, and told his sister every day that he wanted to become an actor like him. While his sister smiled back at him saying that it would be hard, she explained to him what acting was about whenever she had the chance to. Although he somewhat impulsively decided that he wanted to become an actor, Bangjoo thought that it wasn't that bad.

Since then, good days with good news about his sister continued. His sister's acting was seen in a positive light, allowing her to move to a bigger stage, while his grandma's health took a turn for the better to the point that she was able to take walks outside without anyone's help. Bangjoo was also showing his talent in his elementary school soccer club, and he was asked if he wanted to do it seriously. He was briefly tempted because he liked sports, but he ended up refusing, saying that his dream was to become an action star.

One day, his sister came home cheerfully saying that she was cast in a drama. She cried endlessly on the phone that day. Bangjoo was young, but he knew that she wasn't crying because she was sad. After that, his sister sometimes came home with a tired face, but she never stopped smiling. A few months later, his sister appeared on TV. It was a short one-act drama that was broadcasted late at night. His sister always told him that he had to sleep early and usually did not allow him to watch TV late into the night, but she gave him special permission for that day. She kept looking for her own appearances on TV while wiping away her tears. When he asked why she was crying, she replied that it was because she felt happy.

After that, his sister became even busier. Their mother, who came back from Jeju island, was worried about her because she was working so hard. His sister became so busy that she had to leave the acting troupe that she belonged to and started staying nights out. Eventually, she showed up at home at most once every ten days. His sister teasingly asked him if he missed her, but Bangjoo replied to her with a snort saying that she should mind her business. He did feel a little lonely, but he didn't want to say it out loud. He was a boy after all.

While everything seemed to be going well, bad news came from the South. His grandma had collapsed again. His mother, who came back home, went back down to Jeju island. He asked if he could go with her, but his mother sternly said no. Seeing her being so strict, Bangjoo intuitively realized that his grandma was in a bad condition. A gloomy atmosphere started filling the house again. The house was without his mom or his sister. Just as he was receiving help from his uncle, something bad happened to his sister.

Bangjoo clearly remembered that moment. His sister came back drenched in the rain, and she powerlessly walked into the house while looking into the empty void. Her wet feet created disturbing sounds. Bangjoo carefully spoke to her as she walked to her room. His sister, who would usually reply that nothing had happened, just walked into her room without saying anything.

That silence was frightening. Bangjoo felt fear from his sister's taut lips. The house was filled with the heavy air of frustration. Bangjoo wanted to help his sister out. He wanted to help her, who had looked after him when he was young. He knocked on her door asking if she was okay several times, but he never got a reply back.

Even when the sky was turning bright again, Bangjoo could not move from the front of his sister's door. The occasional faint crying sound made him unable to budge from the spot. He thought about what he

could do with his small head, but there was only one answer. He couldn't do anything. Being young and powerless couldn't feel more frustrating that day.

Bangjoo returned to his room and spoke. What could he do? The moment he brought up that question, the first thing that came to mind was the drama that his sister shot for the first time. The short one-act drama that he stayed up until midnight to watch. In that drama, she cheered for her boyfriend who was having a hard time with a loud voice. She shouted regardless of what other people were doing, and that scene was deeply engraved in Bangjoo's mind.

When the sun rose, Bangjoo shouted 'wake up' with the loudest voice he could muster. He forced his voice out. His sister, who had locked her door, slowly opened the door. It was as though she had left her emotions elsewhere, and she looked like a completely different person from the day before, but Bangjoo cheerfully talked to her without minding it. When he did, his sister very carefully smiled and told him that she was okay now.

After that day, his sister wasn't as kind and smiling as before, but she became sturdier, and a few years later, she became well-known as the actress with a foul mouth. The actress with a kind image had disappeared, but she did not feel disappointed. In fact, she enjoyed her changed self. And one day, she said this to him in passing - thanks for cheering for me that day.

* * *

"I think he should look into becoming a religious leader rather than into acting."

"I think so too."

Maru watched Bangjoo who was speaking out loudly on the terrace of the café. They were doing the same thing they did last year and each member of the club was doing a monodrama on the terrace that was filled with many customers.

Maru started off and Daemyung followed suit to give them an example. They no longer felt that awkward since they had experienced doing it in the same place last year, and above all, the nervousness lessened since they had experience standing on actual stages. After Daemyung was the only 2nd year other than the two. He asked Daemyung if he could skip, but there was no way Daemyung would permit it since he was strict when it came to acting. In the end, Dowook acted out a delinquent and returned to the shop while receiving an applause of encouragement from the people there. Dowook sat down and never lifted his head since he had become beet red.

After that was Aram, who said that she wanted to go first. Unlike her dignified entrance, she became stiff like a statue as soon as she stood at the center of the terrace. Her expression was stiff and she was very awkward as though she was frozen. She went up feeling confident, but she came back like someone who had seen the worst nightmare of her lifetime. It even felt pitiful when she muttered if she could still act.

The second one that went up among the first years was unexpectedly Jiyeon. It seemed that her classmate Aram's courage provoked her as well. Jiyeon walked up to the center of the terrace in a shy manner, and started off stuttering, but she soon calmed down and showed a decent act. She was the type of person that did not get stage fright. She was the complete opposite of Aram, who was a tomboy who stiffened in front of a crowd, and was someone that became soft in front of a crowd. Jiyeon's

actions seemed to indicate that she was only shaking due to her trauma. Jiyeon returned to the table with a happy face. Miso also told her that she got a pass. Dowook and Aram, who went up there before her, kept sighing endlessly.

Next was Bangjoo. Maru thought that he would never get nervous, and he was right. He took a bow like an English gentleman before he went onto the stage and even induced the crowd to applaud before he even started. Then, he started his act, and although there were a few awkward parts, everything was negated with his confidence. Since coming up with an act on the spot was difficult, they were instructed to act out the role they had. However, Bangjoo seemed to have forgotten his lines midway and started talking about what he wanted. His story seemed to be about some drama, and he continued the story until the end with a joyous yet slightly nostalgic-feeling expression.

“It’s his own story.”

“You think so too?”

“Such a plentiful expression doesn’t come without firsthand experience. One can only make those faces when talking about what’s in their heart. However, it’s hard to give him a high score as an actor.”

Miso spoke in disappointment. Maru nodded since he understood where she was coming from. When she said that he should look into becoming a religious leader instead, that was her evaluation of him. Bangjoo’s pronunciation was very crisp and clear. It was the type of voice that could be heard loud and clear no matter how far a person was.

However, that was all. Others at least put on an act despite being shy and embarrassed. Acting was something that had to be done not through just the body and facial expressions, but through the voice as well. Imbuing emotion into speech. It was something hard to do without proper training, but he had learned the basics, so he had to be able to do it. The other three, albeit awkward, managed to imbue their feelings into their voice. They were conscious of the emotions as they spoke their lines.

On the other hand, Bangjoo just had a ‘good voice’. He put on many different facial expressions, yes, but his voice was cheerful from the beginning to the end. He was speaking with a longing expression, but if his voice did not contain longing, the crowd would be confused due to the disparity. Moreover, they would then proceed to think that it might be black comedy.

“It feels like what’s done on purpose is not being done on purpose. Does he always have a loud voice like that?”

“Yes. His voice is always energetic even when he feels down.”

“Hm, if you let him know about it, there won’t be any problems in this play, but it’ll be hard for him to become a proper actor if he does not fix that. Hey, he’s just in the acting club and is not considering it as a career path, is he?”

“Well, he’s an aspiring action star.”

“Really? Then that’s no good. What the heck is Kim Suyeon doing? Does she not care about the details?”

“Instructor Suyeon focuses on raising everyone’s skill level as a whole rather than on developing one’s talents.”

“...Sigh, who am I to say anything. I’m not even related to any of it now. I’m a powerless senior that has to obey every beck and call.”

“Are you holding a grudge because of what I said last time?”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t? I am holding a grudge.”

“...”

“Just joking. I don’t think her method is a bad one. But still, she needs to fix a problem if she sees it.”

“I’ll try asking her later.”

“Okay, that should be better. It’s somewhat awkward for me to ask too.”

Maru watched Bangjoo as he was being applauded. Humans were affected by the law of cause and effect. There had to be a reason behind Bangjoo’s constantly energetic voice. His money was on the fact that Bangjoo had been living alone since young, as well as what might have happened to his sister. Like what Miso said, there was no need to correct him, if his acting career ended with club activities. His character would be a merit rather than a demerit in society. However, if he was aspiring to become an actor, then it was definitely something he had to fix. If his voice was simply loud, then it could be suppressed, but the strange sense of energy had to be adjusted. The act would become horrible if he was putting on an angry act, but with a cheerful voice.

“I did well, didn’t I?”

Bangjoo waved his hand as he returned to the shop. Maru exchanged glances with Daemyung before telling him that he did well.

“Then is it over now?”

Aram asked with a powerless expression.

“That’s it for today. Let’s do the rest as we get something to eat.”

Daemyung stood up as he said that they should switch places. At that time, Miso received a phone call and flinched before speaking into the phone in a low voice. Maru immediately realized who was on the other side of the phone.

“Seonbae-nim, you should go back. We can do the rest.”

“Sh, shall we, then?”

Maru waved his hand at Miso with a smile when she was looking at him with unease. Miso glared at him and wordlessly said that ‘I’ll pay you back for this’ with her mouth.

“See you all later, kiddos.”

After sending Miso off, they started walking towards a nearby restaurant to get dinner. Bangjoo, who was talking with the others, suddenly got a phone call. When he accepted it, he froze on the spot. He made a difficult expression and asked as he put his phone away from his face.

“Uhm, seonbae-nim?”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“My sister says she wants to come. Should I not tell her where we are? It’s better if I don’t, isn’t it?”

Bangjoo rapidly spoke his words in panic. Maru pondered for a moment before taking the phone from Bangjoo’s hands.

“Hello, senior. It’s Han Maru. We haven’t had dinner yet, so why don’t you treat us to something nice? Okay, I’ll tell you where we are right now.”

Maru briefly explained where they were before hanging up. He threw the phone back at Bangjoo who looked dazed.

“We should learn while we still have the chance to, don’t you think?”

Bangjoo became dejected.

There was no reason to stop a super popular actress from coming, especially with the competition approaching. Her words would definitely help out the club members a lot. Moreover, it would be great if she could solve the problem with Bangjoo as well.

“Oh yes!”

Aram and Jiyeon were overjoyed. Maru took the club members to the place Joohyun and he agreed on to meet.

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“Uhm, Joohyun, please. Let’s do a shampoo commercial. It’s not just any shampoo, but Ella. You know Ella, don’t you? They pay in the hundreds of millions. They want you. Aren’t you the idol of all women in their 20s and 30s? Do you know how many people gasped when your hair waved in the air in the last drama you di... hey, hey hey!”

Team leader Han blocked the exit of the rest area to stop Joohyun from leaving.

“Oppa, no, team leader Han. Do you want your nuts cracked?”

When Joohyun said that with a smile, team leader Han immediately put his knees together and covered his lower region with his hand. Joohyun was the type of person who would do what she said. Nothing bad would come from being careful.

“No, but, Joohyun. This is Ella we’re talking about. Your hair, more elegant than ever, it’s that Ella! They rarely decide who they want for their commercial, and they chose you this time! Hey, other women from the company can’t even do this even if they want to, but you just had to kick the chance away without even looking at it. You should at least try to see what this opportunity is.”

“I don’t care about that. And so? Who got this commercial for me?”

“Uh, what? Why do you ask that?”

“Team leader Han.”

“...Yeah.”

"I really like you, team leader Han. I know that you're a decent person. I'm also aware that you're trying your best day and night in order to keep the company running, and I'm also aware that you're looking after our new recruits. However, you know who I am. You know what kind of mindset I came to the entertainment industry with."

Her eyes were resolute without any shaking. Team leader Han, named Han Gwangjoon, bit his lower lip and scratched his head.

"Joohyun. Did you know? I feel scared whenever you talk to me like that."

"And yet you still bring me such offers every time?"

"Haah. You really owe me a debt this time."

Team leader Han took out his phone feeling very sad. Then, he called the CEO. He felt like he was having a stomach cramp, but he had no choice.

"Yes, president. I mean, about the thing you asked me to ask our super actress about... No, I haven't talked to her about it yet. Yes, that. So, Miss Ahn isn't exactly, you know, I think she'll make losses if she takes the commercial. She has a villainous role in the movie, right? Such a woman saying lines like 'for your hair' on TV sounds somewhat strange, doesn't it? Sorry? It's fine because she has a bright character role in the drama? Oh, of course, you're right. But uh... president. I think Miss Ahn damaged her hair a little. You know that she had to apply oil to her hair for three hours the last time she did one, right?"

Team leader Han took the phone off his ears for a brief moment. He was feeling dizzy due to the president's shouts. He looked at Joohyun for help, but she just shook her head with her arms crossed. He was like the innocent bystander in this battle between Joohyun and the president. The president's annoyed voice eventually died down. Team leader Han thought that he should visit a medical clinic after this as he put his phone against his ear again.

