

## Once Again 331

### Chapter 331

She picked up the album jacket with the name 'Kwon Dayoon'. Looking at herself with a bright smile on her face, it felt bad. Dayoon threw the album onto the sofa. The album bounced off the sofa and fell on the floor. The plastic casing opened due to the shock and the CD popped out, rolling around on the floor before lying on the ground. The album jacket lay next to it, and she saw the faces of the members who were making a pose in a friendly manner. Dayoon picked up a cushion from the sofa and threw it towards the CD. She didn't even want to see it.

She hugged her knees and watched the TV dazedly. On TV, it was talking about The Five which had split up. Their agency, who had originally said that they would try to talk things through until the end, had just announced the cancellation of the contract. The cameras captured the middle and high school girls who were wearing black masks and going on a riot in front of the agency building.

"Bullshit. You're going to forget about them once some time passes."

Dayoon changed the channel. This time, it was a comedy program. Was that supposed to be funny? She pressed buttons on the remote again. None of the channels satisfied her. In the end, she ended up on a channel that spoke a foreign language. It was much better to not understand anything at all.

She stood up and opened the fridge. The empty fridge contained some pizza slices that she had ordered yesterday. She couldn't eat pizzas no matter how much she wanted to during her trainee days, but now that she was free to eat them, it did not satisfy her at all. It wasn't that she was worried about gaining weight. If she wanted to lose weight, she could just skip meals. It was just that she was fed up. Cheap food like that no longer satisfied her.

Despite that though, she microwaved a piece of pizza. She picked up the flabby piece of pizza and returned to the sofa. The sensation of soggy pizza spread around in her mouth. She chewed a few times before spitting it back out on the plate. She didn't want to eat this shit. She went to the kitchen, opened the trash can, and threw the pizza in. The smell of tomato paste residue from her mouth was disgusting. She washed her mouth with running water a few times before drinking a cup of milk.

She didn't have any schedule today, nor did she have any place to go to. She had cut all ties with her parents ever since she became a legal adult. She didn't want to give any of her hard earned money for their comfort. She wanted to break her phone whenever they called her and asked her if she could send them money for traveling. They stopped at nothing. Even though she had told them multiple times not to call again, they always ended up calling again and asked her for money. They were like cockroaches. No matter how many times she killed them, those horrible creatures still crept out of nowhere. She wished for them to disappear. Dayoon bit her nails. She knew very well why she had no appetite and was constantly annoyed. Time was ticking. Tick tock tick tock, the sound of ticking could be heard from the clock.

"Let's... think about it positively."

Dayoon took off her pajamas. She stood in front of the dressing table in her underwear. She saw her face which was devoid of vitality. This was no good. She smiled faintly. Her facial muscles instantly created the perfect smile for her face. At this point, she was like a machine.

She touched up her skin and did a light touch on her cheeks. The one she was planning to meet today did not like heavy makeup. That person liked the natural kind of beauty with thin makeup. She only faintly drew the eyeline and went with a faint lipstick. After combing her messy hair, she straightened it out with a straightener. Her hair reached down to her chest.

She took out some underwear from her closet. They were white without any patterns. She changed into those and stood in front of the full body mirror. She felt a little better after seeing her body that didn't have any excess fat. She put on a light blue one piece dress and wore a silver necklace with a cross on it. To finish things off, she put on a floppy hat. If she lowered her head, only her chin would be seen by the others.

She sat quietly on the sofa in the living room with her phone in hand. Now that she had dressed up, the annoyance and resentment that she had before seemed to have disappeared. She was even grinning a little.

"I must be crazy," she chuckled.

Just then, she felt a strong vibration from her hand. She felt shivers go up her spine. She sighed in a small voice and answered the call. It was 'that person'.

"Yes, okay. I got it."

She took a deep breath and left the residence. She was going down on the elevator but someone entered on another floor. Dayoon looked downwards and fidgeted with her phone. She could see the man that just got on giving her glimpses.

The elevator arrived on the first floor. Dayoon got off first and rushed out of the apartment complex. She looked around her as she walked. Thankfully, no one seemed to recognize her.

On the street a little away from the apartment complex, Dayoon straightened her shoulders and walked boldly. People didn't recognize her anyway. That was because the idol impression became faint when she didn't have the stage costumes and makeup on.

Despite that, the gazes of the men around her were still hot. Having a pretty face was a heaven-sent blessing. Dayoon looked at the reflection of her face on a glass pane on a building. That face was what allowed her to reach all the way here. She put on a smile that revealed four of her upper teeth. Even she herself thought that her face was charming. It would be better if her nose was a little higher, but she had no plans on getting surgery. She saw an idol being buried into the depths of the abyss when the fact about her plastic surgery was revealed. If she wanted plastic surgery, she had to have had it done before her debut. After that, she would have to claim that it was natural.

It was funny when she thought about it. Surgery was also a form of effort that required risks, but the public considered losing weight as the only 'effort' to become prettier. Anything other than that was a sin. In that sense, Dayoon was thankful that she was born with a pretty face. It would have been horrible if she took after her parents.

"That's right, I'm pretty."

She felt a little better. Using her appearance to earn money. How good was that? She walked a little more and entered the high street. Just as she was watching the cars driving by, a black sedan stopped in

front of her. The door to the passenger seat opened. Dayoon bent slightly and checked who was in it. That person was looking at her as well.

“Get in,” the man inside the car spoke.

Dayoon nodded. She looked around to see if there was anyone looking at her before getting in the car. She closed the window and took off her hat. The man was lighting up his cigarette.

“I’ll be smoking a bit.”

“Yes.”

Dayoon could only reply and wait. She didn’t have that many opportunities to express her own opinion. The man puffed his cigarette and heaved a slow breath out. He was fifty years old. He was an executive at a well-known construction company. At the same time, he was close with the president of her agency.

She got to know this man 2 years ago. Before Blue was formed, Dayoon was despairing as a failed idol. The six members of her former group had resolved together to become successful, but they scattered into thin air after the president of that agency went missing. She was twenty-two that year. She was at a dangerous age for an idol. The money they worked hard to gather was taken by the president of the company as well. Even the head manager of that company went to another company. The members that promised to be together forever had all scattered as well. Among them, three had debuted in another idol group, and two had disappeared altogether.

Dayoon felt stuck. She wondered if she should start taking part time jobs again or prepare herself to get a job. The shock she felt when the path of idols, she had been treading on the whole time, collapsed was too big. She never felt as close to the word ‘suicide’ as she had been then. She had always wondered why people threw themselves into the cold waters of Hangang, but she herself was looking for a bridge when her group disbanded. She was afraid of the very land that she was standing on. It wasn’t even funny. She couldn’t even count the number of times she peeked over the fence.

It was around that time that she came across this man. She was invited to drink by a member of her former group. She didn’t feel that good about it, but she had to do something, so she accepted that invitation. When someone around her father’s age sat down at the same table, Dayoon was both frightened and relieved. She felt like a savior had descended.

She had heard of the rumors as well: that there were people that approached female celebrities. This didn’t happen to the most popular of actors, but to entertainers at the edge of a cliff like her, it happened quite frequently.

The first drinking night was just that - drinking. They drank together and just conversed. There was no indecent gaze or dirty hand movements. Dayoon, who had been nervous, felt like she was just hanging out with an oppa who was just a bit older than most. When that man stood up saying that he had to go home, he handed her some money. When she checked, it was 500 thousand won. It was five hundred thousand just for drinking together and listening to his stories.

When she received that money, Dayoon intuitively realized that that was the decisive moment. She could just end everything there. She could just forget about it and consider it as some pocket money. At first, she tried to do that. It wasn’t like she was harassed or anything, so she didn’t feel bad either.

However, when she came back home and faced the reality that she had an interview tomorrow for a part time job, she immediately sent a text message to the number saved on her phone.

After that, Dayoon experienced things she had never had before. She was able to buy all the clothes she liked at the shopping mall, ate food that melted in her mouth, and watched a movie by herself in the cinema. The world she lived in was different. That man was someone that lived in a completely different world that ordinary salarymen could never imagine.

Their meetings became more frequent, and when they met at the bar again, that man asked her if she was willing to leave things up to him. Dayoon heard those words as 'sex'. Despite the overwhelming guilt, Dayoon replied 'yes'. That night, Dayoon slept with that man at a hotel. Her partner was nearing fifty in age, but his body was well built thanks to regular exercise and a balanced diet.

After the intercourse, Dayoon thought that this kind of life was perhaps okay too. Both of them had to keep it secret anyway. After all, the man had a wife as well. Moreover, Dayoon started liking the man, emotionally, that is. It was not a sin to get support from someone she loved, was it?

After that, she got contacted to become a trainee at a huge entertainment agency, Yellow Star. Dayoon thought that the man had done what he said he would, and when she met him again later, she shook her ass to the best of her abilities. She licked his sexual organ with her tongue and massaged it with her entire body. Then, she told him that she loved him.

After that, she spent her days as a trainee of Blue and made her debut. At first, the tag 'second hand idol' always followed her, but that disappeared soon. A fan cafe was formed, and inside that, she was dubbed the 'big unni'. Thanks to the series of hugely successful albums, she was on a path to success. The number of people that recognized her increased by the day and in just one year, they were able to hold their own concert. Although they didn't earn that much money due to the contract, that was something that was going to be solved soon, so she did not worry about it. She felt happy. She had returned from her gloomy life to a world filled with golden light.

From that moment, Dayoon became wary of that man. It would be the end of an idol once they got involved with a scandal. She avoided all calls from that man and ran away from him with the excuse that she had schedules. She scolded herself and told herself that the love was just an illusion and focused on her activities as an idol.

She thought that she would continue being an idol without many problems. She thought that happiness would last forever. However, after around a year, the relationship between members worsened dramatically. She didn't know what caused it. When she realized, they were at a point where they became annoyed by just talking to each other. It became even worse thanks to the TV shows they attended. They hugged each other with smiles on TV, and they returned to being cold when they returned to their residence.

The moment their relationship cracked, their rankings on various charts fell as well. They had never missed first place on the rankings before, but they couldn't even take first place on the week their album was released. It was a sign of falling. They were in second place, but that wasn't enough. The new idols that appeared were younger, prettier and cuter than them. They took first place for five weeks straight with a song written by a popular songwriter. They were in 2nd place for a while until they disappeared completely.

It was around that time that the president called Blue and told them that they should do their best in areas that they were most confident in. It wasn't a disbanding of the group. They were starting individual activities just like TTO.

The one that became popular first was Chaerim. She was viewed in a good light in a drama she entered with her popularity as an idol, and following that, she was cast as one of the lead roles in Youth Generation, which was known to be the gateway to becoming a star.

"Fuu.."

Dayoon exited her reminiscence. The man was putting out his cigarette. An acrid smell poked her nose. She hated that smell, but she was okay with it right now. No, it even smelled fragrant. The man closed his mouth and started driving. Dayoon looked in front of her before giving the man a glimpse. The man was on a phone call. He was talking about some construction site. Dayoon looked at the photo on the dashboard. There was a fair lady and the man was standing next to her. In front of the two were a boy and a girl with a bright smile on their faces. At that moment, the man reached out and put the photo face down. Dayoon thought that she shouldn't have looked before looking downwards.

### **Chapter 332**

The man turned on the radio. Coincidentally, the music that flowed out belonged to Blue. It was the title song of their first album. She had practiced it a lot to the point that she would subconsciously dance according to the rhythm just by listening to the melody. After the first verse, Chaerim's solo started.

'It was good back then too.'

Dayoon looked outside the window.

Now that their team activities decreased, Chaerim gathering attention from the media made the atmosphere within the team even worse. From some time onwards, the four of them started excluding Chaerim and hung out by themselves. As Chaerim was the youngest member, it was easy to ignore her. That didn't mean that the relationship between the four of them was good. They just used each other for their own convenience to leave when they didn't want to be with Chaerim.

Dayoon became uneasy. There were too many examples of what happened to idol bands with only one member gaining all the attention. She had to look for a way. She showed up on some entertainment programs a few times, but the results weren't that good. Another team member, named Minji, did well on those shows and kept getting calls, while she didn't get any calls at all. The gap between the members of the team kept widening. The two girls other than Minji and Chaerim also started activities in the form of releasing a solo album and doing a musical.

She was the only one left behind. She would become the ugly duckling at this rate. She didn't want to go back to the days where she had to worry about getting new part time jobs. At that moment, she was reminded of that man again. It had been five months since she cut off contact with him. She tried sending him a message. Curiously, the moment she sent the text message, she remembered her past self that fell in love with the man. She thought to herself that those were the good days and waited for a reply. There was a reply. The man wanted to meet her.

Dayoon was happy that she got the reaction she wanted. He was the man that got her into Yellow Star. She was sure that he would prepare something for her this time as well. She met the man at the appointed place and carefully hugged him. Just like the old days.

However, she wasn't the only one that had changed. The man had changed as well. There was no conversation to get into the mood, no shopping, no nothing. They went to a nearby hotel immediately and had sex. It was rough sex. He swore all the time. The man kept saying 'someone like you dares to ignore me?' and handled her body roughly. Dayoon was afraid and was crying, but she hugged the man even tighter. While doing that, she kept making excuses. She said that she was busy, that she only found the time to call him back now, that the fact that she reached out to him first was proof of that, that she really loved him.

However, the man didn't let her off easily like before. He gave her money like before, but his eyes looked at her like he was looking at some hostess at a bar. Dayoon did not use that money and saved it up. She had already experienced firsthand the unpredictability of life. She had to save up that money for later.

Their relationship resumed for another half a year. During that time, Dayoon never appeared on TV. She showed up a couple of times as a group, but the number of individual activities was zero. She fell into guilt. The president of her agency consoled her, but she couldn't rest at ease. The president was a scary man. He was a good man, but being good and being scary were two separate matters.

Dayoon had seen the president try to connect Ahn Joohyun to the president of a famous company. Although Joohyun was precious and the president gave way, what would have happened if it was her in that spot instead? He might have accepted and she would have had to drink with that president.

Since the president was the one that created such places in the first place, it was unknown when he would 'sell her' away. Dayoon felt that her desire and love towards the man increased the lower her self-confidence became. She was disgusted at herself, but the fear of failure was even bigger. Dayoon thought that the chances of failure were small as long as she kept hugging the man.

