

Once Again 361

Chapter 361

After the curtain call, the lights turned on for the audience. The regionals had ended. Maru looked at his juniors who looked happy. They finished the play without mistakes. It wasn't that surprising that they were happy.

"Maru-seonbae."

"Yeah?"

"Is something up?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"Because your expression looks rigid."

Hearing Aram's words, Maru faintly smiled.

"It's because the lights are too strong."

"Aha."

"Let's clean up quickly for now. The next team is coming up."

"Yes!" Aram shouted with joy.

Maru carried some chairs down the stage. He was relieved that their play did not have any mistakes, and he was also proud as a senior to see that his juniors had gotten better.

"It was a little lacking for you, wasn't it?"

Maru turned his head around when he heard that voice. Daemyung had spoken to him with his hands full of luggage. He was really sharp. When they finished the play and greeted the audience, Maru only felt a small sense of achievement like having finished his homework. This was not a small stage. It was a very big stage where hundreds of people were watching the play. However, if he was asked whether he found it challenging, Maru couldn't answer clearly. For his juniors, this stage might still be a breathtaking space. For them, it had to be a stage where they were walking on a tightrope, not allowed to make any mistakes. As a senior of the first years, he couldn't say that the play wasn't challenging.

However, personally speaking, it felt different. There was no pressure on him at all. It might be a good thing. After all, it meant that he was just that used to it. As a senior, he was able to lead his juniors without difficulty.

It was nothing to complain about, but Maru still found it to be a pity. The majority of the audience that came to watch today did not look forward to the plays. After all, they just came because they had an acquaintance in one of the plays, or their school told them to, or perhaps because it was free, so they just randomly decided to.

Looking at the gazes of the audience from the audience seats allowed him to feel the general atmosphere. He could not feel it before, but he could clearly feel it now. Most of the audience did not have any interest in the plays themselves.

“Hey, when’s our school’s turn?”

“I don’t know.”

“Should we just run for it?”

“I heard they’ll be checking attendance afterwards.”

“Ah, that’s annoying! Geez, what’s up with all this even though it’s the holidays?”

“This is homework. What can we do about it? Rather than that, wanna go to the PC-bang after this?”

“Of course yes. Let’s make teams with the people here and have a match. Losing team has to pay for the PC-bang.”

The majority of the conversations from the audience were like that. It was a high school acting festival. The only ones that were interested were the participating schools. No, it couldn’t even be considered interest. Like what they were saying, it was just homework.

The stage, the actors, and the audience. These were the three elements of theater. If there was no one to watch, a play cannot exist. Watching. Before, Miso had said that the synergy between the actors and the audience was important. The stage was something that the actors created, but the ones that decided whether the stage is successful or not is the audience. The more focused and reactive the audience was, the more vitality the stage would have. The actors would then be able to show acting that was beyond their full capabilities. That was the power of the audience.

“It’s not like we can help it,” Daemyung said as he looked at the audience seats.

He was right, it couldn’t be helped. It was just a little bit of a pity. Just like how they did not take the plays seriously, the stage would become light as well. Although they were acting, it did not feel any fun. A stage without any excitement was just boring.

“As expected of a semi-professional.”

Daemyung smiled as he walked out. Maru just sighed before starting to move the props.

* * *

The lecture room was dark. That was because the beam projector just turned off. Miso turned on the lights. In front of her were three people. They were all those that wished to make a living as an actor. The academy in Gangnam, Film. Here, students aiming for universities couldn’t be found. This academy was solely created for the people that wanted to work in the field.

“There are many reasons that make a masterpiece a masterpiece. Direction, music, script, adaptation, outfits, makeup, editing. Among them, the actors aren’t actually entitled to do many things. Despite that, people look for good actors. That’s because the actors can fill in the parts that can’t be made up for with technology.”

Miso looked at the man sitting on the right. Ahn Sungjae. Every South Korean in their teens to thirties would know his name. After all, he was a member of TTO. Miso was also surprised at first to find out that he was in this class. Idols-turned-actors usually learned acting for a short period. That was because they needed to make the most out of their popularity while they were still popular before quitting. Yet, an idol like him was in this class where they started off from the basics. That was why she did some research. According to the other instructors in the academy, there was no one more passionate about acting than Sungjae among the ones that applied to this academy.

“Why are you trying to go into acting, Mr. Sungjae?”

“I’ve always liked acting without any reason since I was young. I was prepared to do anything if it was for that.”

“Without any reason, huh.”

Miso nodded.

“Next, Mr. Moon Gwangseok. Why are you going into acting?”

“Me? Uhm, because I have talent. I think so.”

“Aha, because you have talent. Alright.”

Miso then walked to the girl sitting next to Gwangseok.

“How about you, Miss Choi Gyunglim? Why do you act?”

“I started acting in order to change myself.”

“What do you mean by changing yourself?”

“It’s just as it sounds. I started acting because I want to become a different person.”

“I see.”

Miso stood between the three of them.

“What rumors have you heard about this academy, Film?”

“A place that only people that can concentrate on acting can come.”

That answer came from Sungjae.

“The place with the most expensive tuition fee in Gangnam.”

That was from Gwangseok.

“The place with the most actor connections.”

The final answer came from Gyunglim.

“You’re all correct. Film is among the top three acting schools among the numerous acting schools located in Gangnam. It is also known for its expensive lesson fees like what you said, Mr. Gwangseok.

One of the big reasons people compete to come to this place even with that expensive lesson fee and competition is, as Miss Gyunglim said, because of the actors' infrastructure."

Miso crossed her arms as she continued.

"In order to become a good actor, you need a lot of experience. If you have a look at some of your seniors that are doing well in the industry, they all had experienced some hardships in their life. That's not a coincidence. Nothing makes you experience a variety of things like hardships in life. You describe people that had an easy life as 'sheltered', right? Such people cannot become actors."

She brought a chair and sat down. The eyes of the three people in front of her were intense. They were all filled with the motivation to learn.

"I told you that there are many reasons why masterpieces are called such, right? Actors are the same. In order to have value, you need many elements. In this class, I'm going to force on you many different experiences. Some of them might be very random, and you might not understand why you're doing them. I'll say this beforehand. Do it anyway. Ask me why after you do it. I will not tolerate you complaining beforehand."

Miso stood up from her seat. That was enough for a greeting and a warning.

"I am going to use polite speech as much as possible during class. However, I can't guarantee it. I might curse at you. If you are the type to start spasming if you hear someone swear at you, I recommend you switch classes immediately."

She looked at the three sitting in front of her.

"I'm not switching."

"I applied for this class precisely because I heard you were back, instructor Miso. There is no way I'm quitting."

"I'm not quitting either."

The three were very motivated. At least their answers were good.

"Good. I'm also a little excited because I haven't come to the academy in a long time. Have you gotten to know each other yet?"

Hearing that, the three of them looked at each other awkwardly. Gwangseok and Gyunglim were clearly distancing themselves from Sungjae. Well, it was understandable since he was an idol. Meanwhile, Gwangseok and Gyunglim just looked at each other awkwardly before ignoring each other.