"Yes, president. I'm sorry about that. You know what kind of position Miss Ahn has amongst actresses, right? Her value would start decreasing if she keeps taking model jobs for ads. Let's have her do something bigger later. She's doing well in dramas and movies, isn't she? Yes. I know that you don't feel good since the movie doesn't make any money, but she's still one of the top actresses of Yellow Star, isn't she? Please look after her a little more. Yes, president. Please take a good rest."

Team leader Han sighed after hanging up. His head felt dizzy.

"Joohyun, you're killing me here. I'll be forty soon, but my hair is already falling out at a crazy rate. At this rate, I'll start losing weight, hair, and even things that I shouldn't and become a walking corpse."

"Team leader Han. People don't die that easily. Look at me, I'm still alive."

"Yeah, I have to admit. If I received as many insults as you did, I would have left this industry already. Rather than that, where are you going? You don't have any schedule now. Weren't you going home to get some rest?"

"I'm going to meet my brother."

"Your brother? Oh, Bangjoo, was it? Is he in middle school now?"

“He’s in his first year of high school.”

“Oh really?”

Team leader Han reminded himself of the kid he saw once before. He was short, but had a very energetic voice.

“Then be careful on your way there. Don’t drive fast.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

Team leader Han was about to leave the rest area. The door suddenly opened and a middle-aged man with a bored expression suddenly came into the room. Behind him was the CEO of the company who was forcing himself to smile.

Team leader Han inwardly thought that things were not going well. This man with a lot of wrinkles was from Ella. He also probably had a high position.

“My dear PR team leader was not doing his work properly, so I came. Well then. Hello there, you must be the actress Ahn Joohyun, right?”

The man entered the rest area as though it was his own house. Team leader Han looked at Joohyun’s face. She had a smile on her face. Any normal person would think that she was a kind woman, but team leader Han felt the opposite. He knew that it was her way of expressing her final warning.

“Hello, my name is Han Gwangjoon. I saw you from afar once.”

“Ah, really? Han Gwangjoon, Han Gwangjoon, huh. Oh, you’re the one in charge.”

“Yes.”

“Tsk. Just what kind of a terrible job did you do that she kept refusing? Things weren’t going well so I decided to have a look myself. You know, since I’m here to have lunch with him and all.”

The middle-aged man stood in front of Joohyun with a satisfied smile. Team leader Han wanted to scream when he saw that he looked at Joohyun’s face once before proceeding to stare at her chest so blatantly. This person was too unaware of who Ahn Joohyun was.

“P, president. What were you thinking when you brought him here?”

“Don’t ask. He told me that we should have dinner together because of the commercial, but he barged in just as I was about to leave.”

“But you shouldn’t have brought him here.”

“Do you think I wanted to? He’s the president of the branch. Yeah, that’s right. The CEO.”

“He’s the CEO?”

“Then who did you think he was?”

“Someone who has the position of a head of a department?”

“Do you think anyone is crazy enough to barge into another company with that kind of position?”

“Then why is such a person here?”

“Why do you think?”

“No way, please don’t tell me it’s not what I’m thinking.”

Just as he was whispering with the president. The man from Ella took a step towards Joohyun. He was disturbingly close considering that this was their first meeting. Team leader Han felt a chill running behind his back. He was getting extremely close to dangerous territory. And just as he had thought, he saw Joohyun’s lips twisting.

Team leader Han felt that his stomach stopped cramping and it felt like it was being poked with needles. He felt like visiting the medical clinic wasn’t going to be enough. He then looked at Joohyun and, at the same time, he desperately shook his head. Please hold it in. However, Joohyun kept smiling. Her legs were very thin and bought the envy of many models. However, her thin legs were also thoroughly trained. She did kickboxing. Not to lose weight, but seriously to the point that she was at a level where she could participate in proper competitions. If that leg decided to strike that man’s shin... the results were unimaginable.

Joohyun was actually a pretty calm woman. She normally did not use any foul language either. The reason she was known as a violent woman was because she did a few interviews where people almost did unspeakable things to her. Indeed, Joohyun wasn’t someone that swore at someone right off the bat. She had common sense, knew how to endure, and was quite understanding of others. However, she was unforgiving when it came to one thing. It was none other than when men approached her sexually.

Team leader Han still remembered the event where Joohyun twisted the wrist of the president of a drama outsourcing company during a meal. That time, that person just laughed it over and didn’t mind it that much, but this man in front of him clearly didn’t look like the type of person that wouldn’t ‘mind it that much’. Obstinacy could be seen from his face. He was the type of man to think that women existed for men. It was obvious from his disturbing stare.

Even he was able to notice that, so there was no way Joohyun, who had been receiving that stare, wouldn’t notice it. What would happen if Joohyun screamed at him? Definitely not something good for Yellow Star, that was for sure.

Looks like I should apply for a leave - team leader Han stepped in between the two with resignation.

“President.”

“Wh- what is it?”

“I’ll bring you to a good place.”

“What?”

“I hear that it’s not polite to keep someone so high up standing like this. Please give me an opportunity to make it up to you,” he bowed his head as he spoke.

What he saw was the shiny shoes that the president was wearing. They had to be those brand-name expensive ones that he would never be able to afford with his salary. Bowing his head to others and

flattering them didn't feel like anything since he was so used to it now. He only wanted to avoid an accident at all costs.

"This fella, you know your stuff."

The president patted his shoulders before laughing heartily.

"Looks like you have a glib tongue."

"I don't act like this to anyone. President, why don't you have a drink with our president in a good place? They say drinking during the day is the best experience."

"Is that so? Is actress Ahn joining us?"

"I'm not."

"Ehem, don't say that."

The president reached out and tried to grab Joohyun's hand.

Team leader Han inwardly sighed inside.

It looks like I'm getting a ton of insults this time.

Team leader Han pretended that he tripped on his feet and fell over towards the president, just enough so that he didn't fall over. As he did so, he pushed him slightly so that he had to step away.

"S-sorry about that. I'm feeling anemic lately."

"...Hm. You're quite feeble despite your age."

"It's you who's very sturdy. You felt like an immovable rock when I fell over. Just what kind of exercise do you do to stay so healthy?"

"I'm like a rock? Haha, this fella. That's obvious. I did some boxing when I was in my prime."

"I knew it. I thought that the way you tensed your shoulder and your legs was not the actions of a novice. President, can you show me your punches?"

Team leader Han raised his hands to receive his punches. After laughing, the president got into a boxing posture and punched out. Tcsh, Tsch, he made sounds with his mouth and punched out with his fist but it looked very awkward. Any typical delinquent was better than him. Though, he couldn't say that out loud.

"Oh no, president. I don't think there will be anything left of my hands if you keep going like that. Looks like you should have become a professional boxer instead of running a business."

"You think?"

"Of course. Isn't that right, president?"

His president caught what he was doing and raised his thumbs up. There was a reason why people advised to be wary of flattery. It was because it was very effective. The president felt better and walked outside.

“I’ll be right behind you after I get some things ready.”

He bowed to the president that just left and raised his head. He had burned about half of his soul doing that. He could practically see the doctor saying that he had a stress-induced gastritis.

“You should get going at this chance. I’ll tell him that you have family matters that just came up.”

“Team leader Han, no, oppa.”

“Stop. I know what you want to say so just get going.”

“You’ll regret it if you keep living like that.”

“I know that. I might regret it. However, not everyone in this world can be as resolute as you in life. If I was able to keep living after kicking away the money in front of me, do you think I would still be doing this?”

“Then I’ll just settle the deal with him.”

“No! I’ll do it this time.”

“He won’t stop his bullshit like that next time though.”

“Joohyun, please use nicer words. I can have him go back if I blab on for a bit. The commercial might be taken by someone else, but your image will not take a hit. You know that you’re the top star of our company, right? I cannot stand your reputation taking a hit.”

“I don’t have any reputation to take a hit.”

Joohyun sighed. Although she was known as the woman who said everything that was on her mind without caring about the others, she would have snapped at that man already if she was actually such a person.

“Miss Ahn. Please hold it in for a little more. You just need to go up a little more. You know that, don’t you? Once you reach the top, you won’t have to face people like that. At that time, you get to pick what commercial you want to do. I’ll pave the path for you, so you just have to walk the road I made for you without straying.”

In South Korea, celebrities were never superior to their business counterparts. They might look like they’re the superior ones with all the spotlight being directed to them, but the actors that could really act as they wished could be counted on one’s hand. Most of the time, entertainers had a hard time in their companies. Right now, Joohyun was in the transition phase. She gained popularity as a youth star, but she left the industry due to unfortunate events, and she had made her comeback a few years ago and was in the process of gaining reputation.

In team leader Han’s eyes, Joohyun had plenty of potential to grow up into a first-rate actor that no entertainment company could touch. The fact that she rapidly gained popularity as an actress despite the gap in her career was proof of that.

What she lacked was her skills in managing personal relationships. Team leader Han did not wish for her to smile at the advertisers and pour wine for them while revealing her breasts. Joohyun was too good for that.

An untouchable actress. Team leader Han wanted to raise Joohyun up to that level.

“If that guy does some bullshit stuff again, I’ll kick his balls even if I have to pay him for it.”

“My lord, Joohyun. Don’t say the word ‘balls’ with such a pretty mouth. I’ll take care of this so you just go to your little brother and have a nice dinner. Okay?”

After forcefully sending Joohyun off, team leader Han sat down on his seat for a while.

“...I should look into medicine that’s good for health.”

Team leader Han stood up as he thought about the president that would be waiting for him.

Chapter 294

The sun was still up outside. Students were probably studying with dreams of getting into a good university, while salarymen were probably wrestling with work while waiting for their salary day. It was 4 p.m. Many people should be wrestling with the world, but here, it was the opposite.

“It does feel good to play like this from time to time! It reminds me of my younger days, good!”

Team leader Han clapped with the tambourines to the president who was shaking his ass in a disturbing way. He felt pathetic for having to smile and laugh for someone over fifty doing such immature actions, but that only lasted a moment. He put the tie that the president took off and put it around his head like a headband before swinging his head round and round.

“Now that’s some good spin!”

samul norisangmo.”

trot song that was way past its date, and team leader Han clapped according to the beat.

“Here, receive one from me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You too, girls,” he spoke to the girls who were sitting on the sofa.

The ladies with revealing clothing accepted a glass immediately with joy. That bottle of vodka cost 1.2 million won per bottle. The president just drank it from the bottle as though it didn’t matter to him.

“President, let’s do a love shot.”

“A love shot?”

“Yes.”

A girl who looked to be in her early twenties grabbed his arm in an attempt to grab attention. When she did, the other girls all threw away the vodka into the bin under the table. Team leader Han saw that scene, but did not say anything. Just like how he bowed his head to the president in order for him to

live, they were throwing away the vodka for the same reason. There was a sort of sympathy between the vodka that was being thrown away and the gaze that looked over it. After waving his hand at the girl that winked at him, team leader Han approached the president.

“President. Are you okay?”

“I might have drank too much. I’m feeling a little tipsy.”

“Please take this.”

He offered him a drink to ease the hangover. The president gladly received it and started drinking it.

“It feels good to play with the young ones once in a while. I should do this more often.”

“Oh my, you’re no more than a youth at your age. You should try out more things.”

“You think?”

The president giggled and reached his hand into the cleavage of the college girl. The college girl acted coquettish and stuck her body to him. It seems that the president seemed to have taken a liking to that girl. Team leader Han left the room and called the madam here.

“Are the girls inside allowed to do 2nd rounds?”

“Who wants them?”

“The president of one of YM’s subsidiaries.”

“Looks like I can’t say no. I’ll book a hotel right next to this place so take them there. The uncle there will sort things out.”

“Thanks.”

Team leader Han nodded before returning to the room. In the short time he wasn’t here, the president had already stripped the college girl of her one piece dress and was burying his face into her chest. The girls sitting next to them all looked at him. Team leader Han quietly whispered to them that they could leave.

“President, I booked a room for you. Please let me guide the way.”

“A room?”

“Yes.”

“Hey, hey. Team leader Han. I’m not someone that rolls around anywhere. What happens if some flies decide to come my way while I play with this bumpkin?”

The college girl in his bosom flinched when she heard the word bumpkin, but she soon smiled and just acted cute, saying, ‘oppa, that’s going a little too far’. Team leader Han clasped his hands and just stood there silently since the president just sat there while fondling the girl’s breasts, seemingly not having any intention to stand up.

“Team leader Han.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Give me a rubber. I’ll just do it here.”

Team leader Han smiled bitterly. He left the room after telling the president that he would be right back. The madam gave permission after hearing the circumstances.

“You know we don’t do this kind of service, right?”

“I apologize.”

“I’ll have you pay double for the room, just so you know.”

“Well, the old dude inside is the one paying.”

Team leader Han went into the room with the condom that the madam gave him. The college girl wearing only underwear and the president with his lower half revealed were entangled with each other. Seeing that the president was trying so obstinately to pull down her underwear, team leader Han passed the condom directly to his hands.