And today, she met the man again.

The buildings that whizzed past her vision gradually slowed down. The traffic light had turned red. She saw a hotel beyond the traffic light.

The hotel again, huh. I wonder how much he's going to give me today. I wish he would give me around 3 million just like before.

Just as she was thinking that,

"Shoot a movie."

"What?"

A movie? At that moment, she thought of 3rd-rate erotic videos. So she was selling her body for real now. It would become quite an issue. Popular Idol Strips Her Clothes - something like that would make the headlines. However, what came out of the man's mouth was something she was not expecting.

"An acquaintance of mine is shooting a movie, and I asked him if I can get you in."

The man touched the tip of his nose as he turned left with the car. They weren't headed to the hotel. The car slowly headed to a famous restaurant. She had been here with the man before. The third floor only took reservations, and could only be accessed by the elevator. Privacy was taken seriously here.

Dayoon felt complex. After getting out of the car, she stood behind the man like a secretary. She did not do something like speaking first. She knew her position now. She tried analyzing what the man meant with the time she gained through her silence. Did he seriously get her into a movie? Or was he deceiving her with sweet words?

They were politely guided to a private room near the window. There was a deep brown wooden table in the middle and on the left was a painting of a famous artist. She had heard last time that each of those pieces cost dozens of millions of won. It was a world she couldn't understand.

She sat down on a chair that the waiter pulled out and handed her hat to him. She thought that she would go to the hotel like usual and have violent sex before parting again, but she was at a restaurant like the first time they met.

She was greeted with a glass of water that cost 10 thousand won per cup. 10 thousand won per cup just for water. This was that kind of place. The man sipped a bit of water before speaking.

"Have you tried acting?"

"No, not yet."

"Why? I think the others had at least tried."

"I went to entertainment shows before, and that didn't turn out well. After that, I never got a call from anywhere..."

"So your popularity fell and none of the places called for you, huh."

Dayoon barely stopped her mouth from twitching and replied 'yes' in a small voice. She felt thirsty. She hurriedly emptied the cup of water. Ten thousand won was shoved down her throat. Even though it was water, the texture was rough.

"Then you should try at this opportunity. I heard you'll be a leading support role."

"Is that... for real?"

"Yes."

Dayoon wanted to ask. She didn't want to know what kind of role she had but wanted to know the genre of the movie. If it was really an adult movie, it would really disgust her. Stripping in front of this man and stripping in front of the camera was on a completely different level. Her fear of poverty was big, but nor did she want to be the controversy that everyone talked about. Just thinking about being an adult movie actress churned her insides.

"It's not a strange movie."

The man seemed to have read her expression as he spoke as though to relieve her. Dayoon's heart sank when she realized that he found out what she was thinking. At the same time, she sighed in relief at the fact that it wasn't some weird movie.

"Then what..."

"Film noir, I think it was."

The man explained. The movie was crime-themed. The movie was about two close friends that got involved with the mafia when young, but went separate ways as adults after quarreling. The man said that she had the role of a secret mistress of one of the main characters.

"He's a fella with decent popularity. His first piece worked out so well, so most people thought that he would walk the path of success, but his following movie wasn't that good. He was invited to some film festival overseas, but it was worthless since it wouldn't give him any money."

The man put a cigarette in his mouth. This was a restaurant that allowed smoking. There was an ashtray that seemed to be made of gold as well. The man puffed once before putting down the cigarette against the ashtray. He always had a habit of doing that. It was like he was burning incense.

"Try it. Acting is something anyone can do with enough willpower. It's just wordplay anyway. It's child's play compared to business."

"Was I really cast in a movie?"

"You don't believe me?"

The man's eyes twitched. Dayoon shut up immediately and put on her obedient eyes. She couldn't go against him. He was still angry at her right now.

Considering how he was giving her this opportunity despite that, perhaps his anger had died down somewhat. The fact that he had brought her here meant that he had a change of heart. Dayoon brought out her courage and looked back at the man. He looked like he was dissatisfied with something. It was then that she thought of the events that happened in the car. The man looked annoyed when he covered the family photo that she was looking at. The man didn't do that before. Even after having sex with her, he called his wife in a loving voice. This man was someone that completely differentiated his home and sex partners. But today, it felt a little different.

She took another sip of water before thinking about it. There was a need to improve their relationship. Now that Blue had started walking down the path to disbandment, she crucially needed this man's help. As long as she could improve their relationship to that of before...

'It's disgusting and dirty. But it's not like I have a choice.'

She was innocent. It was the dark truth of reality that was pushing her back. The word self-justification appeared in her mind but she tried her best to ignore that word. Right now, she had to focus on capturing this man's heart again.

"Uhm..." she spoke carefully.

She was planning to stop if the man looked back at her with a vicious glare.



“What?”

“Is something wrong?”

The man made a surprised face before smiling in vain. A lot of different emotions flashed past his face. Fortunately, it didn't feel that negative.

“If I go to Gangnam, I can meet younger and prettier girls than you. I can be safer, and they are more obedient. There are even some girls that would lick my feet if I tell them to.”

The man loosened his tie a little as he continued speaking.

“Do you know why I'm meeting you despite that? Why I take the risk to meet you?”

“...Is it because you like me?”

The man neither confirmed nor denied her opinion. In that silence, Dayoon saw hope. Affection, whether good or bad, was still affection. This man still had regrets about her.

“Is something perhaps not going well with your wife?”

“I don't like quick-witted women that much.”

“S-sorry. I overstepped my bounds. I will be careful in the future.”

She lowered her head as she spoke. She was excited for a moment, but there was something she had to be clear about. It was that that man was the superior here. There is no longer a hierarchical society? Everyone was equal? That was bullshit. This era had one of the most hierarchical societies in the history of mankind.

“You don't need to be that scared.”

The man reached out to her with his palm facing up. Dayoon subconsciously reached out and put her hand on top of his. She was like an obedient puppy. Looking at that action, the man put on a genuine smile. He seemed really happy.

“Yes. That's right. You just need to do what you're doing right now. We were in a good relationship back then, weren't we? So let's be like that in the future as well, yeah?”

“Yes. I will do that.”

“Good.”

At that moment, there was a knock on the door before a voice said if they could come in. When the man permitted, the waiter opened the door carefully and entered the room.

“You have a guest. Shall I lead him here?”

“Go ahead.”

The waiter left. Dayoon looked at the man. A guest?

“The director of the movie. You have to meet him.”

“He’s here?”

The man nodded. A while later, a man in his forties entered the room. He was wearing a casual-style suit and had a tidy beard. He was rather handsome-looking and different than the chubby and messy hair image that Dayoon had of directors.

“Long time no see, hyung-nim.”

“Like hell it has. Sit down.”

“Alright.”

The director in a suit took a seat. After that, he talked to Dayoon.

“Miss Dayoon, right? I enjoyed your songs.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

“Do you know who I am?”

Hearing that question, Dayoon’s hands, which were under the table, clenched hard. She didn’t know who he was. It would be very rude of her to say that she didn’t know.

“I’m Park Joongjin. Perhaps you might be more familiar with ‘Spring Calendar’?”

The director revealed his name first. Dayoon widened her eyes and nodded. Spring Calendar - that was the title of a movie at the peak of popularity 10 years ago, that is, when she was in her third year of middle school. Dayoon remembered playing the videotape over and over again. At that time, girls weren’t capable of holding a conversation without mentioning that movie.

“Let’s shoot a good piece together.”

Joongjin reached out.

To Dayoon, that hand looked like Midas’s Hand. The magical hand that would turn her into gold. Dayoon grabbed that hand with both of her hands.

\* \* \*

“Wow, so big.”

“Yeah.”

Maru had a look at the large building in front of his eyes. He had read from the internet that this place was a modified factory, but he didn’t realize that it would be this big. When the two entered, he saw various structures. Some of them looked like fences and walls. There were mats and parallel bars as well.

“Oh, you’re here.”

Choongho, who stood in front of what seemed like a recreation of a collapsed building, waved his hand as he approached the two. Maru told Bangjoo that he was the action director.

“Good morning! I am Ahn Bangjoo!”

His unique loud voice rang throughout the whole building. The people who were practicing stunts in front of various obstacles gave them a glance before going back to practice.

“Haha, your voice is promising.”

Choongho smiled and told the two to follow him.

### **Chapter 333**

Choongho told them to wait before leaving. Maru and Bangjoo looked around while drinking the energy drink they were given. They were inside a container within the building that was set up to look like an office. On top of the door was the character 武 (Martial Arts) that was framed. There was a half-open cabinet in the corner, and there were various pieces of protective equipment inside.

“The ones that will take the test will arrive soon. You should look around until then.”

It seemed that the scheduled time had been delayed. They were led outside by Choongho. Right at that moment, a man rushed across the top of the mattress right in front of them. He drew a sharp arc in the air and curled himself up before landing on the ground with his right arm and shoulder and then rolled on the ground. Maru looked at the spot that the man jumped off from. It looked like he fell four meters at least.

Behind that, he saw a man standing on top of parallel bars. He was doing a handstand with his hands grabbing the bars, and he slowly rotated downwards as though climbing stairs. Whether he was a gymnastics athlete or a stuntman, he was amazing either way.

“So, I heard you did some sports,” Choongho asked Bangjoo.

Bangjoo replied that he did Taekwondo when he was young and that he was learning Judo right now.

“Then care to show me some falling techniques?”

When Choongho pointed at an empty mattress, Bangjoo stood on top of it.

“Show me the ones you’ve learned. Sideways, front, back, front-spin, and whatever else you have.”

“Yes!”

While Bangjoo fired himself up and continued to fall onto the mattress, Maru walked away and approached the people that were in a group fight. They were acting out a group fight with rods that were made out of styrofoam. They signalled each other before violently rushing at each other and started to kick, punch and swing their rods at one another. When the one that looked like the main character punched, the opponent collapsed at just the right time. The gap between the fist and the skin of the opponent was so narrow that it looked like they were hitting each other for real. People started falling over one by one, and when the last one was thrown over the shoulder, all of the people on the ground stood up and dusted off their clothes.

Even though the motions looked very dynamic and violent, their breathing hadn’t wavered at all. They gathered around in a circle to exchange opinions before doing the same thing again. This time, the actions looked much sharper.

The action was like a fine mesh without any gaps. They swore at each other like they were fighting for real. Just then, one man covered his mouth and raised his hand. When Maru looked closely, he was bleeding. It looked like he cut his lips when he was 'hit' by the spinning crescent kick. After touching his lips for a while to see how it was, the man said he was okay before getting into position. Then, they resumed punching each other as though they had forgotten about the fear of injury.

"They're good, aren't they?"

Choongho had approached him. Maru could only nod his head. At this level, it was sufficient to be called art.

"The reason I set this place up is for people like them. You need to be taught to learn techniques. But there aren't that many schools that teach such a subject so I had no choice but to make one myself."

"You set up this place yourself?"

"I had a few colleagues. But now, they all became chubby men and quit, leaving only me left. Hey! Over there! Watch out for your hand."

Choongho shouted at the man in front. The man replied 'yes' before moving again.

"They all look like they did some form of sports."

"Some did sports, and some were just back alley thugs. Whatever the case may be, they are more adept at using their body than their brains. Of course, some of them came because they wanted to learn action acting for real. This is the only place in the country that teaches action rather than martial arts."

Choongho's eyes were filled with pride as he watched the people practice with his arms crossed.

"Is that a wire over there?"

"Yeah. Wanna try?"

At that moment, a man wearing wires floated into the air and spun twice before coming down.

"I don't think I can do that."

Choongho no longer said anything as though he was joking. Listening to the shouts from all around, Maru's body heated up slightly. He liked sports, so he wanted to run around to his heart's content whenever he came to places like this. After all, there was nothing more refreshing than moving around violently and getting some sweat out.

"I like how he doesn't get scared."

Choongho spoke as he looked at Bangjoo standing in front of the sandbag. Maru turned his gaze that way. Bangjoo kept looking at the sandbag. Then, he tapped the sandbag with his left hand twice before punching out with his right. After a low thud, Bangjoo turned around while shaking his right hand. From his expression, it looked like it was quite painful.

"It's not foam inside."

"This is not a diet gym after all. Hey, is your wrist okay? Oh, and also, you'll rip your skin if you don't punch with gloves on. Be careful."

Bangjoo, who was standing afar, replied yes. He put on the gloves placed next to him and started hitting the sandbag again. His posture as he punched the sandbag that swayed around was a little awkward.

"Hey, you said you did boxing, right?"

"I just followed my father to the gym from time to time."

"So you know what it's like at least. Why don't you try hitting it? There's nothing to do until everyone else arrives, right?"

Choongho pushed his back. As he said, there was nothing to do until then so it wasn't a bad idea to spend some time hitting the sandbag.

"Seonbae-nim. This is really hard. It looked really easy in the movies too."

Bangjoo hit the sandbag once again. He stood with his feet parallel like when doing a straight punch and punched out with his right hand. The red sandbag made a low thudding noise again as it was pushed back. Maru caught the sandbag that returned from the rebound.

"You're going to try?"

"It's been quite a long time, so I don't know if I can do it."

He glanced back at Choongho, who was watching him, before getting the gloves from Bangjoo. As the gloves were made for practice purposes, it wasn't that good. It had minimum protection against the skin. It was no different from taping.

He clenched his fist slightly. The sensation of leather being stretched out was quite good. Before his father became busy with work at the factory, he used to go with him to the boxing gym and practice together. Thinking about it now, his father's punches were so smooth because he once aimed to be a pro boxer.

Maru did some boxing steps and did a full turn around the sandbag. The rhythm that he had forgotten about until now became vivid again. He thought that he should visit the boxing gym again when he had some time.

Although he hadn't warmed up properly, he still did a light jab. Ever since his boxing teacher told him not to punch sandbags without warming up, he always warmed up before punching sandbags.

*Thud*, a quiet sensation spread out through his knuckles. It felt quite good. Then, the left hand. The left hand moved forward slowly until it reached the sandbag. He moved just a little further back. He did light jabs with his left hand and made a full turn around the sandbag once again. As he hadn't hit sandbags in a long time, he wasn't familiar with the distance.