"You two know each other?"

"We met as minor actors at a shoot once," Gwangseok spoke.

Gyunglim nodded in agreement.

"I don't think you get along."

“Us? Not at all. Gyunglim is just shy, we’re actually on good terms. We even went out and drank together after the shoot. Isn’t that right, Gyunglim?”

“We drank together, but it’s not like we’re on good terms.”

There was a moment of cold silence. Gwangseok smiled awkwardly.

“Miss Gyunglim. You’re quite proud of yourself. You’re also the type to speak what’s on your mind.”

“Yeah, well.”

“Then why do you seem to lack confidence? You need to look at the other person when you’re talking to them.”

Hearing that, Gyunglim looked at Gwangseok. However, she couldn’t look at him for long.

“I won’t tell you to get along. You’re all adults and you know what’s good for you. Well then, let’s finish the introductions here and take a break before we start.”

* * *

Gyunglim looked at Miso, who was sitting with a coffee cup in hand. Miso was a woman filled with dignity from top to bottom. She might not have shined as an actor, but she was one of the best teachers around. Although the lesson fee was expensive, many people said that she was worth every penny, so Gyunglim applied to it despite having to push her finances.

‘Rather than that, TTO, huh.’

On the first day of class, she was surprised to see Sungjae sitting in the class when she opened the door to the lecture room. She wasn’t a fan of TTO, so she wasn’t overly agitated, but she did feel a little strange when she thought about how one of the greatest idols in the country was taking the same class as her.

Just when she was dazing out on her seat, Gwangseok came in. The idiot that lived on his ego. That was her impression of Gwangseok. She didn’t even want to greet him, but she couldn’t entirely ignore him so she just greeted him with her eyes. Gwangseok also didn’t seem to feel good to see her.

“I hope we can get along,” Sungjae spoke then.

She thought that he would be rather arrogant since he was an idol, but he didn’t have any of that attitude.

“Of course. Oh, how old are you? I’m twenty-one this year,” Gwangseok asked.

“Me? I’m twenty-six.”

“Then I guess you’re Sungjae-hyung. I listen to your music all the time. All of the girls I know are your fans. Oh, can I just call you hyung?”

“Go ahead.”

“Then you can talk to me without being polite as well. I’ve always wanted to be brothers with an idol. Since we’re in this class together, let’s get close. How about it?”

“Haha, alright. Then let’s do that. Oh, Miss Gyunglim, was it?”

Gyunglim looked at Sungjae and nodded. She felt like she had to state her age here. Just as she was about to speak, Gwangseok interrupted.

“She’s Choi Gyunglim and she’s twenty years old. She’s like a sister to me. I guess that clears up the hierarchy.”

Gyunglim glared at Gwangseok a little. Gwangseok turned his head and smiled at her after feeling her gaze. He hadn’t changed his habit of interpreting everything however he wanted to. He was really dislikeable.

“But Sungjae-hyung. You appear in Twilight Struggles, right?”

“Oh, you know that?”

“I actually took the audition for that and failed by just a tiny bit. It was such a pity. I wasn’t in a good condition back then, so I couldn’t bring out my full capabilities. If I passed back then, I would’ve met you on set.”

“Really? That’s a pity.”

“Hey, you and I are quite connected. Hahaha.”

Gyunglim was flabbergasted when she saw Gwangseok laughing like that.

“Like hell, you’re connected,” she spoke.

The two immediately looked at her. She realized her mistake, but it couldn’t be helped. She couldn’t unsay something. Moreover, Miso also said that there was no need to stay close.

“She’s quite a picky girl as you see. Please be understanding.”

“Looks like you two are on good terms, playing jokes on each other like that.”

“Of course! My sociability is top-notch, so I haven’t seen anyone that hates me until now. I also got close with a picky girl like Gyunglim in a short time. Rather than that, Sungjae-hyung, have you seen a lot of actresses in your career as an idol?”

Gyunglim looked at Gwangseok for a while before falling silent. She didn’t even want to face him. She decided that she should talk to Sungjae when that chatterbox wasn’t here. Actually, Gyunglim had been feeling Sungjae’s gaze for a while now. The way he looked at her was out of the ordinary. Did he perhaps have feelings for her? She smiled faintly. Boys always gave signals like that, and she always noticed such signals quickly.

‘I must be quite charming.’

She stroked her side hair behind her ears and smiled faintly. Would this excite him a little? Thinking about how Sungjae would be looking at her right now, she tried to act calm.

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Sungjae looked at Gyunglim and smiled. For some reason, they kept meeting eyes for a while now, so he wondered if she was looking at him or not. Did she have something to ask?

“Sungjae-hyung. Tell me who the prettiest actress was among the ones you saw.”

Gwangseok, who sat next to him, grabbed his arm and spoke. It was good that he was acting close, but he acted a little too close that it made him uncomfortable.

“They’re all pretty.”

“Don’t say that and say what’s on your mind. I’m into Suyeon-noona these days. Do you know her?”

“No, I haven’t met her in real life.”

“I see. If you do meet her, then can you please get me her autograph in my name?”

“If I have the opportunity.”

“Ah, right. I also dreamed of becoming an idol once. I’m quite good at singing you know? And at dancing. I would’ve done pretty well if I became an idol.”

“I see.”

“Let’s go to noraebang together. I’ll show you my skills. And if possible, with a girl idol too.”

“I think that’s going to be difficult.”

“Ah, why? I think you can do it since you’re TTO.”

“I’m no one great.”

“Mm, fine. But don’t forget to call me if there’s an opportunity. Promise me, okay?”

“Alright.”

Even though it was just a conversation, it tired him out. He kept asking for something, and it didn’t look like he was joking. No, even as a joke, he was going too far. Was he saying all that because it was the first time they met? Some time would be necessary to find out what kind of person Gwangseok was, as well as Gyunglim.

Sungjae turned his head and looked at Miso. Miso was watching them while drinking coffee. He had heard a lot of rumors about her. She was a famous instructor known for her teaching skills even in this academy.

After his shoot for Twilight Struggles ended, Sungjae decided that he should learn acting from the basics. The reason he applied to this academy and registered for this class specifically was because of that.

Learning acting while having activities as an idol, and using the popularity gained as an idol, break through the wall that separated the movie world. That was the path that president Narim showed him, and the road was well-paved and it seemed that he would be able to arrive at the destination as long as he followed the right path.

However, after talking with elder Moonjoong, Sungjae started to feel uneasy about the path he was walking. It wasn't an unease due to his popularity. As long as he was Sungjae of TTO, he would be loved no matter what he did. This wasn't him being arrogant, but being confident. He checked that fact multiple times over the past 6 years.

What he was uneasy about was what kind of actor he would become. If he was aiming for an actor that was successful financially, then he could be considered one. There were many scripts that president Narim brought. Some of those offers just asked him to come to the set without any audition. They just needed his presence. He had decent acting skills, and he was hugely popular. As long as he shot a movie, his hardcore fans that visited his fan café to check his schedule every day would watch the movie for him.