“Then I’ll take my leave.”

“Oh my, team leader Han. You do a clean job.”

“Haha. Thank you.”

Team leader Han looked at the college girl before he left. She had a slightly annoyed face, but just left her body to the president as she knew that the middle aged man wasn’t ordinary.

Team leader Han quietly closed the door before leaving. As the room had perfect sound isolation, nothing could be heard from the outside. After looking at the dark corridor for a while, team leader Han just sighed and walked out towards the entrance.

“Team leader Han.”

The president of his company was there.

“Sir, did you really have to run away by yourself?”

“There’s no need for both of us to die, is there?”

The two were able to get an empty room per the madam’s kindness. After drinking some cold water, team leader Han felt better.

“What happened to him?”

“He must be shaking his ass right about now.”

“They say the rich are even worse than the poor, urgh. What about the ad?”

“He’s drunk, so I can’t be entirely sure, but I did get the answer that ‘he’ll consider it’.”

“That’s good then.”

Team leader Han chewed on some nuts in front of him. He felt better when he considered the crushed bits as the president from the advertiser company.

“Sir, is there really a need for us to do this? He might be the president of a YM subsidiary, but still. Let’s leave aside Joohyun, since we don’t know what she’ll do to him if he tries to do that to her, but do we really need to suck up to him that much? We’re Yellow Star, too.”

There were three colossal corporations in South Korea. DK, SC and YM. The president of one of their subsidiaries had shown up, so it was understandable that they were giving him good treatment. However, Yellow Star was also one of the top 3 entertainment companies in Korea.

. Do you know how many times their aggregate market price is compared to us?”

“...Can I not even complain?”

“I can see that you’re riled up due to all that alcohol in your blood, but watch your words. And also, we’re not sucking up to him because he’s the president of one of YM’s subsidiaries.”

“Then why?”

“That man is the son-in-law of The Daily Sunghwa.”

“...Goddammit.”

A piece of peanut he was chewing on got stuck in between his teeth. The Daily Sunghwa. It was one of the top 3 news outlets in South Korea along with Hanguk and Jungil.

“Joohyun is very popular. That’s because there are women who admire her don’t-look-back actions. However, she’s not a top star in terms of her acting career. 30% drama viewing rate? However, the drama that became a hot topic peaked at 54%. As for movies, she only takes the ones she wants, so it’s far from profitable. She has popularity but we don’t know if that popularity will last or not. An actress without a good work to do will eventually be forgotten.”

The president lit up his cigarette before sucking in a deep one.

“There’s a wave of change among actors due to the Korean Wave and whatnot, but right now, the influence of news media within the country is still supreme. Let’s say Joohyun, who needs to leap to the top, gets her reputation tarnished right now. If it was any other actor, they’ll just clench their teeth and endure it, but is Joohyun the type of woman to do that? She’s the type of person to outright give up if she doesn’t like something. She’ll say what is on her mind even when she is talking to a super rich person. So, then. What about the contract we have with her? What about the advertisements? What about the contract we have with her for maintaining her dignity? You know? Actresses in Korea really don’t have any power. They can’t even date the people they like, and they can’t get married either. Joohyun entered the ranks of such people. She’s someone who would become big through acting. That’s why we need to look after her so that she doesn’t do anything bad.”

“Is money important to you, president?”

“Everything comes down to money in the end. The reason we’re here right now is also because of money.”

The president flicked the cigarette on the ashtray.

“Above all, Joohyun is 33 years old this year. She’s not that old when you consider the era we’re in, but she’s definitely not young either. Other top actresses of her age have a long filmography. There will always be a movie that is called a masterpiece among them. That’s why they’re called top stars. However, Joohyun doesn’t have one. The one she’s doing right now, she’s only a side character. Her acting will definitely be seen under a good light, but what about popularity? A star is, in the end, all about popularity. A flower on top of an unreachable cliff definitely looks pretty, yes. However, people will always end up going to the local florist’s and buy a cheap rose.”

“Goddammit. Han Mijoo has horrible acting, but she’s still doing well, isn’t she?”

“She’s disturbingly pretty, that’s why. But do you see dramas or movies casting her? The only place she shows up in are ads. And she’s the rose I talked about before. She can be seen practically everywhere.”

“Joohyun is pretty as well.”

“Yes, but she’s uniquely pretty. When she dyed her hair purple last time, I... urgh, let’s not talk about it.”

Team leader Han laid back into the chair. He inwardly imagined the college girl and the president of the advertiser company who would be rolling around naked. He was the one who created such a place. If he told this to someone ordinary, they would point at him saying that they were disgusted. It was obvious that he, who triggered such an event, would also eat a share of the insult.

However, what could he do? Entertainment companies did not live on actors doing work. Top actors weren’t actually cash cows that earned money, but the opposite. They were black holes that sucked in endless amounts of money. The source of money was not the actors themselves but the advertisers and the investors. The true owners of entertainment companies were the people that invested their money because of those top actors.

‘That’s why we have no choice but to suck up to them, huh.’

Team leader Han sighed bitterly.

A popular celebrity? Those people fell to the depths of the abyss with a single scandal. It wasn’t that the money they earned disappeared so they would have no problem with living, but their career in the entertainment industry would be finished.

The Daily Sunghwa had deep connections with not only the entertainment industry, but the political field as well. It would be hard to keep doing business in this industry if he pissed off someone that had connections to such a place.

I heard that the actress in that drama is pretty; I like the young one from that movie; she looks good; this girl’s cute; that girl looks sexy. After such a line came just one sentence.

Let me meet her.

When they say ‘all the popular actors can be seen at a party held by the grandson of some CEO’, it wasn’t a lie. Why do such actors, who didn’t lack anything, go to such places? Did they lack something after all? No. They just go there to humor the main characters. Why? Because they have to keep on living. To be exact, they have to keep others close to them living.

They say celebrities live on the love of the public. Was it true? Then where do such celebrities appear? In TV programs, of course, as well as adverts. TV programs, ads, dramas, movies. They were all places with heavy investment, and that heavy investment naturally came from big companies that boasted immense financial power.

Taking a look at movies, no matter how good a movie is, it would be all for naught if a super powerful distributor was displeased with whatever that was related to it. After all, no matter how good it was, there would be no one to watch it if not many cinemas aired the movie. With little profit came less opportunity. Regret would do nothing at that point.

Money made actors.

That was one of the truths he came across while working in this industry.

"It would have been good if Joohyun had more interest in the entertainment industry," the president said as he looked up at the ceiling.

"You want her to pour wine and vodka to people?"

"That's just the basics. Like the ones these days."

"I don't think I'll be okay with that even if you kill me."

"Hey."

"Yes?"

"Do you fancy her?"

"Haha, me? There's just no way. How many people do you think did well after being involved with an actor? I just want to raise a full-fledged actor during my lifetime. I mean, she has the potential after all."

The president stood up with a smile.

"Then let's get our old man. We have to send him home while we still can."

"Yeah, yeah, sure."

"What?"

"Why do you care about Joohyun so much? If it doesn't work, then just throw it away. That's how you do things, isn't it?"

The president made a rather sympathetic smile as he spoke,

"A chrysanthemum flower offered to the best nameless actress."

"What?"

"There's something like that."

The president then left after patting him on the back. Team leader Han tilted his head in confusion as he left.

* * *

Maru stood up after getting a call. Joohyun had called him to come out since she was almost there. He left the streets with the stalls to the main street where he saw a white car slowly scanning the surroundings.

“Over here.”

He waved his hand as he walked towards it. Joohyun nodded her head before parking her car on the side of the road.

“That place is a no parking zone.”

“Then what about the cars in front and behind mine?”

Joohyun got out of the car. Maru shrugged his shoulders. As this neighborhood severely lacked parking spaces, they didn’t tow the cars that were parked on the side of the road. There were no parking tickets issued either. It was illegal, but it was an unspoken agreement.

“I was surprised because you called me. I thought you’d call your brother.”

“The one who called me here should be the one to come out.”

“Ah, sure.”

Maru had a look at Joohyun’s face. She seemed angry for some reason.

“Did something happen to you?”

“Me? Oh, I just met someone annoying.”

“Don’t tell me you swore at the person.”

“Do you think I’m that reckless?”

“Your interview left quite a deep impression on me. I thought you’d shed the first blood.”

Joohyun giggled when he said that.

“Hey, we feel quite close.”

“You think so?”

“I like your attitude.”

Chapter 295

Maru walked forward as he talked about a TV show he watched during the weekend. Joohyun stopped walking and spoke,

“Hey, do you have something to ask of me?”

“Was it obvious?”

There was a faint smile on Maru’s face.

“It’s strange because you’re suddenly acting like we’re on close terms. You gave me silent nods as a greeting during the read-through. Anyone would realize something’s up.”

“Not everyone thinks that way. There are plenty of people who just avoid others because they don’t want to change how they act towards certain people.”

Maru started walking again.

They left the main street and entered a narrow street with a lot of commercial buildings on it. The street was filled with students. As she had tied her hair and was wearing a baseball cap, no one recognized who she was. Actually, people didn’t normally recognize celebrities. Just slightly changing the image created by the angle of the camera, the lighting, and the makeup would make them into completely different people, so just wearing normal clothes and putting on a hat was enough to fool most people.

Joohyun boldly walked next to Maru.

“So, what was up with that just now?”

From what Joohyun saw of Maru, he was a kid who was rational and had a clear view of the world. Such a kid had changed his attitude and approached her warmly. Even considering that he had a favor to ask of her, why would he act like that?

“Because I don’t know you that well, senior.”

“You don’t know me that well?”

“Yes. Judging from the conversation we had on the school stairs that day, you are a person with a clear philosophy. At the same time, you’re kind enough to give out advice to young people who you haven’t met before. However, the you portrayed by the media is very different. Even now, the first related search term when looking up your name is ‘blunt speech’. Also, people like Ahn Joohyun for her cool image. From what I gathered on the internet alone, you’re someone that speaks what’s on your mind even at public events. To put it in a good way, you stop at nothing, however, when putting it in a bad way, you’re complacent because of it. But when I saw you at the get-together, you were kind enough to tell a friend of mine your phone number and even joke with her. The disparity was so great so I felt a need to probe you out.”

Maru turned left. The street changed from being filled with bars to a street filled with shops that sold grilled meat. The setting sun and the smell of grilled meat. This was a very common food alley.

Joohyun nodded her head when she heard Maru’s words.

“And so?”

“We haven’t met each other that many times, but the difference in impression is different every time I met you. That’s why I tried changing this time. I was trying you out to see which approach you prefer.”

“Which approach I prefer?”

Joohyun stopped walking. The word ‘prefer’ was definitely something that could be used between people. Preference was an important indicator when expanding human relationships into business. I

prefer working with him, I like the way she works - these were the basics of human business. What was strange though, was that the words came from a high schooler.

"I don't know anything about you after all. The thirsty shall dig the well. We might come across each other more in the future, so I should get to know you, don't you think?"

"Well. Who likes a kid who approaches it like that?"

"You think so too? I tried my best but it looks like I failed."

Maru spoke as though nothing much had happened.

"And so, you're going back to the way you were before?"

"If that's what you're comfortable with."

"Hey, you're quite good at humoring people. I thought you were a more stuck-up person."

"Me? No way. I'm ready to bow my head down at any moment. My knees are cheap as well."

"That's different from my first impression of you."

"Did I look that stuck-up?"

"Even your appearance tells me that you're stuck-up. But if you have such a mindset so early on, you'll have a tiring life, you know? Isn't it better to live a simple life when you're young? I mean, things like probing people out and humoring them according to their preferences can be left for later."

"That varies from person to person. There are plenty of people who can't do that even after they grow up."

"Are you saying that to me?"

Hearing those words, Maru turned his head around before scratching his eyebrows. He started walking slowly. Joohyun also stayed quiet and just followed him. As this place had the cheaper restaurants, more students could be seen as they went further.

Just as she was following Maru, Joohyun felt a sense of déjà vu. She thought that they had passed this place before. When she thought more about it, it wasn't just her imagination. They had actually walked past this place before.

Joohyun looked at Maru. Did he forget where he was going?

At that moment, though, she saw that Maru was looking straight into her eyes. Due to the sudden gaze, Joohyun tilted her head.

"I asked you if something happened when we met, didn't I?"

"Yeah."

"And I acted kindly, to which you said that it didn't suit me."

"I did."

“Why do you think I did that?”

Maru pointed sideways. He was pointing at a cosmetics shop, and that shop had brought out a table and was selling their products on the streets. What Maru was pointing at was the mirror on that table. Joohyun walked past the students that were trying out some lipsticks on the back of their hands as she looked into the mirror.

“Uhm don’t pus... ah, it’s nothing.”

“S-sorry.”

The girls spoke with annoyance since Joohyun bumped into them, but apologized when they looked at her face.

Joohyun raised her head to look at the employee in charge of the table. When the two met eyes, the employee flinched back.