When he got into a suitable distance, Maru started hopping in front of the sandbag. As he hopped, he calmed his breathing and punched out with his left hand again when his feet touched the ground.

Thud - he was still a little too close. His hand reached its target before his shoulders could drive enough power into his hands. He punched with his left hand again at the sandbag that was pushed back with a low sound. Tang. There was a decent sound this time. Maru thought of his figure in front of the sandbag before punching out again.

'One, two, slip.'

Left, right, then a light duck. He followed the swaying sandbag with his eyes and sprung back from having ducked to the left with his waist and followed it up with a left hook and a right cross. Bang bang, this time, the sound was much more pleasing. He chased the sandbag that swayed backwards and ducked again. This time, he did a left jab and a right hook.

The rhythm slowly came back to him. His boxing teacher always told him that rhythm was important in boxing. He chased the sandbag with a right step. Then, he did a combo again. He hit the sandbag so that it wouldn't start going in circles as he punched out. He started exerting more power into his hands. Maru smiled whenever he heard the leather popping sounds.

His breathing started quickening, and just as his knuckles were starting to ache, Maru stopped the sandbag before heaving a deep breath out.

"It's quite fun to hit it after such a long time," saying that, he turned around.

The first thing he saw was Choongho, who was smiling and nodding. He was saying 'I knew it' with a small voice. Bangjoo, who stood next to him, approached him and spoke,

"Seonbae-nim, you learned boxing? You were really good just now."

"I'm just a beginner."

Maru took off the gloves. The slight ache that remained in his hand and wrist made him smile. This sensation was what made him like boxing. This was what made him follow his dad to the gym.

"You didn't just quit after a month or two," Choongho spoke.

"You learned properly. I'm not a boxing expert so I can't judge you properly, but your punches were really clean. Do you really not have any intentions to work under my wing? I think you'll get used to stunts quite easily."

"It's just hitting a sandbag. I don't have any talent."

Just as he put down the gloves, some men entered the building. They all seemed to be students.

"Well then, let's narrow people down then, shall I?"

Choongho signalled everyone to gather round. The students that just entered stood in front of Choongho. Maru and Bangjoo joined them.

"I don't like dragging things out so I'll get straight to the point. I'm going to pick a few of you here and meet the director. The director wants someone young who can do proper action so do your best. I'm going to have a look at your basic posture. There's not much time so look carefully for now."

Choongho called a man wearing black training clothes.

“I’m going to show you the basic choreography. Here, punch like this, and grab his collar. It won’t sound fun without any lines, so let’s go with ‘you bastard’ as the line.”

Choongho did a demonstration. He punched out at the right shoulder of the man in front of him. The man deflected Choongho’s punch with his left arm. At the same time, Choongho grabbed his collar and shouted ‘you bastard’. It was a short scene.

“The hit point is the right shoulder. You have to grab his collar violently. If you hesitate, then that’s the end. You have one round of practice and one real deal. Everyone got that?”

Choongho then proceeded to pick the student standing on the far right. The one that got picked came out without hesitation and greeted the man wearing training clothes.

“Then here I go.”

The student then tried doing the choreography that Choongho showed them. He approached the man, punched, and grabbed the man by the collar once his punch was deflected. After that round of practice, the student said he’d begin with a resolved face.

The student started running. Then, he punched out. His hand was pushed away. He took another step and grabbed the opponent’s collar. The acting was quite clean.

“Sangjin, good. Well then. Next.”

It seemed that Choongho was acquainted with everyone here. As soon as Choongho said next, another student stepped forward.

\* \* \*

“Let’s go with that for now.”

Maru had a look at the students that looked disappointed as they were turned away. Five people didn’t pass Choongho’s test. Although everyone looked decent, it seemed that they weren’t up to Choongho’s standards.

“This time, it’s blocking then hitting.”

Choongho did a demonstration this time as well. The difficulty rose by quite a lot. The sequence went as such: punch, then block a rod from the side with both arms and then punch the person to the left.

The rightmost student stepped forward immediately. He didn’t make a mistake in the practice round, but he was late in blocking the rod in the real deal. There was a sound signal before the rod was swung, but he couldn’t block it due to having messed his steps up. The student made a disappointed expression after getting hit by the styrofoam and stepped back.

“Don’t feel down. I’m just looking at how you do.”

Next was Maru’s turn. His developed body and nervous systems handled the action without much difficulty. He punched and blocked just like the choreography.

“Good.”

Bangjoo passed without a hitch as well. He was someone who wasn't scared of anything so he looked good with stunts. Like that, they did a few rounds of tests before around 10 people remained.

"Today, I focused on how bold you were in your actions and how much trust you had in your opponent. I can't use people that can't look at the opponent in the eyes when doing action scenes."

Choongho took out his phone before calling someone up.

"Yes, then let's do that. We'll be eating dinner then, so come by whenever you want. Yes, director. Then see you later."

Having finished his call, Choongho spoke.

"Why don't we get some meat?"

### **Chapter 334**

She was uneasy throughout the whole meal. She had never imagined that the director would show up. The man surely knew that the relationship between her and him was a secret. They were in an indecent relationship that would hurt both of them if anyone found out. Just hiding their relationship wasn't enough, yet he went and invited the director to this place.

Dayoon didn't have the leisure to evaluate what the food tasted like. The butter-roasted scallops tasted like hard rubber.

"You look much prettier in person," director Park Joongjin spoke.

Dayoon smiled as she put down the roasted garlic that she was about to eat. She felt her heart sink whenever Joongjin spoke. How was she supposed to answer if he jokingly asked what the relationship between the two was? She started sweating cold sweat. She was more nervous than when she made a mistake on a live show.

"Thank you."

"This hyung-nim over here doesn't really recommend people, but he told me that you were a reliable person, Miss Dayoon. If it was anyone else, I would have rejected it in a heartbeat, but this person's eye for other people is really amazing. Hyung-nim, do you still remember the person you guaranteed for without a word?"

"I do."

Joongjin spoke to the man. Dayoon sighed in a small voice. She had to consciously breathe while that director looked at her.

"Didn't I tell you that you'll ruin yourself if you stand up for him?"

"That you did."

"But then that guy set up a factory, gained several talents, and successfully became a mid-sized company, and he's now supporting your construction company, isn't he?"

"That's when I realized that he has a good eye for people."



“Nah, it’s nothing that great. That man already had his own vision. He just lacked a little money.”

“No way, if it was up to me, I would never have taken that risk no matter what kind of vision he had. In that sense....”

Joongjin raised his wine glass. Dayoon smiled and grabbed her glass as well.

“Why don’t we toast? Since you recommended her, this movie will do great as well.”

“That will be great for me too.”

After toasting, she drank a sip. Her mouth still felt dry. A movie cast. This was an opportunity of a lifetime for her. She should thankfully accept it, but it was also very scary because the opportunity was given to her too easily. Just what did this director see in her that he decided to cast her as a leading support role? Why wasn’t he asking anything? Was he intentionally avoiding mentioning that subject because they were in a private place?

Questions after questions appeared in her mind. Ever since her self-confidence hit rock bottom after failing numerous entertainment shows, she was being driven into defeatism. She was aware of that, yet she couldn’t escape it. She always suspected when someone approached her with goodwill.

‘Get yourself together.’

Dayoon heaved a deep breath while drinking the water placed in front of her. She thought that she shouldn’t think about it deeply; that she should just accept this opportunity since it came out of their newfound love.

“Oh, yes. Hyung-nim. I heard that your daughter passed the Foreign Service Exams, right? Wow, looks like your daughter’s smarts really take after your wife.”

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

“But I’m surprised that you gave her permission. It must be hard for a woman to live away from home.”

“That’s up to her to take care of. It’s not like she listens to my words anyway. She told me that her dream is to become the first female ambassador to the US or something. Well, she’d have to experience the harshness of reality to realize that home is the best place. It hasn’t even been that long since she came back from the US, but she’s thinking about leaving again.”

“Yet there’s a bright grin on your face?”

The two men seemed extremely close. Dayoon clicked her tongue as she looked at the man. He showed one of his close acquaintances his affair girl? He was daring as heck. Things would get out of hand if he made a mistake and revealed the fact that he was having an affair.

Perhaps because she was in an uncomfortable spot, it felt like time was passing very slowly. All she was thinking about was that she wanted to escape this place as she sliced the lamb dish that the waiter brought.

“Then it looks like I must get going.”

Dayoon raised her head. The man wiped his mouth with a napkin and stood up. Just as she absent-mindedly looked at him wondering what to do, the man signalled her to stay seated.

“You’re leaving?”

“I have to. I have work to attend to. You two can have a talk with each other. About the movie, that is.”

Joongjin stood up from his seat. Dayoon followed suit as well.

“Then be careful on your way back, hyung-nim. Ah, tell your wife I said hi. Also, don’t forget to tell her to introduce me to a fair lady if there’s anyone she knows.”

The two shook hands before the man left. Joongjin was all smiles until the door shut and he sighed and sat down as soon as the door closed.

“Hyung-nim’s tastes haven’t changed at all.”

Dayoon felt her lips trembling. Her smile stiffened. She came to herself quickly and sat back down as though she had heard nothing.

“How long has it been since you knew him?”

“Uh....”

She didn’t know what to reply. They met each other four years ago. Was it better to be honest here or was it better to deceive him?

“A little less than a year.”

“A year, huh.”

Joongjin smiled before grabbing the lamb steak in front of him with his bare hands. He picked it up by the bone and smelled it before taking a big bite out of it.

“You don’t need to lie to me. I already heard from him already. I’m not the stuck-up guy you think I am. Well, the term ‘office wife’ doesn’t exist for nothing. How can a person eat the same food every day? They should change things up and eat noodles, sushi, or steak from time to time.”

Those words sounded very suspicious. Dayoon immediately put both of her hands below the table. She didn’t want to show him that her hands were shaking.

“You look like the ideal girl that hyung-nim always talked about. Oh, let me give you some advice. Don’t get any surgery on your face. If you need him, then you should maintain your current face.”

“...I don’t get what you mean.”

“Miss Dayoon. We aren’t kids. Should I open up the textbook and read what’s on it? That sex is a pure and beautiful thing? Both of us know that it’s nothing like that. How is sex pure? It’s the epitome of desire itself.”

Joongjin licked the sauce that was on his hands. Dayoon became more scared of this man named Joongjin rather than this occasion as a whole. She finally understood why the man left the two of them

here. They were close enough to share a secret that was supposed to be never revealed. This man knew everything.

She locked her hands on top of her thighs. When she glanced down, she saw blue veins pop up on the back of her hands.

“Hyung-nim probably loves you. He might look like a cold person, but he’s quite the romanticist. Moreover, he’s kind. I think he’s a little upset because he got into a fight with his wife, but he’s the type of man that would bring a present for her tonight as he goes home and whispers love into her ears. He’s very devoted to the people he loves. At the same time, he’s free. He loves other women just as much as he loves his wife. Of course, people might point fingers at him and tell him that he’s having an affair, but it’s fine as long as he doesn’t get found out, right?”

Joongjin then started eating the shrimp rosé pasta with his hand again. The way he ate food with his hands and not with cutlery surprisingly suited him.

“Uhm....”

What was she supposed to say here? It was too late for excuses. But telling the truth here would be kinda funny as well. She was very distant from the word ‘ethics’ but she was hesitating inside due to ‘ethics’ as well. No, it wasn’t just because of ethics. She was scared as well. She was afraid of the man in front of her.

“Oops, it looks like I made you even more nervous even though I did that to get you to calm down.”

Joongjin stuck out his tongue and rubbed his fingers on top of it before washing his fingers with the water in the cup. Dayoon just watched as Joongjin slowly stood up. He walked towards her, step by step. He stopped right next to her, and he looked extremely big. Even though he looked to be less than 170cm tall, he looked like an insurmountable mountain right now.

She couldn’t endure his gaze that looked at her. Just as she was about to turn her head away, Joongjin grabbed her by the chin. She twitched as though she fell into shock. Didn’t she have to flick away that hand? Yet, her body flinched back as though she was tied up with some rope.

“Hm, you would look pretty with some makeup.”

“Y-yes.”

“Your neck looks good as well. No wonder hyung-nim loves you.”

His other hand descended upon her. It stroked her neck once before moving downwards. Dayoon was reminded of a snail. It felt like a disgusting snail dripping with mucus was crawling all over her body. She wanted to scream, but her reason suppressed her voice. Everything would be over if she screamed here.

The hand stopped just as it was about to approach her cleavage. The hand did not proceed. It just touched the necklace with a cross on it.

“Do you go to Church?”

“Y-yes.”

“Jesus, he’s a good man. I heard that praying was enough for you to get salvation. He must be a generous man. In that sense, Buddha is also a thankful person. Don’t you think so?”

“I-I do.”

Joongjin put down the necklace and straightened out her one-piece dress that creased a little.

“You’re in good shape. Did you get treatment or something?”

“No.”

“It must have been hard. I mean, it’s not easy for a girl to shape up, right? It involves exercise and balancing diets.”

Joongjin formed a rectangle with the thumb and index fingers from each hand and scanned her from three steps away as though he was taking a photo of her.

“You have a good body figure as well. Can you try smiling for me?”

She smiled like an obedient dog. From a faint smile to a bright happy smile. She did everything she was told to do.

“Have you ever watched a movie of mine?”

“Yes, in middle school.”

“When was that?”

“I think it was 10 years ago.”

“How was it?”

“I was touched.”

“Touched, huh. You flatter me.”

Joongjin sat down as he stretched his hands out. Dayoon pressed down on her knees with shaking hands. The more they talked, the deeper her fear became. This man she didn’t know the identity of pressured her too much.

“Miss Dayoon.”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to shoot a commercial movie. I kept shooting independent, artistic-purpose movies, but that lowered people’s awareness of me too much. I’m planning to rake in some money with a commercial movie.”

“I-I see.”

“Actually, movies are quite strange. They’re like stocks in a sense. There are cases where even after casting all the super popular actors, you fail miserably, and there are cases where only less well-known B-grade actors are used, yet still become six million-view hits. It’s very hard to predict the success of a movie just like the stock market. That’s why I don’t trust filmography. I trust my intuition.”