What an easy success was that? However, that didn't mean he was earning money as an actor, but as Sungjae the idol. Before he talked to elder Moonjoong, he thought that he would be satisfied with just being a 'successful' actor.

Just what led him that way? Now that he thought about it, he felt his past self was pathetic. He must have been tired of everything. He was fed up with money directing his every movement and the sheer number of TV programs he had to attend to. When he saw his former colleague that he studied with, living a hard life as a minor actor, and when he suppressed that colleague with his popularity and disdained him, he thought that acting was, in the end, just a side skill. In the end, TV programs aimed for money, and since his popularity gained that program money, he thought that popularity was the metric that decided everything.

However, that wasn't it. Elder Moonjoong was walking on a completely different path. An atmosphere that he had never encountered when shooting dramas was present on that set. He felt what a 'professional' that elder Moonjoong talked about, was on that set.

Just what were the dramas he shot until now? When he looked back in retrospect, his acting skills never became a hot topic. All the time, it was about Sungjae of TTO appearing in some drama in the news articles. His acting in the role that he gained through popularity was just a tool to fill in the scenes.

On the movie set, Sungjae watched Moonjoong's acting without taking his eyes off him. He engraved the acting of other actors into his eyes. It was a fierce zone. Sharp words that sounded like they could slay someone were floating around in the air like it was normal. Although the atmosphere was good, it would freeze up in an instant the moment a scene was not to someone's liking. Amidst all that, Sungjae felt his emotions become agitated.

He started putting effort into synchronizing himself with the rest of the pros that were there as he spoke his lines, not mechanically saying his lines like a dumb machine. He didn't want to be separate from the rest of the actors. He was tempted by the strong thought that he wanted to stand with them.

It was then he realized. He realized that that was the kind of acting he wanted to do when he was a student. He wanted to become a part that created a story. He didn't need any other reason.

He realized that he got his priorities wrong at the set. Since when was he acting in order to gain popularity? Didn't he need his popularity to get into acting? When he realized that his tool had become the objective, that fierce movie set became a playground more enjoyable than anything.

He was scolded a lot. He heard countless times not to make mistakes. Your pronunciation is not correct, your actions are awkward. You're not putting enough emotion - the words that pointed him out made him feel glee. If he was just a throwaway card, if he was someone that they didn't care about, then they wouldn't even care. The fact that they pointed him out meant that they wanted him to do better. Sungjae really liked that place since they treated him as an actor, not an idol.

He felt like he was the new kid in class all over again. He carried the luggage with the staff members and made coffee for the actors. He sent his manager, who tried to stop him, to Seoul first and stayed next to the actors. When he started immersing himself, he started to look at not just the lead actors, but the supporting actors and the minor actors. He started taking interest in the people he never cared about when he participated in dramas as the idol Sungjae. He approached them as carefully as possible and asked many things. When he did, he was surprised.

The careers of the actors in that place were amazing. Even though he had never seen some of those actors before, there was one that had over 15 years of experience. They were all people that made a living out of their acting skills. He could finally see why the acting of the minor actors was so smooth.

If the president did not call him herself, Sungjae would have kept following Moonjoong as a staff member. The shooting set was just that charming for him.

After that, Sungjae told the president to get him minimal events and wholeheartedly started focusing on studying acting. He rejected all the works that he originally decided to participate in. He did not want to do them when he thought that they were for the idol Sungjae. The desire he had when he was still a student came back to him. He wanted them to look for him for his skills.

Of course, this didn't mean that he now thought that popularity was absolutely unnecessary. He had seen too many things to go back to his innocent days.

"Looks like you had enough talk, so shall we resume class?" Miso spoke as she put down her coffee cup.

"I am going to teach you everything from the beginning like I'm teaching a child that's just learned to walk. All of you have studied acting one way or the other, so I believe there should be no problems in following the class. Well then, first up," Miso pointed at the floor and spoke,

"Consider there's the person you like standing here and confess."

* * *

Dayoon sat up as she covered her upper body with the blanket. Next to her lay that man. She carefully got off the bed and went to the bathroom. They had come to the motel after a long time. The man caressed her body with his hands and shared his love passionately. They had returned to their relationship of the past.

Her figure looked a little tired when she looked at the mirror. Dayoon smiled.

"Yes. I'm doing well. I am in love with that person. My objective is not money. Yes, this is love. We are in love with each other."

She said that to herself multiple times before leaving. The night skies of Seoul could be seen through the window next to the bed. Dayoon put on a bathrobe and sat down on the chair. She didn't feel like falling asleep any time soon.

She turned on her phone. She had received a few text messages. She first read the message from her president. It was just the usual 'everyone, let's do our best' text. She wanted to ask 'at what?' to the president.

Beneath that were messages from the members. She couldn't remember the last time she received a text like this. When they just had their debut, they always called each other and said that they wanted to see each other even when they were apart for a brief time, but now, they didn't even ask each other how they were doing.

She checked the contents of the message. One member was going to change her phone number. When she saw that text, it finally came to her that Blue had not much life left.

She leaned back into the chair. The number of idol groups that are born and disappear each year couldn't be counted with one's hands. A star only had value when it shined. A star that forgot how to shine was no longer a target of interest. It was just a rock, and a rock would just be kicked around.

The members were each looking for their own ways to survive. Minji had become a fixed member of an entertainment show. She was gaining quite a bit of popularity as well. It was an entertainment show where they had to do physical things, and she was acting as a couple with another member. The internet was all over about whether she was an actual couple with that actor or not. She had caused people to look at her.

Chaerim was solidifying her position as an idol-turned-actor. There were no longer talks about her acting skills either. From what she heard, Chaerim became a supporting role in a daily drama, but she didn't affirm with her so she didn't know the truth.

"The other two are doing well as well."

Dayoon raised the glass with whisky and threw it on the floor. Along with a sharp glass shattering sound, the fragments spread out across the floor.

Here, she was extending her life by selling her body to a man, yet the others were shamelessly doing well. She felt uneasy to death. Once Blue disappeared, the only title she would have left was a 'rather pretty girl in her mid twenties'. She didn't even want to imagine such a future.

"What happened?" The man woke up and asked.

Dayoon sighed nervously before turning around to look at the man. Of course, she had a smile on her face.

"Sorry about that, my hand slipped."

"Really? You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"I'm fine. Sorry about that. I woke you up, didn't I?"

"It's fine. Rather than that, there's glass on the floor so stay still."

The man brought a towel before laying it out on the floor. Dayoon stepped on that towel before going into the man's arms. There was a faint smell of cigarettes. Dayoon felt that that smell was adorable. No, she had to feel that way.

"You're not going to throw me away from now on, are you?"

"What's up with you all of a sudden?"

"I feel uneasy."

"I won't. Also, what's there to be uneasy about? All that's left for you is to do good. Didn't I tell you that everything will go well as long as you trust Joongjin and do as he says? He'll turn you into a star."

"Will it really be like that?"