Joohyun had a look in the mirror again. A woman with a scary gaze was looking back at her from the inside. The shade from her baseball cap and her narrowed eyes from the rage she felt couldn’t make her look angrier. She wasn’t conscious of it. As an actress, she didn’t even know what kind of a face she was putting on. She felt embarrassment at first, and felt shame when she realized the reason she was making such an expression.

Joohyun smiled in vain as she turned around. She thought that she was over it, but it seemed that her deep emotions didn’t think the same. Until the very moment she arrived at this place in her car, she was thinking about the president that looked at her with indecent eyes. That president’s face reminded her of the man in her past, and that man in the past made an indecent grin as he stroked her legs. The days of shame became vivid to her again, and Joohyun had arrived here in her car full of annoyance.

She thought that she was perfectly over it. She believed that she hadn’t run away, but that she completely disdained them. No, she thought that she had won. She wouldn’t have to be involved with that disgusting man again, and she also had the confidence to make such a person never think about such a thing again in his life if she came across one. The past was just the past. She thought that it was alright since she was no longer as weak as she was before. However, the woman inside the mirror had cruel eyes.

The truly strong laugh and smile. That was because they knew that whatever harm that came their way was unable to harm them. However, the weak barked. They barked while praying that the danger wouldn’t come their way. The woman inside the mirror was on her guard in order to hide her weakness. It was the worst kind of gaze.

Joohyun pushed down on her cap.

“Should we walk another round?”

“...”

“Looks like we should.”

So this was the reason he kept taking detours. Joohyun sighed. If she met her little brother in her current state, she would have given him an unpleasant experience again. Showing him her weak side once was enough.

Maru bought a sports drink from a nearby vending machine.

“I was making such a disgusting face. No wonder people didn’t recognize me.”

Joohyun smiled in self-loathing as she drank the sports drink. Maru, who had been staying quiet while standing next to the vending machine, spoke,

“Bangjoo, he’s a good kid. He depicts his sister as some kind of a freakish monster, but people would never even talk about someone else if they truly hated them. He’s a good little brother that likes his big sister. I thought that he was a good junior without any problems but I came across something strange about him today. He’s too cheerful regardless of the moment. It’s quite strange. It’s like he thinks that he can’t be dejected. Putting it that way, the fact that he can’t reduce his voice is probably also related to this.”

Maru drank his drink in one gulp and crushed the aluminum can with his hands.

“But when I had a look at your face today, I think I know why. Actually, the reason I called you here was because of two things. One was that I wanted you to teach us some tips and tricks for acting as a senior to a junior, and the other was that - I know it might be rude of me to do this but - I wanted to talk to you regarding Bangjoo.”

Joohyun leaned against the wall and looked down at the canned drink. She could see the drink making waves inside the can. When she stared at the drink long enough, she saw the man with the disgusting smile inside that hole. She immediately threw the can on the floor and stomped on it with her shoes. She heaved out a deep breath, which made her feel better.

“If he looks that way, then it’s probably because of me.”

“Hm, I had my thoughts, but it looks like you know something after all.”

“Of course I do. Haa, perhaps it was negligence on my part. At that time, I was busy taking care of myself. Also, Bangjoo, that kid is quite reassuring. He has done everything since he was young, and he didn’t cry when he was in front of me. He was able to cook and do the laundry ever since he entered elementary school, and he never came to me for homework. After entering middle school, he had become the perfect single man. Perhaps I might have become relieved in one corner of my heart since he was like that. Ah, he’s okay. He’ll do fine on his own.”

The day that nameless president stroked her body, and she shook off his hands with the resolve to die, her brother had seen her in the state where half of her soul had escaped her body. That boy silently cried in front of her locked door. He kept standing there throughout the night. During that time, she bashed her head into a wall and spent time severed from the rest of the world in order to forget about that horrific experience, as well as to find a new path forward.

She stood back up again while resolving to herself that she would never be hurt again in the future. Right now, she realized that it was just her way of escaping reality, but it didn’t matter. What was important here was her brother. Was he really okay during that horrible time?

When it became morning, her little brother started the morning for her with a brighter expression and a more energetic voice. Seeing him act that way, she was relieved and just went about her day as usual while not thinking much about it. However, he was just an elementary school kid back then. Would he really have spent the night up without any side effects at all?

Was Bangjoo really okay that day?

Really?

“So that’s why you’re caring so much about us? How kind of you.”

“Uhm, honestly speaking, Bangjoo needs to do well in acting. A friend of mine wants the grand prize this time. So we’ll have to fix Bangjoo. Each person we lack is a step further from reaching that goal.”

“So you’re worried about your grades rather than about someone else’s family?”

“I’d appreciate it if you say that I’m worried about both.”

“Hey, you’re quite a cold kid.”

“The only people that can be at ease because they’re pursuing profit is a coward. Rather than that, can we get going? We’ve been walking around several times already. If you’re okay, we should really get going.”

“Phew. How’s my face? Does it still look scary?”

“No, it’s pretty.”

“Why don’t you come up with a better lie?”

“Usually, I’m good at lying, but it’s not working for some reason today.”

Joohyun heaved out a deep breath before straightening her back. It seemed that it was about time she had to face the really important problem that she had been subconsciously avoiding this whole time. Now that she thought about it, she rarely had a proper talk with her brother. Perhaps it was her that had been avoiding it this entire time. She must have been running away because the events of that day might pop up if they kept conversing.

“Let’s have a talk after today’s stuff is over.”

“Sure.”

Maru smiled as he spoke. Joohyun smiled as well. Just what was this kid? Well, there was no way someone ordinary would have said the same thing as Haejoo.

“Hey, do you know who Jung Haejoo is?”

“Who’s that?”

“It’s fine if you don’t know.”

Joohyun pushed Maru’s back and told him to lead the way.

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Lettuce and tomatoes could be seen between the two sandwich breads. Thinking that there was quite a lot, Maru took a bite. The crunchy feeling definitely felt good, but it was too 'clean' tasting and it didn't taste like much. Eating the sandwich in his hand, he looked at Joohyun.

"So in the end, both observation skills and expression skills are important."

The students who were focusing on Joohyun's words all nodded. It had been around an hour since she started talking, but both Joohyun, the one speaking, and the club members were showing an incredible amount of concentration and were not going off track. Joohyun explained to them what being an actor was, as well as what acting is based on her own experiences.

Another thirty minutes passed while they listened to the vivid experiences. Joohyun ended her speech with 'you'll receive as much as you practiced'. The moment she laid back on her chair after heaving out a deep breath, one of the people in the café quietly approached her.

"I was waiting because it looked like you were doing something important. Uhm, excuse me, but can I take a picture with you?"

It was one of Joohyun's fans who had recognized her. People inside the café started gathering around one by one due to the commotion. Joohyun did not get flustered and just smiled back at them as she took pictures with them and gave them autographs.

Meanwhile, Maru went to the counter and ordered some drinks for takeout.

"Is she Ahn Joohyun?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my."

Even the store owner left the counter to get an autograph. After a round of commotion, the group left the café while being seen out by the owner.

"Ahn Bangjoo. Have a talk with me," Joohyun said to Bangjoo.

"Right now?"

Maru pushed Bangjoo's back since he seemed rather hesitant.

"Go ahead. Practice is over now."

Bangjoo politely greeted everyone that he'd be leaving first and disappeared along with Joohyun.

"Let's finish up here for today. You guys should go back home."

"Thanks for your work."

"We're off!"

Jiyeon and Aram crossed arms as they walked together, and Dowook soon disappeared on his bike.

"Be careful."

"You too, Maru."

Daemyung and Maru separated as well after talking about practice for just a little longer.

As quite some time had passed since they met Joohyun, the skies were pretty dark. The streets were filled with the light of street signs and all sorts of smells of food. Maru became somewhat relaxed due to the familiar night air.

Just as he was walking past a shoe store with a lot of students, his phone started ringing. The caller was Junmin.

“Yes, president.”

-Where are you right now?

“In Suwon.”

-Are you far away from Suwon station?

“No, I can get there in a few minutes if I get a bus.”

-Then come to Suwon station. There should be someone waiting.

“Someone, you say?”

-He’ll tell you the specifics. Also, you’ll be receiving a phone call so don’t forget to take it.

Junmin then immediately hung up. Some thumping sounds from music could be heard in the background, and Maru was not able to guess where he was. An adult establishment? A night club? He didn’t even get to ask what it was about since it sounded like he should hurry. Maru got on the bus even while being a little confused. He got an empty seat at the back and was looking at his phone. Just then, his phone started ringing, just as Junmin said.

“Hello?”

-Is this Mr. Han Maru’s phone?

“Yes. I’m Han Maru.”

-Oh, alright. You got a call from your president, didn’t you?

“I did, but I didn’t get to hear what it was about. What’s it about?”

Just in time, Suwon station could be seen ahead. After a buzzer sound, everyone stood up. As this was a full bus, Maru wasn’t in a situation where he could stand up while he was still on his phone. He told the other party that he’d call right back before standing up. When the bus arrived at Suwon station and opened the back door, there was a small turmoil.

“Hey! Get on after we get off!”

“You guys are really impatient.”

As it was rush hour, the bus spat out people from both the front and the back, and people got on from both the front and the back. Maru barely managed to get off the bus among the crowd of people that

were rushing to get on. It was understandable that they wanted to go home early and rest, but who would be blamed if someone got hurt because of their actions?

Watching the bus take off with full passengers again, Maru redialled the phone number that he received before.

-Are you at Suwon station?

"Yes. I'm right in front of it."

-I'm sorry, but can you wave your hand for me?

Maru waved his hand above his head beneath the pedestrian crossing in front of Suwon station. When he did, one of the cars parked on the side made a horn sound before approaching. It was a black middle-sized car.

"Mr. Han Maru?" The man asked with a smile as he got out of his car. The man, who seemed to be in his mid twenties, was wearing jeans and a hoodie.

"Yes. I'm Han Maru."

"Looks like I was right. Should we go to a nearby café first?" The man spoke as he looked around.

"But you can't leave your car here."

"What?"

"The crackdown here is no joke. 30 minutes after your park, you'll get a parking ticket, and if you're unlucky, they'll tow your car."

Maru pointed at the car as he spoke. The traffic situation in front of Suwon station was very complex thanks to some traffic construction, especially since the construction was blocking three of the eight lanes. Thanks to that, cars parked here illegally were generally towed away immediately.

"Then what do I do?"

Maru wondered why he was asking him. He replied to the man who was slightly panicking.

"There will be some room if we go just a little further, so let's go there."

"Shall we?"

The man smiled and got in the car again. Maru also got in the passenger seat. It seemed like it was a new car as the smell from the air conditioner was quite intense.

"Please allow me to open the windows."

The man turned off the air conditioner and opened the window. After going past the station, the car turned right. As that place was quite far away from the commercial district, the traffic situation was much better.

"That looks like a good place," the man pointed at a café to the right and spoke.

While he looked for a place to park, Maru was looking at the piece of bread next to the gearbox. The surface of it was dried out as though it was left out after just one bite. Next to that was a pack of soybean milk that he hadn't even started drinking.

"Have you had dinner yet?"

"Eh? Ah, not yet."

The man smiled awkwardly.

"How about we go to that Gukbap place rather than a café? I think that looks like a better place to talk."

"Shall we?"

The man visibly brightened up. Maru looked at the man with pity, thinking that he should at least eat while he was working. After getting out of the car, the two went through the entrance which had a big boiling pot right next to it. As this place had a shabby sign and was located pretty far away from Suwon, Maru thought that there wouldn't be that many people here, but unexpectedly, there were quite a lot of customers.

"We have an empty table on the second floor."

They were guided by an employee to the 2nd floor. When they sat near the window, one lady immediately brought them wet towels and a bottle of water.

"We only have seolleongtang on our menu. Do you want two portions?"

"Yes, please."

Maru replied in the man's stead since he looked like he was refraining from speaking as much as possible. The man poured some water before giving it to Maru. Maru felt rather unpleasant since the older person here was acting like the inferior person. Maru took the kettle away from the man and poured the man a cup.

"Thanks."

The man quickly drank the water. After drinking, he heaved out a deep breath.

"Ah, that's right, this isn't the time for this."

"Uhm, you can take your time and talk about it after the meal. If you aren't busy, that is."

"I have plenty of time. I was just worried that you...."

"I'm fine. Rather than that, I didn't get to know your name yet."

"Ah, that's right!"

The man rummaged through his chest pocket, but seemed to have realized something as he reached out to his bag. He was quite fussy.

"Here."

He held out a business card with both of his hands. A business card? Maru also received the business card with both of his hands. The first thing that caught his eyes were the words 'JA Production'. So he belonged to the same company? His name was Lee Byungchan, and there was his phone number as well.

"My name is Lee Byungchan, and I'll be your manager starting today. I'll be handling your complaints and your schedule or things like that and I'll try to solve them as quickly as possible."

Just then, the seolleongtang they ordered came out. Byungchan's eyes were dazing out as he looked at the food.

"Uhm, you should eat."