“Intuition?”

“Yes, intuition. When hyung-nim said he wanted to introduce me to someone, I had that feeling. That hyung-nim has a good intuition as well. And when I saw you, I was sure that you were worth it to put inside my screen as the goddess of luck.”

Joongjin picked up his fork and knife. He no longer ate his food like a savage and started using cutlery like a gentleman.

“Have you ever tried acting?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Then I guess you will need to practice from now. If I chop the scenes where you have to act in accordance with another actor as much as possible, that will decrease the burden on you, so you don’t need to worry about that. Also, I’ve already finished casting the actors that are reliable, so I’m going to focus on them more. After all, for you, Miss Dayoon, it’s more important to get career experience as an actor, am I wrong?”

“....”

“Let’s be honest. Don’t tell me that your dream is to become an actress. You just need a point of breakthrough, don’t you?”

“A point of breakthrough....”

“This movie will do well. I am planning to use the elements that would make it popular. What you need to do, Miss Dayoon, is to stand on screen without looking awkward. That’s it. A mesmerizing act? I don’t even expect that from you. You just need to not break the flow. If you become the flower that’s pleasing to look at, the rest of us will take care of everything for you.”

“Are you really going to use me?”

“Yes. My intuition tells me to, so I am going to. Oh, and starting today, practice looking at your own expression as you talk in front of the mirror. I’ll give you a few movie CDs. Try copying the actresses that appear in those. We just need a short-term solution after all.”

“Will that be enough?”

Hearing that question, Joongjin smiled and put down his fork.

“Miss Dayoon.”

“...Yes.”

“Listen to me carefully. You don’t need the word ‘enough’. Didn’t I tell you that you should become the flower? I don’t mean a living flower. You can be an artificial flower. It will suffice as long as people think that it’s an act. Don’t try to do something. Miss Dayoon, you aren’t anyone great. Just do what you’re told. Do that and I’ll give you the title of the idol that successfully debuted into the movie industry.”

He seemed to have great confidence in himself. His words were smooth without any stops. Although it sounded absurd and nonsensical, it was somewhat acceptable as well. She had the feeling that things would turn out the way he said they would.

“Uhm, Miss Dayoon.”

Joongjin continued speaking as he looked at the steak.

“Can you sleep with me as well? I’m curious about your night skills.”

Dayoon flinched and looked at Joongjin. When she did, Joongjin immediately made a rectangle with his fingers and looked at her through the frame.

“That expression, that’s the one. Remember that feeling. The role you’re about to act has such a role.”

Dayoon couldn’t do anything other than just stare at the man. Only the sound of cutlery filled the room.

“Phew, thanks for the meal.”

Joongjin wiped his mouth and stood up after his meal.

“I’ll take my leave here since I have to see other people for some roles. I have to go and see some energetic high school students. Ah, it would be great if my intuition tells me something this time as well.”

Joongjin turned around with a smile.

“Miss Dayoon, good luck.”

Dayoon stared at his back for a while until the door closed. When the door closed, she curled up and frowned. A scream escaped her clenched teeth.

\* \* \*

The man who introduced himself as director Park Joongjin took off the fedora he was wearing as he sat down. He seemed close with Choongho and the two had an energetic handshake when they met.

“Nice to meet you, everyone. You should have heard the general story from Choongho hyung-nim here. I need some young actors filled with spirit for the movie I’m shooting this time.”

Joongjin spoke with a smile.

### **Chapter 335**

Joongjin stood up as he rubbed his hands and left the office.

The building was quiet since all the actors that were practicing had left. Joongjin, who was scanning the building, stood in front of a mattress wall. He punched the thick mattress a few times before smiling in satisfaction.

“Hyung-nim, may I see them here?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Well then. Can you all stand in a line here?”

Eleven students stood in front of the mattress. Joongjin walked in front of them and scanned them from top to bottom. He made noises like ‘hm’ and pondered.

Maru looked at Joongjin who stood in front of him. He didn’t like how Joongjin looked like he was evaluating him. He felt like a mackerel put on display. Just then, he met eyes with Joongjin. Maru could see that there was a faint smile on Joongjin’s mouth.

Joongjin then left for the next student without saying anything.

“Yes, thank you all. First, I think I need to filter some of you that don’t fit my criteria.”

Joongjin picked out seven people.

“If you give me your number, I’ll give you a call when I need a crowd scene. You are a little lacking to be captured by the camera.”

He did not even mention what those criteria were, nor did he mention what he didn’t like about them. The seven of them left with bitter expressions. Choongho didn’t say much either. It seemed that he had left the appointment of actors entirely to Joongjin.

“The four of you, what are your names?”

Maru, who stood on the far left, started first.

“Han Maru, Kang Sooyoung, Ahn Bangjoo, Choi Joongi. Yes. I’ve committed them to memory now. I’ve picked you four because your eyes are alive. Of course, I did take into account your body figure as well. Your statures are similar to the lead actors who will act along with you. As for the action scenes, since hyung-nim can vouch for you, I guess I don’t need to worry about that. Oh, I almost forgot.”

Joongjin brought a camera from the office and started taking photos. All four of them were photographed.

“Does anyone here have experience acting? Not as a hobby, but like, for real. Raise your hand if you have experience participating in a drama or a movie.”

Maru raised his hand. The other three did not.

“Hm.... Mr. Han Maru, was it? I committed you to memory. Let’s see, your face is good, but I like your eyes the most. They do look a little too cold, but can you try smiling?”

Joongjin spoke as he moved up close with the camera. Maru made a faint smile. His employer told him to smile, what else could he do?

“Good. I’m getting inspiration. I think I’ll have you take that role. The role that dies. Yes, that’s good.”

Joongjin seemed like he was happy to death just imagining.

“The role that dies?”

“Oh! I guess I didn’t explain enough. It’s just a typical cliché. The death of a friend. It’s a rather old trick in the textbook, but it still works. You’ve just been cast in my movie. We’ll start shooting the movie starting at the end of this month. This applies to the three of you as well.”

Joongjin laughed heartily and shook hands with the four students. He was a peculiar man. It was unknown if he was decisive or complacent. He didn’t see anything, yet he said that all four of them were cast, which made Maru suspicious instead. He even wondered if this man was trying to rip money off them with that excuse.

“That’s the end of the audition?” Maru asked.

“Yes.”

“I heard you were looking for an action actor.”

Hearing those words, Joongjin smiled.

“Good question. Let’s think about that, then, shall we? How many students in the country, do you think, have learned to do action acting? I mean, action is not just about punching and kicking.”

Joongjin smilingly looked at Choongho and asked for forgiveness for trying to look like an expert in front of a real expert.

“It has been five years since Kim Choongho Action School opened, and it has been two years since this large practice space was opened. Hyung-nim, what happened to the congratulatory wreath I sent you back then?”

“I threw it away.”

“No way, that was expensive you know? Anyway, what I want to say is that it hasn’t been that long since action actors have become specialized in this country. Did anyone here know that there was an action-specific acting school in this place?”

The four of them all shook their heads.

“See? Even people that are interested in acting, and have actual experience participating in a movie do not know that this place exists. Now, then. You asked why I don’t have you demonstrate your actions, right? I’m saying that I don’t need to. I have a general gist of your levels. Also, the fact that action director Kim Choongho over there picked you all means that you are capable to some extent, and I used that as my basis of judgment. As for the real action, we’re going to polish that starting now. With that hyung-nim’s skills, you four will become some of the most capable action actors in the country among those your age. Am I right, hyung-nim?”

“Probably,” Choongho replied with a confident expression.

“You know? I trust my intuition a lot when I work. And that intuition gave me the feeling that this movie will become a huge hit.”

This man had endless confidence in himself, and he said that the basis of his confidence was his intuition. Was he a hopeless optimist? Or was he a genius that sees something that the ordinary does not?



“Do you have any other questions?”

“When can we expect to receive a script?” Maru asked this time as well.

“You’ll be able to see one soon. For now, we’re going to start practicing part by part. Efficiency is the priority here after all. We’re planning to shoot at the end of August, so there are around 3 weeks left until then. During that time, you’ll learn basic acting from the action director. The centerpiece of a movie is its story, but the force that drives that story will come from the action, so you will have to do extremely well. Hm, I think it’s almost about time.”

Joongjin looked at his watch. Time for what? Maru looked at the entrance. Just then, he saw a white van stop in front of the building.

“There they are.”

Two men entered through the door. Although they weren’t that tall, their heads were small, consequently making them look like they had great proportions. As for their age, they looked to be in their late teens or the early twenties. It seemed that they were the lead actors for the movie.

“Those two are the actors that you will act with. They’re going to practice with you until the shoot begins.”

When Joongjin called out to the two at the entrance, they took a bow before approaching them. Behind them, a man with a heavy build followed with a phone in hand. He seemed to be their manager.

Maru watched the two as they approached them. He was familiar with their faces. From how someone next to him exclaimed, they might be rather famous actors. He wondered if he should start watching TV more. He didn’t know any actors other than the most famous ones.

“You know who they are right? I mean, they’ve appeared on TV a lot as child actors. This is Park Gwangsoo, and this is Cha Taehoon. You can get to know each other. You’ll have to see each other a lot for the next month or so.”

Gwangsoo and Taehoon greeted first. Maru greeted back.

“Ah, hyung-nim. I want our big actors to start their action education this week. Is that okay with you?”

“I don’t mind.”

“There are a few ladies, so I hope you can get a female coach for them. Oh, some will have to learn wire action, is there a problem with that?”

“I’ll teach them well as long as you bring them here, so don’t worry about it.”

“Alright. I’ll see what their timetable is like and schedule their time here.”

Joongjin started humming and started calling various people. Was he involved in casting and scheduling the actors as well? Normally, a ‘director’ would be in charge of everything during the shoot itself. Other than that, most of the things were handled by the production company. The production company provided everything else so that the director could wholeheartedly focus on making the movie itself.

In that sense, Joongjin was very eccentric. Although Maru couldn't be entirely sure about it, it seemed like he was in charge of everything regarding the production of the movie. He was like the director and producer in one.

After giving many places calls, Joongjin closed his flip phone audibly.

"Well then, can you all stand next to each other? You should get into poses as well."

Like a movie poster, they split up into threes and glared at the other team. Joongjin appreciated that scene from many angles before clapping in satisfaction.

"I think I should really go with these members here. Your proportions are good. Well then, Mr. Gwangsoo and Mr. Taehoon, you two will receive instructions from action director Kim Choongho here. It might be a little hard, but consider it as medicine and I hope you can make his skills yours. Hyung-nim, please take care of them for me."

Choongho nodded as though to say that he should leave everything up to him.

"And as for the four of you, I'll contact you within three days. You might have lines, but you might not as well. However, I can assure you that you will be on screen, so you can look forward to that."

Joongjin gathered everyone's attention with a clap and bid farewell after rallying the group. Seeing Joongjin hop his way out, Maru was reminded of a storm. Joongjin was like a storm that came suddenly and made everything chaotic before leaving suddenly as well.

Choongho led Gwangsoo and Taehoon to the office before telling the rest that it was over for today.

"Everyone's on holiday so you're okay timewise right? I'll give you all a call once the schedule is set, so you can come here. I'm planning about three or four hours a day of practice. It might take longer if something doesn't go well. Once you go back home today, I hope you can at least start running regularly. It will be hard to catch up to the rest of the class if you don't have enough basic stamina."

The rather peculiar audition ended like that. In any case, it was something to be happy about since he got another job. Maru sent his manager a text message. After a while, he got a reply that he should contact him again once it became official and he had to write a contract.

He had heard last time that it was very rare for minor roles, background roles and staff to write formal contracts. Most of the time, it was a verbal contract instead. He was told that it was customary not to write any contracts since the people working together knew each other.

That was one convenient custom. Wherever it was, the system was structured so that the bottom of the rung could be swept away easily. Telling them to write a contract was not an option either. The moment they mentioned 'rules', they would be excluded from the casting list without a word.

"Are we really shooting a movie? It doesn't feel that real," Bangjoo asked on their way to the bus stop.

"He was rather peculiar as a director."

"Are auditions usually like this?"

“Hm... that’s hard to answer. Although his method was rather peculiar, the fundamentals are the same. After all, all that’s left after taking into account all the factors is intuition.”

“Well, I guess he did say that our action abilities must be on a similar level,” Bangjoo seemed to have accepted.

“Seonbae-nim, do you want to eat hamburgers? I’ll treat you. I got to learn action thanks to you, so I can’t just sit still.”

“Didn’t you eat a lot of meat?”

“It’s all digested already,” Bangjoo spoke as he tapped on his stomach.

Despite his small stature, his digestive capabilities were top-notch perhaps thanks to his sturdy build.

“How could I accept something from you? Let’s go, I’ll treat you.”

He took Bangjoo, who refused him to no avail, to a nearby fast food restaurant. Bangjoo ordered two burgers, a pack of nuggets, and a pack of fries as well as a drink. That was a lot for someone that just ate meat for dinner just an hour ago.

“You can eat all that?”

“Yes.”

“Incredible. If you find it lacking, then you can order more.”

“I’ll feel sluggish if I eat too much. This is just enough.”

Now that he looked at it, the amount of food Bangjoo ate was comparable to Daemyung’s.

Maru chuckled as he saw Bangjoo eat. He was at the age where he could chomp on stones, so this must be an easy feat.

Maru sipped on his milkshake as he thought back to Joongjin who he just met. Was he a new director? Or was he someone with a career? Although he did meet him, he didn’t find out much about him. All he found out was that he was quite eccentric.

After having a look at the time, he called Geunsoo.

-Yes, Maru.

“Hyung-nim, are you okay taking the phone right now?”

-Yeah... wait a sec.

There was no word for a while. It seemed that he was switching places.

-Go ahead.

“It looks like you’re busy. Sorry about that.”

-Nah. Rather than that, what’s up?

“I just had something to ask. You’re the only one I could ask.”

-Okay, what is it?

"Do you know a person named Park Joongjin? He's a director."