"Of course."

Dayoon looked up at the man's face. There were wrinkles on his forehead. He had a stubborn-looking face. That face was adorable.

'This man is the answer.'

She hugged the man's arms and kissed him. She put in her tongue and tickled him. She took off the bathrobe and stuck her body against the man's. She grabbed the man's stiff genital and caressed it.

"Tell me you love me."

"I love you."

"Really?"

"Of course."

"I love you too, so don't throw me away."

This man was the only thing she could rely on. Dayoon accepted the man's genitals deep inside her body and smiled.

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"Swinging your fist without thinking wouldn't make an action scene. You need to know how to set up a composition. If you digest only the things I tell you, you will just stop there, but if you study more by watching your seniors, you will experience growth. Bear in mind that what I'm teaching you here is, in the end, the basics."

Choongho said those words as he finished the class. They started relocating the mats back into their original positions and put away the tools. They also did some cleaning.

"Thank you for your work!"

They left the building after thanking him loudly.

"I'm dying."

Kang Sooyoung and Choi Joon-gi, who took classes together, massaged their shoulders as they spoke. Maru also stretched his arms out. The intensity of the classes was rising. The time they spent on learning theory was reduced by the day, and they started moving around more physically.

“How many times did we fall over today?”

“I don’t know. But it’s over 100 for sure.”

“Maru, are you okay? There was a big sound when you fell last time.”

Maru twisted his body to stretch as he spoke.

“It was loud, but it didn’t hurt that much.”

“I almost thought you broke a bone or something. I mean, the sound was quite loud, and deep too.”

There was a fight scene where Maru was shoulder-thrown, and due to a mistake, he ended up falling on his shoulder. If he fell properly, the area of contact would be wide, the sound would be a popping sound rather than a thud, which would distribute the shock over a wide area, but at that time, he fell on his shoulder which made a deep sound. Thankfully, the mattress was thick and he did not get injured.

“So even instructors can make a mistake.”

“That’s why the director called him, right? He probably got shouted at. Did you see how he looked at Maru awkwardly after that? He always boasted about himself and that felt like sweet karma.”

“Yeah, it did.”

Sooyoung and Joon-gi walked away after saying their goodbyes. Maru nodded his head and waited for Bangjoo outside the building.

“Did you find your phone?” He asked Bangjoo who came out.

Bangjoo showed him his phone and smiled.

“It was next to the wire practice area. Looks like I forgot about it after I took a picture.”

“Don’t leave things everywhere. It’s all money you know?”

“Okay.”

Bangjoo walked next to him with his bag in hand. But he was a little too close. Maru looked at Bangjoo since he looked like he had something to say.

“I heard something while I was finding my phone.”

“What did you hear?”

“I overheard the names of the actors appearing in the movie we’re doing.”

“Really? Who?”

“I started listening from halfway so I don’t know about anyone else, but I heard one name loud and clear. Kwon Dayoon from Blue.”

Bangjoo clenched his hands and shouted hooray.

"I heard that clearly. The idol Kwon Dayoon. I'm a fan of hers."

"You like idols?"

"Just her. She's really good at sports. I saw her on TV before and she's really good at learning. I became her fan back then."

"You became her fan because she's good at sports?"

"She's pretty too. I saw her photo without makeup and she looked really pretty. You know her as well, right?"

"No, I don't."

"Hm, I guess it's reasonable that you don't know since you don't watch TV that much."

Bangjoo smiled pleasantly.

Blue, huh. Maru was reminded of Chaerim for a brief moment. Now that he thought about it, she said that *she* hung out with her last time. It looked like they had gotten close.

'A movie with an idol in it huh. Director Joongjin should have picked her as well right.'

Joongjin even picked the minor actors. There was no way he would've not met an actor that was lead~support-level actors. Since he, who was called a genius, picked her, there must be a reason for it. Perhaps she was a hidden pearl or something.

"When do you think we'll start shooting the movie?"

"They said it was at the end of August, so we don't have to wait that long."

"I hope we can start shooting soon."

"Why? To see that Dayoon girl?"

"There's that too, but I'm curious about what shooting a movie is like. As for plays, I'm doing one right now, so I don't feel lacking in that part."

"If it's anything like what I've experienced before, then it will be very hard. No, it will be awfully hard."

"Awfully hard?"

"Think about it. There are at least a dozen people watching your lips. On top of that, there are people much more popular, much better at acting than you waiting. Every mistake you make is another glare in your direction, and you'll be sworn at with a high chance. Do that multiple times, and you might see a script flying in your face. It's a harsh place for sure."

Hearing his words, Bangjoo looked even more expectant. Maru smiled faintly. He liked how Bangjoo did not lose his spirit.

"Seonbae-nim, why don't we get some toasted sandwiches on the way home? I'll treat you."

“Hey, I think you’re looking for ways to get me to treat you all the time.”

“I’m really buying this time. I got some pocket money from my sister.”

“Then I guess I’ll eat something from you this time?”

“Of course. You can add extra fillings as well. My sister gave me a lot of pocket money.”

Bangjoo said ‘let’s go’ in a loud voice. Maru smiled as he followed.

* * *

“I’m seeing you quite frequently.”

“That is true.”

“I wanted to have a drink with you when I saw you a few days ago, but I couldn’t since I had a lot of appointments.”

“It’s fine. We’re not close enough to drink together.”

“I guess that’s true.”

Junmin looked at Joongjin who sat in front of him. There was a mysterious smile on his face. Junmin also replied with a smile since he was given a series of slightly different smiles.

“Looks like the conversation we had last time wasn’t enough since you’re here again.”

“Back then, we only talked about the past, not about business.”

“Business, huh. Oh, should I give you some tea?”

“No, I’m good. As I said before, I’m a busy man.”

“Alright. Then let’s get to the point. It will be rude of me to keep holding a busy person here.”

Junmin leaned forward a little. Why was this man, Park Joongjin, here?

“I’ll get straight to the point then. I wish to borrow Miss Yang Miso for a little.”

“Miso, you say?”

“Yes. I’m shooting a movie soon, but I haven’t seen a suitable person to supervise acting at the scene. The people I’m acquainted with all had schedules. So I looked into other people, and she came onto my radar. My acquaintances recommended her as well.”

“I see.”

“On top of that, I found out that you were taking care of her, so I saw no reason to hesitate. That’s why I came here immediately.”

“It looks like the rumors have already spread that I’m taking care of her.”

“It’s not to the point of being a rumor, but I just heard some stories. Ever since I came back to Korea, I’ve been hearing a lot of things. I can’t be sure about anyone else, but I trust your eyes at least.”

“Yes. I do have a good eye for people. But unfortunately, Miso is currently occupied with something else.”

“What is she occupied with?”

Junmin stopped leaning forward and rested his back against the backrest. He now understood the reason behind Joongjin’s visit. He was in a better position here.

“She’s an instructor at an academy.”

“An academy instructor, huh.”

He saw Joongjin stroking his chin.

“President.”

“Yes, please speak.”