"Okay then!"

He took a deep scoop out with his spoon. He even held his breath as though this was his first meal of the day. He was practically drinking everything in front of him. Maru poured some of the sauce from the kkakdugi before he mixed it in with the rest of the bowl. The thick and warm soup was perfect for his tastes. Perhaps it was because he had a sandwich for dinner, but he felt hungry as well and ate his meal while not minding about Byungchan.

"Phew, that was good."

Byungchan made a satisfied smile. Maru also put down the spoon.

"I was feeling dizzy because I hadn't had proper food in a long time. This makes me feel better."

"Looks like you were busy."

"Yes. Today's the first day I started this job, so everything feels so new to me. I was originally an aspiring actor, but things didn't go that well, perhaps due to my lack of skills. I was feeling pathetic while my parents were worried about me, and I coincidentally became a manager. Oh, sorry for talking about boring stuff all of a sudden."

Haha - Byungchan scratched his head as he laughed awkwardly. Maru knew that people at his age had it hard, so he liked how this man could smile about it.

"Oh, that's right. The reason I came here today is to greet you and get to know you, but there's also something we must do."

"Something we must do?"

"Yes. I didn't know if you've heard about it from the president or not, but there's a drama that...."

"Yes. I've heard about it. I thought it was up in the air because I didn't get anything back for a while."

"The thing is, there's a schedule for it tomorrow."

Byungchan carefully took something out from his bag. It was a stack of A4 papers. On the top, it said 'Youth Generation'.

"You know it, don't you? It's a youth drama that just started airing yesterday."

“No, I don’t really watch TV that much.”

Hearing Maru’s answer, Byungchan blinked several times. After staring absentmindedly for a while, he started laughing awkwardly as he tried to switch the topic. Was ‘not watching TV’ something to be so surprised about?

“Th- that’s right. There’s really not much to see on TV these days. A- anyway, it’s a drama airing on KBS, and season 3 just started. The actors in season 1 did so well that it became a drama that somewhat became an entryway to becoming a star.”

“Ah, okay.”

Maru remembered something. It was one of the dramas that his sister recommended him to watch.

“And you’ll be appearing in it as an extra tomorrow.”

“Huh? Me?”

This time, it was Maru’s turn to be surprised. If it’s a drama that’s already airing, the entire cast should have been decided already. But he suddenly had a role in it?

“Uhm, the thing is...”

Byungchan became hesitant as he avoided direct eye contact with Maru. He was the type of person who didn’t like talking about the bad things. People like them couldn’t easily make lies either. Maru thought about a few potential reasons and then talked about the most common reason for such an event.

“I’m a filler, huh?”

“Ah, yeah, well... it’s like that. I had a brief look at it, but your role is to stop others from fighting and get hit once. You have a few lines as well.”

Byungchan spoke as he flipped through the script. The directions read ‘glaringly after getting hit’. Maru nodded his head. This kind of thing was commonplace when he was a road manager in his previous life. There were lots of free actors in Daehak-ro, and producers used them as cheap replacement actors.

‘If there’s something different, it’s that Junmin put me in there, huh.’

There was no way a drama producer suddenly went ‘I need to put this kid named Han Maru in’. It was probably Junmin who had grabbed the opportunity to try and send Maru into the empty spot. It was plenty doable if he was acquainted with the producer. There wouldn’t be any big problems since it wasn’t any of the main roles either.

Just as he was thinking about that, Maru ended up seeing Byungchan’s eyes as he read the script. They were filled with longing as though looking at an old love. He was someone who had given up his dream of becoming an actor to become a manager, so it was quite understandable.

“...Oh, are you finished?”

“Yes.”

“Th- that’s what’s happening. But the shoot is in the morning, so you’ll have to be absent from school... are you alright with that?”

“Half a day is fine. I won’t have any problems even if I miss out a little.”

“Ah, okay.”

“But let me ask you a favor.”

“Yeah, sure! Go ahead.”

“Please don’t be so polite to me. We’ll be seeing each other a lot in the future.”

“Eh? Sh- should I?”

“Yeah. I’ll call you hyung as well.”

“That’s better for me. Ha, haha.”

Just as he was scratching his head, Byungchan flinched before putting his hand inside his pocket. It seemed that he got a call.

“Wait a moment, please. I mean, not please. Yes, yes, Mr. Sooil. Ah, yes. I’ll look into the schedule and call you back right afterwards. Yes, yes. Please rest at ease.”

After the call, Byungchan sighed.

“You look busy.”

“Yes, I mean, yeah. I’m not a manager for just one person.”

“You’re in charge of multiple people?”

“Yeah. I was put in charge of students who have less work than proper actors. But JA actually has quite a lot of student actors in it. There are many people like you who are acting while still going to school.”

“Really? I didn’t know how many people there are in the company that are near my age. So the one named Sooil is similar to me in age?”

“Yeah, he’s a high school student as well. But he’s a little picky, or should I say he differentiates his public and private lives too much? It’s a little scary to be at ease around him.”

Byungchan smiled faintly. Maru knew how he felt. Road managers were absolutely weak compared to the people they were in charge of. If the person they are in charge of is young and popular, they would even feel a sense of shame. That kid is earning in the hundreds of millions at his age, yet here I am driving away at the wheel - that was the basic outline. It couldn’t be helped that the brighter the light, the darker the shadow became.

“You can be at ease around me. Both of us have it hard.”

“Thanks. Phew, actually I almost ended up crying when you told me that we should come here instead of the café. Thanks a lot.”

This fellow had a good smile. Maru felt that it would be okay to be close with this guy if this guy was his manager.

“Should we get up? I need to get going.”

“Okay then.”

Byungchan stood up after emptying the water in his cup.

‘But wait, do managers carry around business cards?’

Maru thought about the business card in his wallet.

Well, it wasn’t a big problem. Maybe the president made one for him.

Leaving the building, Maru was driven to Suwon station by Byungchan. He looked like he was about to drive him home, but Maru wanted to send him off because he looked very tired.

“Then you should get going, hyung. Also, get some sleep. You can’t be driving while you feel sleepy.”

“Alright. You should be careful as well.”

Byungchan, who closed the window and was about to depart, rolled down the window again.

“Please take care of me in the future!”

“Okay.”

Byungchan waved his hand with a smile.

Chapter 297

“Sorry about that so late in the evening.”

-That’s okay. Rather than that, if you are planning to be absent more frequently in the future, don’t tell me the day before, but just send me the necessary documents for the absence in one go. That’ll be easier for me. Then have a good rest.

After hanging up, Maru laid down on the bed and looked at the script. His line was simple. ‘Hey, hey, stop’ and then he would get hit. You know, just like the ones that get caught up in fights and get beaten up by both parties. The ‘student 1’ that he had to act tomorrow was that kind of role.

As it was a fight between students, there would be no fancy action. It would probably end once he’s hit by a blind punch. He read through the script around five times including the scene right before of his scene as well as the one right after. He found no meaning in looking into the flow of the story, nor the reason to do some practice. Extras should stay extras. It would be an even bigger problem if an extra like him wanted attention. He just had to get hit once and roll around on the floor before leaving. That was it. As dramas had a different personality to movies, he did not find the need to put his energy into it.

Maru left the script on his desk and left his room.

Bada, who was hogging the TV to herself, flinched and hid the remote somewhere. On TV was TTO.

“I’m not taking it away from you.”

“And you’re going to watch the news? Do you take me for an idiot?”

“Looks like you don’t have that much trust in me. You should trust people more. Rather than that, give me the remote for a sec.”

“Hell no.”

Giggling, she put the remote under the sofa and sat on top of it. Maru had the urge to remind her that there were channel controls on the TV itself, but decided not to.

“Where’s mom?”

“She’s the last shift today. She’ll be here by 11.”

“How about father?”

“Overtime work. I don’t know exactly, but it seems like some machine was broken. He won’t be home tonight.”

“Geez, that factory really doesn’t have a share of its good fortune.”

While watching TV for a while, Maru asked his sister.

“Is there something to eat?”

His stomach, which was full from eating seolleongtang had emptied again.

“There’s instant ramyun in the cabinet. It’s mine but I’ll give it to you. But just one bite.”

Shaking his head when his sister added that she couldn't be bothered to make it herself, Maru walked to the kitchen. Unlike what she said, there were two instant ramyun packages in the cabinet. It was jjamppong ramyun, but those tasted nothing like jjamppong.

He took out a nickel silver pot and put some water in it before boiling it. While waiting for the water to boil, he watched TV in the living room. He saw the man named Sungjae he saw on the set on TV. He was wearing make-up and on the stage, he looked like a completely different person.

‘A singer and an actor at the same time, huh.’

He remembered the words that Ganghwan said. If you lose out in popularity, you can be consoled, but if you were driven out because of your skills, you had nothing to complain about.

Idols were beings that dipped their feet in both the acting and singing parts of the entertainment industry. Before, they got their places in dramas through sheer popularity alone, but these days, they were said to win their positions fair and square through auditions. They were becoming specialized as well. Idols were becoming more and more fit to be called ‘do-it-all’ entertainers.

How was Sungjae’s acting then? Maru became curious about his acting skills since he left a good impression on Maru. He wondered if he received compliments or criticisms from the actors around him.

“Hey, isn’t the pot boiling?”

“I’m going.”

He put in the ramyun noodles and the soup in the boiling water before giving it a stir with chopsticks. He raised the noodles up and down many times since he preferred firm noodles and cracked an egg in the middle as well. He brought his nose up to the steam that contained a savory smell. Ramyun eaten at night was better than any food in the world.

“Don’t pop the egg!” His sister shouted from the living room.

Feeling that he was being used to the fullest, Maru grinned as he popped the egg yolk. He looked at the murky soup with satisfaction and put the pot on a tray. He glanced at Bada once, who was looking at him with shiny eyes on the sofa, and immediately went into his room before locking the door.

“Hey!”

Being able to lock the door was a truly joyous matter. Ignoring his sister who was bashing her hand against the door, he turned on the power for the computer.

He opened up an internet browser before going to his blog. As his blog was a minor one without any professional writing, not many people made visits. He usually posted about stages that he had first hand experience on or about actors. He just wrote things that he could tell others and as long as it was within the limits of his knowledge. Perhaps it could be compared to a diary.

He started typing slowly about managers. When he was writing, he remembered his past and the post became rather long. The pathetic truth that one’s own value is frozen while the one they’re in charge of becomes popular with the public and has their value shoot through the roof; how the days when the kids that warmly called them ‘oppa’ or ‘hyung’ only last a brief moment and they start shouting at them for their work; being scolded by their superiors, being disdained by their stars, and having their collars grabbed by the fans.

“I hope you won’t be like that, and I hope I won’t be like that...”

Maru read the last part he wrote out loud.

Isn’t it better to be in a symbiotic relationship? Isn’t it better to treat the person that will be your ears and eyes well rather than bad? Maru reminded himself of Byungchan, who had a great smile. He wanted to look after him more since he remembered about the first time he started working.

He turned off his PC and left his room with the empty pot. Bada was eating a pot of ramen that she cooked herself.

“You’re so bad.”

“Why don’t you say that after you cook one for me?”

“Forget it. I can cook one too.”

“Good then.”

He started washing the pot while talking about trivial things. These trivial conversations felt very precious to him. If this was his previous life, he wouldn’t have even said anything. The wall of silence between them changed into a wall of disinterest when they grew up.

“Do you want some snacks?”

“You have some?”

His sister smiled as though she was never mad in the first place. Their mother probably told his sister several times to not follow strangers who gave her candy when she was young.

Maru tossed her a pack of chips before going back to his room. He could hear the sound of the pack being opened through his door. Listening to the munching sounds, Maru opened the novel that he had been reading.

* * *

The scheduled time was 10 a.m. When he was sleeping in, his mother came to him and told him to wake up, and Maru told her that he had a shoot.

“How about school?”

“I’ll have to be absent.”

“Can you just take school off like that?”

“It’s fine. I’ll graduate as long as I fill the necessary days. So don’t worry about your son and go to work, Mrs. Lee.”

After walking around in his room for a while, his mom left with the words ‘don’t make your mom worry too much’. She had the last shift the day before, and the first shift the next day. From what he heard, the labor union at the mall she was working at started going on strikes due to matters related to the temporary employment matters, and thanks to that, people for the counter were drastically reduced, consequently making his mother busy. Regardless of era, irregular employment was always a problem.

It was Maru that took care of Bada’s breakfast in his mother’s stead since she was busy. He warmed up the soup that she made during the night and woke his sister up. She walked out with a drowsy face and started eating.

“How about your textbooks?”

“Got’em.”

“Homework?”

“I said I have it all.”

“Check to see if you forgot anything. Are there any printouts or anything?”

“No.”

“Don’t come home late, don’t go anywhere strange, and make a call if you’re going to be late. Okay?”

“Geez, you’re even worse than mom.”

Only after telling her to watch out for cars as she left through the door could he sigh in relief. He told similar things to his daughter in the past and perhaps the reason people became naggy as they became

older and older was because they knew about the harsh part of the world. If his nagging allowed her to live an easier life in this world, he was willing to become naggy at any time.