-Park Joongjin? Yeah, I do. I don't know him personally, but I've heard the rumors.

"Ah, it seems like he's quite famous."

-He's very famous in the movie field. You should know the movie 'Spring Calendar' right? It's a movie from ten years ago, and Joohyun-noona became a rising star thanks to that. She earned the title 'the supporting role that gobbled up the lead role'.

People send large 'wreaths' (I didn't find any other suitable translation, look up " in google images) in both 'celebratory' and 'mourning' occasions with 'well wishes' written on them. In this case, Joongjin sent Choongho one to congratulate him and wish him luck on his 'business' (action school)

### Chapter 336

"I'll get going then."

"Okay. Careful on your way back. See you at practice tomorrow."

"Yes, seonbae-nim."

Maru started walking after sending Bangjoo off in a bus. The area around Suwon station was filled with the stuffy air of the night. He could smell something savory from the toast sandwich shop right next to it. Salarymen eating late night dinners were standing in front of the store. One of them suddenly picked up his phone and put down the unfinished toast sandwich. He hurriedly paid the shopkeeper before walking towards the station.

Although it was the time of the day to finish the day off, there were still busy people here. Maru's mind was also busy thinking about what he learned at the fast food restaurant.

'Spring Calendar, huh.'

That was a movie from a decade ago. He remembered watching it a couple of times when it aired on TV. However, it was a romance so he didn't remember watching it till the end. He could remember the beginning parts. The two main characters drenched in rain were talking to each other at the bus stop.

Maru thought about Geunsoo's words as he avoided the drunk person that came his way.

"It's a piece that Joohyun-noona appeared in?"

-Yeah. She caught the eye of the director and became a youth star thanks to that movie. She was very popular back then.

"And the director of that movie is director Park Joongjin?"

-That's right. When that movie became hugely successful and the actors that participated in the movie gained popularity, the director was also interviewed a lot, and that's when people got to know the name Park Joongjin.

"So he's not just known for his work."

-That's right. He was an eccentric man. Of course, I haven't seen him in person, so I can't say for sure, but based on the rumors and the interview, he's a really strange person. No, I guess I should call him eccentric.

Strange person. Eccentric. Indeed, Joongjin was very different from usual. He was a director that believed in intuition. Although Maru had only seen him for a short time, he left a deep impression on him.

"What made people start calling him eccentric?"

-First up, his first piece of work is Spring Calendar, and the production time of that movie is absurd. Usually, when producing a movie, most of the time is taken up before the pre-production phase, that is, the writing of the scenario. After all, the scenario is the backbone of the movie. You probably know from experience, but for urban-themed movies and movies that don't require changing places that much to shoot, it takes around two months to finish the whole shoot. However, when it comes to writing the scenario, it takes much longer than that because the director will hold on to it until they feel like it's perfect, so it takes several months to years to finish it.

Geunsoo chuckled in a small voice as though reminiscing about the past. It was a rather vain laugh.

-But that man said in the interview that it only took him three days to finish the scenario and the editing. He also said that it only took that long because it took time for him to write out the words in his head. With just that, he would be called a genius, but what I found out after that was even more amazing.

"What did you find out?"

-Director Park Joongjin was thirty-four years old when he wrote 'Spring Calendar'. The reason I remember that is because the interview article was really hard to believe. 'Director' Park Joongjin was just the owner of a decent restaurant when he was thirty-four.

"A restaurant owner?"

-Yeah. Such a guy quit his business, which was doing well enough to almost become a franchise, and shot a movie with the money he saved up and some investment solely because he was 'bored'.

"Did he have any knowledge of production?"

-He said he wanted to learn through books, but quit because it wasn't his style. Then he went straight into shooting. The result? A huge success. Although people say there were a lot of ups and downs, the movie successfully launched in cinemas and became hugely successful.

A man who quit a successful business and dived straight into the movie industry. He was definitely eccentric.

At the same time, a question popped up in Maru's head.

A famous movie director would be just as well known as famous actors. He had heard of the name Choi Joonggeun before he started shooting Twilight Struggles. The director of 'Spring Calendar', which was known as the greatest romance movie of its time, should have received a lot of attention, and the media should have been noisy about him, yet he had never heard of that name. In this case, it would be one of two things.

He either stopped creating movies, or his following works had failed continuously.

“I don’t seem to remember anything about director Park Joongjin at all. It must be because I’m not paying attention properly, right?”

-That shouldn’t be all of it. From what I know, he did not shoot any commercial movies after that. He instead tried his hand at challenging videos like 5-minute ones, 10-minute ones, and silent movies. However, such a movie doesn’t work in South Korea, so it never became an issue. He was invited to the Berlin International Film Festival as a non-competitive work, but there hasn’t been any news of him for seven years after that, so it’s not that surprising that you don’t know him.

“Seven years?”

-Long, right? That’s why I almost couldn’t remember who he was when you mentioned him. He’s a forgotten name after all. But why do you ask?

“The movie I’m participating in as a minor role this time is directed by him.”

-Really? Is it another person with the same name?

“I don’t think that’s the case. I met him for the first time today, and he was unlike most people. Since he has the same name and the same personality, I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

-Director Park Joongjin is shooting a movie again, huh. Looks like news will spread around in a short while. Wait, you’re participating in it as a minor role? I haven’t heard anything about the audition. There weren’t any notices either.

“I’m not surprised. He finished casting the people he needed on the spot. I think he’s doing things quietly through his acquaintances.”

-He cast people on the spot?

“Yes. He said he’s picking people based on intuition.”

-Haha. He’s really eccentric as people say he is.

“Indeed.”

-If your role is confirmed, I guess I should say congratulations.

“Thank you.”

-In any case, he was once called a genius. You might learn a lot of things working with him. Do your best.

“Yes.”

-Ah, and... hm, nothing. See you next time, with Ganghwan too.

Geunsoo sounded like he was going to say something, but he just hung up.

\* \* \*

“Hey, you fucker. Are you that great?”

Maru saw a drunk man shouting at a streetlamp before going his way. He now knew a little bit about what kind of man Joongjin was. What made him return to movie production after all this time?

'Because he's short on money?'

No, that shouldn't be the case. He was someone who already had some success in his restaurant business. If he needed money, he might as well start another business.

"A simple change of heart?"

He was someone that quit his business and started a movie production solely because of boredom. It would be a waste of time and energy trying to figure out what he was thinking. What was important was that he once became famous in the past and that such a person decided to use him. It was a great opportunity to experience the movie scene again.

He went inside the convenience store in front of him and bought some milk tea. As he sipped on his drink as he walked, he eventually arrived at the bus stop. Since he had organized his thoughts, it was time to get on the bus.

When he arrived at home, it was past 9. Bada wasn't at home. When he opened the door to the main bedroom, he heard a faint breathing noise. It was his mother. He quietly closed the door and went to his own room. Bada seemed to be staying the night over at her friend's house. Since Maru's parents and Bada's friend's parents were close, his mother turned a blind eye to her staying over at her friend's house.

He picked up the script for 'I've been really wronged' on his desk, and lied down on his bed. The day after tomorrow was the preliminaries. Right now, he had to focus on the competition rather than the movie.

"When I just joined the company...."

Maru said his lines in a small voice so that he didn't wake his mother up, but still did so with emotion. That practice lasted late into the night.

\* \* \*

Suwon Center of Culture. He was back here after nearly a year. Honestly speaking, he really didn't feel anything. Last year, Woosung High failed to pass the preliminaries. Although the source of the problem was Geunseok, it couldn't just be blamed on him. In the end, they all stood on the same stage. They all froze because of that mistake, and they could not make up for the mistake. The moment they blamed one person for the failure, was the moment they admitted that that was all they amounted to.

Maru watched Geunseok's mistake from the audience seats. He also saw that the rest of the members' expressions froze up as well. They must have panicked. After all, the one they had the most confidence in ended up making a mistake. There was no guarantee that the same thing wouldn't happen today either. No, it will happen. Mistakes will happen, whether big or small.

"There will be mistakes on today's stage. Don't guarantee that you won't make a mistake. Go about it with the mindset that you will make one. If someone next to you makes a mistake, calm down and react

accordingly. If you hurry because you panic, the one that made a mistake will stiffen up as well," Maru spoke as he unloaded their luggage from the truck.

The ones that were organizing the luggage heavily nodded. This was a stage acted out by people that just started acting. It would instead be abnormal for there to be no mistakes at all. What was important was to smoothly gloss over that mistake. For that to happen, they had to think beforehand about what they would do in case someone next to them made a mistake.

"We're here!"

Yoojin appeared with a makeup box in one hand. Next to Yoojin was her. *She* had a box of energy drinks in her hand.

"How did your preliminaries go?"

"Are you asking me or *her*?"

Yoojin made a mischievous smile and alternately pointed at herself and her. Maru of course looked towards her.

"Geez, I knew it."

Yoojin walked past him towards the others. She had practically become a member of Woosung High's acting club. The club members also welcomed Yoojin.

"That's the stage costume?" She asked.

Maru nodded. A suit and a necktie. Of course, the necktie was the one gifted to him by her.

"Does it suit me?"

"Who do you think bought it? Of course, it suits you," *she* grinned.

"Ah, we finished our preliminaries without a hitch."

"Do you think you're going to pass?"

"Myunghwa High never failed to pass the preliminaries you know?"

"You sound confident."

"Yeah, I am confident. Rather than that, how do you think it'll go?"

Maru looked behind him. The club members had dressed up, gotten around in a circle, and were talking to each other. Although they looked nervous, they didn't stiffen up.

"Good."

"That's fortunate."

"Aren't you too generous? We're a rival school."

"Myunghwa High will take the grand prize anyway. And the individual prize is mine," She spoke confidently as though she had no intentions of going easy at all.



“Don’t make a mistake. I mean your results weren’t that good last year.”

“That’s because they didn’t have the talent named Han Maru last year.”

“Don’t you feel embarrassed when you say that with your own mouth?”

“I just followed the example of someone who just said that the individual prize is hers. Was I too lacking?”

“Sheesh, why don’t you be a little more nervous?”

“I was too nervous before, so I don’t have any nerves left.”

Maru took the box of energy drinks from her hands.

“Thanks for the drinks.”

“Warn the first years before you give it to them. It has caffeine in it so it might get them agitated instead.”

Maru nodded his head. At that moment, staff from the Center of Culture called for the instructors of each school. Miso and Taesik, who were conversing on one side, walked towards the building. It seemed that they were being briefed on using the waiting rooms.

“Maru, here you are.”

Just then, Maru heard a familiar voice. When he turned around, he saw Suyeon, who was wearing a baseball cap.

“You’re here. I didn’t think you would make it.”

“It’s the competition so I should make some time for it. Rather than that, this is nostalgic. The acting of na?ve little students huh.”

Suyeon smiled brightly as she looked around. Maru looked at his girlfriend who was standing left of him. *She* seemed a little wary.

“Oh, you’re the girl I saw in the ward last time. Hi.”

“Ah, yes. Hello.”

“You’re Maru’s girlfriend?”

“Eh? Ah, yes....”

Seeing her admit to it so easily, Maru made a thick smile. She saw that smile and blushed a little.

“The others are over there.”

“Ah, you’re right.”

Suyeon walked towards the others. The club members cheered after seeing her. It seemed that it was nice to see her since she didn’t show up much recently because she was busy shooting a drama.

“So you don’t like her.”

“Wh-what? Me? I-is it that obvious?” *She* was startled as she replied.

“You don’t need to be jealous though.”

“Who’s jealous!”

“If you aren’t, you aren’t. Rather than that, help me with makeup. Our turn is early, so we must hurry.”

Maru grabbed her wrist and walked towards the others.

### **Chapter 337**

“I think that should do,” Yoojin spoke as she took her hands off.

She handed Yoojin some cotton. Yoojin cleaned up the area around the eyes of the girl sitting in front of her in a delicate manner. The brown eyeshadow was spread around and the eyes were emphasized.

She exclaimed in a small voice. Yoojin was like a professional makeup artist. Yoojin’s makeup skills were excellent and were not worse off even when compared to the lady that always helped Myunghwa High whenever they went on stage.

“Wow.”

“I think that’s enough. What do you think?”

“I feel like it’s not me.”

“It is you. Jiyoong, your head is innately round, so I emphasized the outline of your chin. You’ll look sharper under some light. I thought that you look better that way rather than just looking innocent.”

“It turned out much better than I was thinking. Thank you, unni.”

“That’s good then. But I think you should shorten your shoulder straps a little. Others might see underneath your clothes.”

Yoojin fixed up Jiyoong’s attire. She helped out from the side as well. They pulled the shoulder straps and fixed it in place with a clip. Now, her clothes wouldn’t hang downwards even if she crouched forward.

Jiyoong thanked the two before leaving the dressing room. With that, all the makeup was done.

“It’s over!” Yoojin stretched her arms out as she spoke.

She gave her an energy drink while thanking her for the job. *She* had bought a whole box, but it was empty already.

“Uhm, we need to use the dressing room now.”

A girl wearing white mourning clothes opened the door and spoke. She immediately picked up the trash lying on the floor and stood up. Yoojin packed up the cosmetics. When they left the dressing room, they saw students waiting outside in the corridor. They walked past the students wearing various costumes and left the corridor.

They looked for places to sit on the first floor lobby, but there was a person sitting on every seat. There were a lot of parents and students who came to cheer their team on.

"I'm sure there must be some of them that were forced to come here," Yoojin said.

She nodded as well. Since it was a play done by youths, the audience was always small. Although the finals, which were held in Seoul Art Center, always had full seats because of advertising, the regionals were mostly empty unless the participating schools selected students to come and watch. That was why schools recommended students to go and watch. It was a 'recommendation' on the surface, but some schools even checked attendance.

"Should we go outside?" She pointed at a bench outside.

"At least there's shade."

If there wasn't a tree behind the bench, they would have roasted themselves in the heat of August. The empty lot in front of the Center of Culture was bustling with students practicing. They were all reading their scripts under the shade. Although the building was much cooler, the organizers required them to be quiet inside the building, so they could only go outside in order to practice.

"There's Woosung High," Yoojin pointed towards the right of the building. They were sitting in a circle next to a fountain that wasn't in operation, practicing. Maru was leaning against the marble wall and was looking at the expressions of each member very closely.