“May I go and meet this person called Yang Miso?”

“Well, you don’t need my permission for that. She’s in Film right now.”

“Film? You mean the one in Gangnam?”

“Yes.”

“An instructor there huh. It looks like you have multiple talents below your wings. The one called Geunsoo last time was very good as well.”

“He’s one of my valuable assets. He’s an important guy.”

“Oh, my. Everything I wanted since before seems to go into your hands. Haha, that’s right. It was like that back then too, with Haejoo.”

The smile on Joongjin’s lips started turning faint. Junmin also put away his business smile.

“I hear that name from you a lot, director Park. I don’t really feel that pleasant about it.”

“Me too. I don’t want to keep mentioning her either, but looking at you keeps reminding me of her. Oh, I had a drink with the people that shot ‘Spring Calendar’ a few days ago. Miss Joohyun was there too. She’s matured a lot since the last time I saw her.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Ah! Mr. Han Maru was there as well. What a coincidence. Mr. Maru is also under you, right?”

“You’re probably right.”

“Again, just why are the people I like always related to you? It’s quite ironic. Just how good is your character that all the good people go under your wing?”

“I only give some support to those with talent. Somehow, people gathered under my wing like that. It’s not that I have a good character.”

“How humble of you.”

Joongjin put on his fedora, which he put on his lap, and stood up.

“Anyway, I’ll go meet Miss Miso. Who knows? She might have enough free time to help me out.”

“If Miso says okay, then you can use her as you like. She’s skilled in that regard.”

“Thank you.”

Joongjin turned around. Junmin no longer looked at him and looked at his desk. He saw a pile of documents he had to look over.

“President.”

Junmin raised his head. He saw Joongjin standing in front of the door.

“Fifteen years ago, I made a lot of regrets. It was back then that I realized that humility and refusal might be poisonous. What if I had grabbed Haejoo before that? What if I interfered between you and her? I keep thinking about it even now.”

“If you want to swear at me, then go ahead. If you want to hit me, you can do that as well. However, you will not get me to say sorry. Even if I go back to back then, I will grab Haejoo. I will help her become the greatest actor in South Korea.”

“What if Haejoo dies again as a result of that?”

Joongjin turned around. He had scary eyes. It wasn’t the eyes of someone that was smiling. They were the eyes of pain that could only be expressed by people that possessed a wound that had started to rot.

Junmin returned the gaze. When Joongjin writhed in pain back then, he was right next to him. Pain wasn’t something unique to Joongjin.

After looking at each other for a while, Joongjin took off his fedora and smiled again.

“Please excuse me. I apologize.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’ll bring a bottle of whisky next time. Let’s talk again at that time.”

“Alright.”

Joongjin nodded slightly before leaving. Junmin sighed deeply before leaning back into the chair. He felt very tired.

* * *

“Emotions aren’t something that you bring out. It is something that is brought out because of your opponent. Of course, you can bring it out as well, but emotions brought out like that are less sympathizable. Even a monologue is bringing out the emotion by looking at one’s inner self.”

When Miso finished her words, she looked at the man sitting in the corner of the room. She was going to pause the class after seeing the man come into the class mid-way, but the man told her to keep going without minding him. When she asked him who he was, he only replied that he came here upon Mr. Lee

Junmin's recommendation. She wasn't the type that would become nervous just because someone was watching, so she ignored him and continued the class.

"Let's take a break," she told the three applicants before walking towards the man.

"Are you Miss Yang Miso?"

"Yes. I am Yang Miso."

"Nice to meet you. Please excuse me for coming here all of a sudden. My name is Park Joongjin, and right now, I'm shooting a movie," Joongjin said as he put out his hand.

Miso grabbed his hand back for now. She thought that he would shake gently, but Joongjin vigorously shook his hand up and down as though he was playing a prank. Miso did not get flustered and shook her hand even more vigorously. Joongjin declared defeat and pulled out his hand first.

"You really are out of the ordinary. I like you."

"Just what are you?"

"A director. I think I just told you that."

"Are you really a director? I really don't like scams. I don't usually get scammed either."

"I also dislike scams."

Joongjin took out his phone and called someone before having a short conversation. A moment later, Miso saw a text on her phone.

-He's director Park Joongjin who shot Spring Calendar. If you have time, talk to him.

It was from Junmin.

Chapter 364

"Many of our seniors and instructors say this: make it look natural. The reason they always say those words is because it's the most important ability. You should already know how ugly acting can be. The moment it's obvious that your acting is acting, people come to themselves. Oh, they're just acting - like that. That's why we need to keep thinking. Just what is 'natural acting'?"

Miso watched the three people sitting in front of her before looking at the back of the classroom. Director Park Joongjin, he said he had something to talk about with her, but said that they should talk about it after class. Then, he asked if he could watch the class since it was boring to wait outside. Miso permitted him to. When she heard that his name was Park Joongjin, she became interested as well.

"Miss Gyunglim, can you do an act where you get angry?"

"An act where I get angry?"

"Yes. Should I give you some context then?"

"Yes, I think that will be easier for me."

“Then let’s go with this. The two of you should think about it as well. I’m going to give you the same situation.”

Miso looked at Gyunglim and spoke.

“I’ll give you a situation. You were fired from work two days ago. Moreover, you just heard that you need to vacate your room this morning, while your parents are asking you for living expenses. You can’t be in a worse situation. Just then, a friend, no, just someone you know appears in front of you and picks a fight with you, asking why you live your life the way you do. Well then, how are you going to get angry?”

Miso pointed in front of her. Gyunglim, who was sitting down, stood up and walked there.

“How would you feel in that situation?”

“I would want to break everything around me.”

“Then express that emotion. Consider me that acquaintance.”

Miso waited for Gyunglim to bring out her emotions. Not long later, Gyunglim nodded her head. It seemed that she was ready. Miso just told her ‘why do you live your life like that’.

“Why I live like that? What the hell are you? Who the hell are you to just show up in front of me and say such things to me? What do you know about me? Why are you sticking your nose into my business? Huh? Why do YOU live your life like that? Huh?”

Gyunglim screamed her lungs out. Miso pointed towards Gyunglim’s side. Gyunglim looked at her before walking to the side.

“Next. Mr. Gwangseok.”

“Yes!”

“You’re in the same situation. Begin when you’re ready.”

Gwangseok took some time to bring out his emotions as well before starting his act. Although the repertoire had changed, he also screamed his lungs out.

“Mr. Sungjae?”

“Yes. I’ll begin right away.”

“Good.”

Sungjae expressed his anger in a different way. If the previous two burst out with their emotion, Sungjae suppressed his anger. He finished off with raising his voice for a short time at the very end.

“Well then, what did you think of each others’ acting?”

“I don’t know,” Sungjae replied.

Gwangseok replied ‘everyone did well’, while Gyunglim asked back instead, saying ‘you asked because it wasn’t good, right?’

Miso had everyone sit down.

“Everyone did their act according to the way you learned, right?”

The three nodded.