He ate his breakfast with the cooled down soup and some rice. When he looked at the clock, he saw that the hour hand was pointing at eight.

“So there’s an hour left?”

He made some instant coffee and turned on the TV. The world was moving around busily as always. Watching the traffic being practically still on TV, he couldn’t be more relieved that he was a student. There was nothing more annoying than a traffic jam during the commute after all. He was switching channels to watch the news when one RBS news was talking about sexual services related to aspiring entertainers. The main story was that people were coercing aspiring entertainers into sexual services by enticing them with their debut. That news wasn’t that long. Either everything was very clear, or there was practically zero evidence.

When he was still immature, he was enraged when he watched news like these. He considered men to be trash. However, after he realized that there was no distinction between men and women when it came to being trash, he tried not to come to early conclusions. He primarily believed in the things he saw and experienced, and secondarily believed the things that were proven.

Perhaps there would be another news in a few days. And perhaps at that time, the offender and the victim might have switched.

‘It’s about time I get going, huh.’

Maru took his bag and left the house. He was appointed to meet at Suwon station. He took the bus to Suwon station and saw the familiar black car. He approached it and knocked on the door.

“Oh, Maru. Come on in.”

He got in the car. Byungchan was eating a sandwich he seemed to have bought from the convenience store.

“You should really eat proper breakfast.”

“I want to do that too, but I’m not in a situation where I can cook for myself at home. Want a bite?”

“I had breakfast.”

“Really? Then let’s get going for now.”

“You can finish that first. There’s still plenty of time, isn’t there?”

“That’s true.”

Byungchan nodded and stuffed the rest of the sandwich in his mouth. Perhaps Maru should have added that he could take his time finishing it. He opened the window with a faint smile. The weather was quite hot. If the sun was this glaring in early July, he didn’t even want to imagine what it would be like in August. He was just following a lady who was shaking the front of her blouse to cool down a little, when,

“Fuah! I finished.”

“You could’ve taken more time.”

“We have a schedule to upkeep so I can’t really do that. Put on your seatbelt.”

Byungchan turned on the car and started driving.

“Where are we going?”

“Sangam High School in Apgujeong-dong in Seoul. It’s supposed to be a high school but it’s fricking huge like a college campus. I heard that it’s a school for kids from wealthy families.”

“Well, if they live in Seoul, I guess they’re better off than most.”

“That’s true. Ah, I wish I could live in Seoul.”

“Where do you live right now?”

“Me? I do live in Seoul. Though, it’s a goshiwon.”

“Then in Noryangjin?”

“No, not there.”

“How’s life there?”

“Don’t even start. If I lie down, there’s not even space for a cockroach to lie down next to me. You can experience what filling the entire room is like.”

Byungchan drove as he giggled.

“You should earn a lot of money and raise buildings.”

“Yeah, I wish.”

“It’s everyone’s dream in Korea to go traveling while being paid monthly rent, isn’t it?”

“Haha, isn’t that too small of a dream?”

“How many people do you think aim for that small dream? I think there’s around 40 million people.”

“Well, yeah, I guess I’m one of them. But hey, you should dream about even bigger things at your age.”

“Like what, becoming the president?”

“That’s a good one.”

“But this world is where a land owner in Gangnam has a better life than the president.”

“Why are you so pessimistic?”

“What, you don’t want to become a land owner in Gangnam?”

“No, I’d love to.”

Both Maru and Byungchan made satisfied smiles.

When very young, most boys wished to become either the president or a great scientist, and after just a little more, they wished to be firemen or policemen. After growing up a little more, their dream usually changes into entering a good university, and during college, it would become a good employment. Dream and age were inversely proportional to each other.

Like that, an ordinary civilian's dream changes into becoming a land owner in Gangnam. It was a worldly desire, and not romantic at all, but Maru honestly thought that receiving rent from other people on a monthly basis looked more beautiful than anything. A rich land owner, how good was that?

"But I think a rich land owner in Gangnam is too big of a dream. After all, it's even more difficult than becoming a lawyer or a judge."

"Now that I think about it, you're right."

"Perhaps it's even harder than becoming the president."

"Yeah, that's for sure."

They were half joking and half serious at the same time, but soon they arrived at the destination. They were at Sangam High, where people wearing gym uniforms filled the school sports field.

A (usually) very small, cheap residence in Korea targeted towards employment-seekers and examinees. All you get in a room is a bed and a small desk. Everything else, like the bathroom, laundry machine, and kitchen, is shared with other residents. for more details.

Chapter 298

The school gates were grand and they looked as though the pillars were removed from the Parthenon. Byungchan said something about the school being comparable to a college campus, and indeed, just the school gates alone were different to other schools. When Byungchan was about to drive through the gate, someone walked out from the janitor's office. A man wearing a blue security guard uniform walked towards the driver's seat.

"Where did you come from?" The man asked politely.

Byungchan told him that they were here for the drama.

"Please park your car behind the school. There might be problems if you park it elsewhere, so try to park it as deep inside as possible. I hope you can park next to the people from the TV station. Did you get that?"

"Yes, I'll do that."

The man then saw them off by touching his security uniform hat once.

"Phew, it's somewhat nerve-wrecking."

"Do most schools have a janitor's office at the school gates?"

"Well, the school I went to certainly didn't have one."

"Mine doesn't have one either."

Byungchan slowly drove along the edge of the school field to the back of the school.

“Wow, this place is huge.”

Even Maru was slightly shocked when he saw the parking lot and another school field that was hidden behind the school building. Two school fields for one school? The field near the entrance had grass and soccer goals, but the field at the back had tracks for the track and field activities. There was also a tennis court, a basketball court, and a futsal field around the outside.

“This place must be operated by some large foundation or something.”

“This place is incredible.”

Byungchan spoke nervously. Maru wondered what it was about and looked where Byungchan was looking. There were cars on either side of the parking lot, and every single one of them was a high-class sedan. On the left were cars produced within the country, and on the right were imported cars. It looked as though a slight nick would cost an average man’s salary. Even the wheels looked premium and just looking at them made Maru laugh in vain.

“Why are there so many cars that people would never be able to afford with a teacher’s salary?”

“How would I know? Hey, look at that one. Isn’t that a sports car where you can open the roof?”

“Wow, that probably costs as much as a house right there.”

They finally understood the reason why the janitor warned them to park their car ‘deep inside’. There was no way teachers drove such cars, so they must belong to the parents of the students here. Maybe there was some kind of parent meeting? In any case, Maru was flabbergasted at the completely different scale of fortune displayed here.

“It’s over there.”

Sighing in relief, Byungchan escaped the row of expensive cars and parked his car next to a vehicle with the RBS logo on it. People were moving around busily as they were rushing to prepare. People with boxes on their shoulders were heading somewhere inside the school. Next to them were some women following them with school uniforms in their hands. Those women were probably the coordinators.

“When does the shoot begin?”

“Uhm, it’s 12 according to the schedule, but it probably won’t start exactly at that time. I have a lot of experience taking part time jobs like this one, and there was always some wait.”

Just then, Byungchan got a call. While he was on the phone, Maru looked around. He saw someone giving orders with a walkie-talkie in hand. He was probably the producer or the assistant producer.

“Supplementary characters, please gather round!”

A woman who had tied up her short hair above her head used a cone as an amplifier to shout. Maru tapped on Byungchan’s shoulders to get his attention and pointed at the people gathering around. Byungchan covered the microphone on his phone and told him to go.

Maru walked past the school building sandwiched between two school fields and walked along a clearly landscaped path until he reached a smaller building compared to the main building. It was a building that couldn't be seen from the school gates. It was a gym building with the entire front wall covered with windows. So schools like this do exist, huh.

"Please find a gym uniform that matches your size and change into it."

The woman with the red cone pointed at the gym uniforms as she spoke. There were around ten people that came with her. They all started rummaging through the pile of clothes before going to the toilet inside the gym to change. Maru also changed into a gym uniform of suitable size. There was no smell since they seemed to have washed them properly.

"They're currently shooting in the main building right now, and after that, we'll shoot a basketball scene in the gym. There are students in class right now so don't disturb them and try to move around on this side as much as possible. It's also absolutely forbidden to smoke here so don't smoke. I won't be responsible if you get caught smoking, okay? You'll have to wait just a little until the shoot starts."

"Okay."

The supplementary characters replied in a calm voice. They looked young, but they all seemed to be in their 20s. After the woman left, people gathered under a shade. Although they all looked different to each other, they took similar courses of action - dazing out. Some people started to read books, but not long later, the books became pillows instead. Maru also took out an MP3 player. He decided that he should enjoy this moment.

People started lying down on the cement floor one by one. They were still getting paid for this, right? This was a very good part time job.

"Stand up, all of you."

Maru opened his eyes when he heard the sudden voice. There was a man standing in front of the sun. He was wearing a black sleeveless shirt and had a handkerchief tied around his head. He looked at the supplementary actors with sharp eyes.

"This is supposed to be a road for people to walk on. Who told you that you can lie down? Huh? Sit down if you're going to wait."

Hearing his words, some supplementary actors sat up like new soldiers that just entered the military, while the rest just slowly sat up while trying not to piss him off any further.

"Geez, this is why we can't pick just anyone."

After grumbling, the man left.

"Who the hell is he?"

"He's the leader. Is this your first time doing this job?"

"Yes."

“You can just ignore him if you don’t plan on doing this for long, but if you do want to do this for a long time, you should really not piss him off. He’s the one that decides which actors to pick for the supplementary roles.”

“Ah, okay.”

Maru found out the identity of that man after overhearing the conversation. Leader, huh. Any kind of workplace had a management-level personnel in one form or the other, so it wasn’t that strange for there to be one for supplementary actors.

“He’s quite a picky man. I heard that he was promoted to leader after working 8 years as a supplementary actor. He’s someone that knows the hardships of this job well, but he never cares about us.”

“That’s not good.”

“But what can we do about it? He has a lot of connections around here so we have to get on his good side. There are about three places that get their work through him. He does swear at me a lot, but I’m still thankful for him since he provides work for me.”

“You must have it hard. Have you done this job for a long time?”

“Me? I think I’m in my third year now. I was originally an aspiring actor, but I didn’t pass any auditions. I don’t belong to a company either.”

As the man had a good way with words, people started gathering around him. Maru also took off his earphones and sat with the group.

“Today’s my first time doing this job, is it hard?” A man with a neat haircut asked. The man at the center of attention groaned slightly.

“It’s different for each person, but scenes like this where we’re just people in the background, aka, ‘crowd scene’, is easy. Most of the time, it just ends while you daze out. The leader doesn’t say anything most of the time either.”

“So we can just stand still today as well?”

“Probably. I don’t have a script, so I don’t know that much.”

“We don’t get a script?”

“We don’t. Supplementary actors don’t get things like scripts. Sometimes, there are scenes where we have lines, but for those, the leader will tell us beforehand.”

“Aha, so that’s it.”

The man explained in kind. Maru had a look at his bag for a moment. He had a script inside, but he stayed quiet since there was no need to take it out.

“Have you tried acting with actors?” A man wearing glasses suddenly asked.

“Yes, I have. A few times. This might be a part-time job, but your experience does count. You know, in scenes where a security guard says stuff like ‘you’re not allowed to do this here’ if the main character goes to some super huge company and complains about his poverty. I had a few roles like that. It’s not much, but it does help out in your acting career. For scenes like that, you’ll have to mind about the camera, as well as the rhythm with other actors.”

Maru looked at the man explaining. He clearly seemed like he had pride in his job. These kinds of people were bound to succeed no matter what they did.

“It’s just a part-time job in the end.”

Just then, a man sitting further away from the group spoke. He didn’t give off a deep impression, and when he received attention, he immediately started fidgeting. Other people started whispering about him.

“You’re right. It is just a part-time job. I’m sorry if you found it disturbing. It’s just been a while since I received so much attention, haha.”

The man smiled and stopped speaking. People scattered since the mood was all ruined. It was as though all that talk just now was a lie. A bored atmosphere started appearing again. Maru looked at the man making a bitter smile. He said that he was preparing to become an actor. Taking part-time jobs like this was probably in order to get some experience. His efforts were downright ignored so it wouldn’t be surprising even if he became angry.

They say that carelessly throwing a stone might kill a frog. The one that ruined the mood just now probably didn’t say his words with that kind of intention. He probably said it just because of the piled up stress due to the hot weather, and the waiting time getting longer. As evidence, he was looking down with an apologetic face.

It would’ve been better if he apologized, and he probably knew that as well, but knowing something was much easier than putting it into action.

“Isn’t something like a traditional drama much harder?”

Maru approached the man who was looking into the distance and asked. He felt that the youth felt hurt because of those careless words when he was putting all of his effort into his work, so he decided to help him out.

“Wh- what was that?”

“You know, in traditional dramas, even the clothes look heavy. Unlike modern day-themed dramas where you can use pretty much any clothing.”