"He's in the team, so they should be able to advance into the finals without a hitch."

"He?"

"Your boyfriend."

"..."

"You haven't seen him acting up close, have you?"

"No, I have. We shot a drama together last time."

"You mean Youth Generation?"

"Yeah. I went there for one day as a part time job."

"Then I guess you must have seen his frightening acting skills then."

"Frightening acting skills?"

She tilted her head. From what *she* saw, Maru's acting during the drama shoot was far from 'frightening'. His acting wasn't out of place. He looked neither splendid nor lacking. It was just ordinary.

In fact, Maru's acting during his first year seemed better. On the stage, Maru gave off a different vibe from the rest. She was even a little jealous of his uniqueness back then.

"You don't look convinced."

"I don't know if you should call it frightening. He's just... ordinarily good."

"No way. I watched him during the read-through of the movie. Even the lead actors were slightly surprised. The director even complimented him. And you call him ordinarily good?"

Yoojin had an expression of disbelief. She fell into thought. Was *she* wrong? No. During the drama shoot, Maru didn't show anything that made *her* heart flutter.

"It must be because the role is different, right? Different roles give off different vibes."

"No, that shouldn't be. If he does it, even the ordinary wouldn't look ordinary anymore. Of course, a professional actor should be better than him overall. But just for that day, just for that moment, he was beyond the pros. I got the chills just watching him. He did have a scary line, but that can't explain all of it."

Yoojin pouted and looked at Maru.

"Of course, like what you said, it might have been because that role was special, but still..."

That shouldn't be the case - continued Yoojin in a small voice. She also had a look at Maru who was standing afar. He was talking to his club members with a serious expression. A frightening act? Maru's acting definitely had a charm that captured the attention of the audience. *She* knew that from experience. *She* wasn't focusing on him because she liked him. When *she* sat in the audience seats, she became quite cold-minded. Despite that, Maru's acting that *she* saw before had some kind of energy that made her unable to take her eyes off him.

However, *she* couldn't judge that as 'frightening acting skills'. *She* would definitely shiver in excitement if she felt so. Unfortunately, Maru's acting wasn't at that level yet. Although he was unique enough to stand out from the rest of the people on stage, he didn't overwhelm everyone else.

"I guess I'll see today," *she* spoke.

Woosung High's turn would start in just a short while. *She* didn't need to think about it, she just needed to see it. *She* grabbed Yoojin's hand, who looked a little down for some reason and stood up.

"What?"

"Let's get seats early on. I want to watch from the front."

"Ah, you're right. There are a lot of people, aren't there?"

"Yeah, so we should go in early."

She grabbed Yoojin's hand and walked into the building.

\* \* \*

"Hello."

"Ah, hello."

"Looks like we're having a hard time for two days in a row."

Ahn Pilhyun greeted the two people in front of him as he entered the building.

Pilhyun was a playwright. He wrote a few play scenarios and had experience helping out with writing a movie scenario. A while ago, he was requested to be one of the judges for the regional preliminaries, and he accepted that job. Actually, he accepted because he wasn't making progress on the scenario he

was writing. He accepted that job in order to give himself the excuse that 'he was too busy because of the job'.

He felt pathetic, but he wanted to get some room to breathe even if he had to do that.

The two people next to him also worked in the art field. One was the leader of a theater troupe, while the other was a university professor.

"Everyone's pretty good, right?"

"Yes. They have their own thematic consciousness and their acting is pretty good as well."

"Some of them will proceed to major in theater and film, right? Haa, that department has it hard these days. There are a lot of kids wanting to be actors, but there just aren't enough spots for all of them."

The professor, who was a woman, sighed.

Pilhyun ignored the professor's words. This woman sighed all the time. He played along with her yesterday, but from how she hadn't changed at all today, it would be very tiring for him to play along again. The other man, the leader of the theater troupe, crossed his arms and dozed off as soon as he sat down, just as he did yesterday. It seemed like he was going to watch just a little bit and make his judgment off that. Again, just like yesterday.

Pilhyun wasn't in a position to talk either. Although he said that their acting was pretty good, he was saying that based on the fact that they were just high school students. What he really meant was that they were just 'not horrible to watch' and not 'worth watching deeply'.

He sighed as he fidgeted with the pen in his hand. He thought of something good to write yesterday, so he sat down in front of his desk, but he got stuck after just two lines. He felt like he was going to lose all of his hair just writing the synopsis of a movie. It was a sad reality that he was worrying about balding at the age of forty-three. In truth, he had lost quite a lot of hair as well. It must all be because of stress.

He thought about sleeping just like the man next to him. It didn't sound like a bad idea to look for stories in his dream. Since the plays that were going to be acted out today were probably of similar styles to yesterday's, it probably wouldn't make a difference even if he didn't watch it properly.

\* \* \*

"Woosung High, please get ready."

They were expecting to hear that ever since they heard the audience applaud from inside the waiting room behind the stage. They were signalled by the staff to go on the stage. There was a 20-minute break. They had to finish setting up the stage within that time.

"Daemyung! Start with the cabinet!"

"Got it!"

The four boys moved the metal cabinet with the plate that read 'Department of Investigation' on it. Following that, they moved the bars of the holding cell, which were just PVC pipes painted in silver.

"Should I put the desk over here?"

“Yeah, that looks good.”

“What about this desk and this chair?”

“Let’s distance them a little further apart. Move them closer to the cabinet.”

“What about the hanger for the police hats and jackets?”

“Right of that desk!”

Maru ran to the bottom of the stage.

“Daemyung! Move the desk next to you to the left! Also, Bangjoo! Push the hanger forward a little and hang the police hat a little higher up!”

Even if the set looked perfect from the stage, it was wrong if it didn’t look right to the audience. Maru adjusted the distance between each item so that it wouldn’t look too empty from the audience.

“Do you need any help?”

Maru turned his head when he heard her voice. *She* was standing with Yoojin.

“It’s fine. We’re almost finished.”

She nodded once before sitting in the front seat. It seemed that the two had entered the hall early to watch from the front.

“How does it look to you? Do you see anything awkward?”

“No, it looks good to me.”

“What about you, Yoojin?”

“Wouldn’t it look better if there was something like a computer on the desk?”

“We’re going to bring it soon.”

At that moment, Dowook appeared carrying a monitor. He placed it on the police desk that Daemyung was sitting at and adjusted the angle. Since Daemyung couldn’t be hidden behind the monitor, he placed the monitor to the edge of the desk.

“I’ll get going now then.”

“Alright. Don’t make a mistake.”

“Don’t worry.”

Having returned to the stage again, Maru picked up the glow-in-the-dark tape and started checking the movement lines. They wouldn’t be able to see anything in the dark. The people behind the holding cell bars didn’t move much, but Daemyung, who would be outside, had to move around a lot. There was a scene where he had to leave the scene and come back in again, and he was marking those spots.

“Everyone, gather round.”

Daemyung called everyone. There were three minutes left now.

“Like Maru said in the morning, anyone can make a mistake. Those mistakes are an element of the play. Without them, there would be no nervousness either. So even if you do make a mistake, don’t feel guilty about it. It’s natural. Instead, if you forget your line or were late to do something, don’t panic and take deep breaths. Act as though taking deep breaths is a part of the scene.”

Daemyung said a part of his lines and stopped midway. Then, he grabbed his forehead and sighed. He acted as though that sigh was a part of the play.

“If you can buy some time like that, the others can help you. You don’t need to do it hastily. This is our stage. No one will blame us even if we make a mistake.”

Daemyung put his right hand out.

“Blue Sky.”

Then the hands pushed downward.

“Fighting!”

At the same time, there was an announcement in the building.

- Part three of the youth acting festival, Woosung High’s play, will begin shortly. Please...

Maru took a deep breath and looked at Daemyung. Daemyung on stage wasn’t the usual sluggish Daemyung. He had sharper and more astute eyes than anyone else here. He was a reliable club president in this place.

They hid behind the side curtains. They could hear people talking as they entered the hall. This was the most exciting time last year as well.

Maru looked at the first years standing behind him. Jiyeon, Aram, and Bangjoo all looked nervous.

“There are quite a lot of people outside. Wanna look?” Maru asked the three.

They all shook their heads and replied ‘no’.

“How about you, Dowook?”

“Don’t talk to me. I might forget my lines. Damn, it’s nerve-wracking.”

“Do you want a calming pill?”

“Shut up. I’m really nervous so stay still.”

Even the usually bossy guy was nervous because of his first stage. The pressure must be completely different from the almost joking of a play that they did during the festival. The heat from the stage lights, the breath of the audience, the texture of the floor would all affect his heart rate.

“Think of it as playing around.”

That was the only advice Maru could give. There was no nervousness that would disappear just by telling them to ‘stop being nervous’. It was the capability of the individual to change that nervousness into energy. That wasn’t something that someone else could help with.

'The only option is to get nervous and clash with the audience head on.'

The lights shining on the audience slowly dimmed. It would go completely dark in just a moment. They had to go on the stage and get into position at that time. When the lights turned on again, they would no longer be in the Suwon Center of Culture, but a police station within the country somewhere.

"Take a deep breath."

Daemyung's voice could be heard. The juniors all took a deep breath just like he said.

Then, darkness finally pervaded the stage.

"Let's go."

### **Chapter 338**

The first thing he saw when his eyes adapted to the darkness was the glow-in-the-dark tape. The first piece of tape was on the hanger, the second was on the desk, and the rest were on the floor. He blinked a few times. He could faintly make out the outline of the stage. After seeing Daemyung's figure on the other side of the side curtain, he started walking.

He stepped on the waxed floor and walked into the holding cell. Dowook, Jiyoong, and Bangjoo all checked their respective positions before sitting down. With that, they were ready to start. Maru signalled Bangjoo who was staring at him.

"I get it so be quiet already!"

The lights turned on along with a loud shout. Daemyung clicked his tongue as though he was tired of the fuss and hung his black jacket on the hanger.

"Don't stand over there and come here already."

He shouted to the side curtain. Aram could be seen taking a deep breath.

'Don't get nervous and take your time.'

Maru tapped Jiyoong who was looking at Daemyung absent-mindedly. The play had started already. It wasn't just the ones talking on stage that were acting. In fact, the ones that didn't have lines had to be more careful when acting.

Jiyoong fixed her expression immediately and looked towards the audience. The others also acted as they practiced beforehand and formed the right atmosphere within the holding cell.

"Do you know who I am?"

"I don't, so go in for now. I'll listen to the full story once the related people are here tomorrow morning."

"Are you really allowed to put innocent people into cells like this?"

"Excuse me? We are allowed to lock you up because you've committed a crime. Also, if you really didn't commit anything, then you'll be able to leave in 48 hours so don't worry about that."



“But...”

Aram entered the cell with a crying face. She must have been nervous because her act was what started off the whole play, but she finished it without making any mistakes. Maru nodded slightly towards Aram, who sat opposite to him. Aram faintly smiled back before returning to her normal expression. Maru saw that Aram’s left arm, which was on the floor, was shaking. So she was acting in that kind of state. She was a cool junior.

\* \* \*

“They look a little tense, right?”

“Yeah. But it’s still okay right now. There weren’t any big mistakes either. However, it does look a little unstable. The first years are doing well, but I can’t shake off the feeling that they’re barely making it. Although it looks okay right now, if that persists, the audience will feel uncomfortable as well. That will probably affect the scores.”

Yoojin was analyzing the stage. She agreed with her. It was true that they were doing well. They were five minutes into the play. Their lines were smooth, and their movement didn’t look messy. However, just like what Yoojin said, she couldn’t erase the feeling that they were on a tightrope.

Why was that so?

“Hey, over there! Be quiet! Are you going to cause a fuss even in the cell?”

“Who’s causing a fuss?”

Daemyung and Aram exchanged lines. When she saw that, she finally realized why this stage looked like they were on thin ice.

“The gap is too big,” she spoke in a small voice.

Daemyung had completely dissolved into the role of the police. He had become a stubbly policeman in his forties. His speech and even his habit of pushing his belly outward indicated that he had done a lot of research and practice.

The first years were definitely doing well. However, they looked immature compared to Daemyung. Viewed separately, there was not that much of a discrepancy, but put together, the gap was obvious, making the audience tilt their heads in confusion.

The astute people among the audience were probably thinking that something was off. What was fortunate was that the first years did not notice that. The moment they pushed themselves to imitate Daemyung, the balance would break.

If she, a non-expert, could feel it, the judges would have noticed already and it would consequently affect their scoring.

“Since they’re taking turns, I guess it should be Maru’s turn soon.”

Yoojin leaned forward and focused on the stage. She also became quiet and looked in front of her.

\* \* \*

Pilhyun was startled by the twitching and woke up from sleep. When he looked next to him, he saw the theater troupe leader scratching his head with an awkward smile. It looked like he had a bad dream.

Since he felt embarrassed as well, he picked up his pen and looked at the scoring sheet. How is the stage layout? Is there a clear thematic consciousness? Was the expressivity good? They could give points out of five for each category. That score would decide whether or not a team would advance into the finals. Of course, after the competition, the three would discuss together which teams to send to the finals. However, most of the time, the teams were at similar levels so the scores would decide everything.

When he looked next to him, he saw that the professor had a bored expression as well. There were eight teams yesterday, and there were eight teams today. They had run out of energy yesterday.

‘This is the third team, so there are five teams left today.’

They were tied down to this place for around six hours. It was actually quite energy-consuming. He wriggled around to relieve some fatigue around some parts. Since his job was to write text while sitting, his waist wasn’t in a good condition. He wriggled around in his seat in order to straighten his waist.

Just then, a crisp voice entered his ears. This was a voice he had heard during the beginning of the play. He dozed off as soon as the play started, so he didn’t know what the story was, but the voice was definitely good. When he had a look at the stage, he saw that the play was set in a police station. A rather chubby boy was talking non-stop in front of everyone. Was he the police? His diction was good, and his pronunciation was on point.

He was definitely better than most of the students he saw until now, but that didn’t mean that he decided to start watching properly again.

Thanks to a little sleep, he became clear-minded. He didn’t want to make his clear mind rot by watching little children showing off their little skills.