“Well, alright. There is no correct answer like mathematical formulas give when it comes to expressing emotions. However, just coating your skin with emotion is not enough when it comes to expressing emotions. You need the essence. An expression without essence is just superficial.”

Miso looked at the three people’s faces in detail. She could learn a lot from looking at their faces, that is, how much the three were listening to her. For Sungjae, he seemed to understand something from her words and was focusing on her more. People like him were enjoyable to teach.

Meanwhile, Gwangseok and Gyunglim looked like they understood, but they did not seem to be looking back at their own acts. From how they didn’t look back at their acts in retrospect, they seemed to have a long way to go as actors.

“All three of you got angry. But that’s it. If I wanted to see you shout, then I’d just tell you to shout, not get angry. Also, I gave you the contextual situation, right? Getting your emotions together is not getting ready to frown, but about thinking. Anger without reason is meaningless. Anger only has meaning if you give it meaning, that is, you give it essence. We are actors, not crazy people, right? Only crazy people get angry without a reason. Actors need to be able to show their reasons for getting angry through their expression of anger. Do you understand? A three-year-old can act angry if they were told to. Think about what this means and do it again.”

Miso pulled over a chair and sat down. Only the ones that think about what she just said will learn anything from the class.

“You’re fierce when it comes to teaching,” Joongjin, who was sitting at the back, approached her and spoke.

“Class is not over yet, are you okay with that?”

“It’s fine. I do not think of investing time into people that I think are necessary as a waste of time.”

“Since we have some time right now, let’s continue where we left off before. You said you needed me, correct?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Do you mean as an actress, or as an instructor?”

“I need an on-the-scene acting advisor. And, I came to a decision after I looked at your class. I really hope you can come to my set.”

Miso crossed her arms. Doing something with director Park Joongjin, huh. It sounded attractive to her. The movie ‘Spring Calendar’ was a movie she liked to the point that she watched it several times at the cinema ten years ago. The director stayed away from a soap opera and made the fullest out of actors that were practically new to the industry.

“Who’s the lead actor?”

“For now, Mr. Lee Hyuk is confirmed.”

“Lee Hyuk? Is he the same Lee Hyuk I know?”

“Yes, probably. Also, there’s an idol-turned-actor as well. Named Kwon Dayoon.”

“An idol?”

That was not good news. Although the general level of idols has gone up recently, that was only when compared to the past. They ruined the overall picture when they were placed amidst veteran actors.

“You seem worried, but you need not be. I will be managing her. I do not plan to have her act as she wishes to.”

“She’s a lead and you’re not having her act?”

“Yes. She will move just as I instruct her to. She will not become a hindrance to the other actors.”

“Does that change anything?”

“It does. It did ten years ago after all. I only assign work to those that are capable. Those that aren’t, I instruct them personally. So, you don’t need to worry about the atmosphere at the set,” Joongjin spoke with a smile.

For some reason, the way he spoke reminded her of someone. She thought about it for a moment before arriving at an answer.

“The way you talk is really similar to the way senior Junmin, I mean, the president speaks.”

“Him and I?” Joongjin replied with a faint smile.

Miso just replied that they just felt similar. For a very brief moment, she saw Joongjin’s expression turn cold. It seemed that he was not on good terms with Junmin. No, that reaction probably indicated that he did not like him.

“For now, I should resume class.”

“Then I shall go back to watching then.”

“If you’re busy, you can just go. I will think about it and contact you.”

“No, no. I’m staying because this looks interesting. Oh, am I a nuisance?”

“No, it’s not like that.”

“Then I’ll keep watching. Let’s have a talk after the class, over a meal or something.”

“Alright, then.”

Miso gave glances at the three people that were looking their way.

“To think that you have the time to think about others, that’s amazing. Looks like you already realized the meaning behind what I said, right? Very well. Start acting again one by one in front of me. Just how

good are you to be distracted when you don't even have enough time to think about yourself? Let's see, shall we? Ah, for your reference, you will be spending more time moving your body rather than sitting down. You can all do leg splits as the basics, right?"

Miso crossed her legs in front of the three.

"Go ahead, then. If I don't see any changes in you from last time, I'll have no choice but to give you an earful."

* * *

"I'll finish up things here for today."

Sungjae fell backwards as soon as he heard those words. He felt like he was getting leg cramps. He turned his head to look at the other two who were leaning against the wall. They were looking at him as though he was some amazing person.

"Mr. Sungjae. You seem like you did some exercise."

"Yes. I'm an idol after all. *pant, pant*."

"I like your stamina. You're quite flexible as well. You seem to know how to use your body, so I'll decrease training that just focuses on stamina for you. However, the two of you should get ready to run just like today. Why are your bodies in horrible states even though you are actors? Bear this in mind. Unless you are an actor that can speak with just your eyes alone, you need to practice so that you can move every part of your body, from your fingertips to your toes, to your will. Anyway, thanks for today."

Sungjae lied on the floor and watched as Miso left the class. He felt like he went back to his trainee days. It had been a really long time since he received training as intense as this.

"Wow, hyung. I can't believe you managed to go through all that."

"Are you okay?"

He said that he was okay to Gwangseok and Gyunglim who approached him and stood up. After resting for a while, his legs felt better. He remembered practicing like this when he went to acting schools when he was still a student. His heart was satisfied even though his body was tired since he felt like he was learning properly.

Just as he wiped his sweat off with his sleeves, the man that entered mid-way through class approached them.

"All three of you look passionate."

Sungjae looked at the man. The man was wearing a casual-style suit and a fedora. Although he looked to be over forty years old, his prankful smile made him look younger.

"Are you all dreaming about becoming actors?"

"Of course. But who are you, sir?" Gwangseok asked.

“Ah, I haven’t introduced myself yet, I guess. My name is Park Joongjin, and I’m just a nameless movie director.”

Park Joongjin? Sungjae had never heard of that name. He calmed down his breathing and asked.

“Do you have any business with us?”

“That I do. I am trying to shoot a movie right now, so if it’s okay with you, would you like to participate?”

“In a movie?”

It was a rather sudden proposal. The first feeling Sungjae had was rejection. He thought about stories where scammers approached people and ripped money off them by coaxing them that they will make them idols. Scams like that were everywhere in the entertainment industry. When he looked back at the man warily, Joongjin laughed.

“I’m just giving you an offer right now. Actually, my main business here was with instructor Yang Miso. Let’s talk about the details later, and so? What do you think about appearing in my movie? Of course, I don’t mean that you will be the main characters.”

Just as Joongjin was about to continue, Miso came back in.

“Director, let’s go.”

“Ah, alright. Anyway, the three of you, please think about it. Well, then.”

Joongjin left the lecture room with a smile on his face. Miso watched him leave before approaching the three of them slowly.

“What did he tell you?”

“He asked us whether we wanted to appear in his movie or not.”

“His movie?”

Sungjae nodded and affirmed her.

“But is he really a movie director?”

“Yes, he is a director. He’s quite famous too.”

“I see.”