“That’s true.”

The man showed a kind smile to a high schooler that suddenly approached him. The man was neither particularly handsome nor did he have clearly outlined facial features, but he had a good feeling about him. Perhaps it was thanks to the natural smile on his face.

“A soldier outfit is actually quite hot. Waiting a couple hours under the sun while wearing that is just hell.”

“But the pay is the same, isn’t it?”

“They sometimes pay more for those. But even so, most people tend to avoid traditional dramas. Sometimes, it’s the opposite and you have to wait for hours wearing a single piece of clothing during the winter. And just when we get a portable heater, they say they’re starting. It drives people mad sometimes. The main characters get to stay next to the large heater, but for us... well... we have to fend for ourselves. But it’s much easier if you find a team that cares about their supplementary actors. Those people feed you well too. But wait, I am talking to you without any honorifics, but you are actually younger than me, aren’t you?”

“I’m in my 2nd year of high school.”

“Really? You did look young, but I never realized you were that young. But wait, you’re in high school?”

Just as the man looked at him with confusion, Maru pointed at the staff. The man followed his finger.

“The leader’s coming.”

“Ah, it looks like it’s starting.”

The leader of the supplementary actors shouted at the people.

“Get up. We’re starting. There are students in the gym, so follow instructions and don’t cause any accidents. We’re going to shoot the scene where you cheer from the side of the basketball court. There’s nothing difficult so just follow the instructions, okay?”

“Yes.”

At that moment, there was some commotion on the main building’s side. Girls’ screeches could be heard all the way from there. A group of handsome boys and girls appeared amidst the cheers.

“Move the equipment! Be careful not to cause any accidents with the students. It’ll be a big matter if they get injured or something so watch out for the heavy equipment and the cables.”

One man, who seemed to be the producer, walked into the gym along with the actors. A procession of the managers, coordinators, and makeup artists all followed in like vassals following their king.

“Now that’s some treatment...”

When Maru spoke in a small voice.

“Of course they get special treatment. They’re paid several times the amount we do.”

“Several times? You mean several hundred times.”

The man’s eyes were filled with a mixture of envy and regret. Ganghwan was probably worried about people like him. They were running out of jobs. It was now an era where effort did not equal to result.

“Supplementary actors! Follow me!”

Hearing the leader’s words, Maru picked up his bag and started moving.

‘We’re like labor workers being driven into a construction scene.’

Well, leader or foreman, they were pretty much the same thing.

Chapter 299

The air was refreshing. It seemed that the air conditioner was doing its job in a place unknown to them. To the left and right of the entrance were stairs to the 2nd and 3rd floors, and in front was a glass door with 'Passion' written on it in big letters. Through the glass door, Maru saw some people who were busily preparing for the shoot. Some students could be seen playing with a volleyball as well. It didn't seem like they were in class though. They seemed to be here to help the drama out.

"Students, please wait."

The producer that was shouting at the staff spoke to the students with a smile. He was a kind(?) man to people that weren't his subordinates.

The students, while they followed the instructions, still shouted at the main actors of the drama who were practicing to look over to their side. When some of the actors waved at them, cheers loud enough to fill the entire gym erupted out.

"Sorry about that! Please wait a little more."

"Woomin-oppa! I love you!"

"Oppa, you're so adorable!"

Maru had a look at the girls that were screeching on the 2nd floor balcony. Isn't that dangerous? The teachers had to move in order to stop a girl from falling over the rails. The girls gave glimpses to the actors in the court even as they were being scolded by the teachers. It seemed that they really liked the actors.

While the actors did a rehearsal in the basketball court on the right of the first floor, the supplementary actors started waiting again. During that wait, some of the students approached them. It seemed that they were curious about the identity of the people sitting here.

"What are you doing?"

"We're waiting."

"Are you going to appear in the drama?"

"For a very brief moment, I guess."

"Aha."

The girls did not stay for long. They seemed to have lost interest and went back to their group.

"It's been more than an hour since we've arrived, but we haven't even started."

"True."

People looked at the main set that was still undergoing preparation with boredom. Maru left the group for a moment because he got a call.

-How's it going?

"I'm waiting just like you said."

-I knew it. Oh, I have to visit the company because of work, so call me if you need me.

"Don't worry about me and do what you need to do. I can just take the bus home."

-I can't do that, I'm your manager after all.

"That will be more comfortable for both of us. Get some proper food if you have time left over after your business. I'll take the bus, no, I'll take the taxi home. I'll probably be paid a transit fee if I submit the receipt."

-Hey, you're quite knowledgeable about that. You're not the type to lose out even if you end up working in a company.

"Yes, I hate having to make unnecessary losses. Anyway, you can do your business as usual. I think I'll have to wait a little longer."

-Alright, do your best. Oh yeah. Apparently, the producer there is acquainted with director Choi Joonggeun. And the reason you got in it was also thanks to director Choi's suggestion.

"Really?"

That was rather unexpected. He naturally thought that it was Junmin who had put him in here. He remembered Joonggeun's face, who he had seen a month ago at the movie set. Did he see Maru in a positive light? Or perhaps there was some other reason? After thinking about it a little, Maru made a faint smile. He was just a supplementary actor. Why would there be a reason at all? He probably just uttered his name at random when he was asked for a suggestion. Hanging up, Maru smiled at the leader who was glaring at him before returning to the group.

"Okay then. We're starting the shoot. Let's do everything in a single shot!"

The students that were watching were placed around the perimeter of the basketball court. Some cheered out loud, while some just chatted with each other. What the producer wanted was for it to be as natural as possible.

The camera started rolling and the actors started their bit. A tall actor dribbled the ball as he charged towards the opponent's area before doing a lay-up shoot. The ball left his hands and hit the backboard once before going right for the ring, but it was unfortunately deflected away.

"Good, good. One more time. Let's just do that one more time."

The producer gave out instructions again and people started cheering. The students seemed to like the fact that they were doing something other than studying in class, so they cheered loudly despite the fact that they were doing the same scene again. This time, the shot went in. From the posture of the one that threw the ball, it seemed that that actor played basketball on a frequent basis.

"Good. Next, Lee Jin and Yu-ri. Badminton scene."

From how there weren't any lines for consecutive scenes, it didn't seem like an important part. It was probably just shooting 'ordinary' scenes that went in between the important bits. This time, the boys started cheering out loud.

"They're quite small. They looked tall on TV too."

"Most idols are small. But they look tall on screen because of their proportions."

The only joy for the supplementary actors was chatting since they had nothing to do but wait. There were quite a few others who had experience doing this part time job other than the aspiring actor, so they spent their time listening to those people.

"It would have been better if we saw them somewhere else..." one person sighed as he spoke.

Although there was a celebrity right in front of them, they were people that lived in a completely different world than them. Just like how watching the lions at the zoo several times would make one indifferent to lions, watching celebrities like this for a long time made them feel indifferent. Moreover, they were here not to watch, but to earn money. Their waiting time was getting delayed indefinitely while the leader was looking down on them. They couldn't be like the students and be happy that they were watching celebrities.

"Cut! Next scene."

The shoot progressed quite quickly. The pace was definitely different to that of a movie shoot. Perhaps it was because there were no lines for now, but it seemed like they weren't taking second shots for the scenes that made the cut. People started moving the equipment. After even the heavy sounding equipment was moved, the leader gave them a signal.

"Look here. The students will split into two sides and start fighting in this scene. There's no fancy action or something like that, so don't get nervous. Here, from you to you, you are team A, and the rest will be team B."

At that moment, the woman with the red cone appeared.

"Who is Han Maru?"

Maru raised his right hand. The woman gestured for him to come.

"Why are you here? We were looking for you."

"Because I was supposed to be a supplementary actor."

"You're right, but not right. You know what your role is, right?"

"Yes. The one getting hit."

The woman nodded before telling the leader that she'll be borrowing him for a moment. He followed the woman to the corner of the gym.

"Consider it breaktime and just sit down at ease. You just need to start looking at the actors worriedly once they start fighting."

“Do we have to say things like ‘what do we do?’?”

“Saying things like ‘what do we do’ and ‘shouldn’t we call the teachers’ are good if you can say them.”

The producer briefed the students and the actors were going over the scene next to him. It seemed like the scene was about punching and dodging.

“I told you that’s not it. Look closely. The camera will shoot from your right side. What does that mean, then? It means that your right side will be on the frame, right? If you grab the opponent’s collar and swing your fist like this, the camera will catch that you’re not doing it for real.”

A man with a sharp chin explained to the two actors. He was frowning as he didn’t seem to like the acting of the two actors.

“Let me show you again. Exaggerate your movements. You don’t have to grab tightly, but if you swing your arm awkwardly, it will look terrible. Also, don’t just use your arm. Use your waist as well. Only then do the viewers realize that there’s power behind that punch. Here, look at me.”

A straight jab brushed past one of the actor’s nose. Maru, who was watching from the back, felt as though the punch went straight into the face. It was completely different from the idol boy’s punch from before.

The man didn’t look satisfied, but he didn’t frown at the actors for long. After a deep sigh, he encouraged them that they should try again.

“Director Kim. He’s the one getting hit.”

The woman introduced Maru. Maru slightly nodded in greeting.

“For now, you two can go over that scene by yourselves. Both of you are talented, so you should be able to understand what I mean with a bit of practice. Since you’re doing this, you must appear cool on TV, don’t you think?”

Director Kim turned around after speaking. He walked two steps towards Maru before scanning him from top to bottom.

“Phew. Your work today is for you to get hit by the punch from that guy over there. The producer will tell you the details during the rehearsal.”

“What exactly do I need to do?”

Maru asked director Kim who had a similar stature to him. Since he wasn’t here to fool around, he had to work properly. To do his work properly, he had to know what he was doing. Director Kim’s explanation wasn’t enough for him, so he had to ask again.

“You have to pretend to get hit.”

“Where do I get hit?”

“On the face. You’ll get hit by a backhand while you try to pull him back from fighting.”

“A backspin blow, huh?”

“Haha, you can call it that, too, I guess.”

Director Kim’s eyes were following the two actors that were practicing. Although they were better than before, they were still too careful. Director Kim didn’t seem to like their punches at all.

“It’s not like an action scene can be created in ten minutes,” director Kim muttered to himself.

Maru could read an expression of disappointment from him.

He was aware of how stuntmen were treated in the movie industry. They put on the masks of actors and do the action in their stead, but people did not call them ‘actors’. They were classified as ‘staff’. And the words that director Kim said just now was enough for Maru to tell how much the producer disdained such action scenes.

“The rehearsal is going to start in ten minutes. Please rest until then.”

The woman with the red cone shouted. Actors rested with other actors, while the staff rested with other staff members.

“I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to do the explanation now because we’re running out of time.”

“Okay.”

Director Kim nodded once before telling Maru to try grabbing his arm. Maru grabbed his arm with both of his hands just like he said.

“It will be the same in the rehearsal. If that kid does what he learned, then he’ll move like this.”

Director Kim pulled on his arm forward violently. Maru wasn’t putting strength into his arms, so his body was pulled forward. When he regained balance and started resisting, director Kim shook off his arm again. As he wasn’t told what he was supposed to do, Maru lowered his center of gravity and pulled his arm downwards as he pushed himself against director Kim. It was a clinching move from boxing.

‘When am I supposed to get hit?’

He looked at the director with that question in his mind.

“Hey, do you do sports?”

“Yes. I did some boxing thanks to my father.”

“Really?”

Director Kim looked visibly brighter than before. It seemed that the fact that Maru had experience boxing was quite good for him. He even put his arm around Maru’s like he found a comrade.

“You have a good posture. Your father must like sports, huh?”

“Yes. He was a boxer when he was young. Though, he never debuted as a pro.”

“Boxing, huh. Boxing’s good. Although there aren’t many matches these days because it’s declining in popularity, boxing used to be the thing in my days.”

Director Kim started weaving on the spot. He was like a child who found a treasure.

“Hey, are you afraid of punches?”

“I’m more afraid of money than punches.”

“Now, you know something. This will be easy. I tried to shake you off twice, right?”

“Yes.”

“Endure the first one, and get hit on the second. I’ll tell you which way you should turn your face when we do the rehearsal so don’t worry about that.”

Just as Maru nodded and said that he understood, a fist flew at his face. Although it was a sudden punch, Maru was able to react. He raised both of his arms to put his guard on and twisted his body sideways to block the punch with his shoulder. The punch stopped just before it hit.

“Looks like you did learn boxing.”

Director Kim smiled and opened his fist before patting his shoulder. Maru also loosened his posture and smiled back.

“Alright. Rehearsal is starting.”

After a moment’s rest, rehearsal began immediately. Director Kim stood in front of the two actors that were going over their fight scene. The supplementary actors participated this time. This was the crowd scene where they try to hold back the two main characters from fighting. Students were placed on the outer perimeter, and actors were located on the inside where the actual fight was going to happen.