He put a piece of paper on top of his scoring sheet and wrote down ideas that popped up in his head. He was drawing a mind map. He organized his thoughts in order to break down the writer’s block that stopped him from writing his scenario.

“Kids these days just don’t know what suffering is. It wasn’t like that when I was young.”

That was the voice he heard after the shout from the previous boy died down. Pilhyun stopped writing with his pen at that moment. The voice was rather calm. It was neither powerful nor powerless.

If it was just that, Pilhyun wouldn’t have raised his head. The weight contained in the voice was different. The boy that played the policeman wasn’t that bad. He watched for a brief moment, but he felt nothing off. His acting capabilities were decent for a high school student. However, that was it. That boy lacked the uniqueness that an actor had to possess. It was natural. There was no way he would have something unique about him when it was just a high school club play done with friends. Just being ‘different’ from the others wasn’t enough to be called ‘unique’. It was only ‘unique’ when someone showed a special talent or wisdom that was clearly a level above others.

That voice just now.

Pilhyun looked at the small stage. It was just one line, but the quality was different. It felt like someone started playing the violin amongst kindergarteners playing the castanets.

The owner of the voice was behind bars. He was wearing a grey-toned suit. Even though it was a high school student wearing a suit, it didn't look awkward at all on him. It was even a grey-toned suit that the older generation would wear and not the navy-toned ones that the younger people wore. Moreover, since suits brought as stage costumes were borrowed from adults most of the time, they usually didn't suit the body figure of the wearer, but that boy looked like the suit was tailor-made for him. It didn't look out of place at all as though he had been wearing it for a long time.

That boy, leaning against the bars of the cell, started talking with the girl opposite of him. For the first time, Pilhyun focused on the play. The girl seemed to have been caught scamming someone, while the boy in a suit looked to be some executive at a large company.

"You have bad eyes. Rather than that, tell me this Daeyang group guy you know."

He put his head on his hands and spoke to the girl. Pilhyun subconsciously leaked a laugh when he saw the boy being so natural. He exuded arrogance. That boy had the disdainful eyes unique to the ones that stepped above all others. Where could he have seen such eyes? On TV? Or from his father?

In the end, acting skill could only be directly proportional to experience. High school students. They were at an age where they were just getting to know the place that was society. They should have heard about how hard, dirty, and underhanded society is.

However, the idiom 'viewing is better than a hundred questions' didn't exist for nothing. Would an ordinary high school student have experienced the cruel realities of society? They would feel down if their grades went down and perhaps might be scolded by their parents, but they wouldn't be left alone. After all that was said, they were being protected. The problems arising in that situation, no matter how difficult it may be, was a drop in the bucket compared to the problems encountered in society.

This was one of the reasons why student actors looked very awkward when they played a role that talked about the problems of society. How hard would it be since they were acting without any experience?

Yet, that boy over there was speaking as though he had experience. His lines didn't just sound like lines, they sounded vivid.

"It's quite funny, you know? I'm the one who hit him, and he's the one giving me presents and apologizing. Do you know the saying, money turns crime into innocence and the lack of money turns innocence into crime?"

The boy smirked as he stood up and scanned the audience. He didn't look unnatural at all. In regards to acting, 'feel' wasn't enough to bring an act to life. Behind the acting that looked 'instinctive' were dozens to hundreds of rounds of repetitive practice and calculations.

How many times did that boy practice in order to possess such a smirk?

Pilhyun put down his pen. His brain told him that this was a play worth watching.

The ones sitting either side to him seemed to be thinking the same thing. The troupe leader who was dozing off until now placed his head on top of his locked hands and watched the stage with incredibly sharp eyes. To be exact, he should be looking at the boy.

The professor was the same. She had uncrossed her legs and sat upright as she watched the stage. The scoring sheet that she always left aside was in her hands. He could feel her intention to judge things properly from where she was sitting.

At that moment, the boy's mouth opened once again.

\* \* \*

He could have walked ahead. He could have exaggerated more than he was doing now. If he did, then the play would have been much more interesting to watch, but the balance would have been broken.

Maru looked around him even as he said his line. Everyone was still going strong. They had all adapted to the stage. He had to maintain this pace.

"It's quite funny when you think about it. That subordinate said the right thing. Meaning, he used forthright words. Isn't there a saying that you should keep a man that speaks bitter words nearby? That he is the most loyal subordinate? But you know? There's a limit to being bitter. Can't it be a little sweeter? Who the hell is he to tell me what to do? You don't live in society with your mouth. This world is all about power, authority, and lastly, politics. You should know how to suck up to people, and how to mix lies within your words so that you can survive in this jungle like company. The young ones are only full of spirit. They only know about justice! Does justice give you food?"

He divided up his breath into precise parts when he said his line. He had checked his breathing several times when he practiced. Long lines like that one couldn't be said without thinking. Where to take a break, where to look, and everything else had to be decided beforehand.

Emotions were the same. If he got all emotional just by himself, it would break everything. He wished he could show more emotion, but that was likely to break the rhythm. That would mean doom.

He had to set his rhythm to match his juniors. As long as he continued his acting so that he didn't break that rhythm, they would be able to finish this play safely.

He looked into Jiyeon's eyes as he said his line. She wasn't able to show the sexy smile that she had practiced until now, but she didn't make a mistake in saying her lines. Being able to show everything that she practiced would make her a professional. For today, this was enough.

At that moment, Aram, who was next, stumbled just as she stood up. It wasn't her fault. She wasn't able to find balance because one of her heels had slipped. It wasn't a fatal mistake, but Aram dazed out since she missed the right timing.

This was dangerous. Missing one line would probably make her forget all the following lines as well. It was a chain reaction. It was just like how one wouldn't be able to remember the following melody if they forgot about the beginning part.

Daemyung was too far away. Moreover, he was looking at the front, so he wasn't aware of the situation here. Dowook, who was sitting next to him, also looked dazed. Maru and Daemyung had told the others

multiple times that there would be mistakes, but it would actually be incredibly difficult to stay calm in the face of an actual mistake.

Jiyoon? She wasn't skilled enough to cover up someone's mistake. Bangjoo had the next line, so he was no good either.

Maru had finished organizing the situation in an instant and stepped out. This wasn't in the script. He approached Aram and grabbed her shoulder.

"Scammer lady, why don't you get yourself together?"

Get yourself together- this was originally Aram's line. His role was an arrogant company executive. This action wasn't that out of line with the play.

Receiving the hint, Aram's expression brightened up in an instant. She was a smart girl at heart, so she regained the rhythm and continued with the line immediately. Maru turned around to the audience and showed Aram a thumbs-up so that the audience wouldn't see it. Aram smiled faintly before sitting down.

### **Chapter 339**

His acting from back then was based on memories.

Last year, when he learned acting from Ganghwan, there was a short period of time where he stood on stage. He did a short monodrama for five to ten minutes before the real show. The role he played back then was a bus driver. There was no need to call it a 'role' since he actually had experience being one. There was no need to put on the mask of an actor. He just conversed with the people in the audience while looking back at his life. It must have looked natural. After all, he just spoke of his experiences.

The reason he couldn't be happy when he was complimented behind the stage was because he was aware that it was not an act. An actor starts off by imitating, but the ultimate goal of all actors was to create something out of nothing. Acting from experience was a stable method, but there would be no progress either.

It was then that Maru thought - he couldn't forget about his past self, nor could he abandon it.

The Han Maru before his reincarnation; the Han Maru aged forty-five was a part of him that he could not break away from. The youthful Maru's challenging mindset and the middle-aged Maru's conservatism were walking towards a common ground, but there were still cases where one overtook the other in regards to certain matters.

While his personality went through such a process, his memory was piling up. The memories from the forty-five year-old Maru were being buried by new memories. The clear picture he had of his daughter was blurring out, and her adult face was becoming fainter by the day. One day, his forty-five year-old self's memories would all sink into his subconscious, or perhaps even deeper than that. Only God would know when that would happen.

The reason he felt uneasy relying on his experience to do acting was because he thought of those things. It would one day be impossible to grab onto the roots of his memories and utter them out through his mouth like a parrot.

That was why he passionately did research. They were definitely things he was already aware of. When he focused, he could remember what kind of gaze company executives had when looking at others, what kind of expression they had during speeches, as well as their blatant arrogance and the attitude of 'seeking gifts' whenever it became performance evaluation season.

However, he did not bring those memories into his acting.

It was definitely very difficult. There were immediate funds he could make use of, yet he had to ignore it on purpose. He did not rely on his memories and started investigating. He put aside the things he knew and started compiling knowledge from the current era. The method he chose to complete the image of a company executive was to listen to his father. Although that would affect the objectivity of the image, it didn't matter. He based his image of the company executive on what he heard from his father and formed his character.

It wasn't easy. There were definitely differences between the image of company executives in his mind and the image his father had. There were some things he just couldn't accept as well. It took him quite a long time to accept the things he couldn't accept before.

He continued that process of breaking the old and accepting the new. During such a process, Maru felt his vision widening. He compared, accepted, and threw away. The process of turning the obvious not so obvious gave him a lot of things to think about.

The moment he formed a general outline of the executive character, Maru realized that what he was doing was precisely the process of applying a character to his role. The form of the character borrowed from the words of someone else clashed with his own image of the character, broke down, and merged into one. During such a process, the character came to possess more depth.

The stabilization process. Just like how his personalities and preferences were being neutralized, his memories needed a similar process. That process was necessary so that his mind wouldn't fall into chaos after all of his forty-five year-old memories disappeared.

"Just shut up if you're poor! Poor people always have loud voices, urgh."

Maru shouted towards the audience. After that, he acted all arrogant and scanned the other actors on stage. Although there were a few mistakes, they reached all the way to this point without breaking the flow. The play was running towards the curtain call. There weren't that many lines left either.

Daemyung smoothly continued the conversation. He definitely had some stability. Looking at Daemyung walking around the stage while speaking, Maru sat down. After Daemyung's line, they would each have their last lines, get into a big fight and finish everything off. The first years, who were shaking, seemed to have gotten used to the play as well and no longer shook. Confidence could be seen from their eyes, and they were ready to say their lines whenever their turn arrived.

This play should end without a hitch.

\* \* \*

"He is doing well, he really is, but..."

Yoojin frowned. The reason she helped Woosung High and their practice to the point that she volunteered to do makeup for them was to observe Maru. She was curious about the secret that allowed Maru to possess that indescribable air about him in just one year. She wondered if he had some special practicing methods or was learning from a good instructor. If that wasn't the case, perhaps he had excellent friends that synergized with him.

However, from what she saw, none of those cases applied to Maru. Before, Maru jokingly said that she could only be reborn if she wanted to know the secrets of his acting skills. Back then, she treated it like a joke, but it didn't take long for her to realize that it was not a joke. While it was true that there were some incredible people around Maru, he did not interact with them that much. He always went to the small practice room and practiced acting with his juniors that had slightly disappointing skills.

Yet, in such an environment, his acting skills rose by the day.

The only plausible explanation was that his innate talent was huge.

Those frightening acting skills. The absorption power that even made professional actors look at him subconsciously, as well as his expressivity that did not match his age. She thought that he was above her in all of those aspects, became jealous, and did everything she could do to follow him.

"But why..."

Woosung High's play was smooth. No, it became smooth. The tension that existed at the beginning of the play had died down, and after that, the play progressed like running water. Maru and Daemyung solidly acted out their part, while the others, albeit not as good as those two, did their best to contribute to the completion of the play. The play was going well without any huge flaws, but Yoojin became more frustrated by the moment.

The reason was simple. Maru's acting was no fun. She wanted to watch him show her the same thing he did during the read-through. She wanted to check with her own eyes how his acting skills, which, albeit unpolished and stood out from the rest last year, had changed this year. She thought that he should have changed and that he would show her something different. She continued watching the play while thinking about those things, but even now that the play was reaching its end, Maru did not show her any special acting skills.

Did his acting skills regress instead?

That was definitely possible. While he managed to stand out even amongst many professional actors, maybe his skills were downgraded after having spent so much time with the ordinary kids.

No, it wasn't really a downgrade. After all, the play itself was going smoothly without any major flaws. It wasn't that his skills were lacking. It just felt bland. The heart-clenching excitement was gone. She did not want to spend an entire Sunday just to watch something like this.

She became bored. She felt like she shouldn't have come to watch. Since her high expectations snapped in just a short moment, she felt like she was being drained of energy.

Maru was someone she was inwardly jealous of. She was envious of his skill. At the same time, he made her look forward to the moment they would stand together in front of a camera. A rival, of sorts. She

became fired up the more amazing Maru was, but it felt like someone poured cold water on top of the bonfire.

People that could act on that level could be seen everywhere in various acting schools. Did she lose a competitive rival and gain a good friend? It disappointed her a lot.

‘Well, this girl said the same thing. That he’s good but there was nothing amazing about him.’

Yoojin looked at her who was sitting next to her. She could finally understand why she said that Maru didn’t show *her* anything special during the drama shoot, and she finally understood why. Was what she saw from him back then a coincidence? A misunderstanding on her part?

“...So he can do things like that,” just then, she spoke.

Yoojin asked what was up.

“Maru. He’s too good.”

“He’s good? Ah, I guess he’s good. But honestly speaking, he disappoints me.”

“Why? How?”

She widened *her* eyes and asked with disbelief in them. Yoojin explained what was on her mind; that it was just plain-old acting without anything special.

When she said that, she firmly shook *her* head.

“No, Maru’s acting is really incredible. No, perhaps this isn’t about acting. I can’t think of the right word right now.”

She looked forward with excitement. Yoojin couldn’t understand. Just what part of Maru’s current acting was ‘incredible’? Being ‘good’ and being ‘incredible’ definitely had different tones.

“Look at that. Look at his expression when he exchanges lines with the others. It’s very different. At those moments, the other people’s expressions become more colorful. It feels much more vivid. Over there, he looked so unstable during his monologue, but he turns stable the moment he does something together with Maru. No, it’s not just about the stability. He becomes better. His expressions become more confident. Maru is inducing him to do that,” she spoke with conviction.

Induce?