“He’s a very peculiar person, so I don’t know what intentions he had when he said that. Don’t mind him too much for now.”

“Okay.”

“Then see you tomorrow. Don’t forget to relax your muscles.”

Sungjae said goodbyes to Miso who left.

“Hyung, he probably said that as a joke, right?”

“I don’t know.”

Gyunglim, who was listening as she packed her bag, spoke.

“He must be joking. Where do you see a director that asks a person to feature in the movie on their first meeting?”

“That’s true.”

Sungjae packed his bag as well.

“Hyung, why don’t we eat dinner together?”

“Dinner? Shall we?”

“Yes. Also, you should tell me about the entertainment industry. There’s a pork BBQ restaurant nearby so let’s go there. Oh, wait. People might flock if they recognize you.”

“If I wear a cap, not many people recognize me.”

“Really? That’s good then. Let’s go!”

“Just the two of us?”

“Yes. Oh, there’s Gyunglim as well.”

Gwangseok shrugged before calling Gyunglim. In the end, they decided to eat with the three of them. He walked along the corridor while stretching his sore neck when Gwangseok went ahead saying that he had to go to the bathroom.

“Uhm, Sungjae-oppa.”

“Yeah?”

“Can you eat dinner with just two?”

“Why? You have an appointment?”

Sungjae wondered if she was busy or something.

“N-no. I meant the two of us.”

Gyunglim looked flustered after saying those words. It seemed that she was indeed not on good terms with Gwangseok. First, it was Gwangseok who tried to leave her out, and now Gyunglim was saying this.

Just then, Gwangseok came back. Gyunglim stayed quiet and started walking again. Sungjae smiled bitterly between the two who only talked to him and not to each other.

* * *

He just got a message from Miso. She said that she accepted the offer since the time looked right. Instead of saying well done, Junmin told her to rip a lot of money off him. Miso also replied that she intended to.

“Refusal and yielding is a foolish thing, huh.”

He didn't know whether Joongjin did it intentionally or it was just a coincidence, but he was somehow acquainting himself with the people around him. If he was someone that was obsessed with the past, he might be planning a petty revenge.

"Perhaps his intention is to steal things away from me since I stole from him."

Junmin drank the red tea that was steaming as he looked at his monitor. Park Joongjin. After all that's said, he was a genius. They should be able to learn a lot from him. Since they found the opportunity to grow, he decided to leave them alone. If he stole them, then he had to think about it at that time. He had confidence though since the man named Lee Junmin reached all the way where he was purely through managing other people.

Junmin clicked away on his keyboard. He had a mountain of work to do. The market was changing rapidly, and the ones that could not adapt would be swept away by the waves.

"A true actor."

He said those words out of habit before pressing enter.

Chapter 365

It was noisy even though it was early morning. Bada, who usually sleepily walked out of her room around 10 o'clock, was preparing herself early in the morning.

"Does it feel that good?"

"Of course!"

Maru shook his head and sat down at the table. He scooped a spoonful of rice out of the rice bowl that Bada had gotten for him. He never realized that there would come a day where his sister would prepare breakfast for him.

"Don't forget to message mom when you get there. And don't forget to message her again once it's over."

"Don't worry about that. I'm going to send ten, no, a hundred messages."

She took out her phone and called someone in front of the door. It was probably a friend of hers. Today was the day of TTO's concert that she had been looking forward to so much. Maru remembered how she was so excited like a puppy seeing snow for the first time last night.

"I'm off!"

"Watch out on the train. Remember to scream first if someone strange approaches you."

"I get it already!"

"Don't inconvenience the elder sister of that friend of yours. You need to be polite the closer you are to your friend."

"I know that."

“Don’t jump around too much because you’re excited. I’ve seen on the news that people collapse due to dehydration. Don’t forget to bring water with you and drink regularly.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“And don’t come too la....”

Slam - Bada closed the door and left. Well, she really couldn’t help herself at times like these. Just when he clicked his tongue, his mother came out of the main bedroom with a yawn.

“You should’ve slept some more. It’s only nine right now.”

“It’s too noisy to sleep. What about Bada?”

“She just left.”

“Geez, she’s quite something. The concert starts at six, and she has to leave now.”

“She says she’s going to hang out with her friends.”

His mother suddenly glared at him. Maru slowly turned his gaze to the soup.

“This kimchi-jjigae is good.”

“I get that you want to help your sister, but don’t splurge the money you earn, okay?”

“I said I got them for free.”

“Like hell those were presents. Mom looked into it already. What? A million won?”

“Mrs. Lee, please calm down. It’s a special occasion.”

“So you spent such a large sum of money without consulting me?”

“I’ll have to say this again, but I really got them as a gift. Why would I have so much money? If you can’t believe me, should I call the president right now and hand it over to you?”

“...You just won’t lose out in words, huh.”

“That’s because I take after you. Stop talking about a done matter and you should eat some breakfast. You’re on break today, so you should get some rest when you can.”

Maru prepared a set of rice and soup for his mother so that she couldn’t nag at him anymore. Since she was someone who hated to talk about bad things while eating, it should be enough to make her calm down. As he had expected, his mother sighed and started eating.

“Are things going well these days?”

“What things?”

“You know, you’re going to practice something. Was it action?”

“It’s going well. Whose son do you think I am?”

“What about your body? Are you sure you didn’t get injured?”

"I'm fine. You know me. I have a sturdy body."

"That you do, to the point that you never got badly ill when you were growing up. But watch out anyway. I heard that some people get crippled because something goes wrong with it."

"You're worrying too much. I wonder how you gave birth to a son and a daughter with that worried mind of yours."

"It's because I wanted to."

His mother smiled faintly.

"What about you? How's work going?"

"I can handle it. Things are complicated with labor unions and whatnot, but it's not something for us cashiers to think about."

"If they approach you and want you to join, then join them. Don't make yourself suffer."

"Don't worry about me and worry about yourself. Your mom is capable of handling it."

"Yes, yes. Who can go against our Mrs. Lee."

Maru finished his breakfast before standing up.

"You're going to drink coffee, aren't you?"

He asked as he poured some water into the kettle.

"Did you drink coffee?"

"Things happened and I started drinking."

"Don't drink too much. It's bad for your body."

"I'll stop if you stop drinking as well."

"Mom's fine because I'm old."

"What kind of logic is that?"

Maru went to the living room with a cup of coffee in hand. He turned on the TV and sat on the sofa. The TV was talking about food that was good for the bones. Carrot and Kale. He wondered if he should buy a juicer. Since it was obvious that his mother was going to object, he thought about buying it in secret.

Just as he was about to switch to the news, he heard his phone sound. He put the coffee on the table before going into his room. He picked up his phone which was on his bed.

"Hello?"

-It's me.

"Ah, yes. President."

-I need you to come to the company.

“The company? What time do I have to be there?”

-Right now.

“...Okay. I'll get washed and go immediately.”

After the call, Maru went to the bathroom immediately. He washed his face and hair before coming out.

“Where are you going?”

“Uh, Seoul.”