“Look here. You two are friends that don’t like each other that much. A quarrel during class escalated and a fight is triggered when you see this guy trying to make a move on the girl you like. Alright? A tense atmosphere forms and you two start fighting. Well then. Our actresses should watch the fight anxiously, and the two of you grab each other’s collars and glare at each other. Alright?”

After he told the main actors what they needed to do, he started explaining to the supplementary actors. After finishing his explanation, the producer called the two main characters as well as Maru.

“Hey, grab his arm here. And Woomin, try to shake his arm off fiercely.”

The two then did what director Kim told them to do. Maru was supposed to hold the arm back once and get hit on the second shake. He tried rehearsing the action with the actor, Woomin. He was rather awkward at hitting as he seemed to be afraid of hitting someone else’s face.

“Uhm, it’s fine if I get hit, so do it with all your might. I’ll just dodge if I think it’s dangerous,” Maru told Woomin.

“Will it really be alright?”

“Yes. It’s fine.”

“Okay, then I’ll try.”

The producer raised his hand and told everyone that the shoot was going to begin.

Maru stretched his neck out sideways before standing in position.

Chapter 300

“The boom mic is in the frame!”

The man holding the boom mic hurriedly raised the microphone up when he heard the fussy words.

“You raised it too much. I’m not picking up any audio.”

“Okay.”

The boom mic tried to find its place that was neither too high nor too low. The person that seemed to be the audio director was whispering into the ear of the youth holding the boom mic, and they seemed to be words of encouragement.

“Be careful not to hurt any of the students. Well, then. Get yourselves ready.”

Maru pulled his chin inward and looked at Woomin next to him. The scenario here was simple. Woomin would try to rush into the actor on the other side, and he just had to pull him back from doing so. They already went through the action once, so there was nothing difficult for him.

“Get ready, stand by, cue!”

Along with the cue sign, Woomin rushed forward. Maru quickly followed suit. He glanced at the light scattered by the reflector and placed himself to the right of Woomin. His face wouldn’t be captured at this angle. Well, he was supposed to be an extra that was supposed to fall down after being hit once, so it didn’t matter to him.

“Try saying that one more time.”

“What, you didn’t hear me?”

“I didn’t. So try saying that one more time!”

He matched his steps with Woomin’s, who took a large step forward along with a shout. He had to be right next to him if he wanted to grab his arm as naturally as possible. The opposing actor closed in on Woomin. They were within arm’s reach of each other. The camera shot the scene so that the two people fighting were on either side of the frame, and the supplementary actors started to stop them without getting in the way of the camera. The mood kept escalating, and Woomin raised his hand.

Now, huh - Maru grabbed his hand. If he pulled too hard, he would surprise Woomin so he didn’t put that much strength into his grab.

“Hey, let me go.”

“You really shouldn’t do this.”

He said his only line today and pulled Woomin’s arm. Woomin tried to shake his arm out just as they practiced. Maru pulled the arm towards his chest just like what they did during practice. The back of Woomin’s hand came considerably closer to his face. Now, he just had to get hit once he tried to shake him off once more.

“Goddammit, I told you to let go!”

Woomin swung his arm. This was what they agreed upon. The problem was that Woomin tried to shake Maru off so awkwardly. Maru was supposed to get hit on the face, but Woomin was swinging his arm downwards. Maru wondered what they did all that practice for. He thought about what he should do in that short moment and decided to fall backwards just like the story. Maru fell on his butt and covered his face as he tried to curl his body up. Would this be enough for a cut sign? He thought that it might not be.

“Cut,” it happened, contrary to his expectations.

“Are you okay?”

Woomin approached him with a worried face. Maru nodded and grabbed the hand offered to him. It didn't hurt that much but the problem was if the producer would accept this scene or not. Woomin did not look good either. And just as he had worried, negative words came from the director.

“Let's do that once again.”

I knew it - Maru returned to his position quietly. Director Kim, who had been watching this whole time, approached Woomin and started talking to him. Have more confidence; swing your arm more violently - he was probably saying something along those lines.

“Over here.”

He was pressing his sore butt when the producer gestured for him to come.

“So you're the one that Joonggeun-hyung talked about. You're good. Did you learn action scenes like that separately?”

“No.”

“Really? I guess you are a tough kid then. Didn't it hurt? It looked painful.”

“I can endure it.”

“What a tough guy. We're gonna do that once again, and do what you just did.”

The producer clicked his fingers and shouted 'stand by'. The actors got into position again and the students also started exclaiming like it said on the sketchbook. Maru stood behind Woomin again. Woomin's expression was a little stiff. Maru wondered if that was because he heard some bad words from the director.

“It was good last time, so let's do better this time. Stand by, cue!”

The exact same situation unfolded out again just as though they reversed time. The two main actors approached each other and said the exact same lines. Maru grabbed Woomin's arm at the precise time again. The first attempt to shake Maru off went perfectly. Now, he had to actually shake Maru off.

Maru and Woomin met eyes just as Woomin tried to swing his arm outward. The hand that was supposed to come at Maru's face brushed past his hair this time. Maru got ready to fall down, but the producer's cut sign fell faster.

“Woomin. I get that you’re worried, but think about the camera. Also, what’s up with that face? The character named Chajin that you’re acting is a kid who doesn’t think about the consequences. Such a kid is swinging his arm out of anger, so it would be strange if you look like you’re struck with fear like that. I’m not trying to scold you. I’m saying that you can do better. You get me?”

“Y-yes.”

The producer frowned seeing Woomin who flinched back but just turned around. Woomin covered his face with both of his hands and sighed. The curtain of silence between the one who had a lot to say but couldn’t, and the person who couldn’t put his thoughts into action, seemed quite thick.

“Well then. Again.”

The producer stood in front of the camera without any emotion on his face. The atmosphere at the shooting scene fell to rock bottom. Even the students, who seemed like they were enjoying themselves, started whispering among themselves.

Other actors approached Woomin and tried to console him, but he didn’t look consoled at all.

“There he goes again. This isn’t the first time he’s delaying everyone, isn’t it?”

“You’re right. He’s driving all of us crazy. Does he not think about how he’s causing a disturbance for everyone? If we add up the times he caused delays, then we might have a whole episode worth of shots.”

“He does well at times, but he’s like this every time he makes a mistake, so the director must have it hard too. We’re almost running out of the production budget because we’re not getting any ad offers. And here we are, giving him money because he’s the main character.”

The chat between the staff members could be heard. Woomin’s image among the staff didn’t seem that good. The reflectors were put back up again, and the lights came on.

“Uhm wait a moment.”

Woomin raised his hand. His face was filled with sweat. The make-up artist quickly came and wiped his sweat out before fixing his make-up.

It seemed that he was sweating because of nervousness since the gym was cool enough for any sweat to cool down easily. Woomin apologized before getting into his position. The producer crossed his arms. It was as though he was saying that this would be the last time.

“Uhm, hey.”

Maru talked to Woomin before the cue sign fell. Woomin turned his head around slightly.

“Just hit me.”

“What?”

“It won’t end if you’re like this. I won’t get hurt if I’m prepared, so swing your arm with the intent to hit me. If you restrain yourself because of worry, then we won’t be getting anywhere.”

“...”

“Worry about ending the scene here rather than about me. At most, I’ll get a nosebleed, and I’m fine with that. I don’t think the director will like it if we keep dragging things out like this. How about it?”

“Alright, I’ll try.”

Woomin nodded his head heavily. At the same time, the producer shouted ‘cue’. This was the third shoot. It felt as though the tempo was faster than the previous two shots. It wasn’t that disturbing though. From how the producer was staying quiet, it didn’t seem like a big matter.

The two actors started getting into a fight again. Maru listened to the conversation as he measured the precise time he should start acting. As it wasn’t like he would be paid more just because he stayed here longer, he wanted to wrap this up as early as possible.

Just as Woomin’s arm flinched, Maru grabbed his arm with both of his hands. The previous takes were good up to this point as well. Woomin tried to shake him off hard. This time, he looked like he had made up his mind. Then came the moment where he had to hit Maru on the head. Woomin glanced back at Maru before shaking off his arm. He was definitely putting more strength into his arm than before. However, the direction was the problem this time as well. It was supposed to head towards Maru’s face, but it was heading towards empty air.

As he had expected this somewhat, Maru pulled in his left arm, which was still holding onto Woomin’s arm, towards himself. He could see Woomin being visibly flustered. Nice expression - he thought as he put his forehead against the hand flying at him. The boxing instructor told him that an ordinary forehead was stronger than an untrained fist. He probably wouldn’t have any problems with just this.

Along with a loud pow sound, Maru fell down on the floor. The sound was louder than expected. Thanks to that, Maru saw that the students standing around looked truly worried for him. It was as though they were thinking what if he was really hurt. Maru was relieved. This would probably get an okay sign.

“Good!”

The director shouted ‘cut’ and smiled with satisfaction. Maru said that he was okay towards Woomin who came to him.

“Sorry. I didn’t plan to hit you that hard.”

“I was the one who pulled, so don’t worry about it too much.”

Maru dusted his butt and stood up. In any case, the shoot was over. He had no more appearances, so he wondered if it was okay for him to leave. He thought that he should have a hot shower once he got back home. He didn’t do much, but he felt tired for some reason. Hot water was the best for fatigue.

“Wow, that was good.”

Director Kim walked up to him from the back and put his hand on his shoulder as he spoke.

“The sound was good as well. But it must hurt. You should’ve secretly angled yourself so that it wouldn’t hurt.”

“It would be strange if that was caught on camera, so I didn’t do it. Uhm, so, the supplementary actors can go home after their scene?”

“That’s for the leader of the supplementary actors to decide. He’s the one that decides whether to send people back or to take them late into the night.”

“Ah, alright. But we don’t get any additional pay or something, right?”

“You do. A lot, too. If you go home before 4, then it’s just 40 thousand won including lunch fee, but it’s 100 thousand if you stay late into the night. That’s why there are people who get on the leader’s good side and stay late into the night despite not having any appearances.”

“A hundred thousand? That’s a lot.”

“Because that much work is involved. Waiting without doing anything is quite tough too, unexpectedly.”

Maru looked at the set where they were shooting the next scene. The supplementary actors he was talking to during the waiting time were doing their scenes now. Though, the only ‘act’ they did was to act like a flustered student. The aspiring actor looked the most natural, perhaps thanks to his experience.

“The producer must be pissed too. There are people who are better than the main actors everywhere, but they have to take people like that kid.”

“Well, they are the ones that get the views, so it can’t be helped.”

Director Kim scanned Maru from top to bottom, probably thinking ‘what is this kid?’. Maru smiled at him before leaving the group. The shoot continued for a while.

“Thanks everyone for your work.”

The scene at the gym ended with the producer patting the backs of the main actors. The students, who had been enjoying themselves, seemed quite tired as well. It wasn’t that surprising though, since they had to go through the same scene several times.

“Your acting is becoming better by the day. You might just end up ignoring me in the future.”

“No way. You know how much respect we have for you.”

“He’s right.”

The producer grinned as he was surrounded by idols. It was as though the strict face he had on during the shoot was all a lie. His efforts into making the mood better for the next shoot was tear-jerking.

Wasn’t the producer supposed to be superior to everyone? It felt quite strange. Slight disdain could be seen in the smiles of both the producer and the idols. Power within the television media was quite incomprehensible at times.

“Director Lee.”

“Haha, director Choi. You’re here.”

The producer greeted the man that just entered the gym. There was an identity card hung around his neck signifying that he belonged to a TV station. Now that Maru thought about it, the people in the staff could also be separated into those that had an identity card and those that didn't.

"Is the shoot going well?"

"It is. What brings you here?"

"I'm here for support. The drama production department is nagging me to support you from the side."

"Haha... is that so?"

After talking up to that point, the two of them looked around before walking towards a corner. No, to be exact, from what Maru saw, the person not at ease between the two was the producer, also known as 'director Lee'. This new 'director Choi' looked like he was at home.

An axe was thrown into the shoot schedule just as they thought that they were going to switch places. The supplementary actors were put in waiting again. When he approached the supplementary actors, they greeted him with smiles.

"You got hit quite hard back there."

"I saw you talking to the producer. Do you know him?"

Hearing the sudden question, Maru replied to him that he was here because of someone he knew. The man who said that he was an aspiring actor opened his mouth.

"Didn't you get hurt? It looked like you fell on your tailbone."

"I'm fine because I twisted my body slightly."

"That's good. It won't do you any good if you get injured. You should be more careful."

"You're right. But do you know who that man is?" Maru asked as he pointed at director Choi. The man nodded his head.

"He's probably the producer from the TV station. He's probably here to interfere."

"Interfere, you say?"

"This drama is an outsourced drama. Although it's called an 'outsourced' drama, the TV station is lending its staff as well as its equipment, so he can't entirely ignore people from the TV station. That's why it's common for people from the TV stations to interfere. I'm not entirely sure, though. I just heard bits and pieces from around."

"Aha."

So they were like the super colossal company that outsourced its work and the primary subcontractor company?

Maru understood immediately why director Lee, who had the title 'director' just like director Choi, was acting submissive to him.