Yoojin was just looking at Maru until now. Although she had a grasp over the overall situation, she was solely focused on Maru, so she did not notice the changes in the surrounding people.

But after listening to her words, she caught that clear difference. The difference between the parts including Maru and the ones without Maru was huge. However, it didn’t make the play become more awkward. The parts Maru were in just became more filled with life and easier to watch.

“Yes, that’s right,” she spoke as though she finally remembered the word she forgot.

“Right now, Maru is....”

\* \* \*



“He’s incredibly... skilled.”

“You could even call him wonderful.”

Pilhyun looked next to him. Skilled. The leader of the theater troupe was leaning forward as he watched the stage. The professor was the same. Although she was sitting back in her chair, her gaze as she looked in front of her had more depth than before.

Just until yesterday, they were drowning in boredom and yawns. That applied to him as well. It was very hard to give a lot of points in the ‘fun’ category when it came to highschool plays. Although they watched the stages out of duty, they dozed off most of the time.

And for the first time today, they focused on the play with their full concentrations. It was just because of one boy.

“Woosung High, huh.”

“What’s that fellow’s name?”

“Please wait a moment.”

Pilhyun put aside the scoring sheet and picked up the list of participating schools and students. He found Woosung High as he read down the list. He saw the name of the teacher in charge, the title of the play, as well as the students participating in the play.

“Salaryman, Han Maru.”

“Han Maru?”

“Is it a name you know?”

“No, I just thought it sounds rather unique.”

Pilhyun looked at the troupe leader. He also said that he hadn’t heard of the name before.

“I’ve been judging youth acting festivals for quite a long time now. I’ve seen many people come and go. Among them, there were many students that showed acting skills that were unbelievable of their age.”

He then crossed his arms.

“And that fellow over there doesn’t seem to be lacking compared to those special students. It’s very easy for an individual to do well. They would pop out more that way. However, tuning everyone else and bringing out the best of everybody is another talent in itself. Just look at them. The air of the stage changes whenever he enters and leaves the conversation. I wouldn’t be this surprised if it was them just becoming more relaxed because they were used to being around him, but that fella is adjusting the tension with his tone of voice and the rhythm.”

“It looks like he clearly knows what group art is. Usually, people his age would want to pop out from the rest and catch the eyes of the people. There’s the individual prize as well. But he... looks like he’s adjusting himself to match the rest. He could do more if he wished to, but it looks like he’s refraining himself. That doesn’t make him half-assed either. The balance is good.”

The leader of the theater troupe and the female professor gave him extremely high praises.

Pilhyun agreed with them. That boy knew what it meant to lead everyone. It seemed like he knew how to share his own energy with the others.

Actors say there are other actors that they felt comfortable with shooting together. That was what was meant by a synergizing actor. Actors that raise the acting skills of one's own even if he or she didn't get along with that actor on a personal level. There were a lot of such actors among supporting actors.

In Chungmuro, people always did the legwork in order to get such supporting actors into their movies. The result was that four of the five currently-airing movies would feature the same supporting actor. It sounded funny, but there were precedents.

'Someone that brings out the best of others, huh.'

Pilhyun sucked in a deep breath and appreciated the play that was nearing its end. He could feel the two next to him watching with their breaths abated as well. Their interest in this new item they found within the boring stage became deeper.

## **Chapter 340**

He said his last line before looking at the audience. He wondered how they felt about it. Maru looked at the first year juniors as well as Dowook and smiled at them. The reason they could finish this hour-long performance without many mistakes was because they did unexpectedly well. They looked very nervous when they just began, but they looked like they were enjoying it starting about halfway through.

Maru tapped on the floor with his feet once. The repulsive force between the rubber soles of his shoes and the wooden floor was pleasing. The stage was a wonderful space. It was a target of fear when treading on it for the first time, but once absorbed, the stage itself emitted heat that made the actors heated up. Getting drunk on that heat while acting would make the actor forget about fellow actors and the audience as well.

The only thing that existed would be the actor himself under the light. There might be a moment of solitude, but even that solitude sublimed into joy, making them excited.

The music track they prepared beforehand started flowing out. This signalled the curtain call. The faint lights drove away the darkness, and the red audience seats entered his vision like the rising sun.

Then he heard people applauding. There were some that even shouted that he was good. Just those words to cheer him up made him feel that the months of practice were not done in vain.

Daemyung, who played the role of the policeman, put on his police hat and jacket in a cool fashion and stood in the middle of the stage. Although he looked very natural right now, he had to practice those actions several times in order to get to that point. Flicking the police hat off his head with his fingers was actually quite hard.

Following that, Aram and Jiyeon held hands and walked up to the center of the stage before taking a deep bow. The applause became louder. They stood on either side of Daemyung.

Bangjoo and Dowook followed. Dowook seemed to have lost his tension at the last moment as he just replaced the action he practiced with just a formal bow.

Maru, who was standing behind the right curtain, also stepped onto the stage. He stood to the right of Bangjoo and bowed towards the audience. They all then raised their hands, which were grabbing the hand of the person next to them, and took a big bow at the same time. The music slowly faded out and the lights in the audience seats brightened.

-That is the end of Woosung High School's acting club, Blue Sky's performance. Damseon High School's play will be held next after a short break.

The audience started exiting. There seemed to be some students from Woosung High as well. Perhaps they were friends of his juniors.

Daemyung clapped to gather attention. The club members gathered in a circle in the center of the stage.

"Well done everyone."

"Wow, I was nervous to death."

"Me too."

"I'm still sweating. Look at my palms."

Dowook showed his palms. They were bright red. There were even some fingernail marks on it. That just showed how tightly he gripped his fists in nervousness.

Maru patted Dowook's back.

"Well done."

Dowook glared back and was about to snap back, but he just chuckled and nodded.

"We're not done yet. We need to clean up the stage we used. Guys, let's move the heavy stuff out first. Jiyeon, you remove the tape we stuck on the ground, and Aram, please carry the props out."

"Yes!"

They moved around busily. Just as Maru returned after carrying the desk to the corridor outside the resting area, he saw two girls struggling to climb onto the stage. They were Yoojin and her.

"Carry those out for me since you're here," Maru told the two before picking up a chair.

"You didn't have to tell us, we were going to help out anyway, you know?" Yoojin grumbled for a while before picking up a jacket from the floor while giggling. She picked up the telephone which was on the floor.

"I could see that you practiced a lot," she approached him and spoke.

"I'm glad that you could see it. Everyone did well. There weren't any big mistakes. Considering that it's their first time, it's very satisfactory."

Maru walked out to the corridor with her. The next team was hurriedly carrying their items to the stage. He pushed his club's stuff to one side so that it didn't hinder them.

"How was it? As the winner of last year, do you think our school is going to pass the preliminaries?"

“Well, I don’t know.”

“That’s a rather low score.”

“I’m just joking. If I was the judge, I would definitely give you a pass. You guys did really well. I mean it.”

She smiled. Maru looked at *her* before turning his head away. Why was *she* so pretty? For a moment, he looked at *her* absent-mindedly.

“What is it?”

“I was just startled.”

“Why are you startled?”

“Because you’re so pretty.”

“...Geez, there you go again.”

She pinched his waist. Maru screamed and surrendered.

“Maru, we need to load that on the truck.”

“I’m going.”

Maru carried the chair outside. The heat of August, which he couldn’t feel inside, suddenly assaulted him. It was like someone was blowing hot air.

“Well done everyone. I’ll go ahead and clean things up, so take your time. You guys did really well.”

Taesik and Miso complimented them before leaving the Center of Culture on the truck.

“For now, you should have some drinks.”

Suyeon gave them drinks. The shadow cast by the baseball cap was covering up her face. Some men, who were passing by, gave her a glance, but it didn’t seem like they recognized her. It seemed like they just subconsciously gave a hot woman a glance.

She was wearing a blue jersey and had big sunglasses on. Unless someone looked at her closely, it would be very difficult to recognize her as the actress Kim Suyeon. Maru looked for her while he drank, and found *her* talking to Yoojin. It didn’t look like *she* wanted to come to him. The reason was probably Suyeon.

“I felt sorry because I wasn’t able to look after you that much, but it looks like you guys don’t need me at all.”

Suyeon was quite talkative.

“I guess you didn’t come over that much, Suyeon-uni. No matter how busy you are with the drama, how could you not visit our cute Jiyeon even once?” Aram pulled Jiyeon’s cheek out as she spoke.

Suyeon smiled before pulling Jiyeon’s other cheek.

“That’s true. I should’ve come to see Jiyeon at least. But I was so busy, you know? Normally, dramas are shot, edited, and aired the next day, but the production company this time seemed to have a lot of money and they decided to go with producing everything beforehand. That messed up my schedule and I didn’t have enough time to come and look after you guys. Sorry.”

Suyeon made an apologetic expression. The club members quickly said that they were just joking.

Maru, who was sipping on his drink, saw that Suyeon looked his way and faintly smiled in a way that the other members couldn’t see. This woman really knew how to handle people.

“Since you feel sorry, why don’t you treat us to something?” Maru said.

“Why do you think I’m here? Of course, I’m here to treat you guys to a meal.”

Suyeon showed everyone her credit card. The club members applauded.

“Let’s go back to the school and clean things up before we go. There’s too much stuff for Mr. Taesik to carry by himself.”

“Daemyung, you really are earnest.”

Suyeon pointed at her car and told the boys to get on.

“The two of you can take the bus. By the time you arrive at school, we should be done with the organization.”

Daemyung, Dowook, and Bangjoo got in the car that Suyeon brought. Maru told them to wait a moment before walking towards her.

“We’re going back to our school, what about you?”

“We’ll just go back. You should hold the afterparty with just the club members. I don’t think it’s right for us to be in it,” she spoke. Maru wanted to take them, but he nodded after seeing that she was so adamant.

“Yoojin, you worked hard as well. Also, while you’re at it, help us out next time as well.”

“Hey, that’s not an attitude of asking someone for a favor!”

“Should I kneel then?”

Maru immediately put one knee on the ground. Yoojin was shocked and shouted at him to stand up again. Maru shrugged before getting up.

“This guy’s weird in the head.”

After sighing, Yoojin said that she was going to help out anyway. She also said that *she* would come if time allowed it.

“I’ll get going then.”

“Okay.”

Maru was about to turn around and go when she stopped him.

“Maru, do you have practice today as well?”

“No, I think we’re going to end things after the afterparty.”

“Really?”

Maru took over from there.

“I have some free time. Do you want to go watch a movie together?”

“Should we?”

“Then I’ll call you. Yoojin, hang out with *her* until then.”

“Don’t go deciding that by yourselves. I’m going to hang out with my boyfriend as well, you know?”

Yoojin snorted. However, when Maru stared at her, the proud expression broke down into a sigh.

“Urgh, I am sooo getting a boyfriend myself.”

Yoojin hooked her arms before dragging *her* away. He waved his hand at her, who was being dragged.

“How hot,” Suyeon said as soon as he got in the car. Maru put his arm against the window and rested his chin on his hand. He could see her walking afar. Actually, he wanted to ask *her* for her impression. It would be very new to hear *her* feelings when she watched the play.

“You guys were good. You were definitely better than the other schools. You should pass the preliminaries just with the fact that there were no awkward silences in your play. I’m sure of it,” Suyeon assured them.

When they arrived at the school, they saw that the truck was already unloaded by about half. They got out of the car and started helping Taesik unload the truck. Only after double-checking that everything was in the container did they close the door.

“This place feels small now.”

“We should probably clean it up as soon as possible.”

“Would we get our clubroom back again?”

“That’s probably not going to happen. There are a lot of teachers that don’t see us in a good light, and it’s not like we can force other people out of their clubrooms. Once we do a play, we should only keep the ones we can and throw away the rest.”

If they had more room, then they would have just kept everything they made, but the small container was almost full just with the things they used for this play. Although they had a hard time making them, they had no choice but to throw them away if they wanted to do another play next time.

“Let’s eat for now. We should worry later.”

Maru locked the container. Although it was too early to celebrate, it should be okay to hold an after party.

“We should pass the preliminaries right?” Daemyung asked as he stroked the container.

“We did our best, so all we can do now is to hope for the best. Let’s go. Our money lord for the day should be waiting.”

He hung his arm around Daemyung’s shoulders and walked towards the school gates. Aram and Jiyeon had arrived as well.

Taesik and Miso tried to leave after saying that they should talk at a later time.

“Why? You should eat together with us.”

“Everything’s good except for one person.”

Miso smiled brightly and said something suspicious. Maru sighed. It seemed that these two would stay enemies forever. Fortunately, the others did not hear her words.

“See you later everyone!”

Taesik and Miso left. Maru wondered when they would get married. Although Miso was very proactive, perhaps she was cautious when it came to marriage after all? No, he didn’t know that for sure. Perhaps she would suddenly call him tomorrow and say something like ‘I’m getting married’. Miso was more than capable of doing that.

“Shall we go then?”

Suyeon waved her wallet in the air.

\* \* \*

“Whaaat? You two are dating? Are you serious?”

Suyeon sat between Daemyung and Jiyeon while giggling.

Watching them, Maru wrapped a piece of duck meat in boiled bok choy and ate it. He thought that Suyeon would take them to eat some pork belly, but she actually brought them to a Chinese-style restaurant and ordered a course menu.

When he ate the assorted chilled vegetables and shrimp, that came out as the first menu, he exclaimed. It was that delicious. When the waiter entered to serve them food, they heard voices outside, and most of the time it was either Chinese or Japanese. It seemed that this restaurant was quite a popular hotspot for tourists.

Maru stood up from the table and left the room for a bit. Then, he called her. Although the signal sounded for a long time, *she* didn’t pick up. Was *she* busy having fun?

“Your girlfriend?”

When he turned around, he saw Suyeon. Maru folded his phone and put it in his pocket.

“You should reply to me at least.”

“You know who it is already, so what’s the point?”

“Aren’t you too heartless towards me?”

“Aren’t you embarrassed to say that to a kid as a fully grown adult?”

He walked past her and entered the room. Just then, Suyeon spoke in a small voice.

“I heard you’re working with director Joongjin.”

Hearing those words, Maru stopped and turned around to look at her. There was a thick smile on her face.