He dried his hair before changing clothes. He wore a grey t-shirt with the words ‘happy’ sewn onto the left chest, and a pair of jeans. He put a book to read on the bus in his bag and came out of his room, only to see his mother handing him a 10,000 won note.

“I have money too.”

“Take it. You won't know what will happen.”

He wondered what expression she would make if she found out that there was 300 million won in his account. Maru received the note before leaving his house. When he went to the bus stop, he saw a bus coming just in time. These kinds of trivial events made him happy. After he got on the bus, he thought about some things. Why would Junmin tell him to come to the company all of a sudden?

‘Not that I'm in a position to ask.’

The bottom-of-the-rung had to do what they were told to. It did seem quite urgent seeing how he called early in the morning.

He got off the bus and took the train. When he read the book he brought, time flashed by and he was in Gangnam station. It was 10:23. He got off the train and exited through the 12th exit. Just then, he got a message from Taesik. They got the silver prize in the regionals.

“So we failed huh.”

He wasn't that worried since their school passed the preliminaries with flying colors, but they didn't seem to make the regional finals. He didn't feel like it was a pity though. Honestly, he thought that it was a relief.

He had lost interest in the stage. He only focused on his play with the objective that he wanted to bring Daemyung to the nationals. Moreover, unlike last year, where the acting competition was the only thing he had, he had more important things to do this year. Considering the opportunity costs, it was actually good that he failed here.

He felt sorry for Daemyung and the others who would be disappointed about this news, but in the end, this was just a competition on a high school level.

‘Last year, I even cried in secret because I was too frustrated.’

He had definitely changed a lot during the past year.

Just as he was wondering what to send Daemyung, Taesik sent another message. It was the names of the schools that got grand and gold prizes.

“It’s not Myunghwa High.”

He thought that Myunghwa High would naturally take the grand prize, but a school he hadn’t heard of before got the grand prize. Myunghwa High got the gold prize. He didn’t think much about it since there were bound to be new and better things. But Hwasoo High, huh. It seemed to be a school in the northern region of Gyeonggi-do.

Just as he was texting Daemyung, Daemyung called him.

“Did you get the message?”

-Yeah. I guess we didn’t make it.

“Are you disappointed?”

-Well. I’m not that disappointed since we did everything we could, but it does tick me off.”

“Ticked off? You are?”

-Hey. I can get angry too. Rather than that, what do we tell the others? I think they were looking forward to going to Seoul Art Hall.

“I guess we should tell them to do their best and try their luck next year. Hey, but can I be honest with you?”

-About what?

“For me, I actually don’t feel that disappointed at all that we didn’t make it. I’m not angry either. In fact, I think it’s fortunate for me since I have more time. I have things to do after all.”

His words may have been unnecessary, but he didn’t want to lie to Daemyung. After a while, Daemyung’s voice could be heard.

-I thought you’d feel that way.

“Really?”

-I thought about it when I saw your expression after the regionals.

“I’m a little cocky, aren’t I?”

-Today isn’t the first time.

“Wow, Park Daemyung. That’s how you wanna play this, huh?”

-I’m joking. Honestly, I don’t feel that disappointed either. Of course, I am frustrated that we didn’t make it. After all, a completely new school pushed us out. But like what you said, now that I have things to do, other things don’t really enter my eyes.

“You mean your romantic business with Jiyeon?”

-No.

"I'm just joking. Don't be so serious."

-...Urgh, I shouldn't have started this. Anyway, what are you up to now? I'm thinking about meeting up and doing something with the others since it's over.

"I'm in Seoul right now. The president called me."

-Really? I guess today's no good.

"I'll call you when I have the time. Oh, what happened to the thing you were going to ask last time? About philosophy."

-For now, the president gave me permission. He said he'll support me with tuition even if I choose that department.

"That's good. Uhm, what about your parents?"

-...Well, I guess I have to try again to persuade them.

"Tell me if you need support. I'll go kneel together with you or something."

-Alright. Text me once your business is over.

"Okay."

After the call, Maru looked up. In front of his eyes was JA building. He got past the automatic doors and walked towards the elevator. He pressed the button for the staff-only elevator on the right and waited.

"Uhm, you need to take that one instead of this one. This one doesn't go to the commercial floors."

A lady kindly advised. There was an ID card on her neck.

"I have business on the 7th floor."

"Oh, 7th floor. Okay."

She nodded her head in understanding.

After getting off on the 7th floor, Maru greeted the lady sitting behind the front desk. He had gotten to know her face as he visited her a few times after the contract.

"I'm here because the president called me to come. Where is he now?"

"The president? He should be in the restaurant."

"The one on the 16th floor?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

The restaurant? Was he eating by himself? He grabbed the elevator again and went to the 16th floor this time. The last time he came here, he received a contract for the first time. In front of the entrance

was a sign that indicated that the restaurant was still in preparation. The doors were closed as well. Now then, what to do here.

Just then, he saw someone wave from inside. It was Junmin. Next to him was the elder. He was waving at him with his kind smile.

He opened the glass door and went inside. Relaxing music was playing in the background. He stood right past the entrance and looked at the two who were sitting at a table. They were hogging this huge restaurant to themselves since morning.

‘Ah right. The president owns this place.’

He could feel the financial prowess of Junmin again. More money was indeed better.

“You’re here.”

The elder reached out with his hand. Maru grabbed that hand with both of his hands.

“You left the hospital?”

“I did. It was nothing big, so I had a hard time staying there doing nothing.”

“I was planning to visit you again tomorrow.”

“That’s exactly why I left. I keep telling everyone I’m okay, but everyone’s making a big deal out of it.”

Maru let go of Moonjoong’s hand before greeting Junmin. Junmin nodded before telling him to sit.

“Have you had breakfast?” Junmin asked.

“I had a very satisfying one.”

“Even if you did, you’re going to have to eat more. Sir Yoon will make you eat,” Junmin smiled as he spoke.

Maru looked at Moonjoong. The elder was nodding his head as though it was natural.

“Let’s talk after we eat. Sir, is that okay with you?”

“Yes, let’s do that.”

Food came to their table soon. Most of the dishes were nearly raw vegetables without any sauce. Junmin probably ordered these in consideration of the elder.

“Isn’t this too much grass?”

“You need to eat like this.”

“Tsk, Maru. People become worried sick about you once you’re old. Maru, you still remember what you promised this old man, right?”

“You mean pork belly and soju?”

“Yes, that.”

“I’ll bring you to a nice place once you feel a little better.”

“Oh, my. You and Junmin are the same,” Moonjoong smiled in satisfaction as he spoke.

‘There seems to be no problems from his complexion. That’s fortunate.’

He was someone that helped him a lot when he was confused about his values. Maru also relied on the elder mentally so he was very worried when he heard that the elder collapsed. He felt better now that he looked healthy again.

When they were about to finish their meal, they were given red tea. The three stopped talking and drank the tea.

Maru looked at Junmin as he put down his teacup. He was starting to become curious about why he called him here. There was no way he called him here to have a meal. He wondered if it was the elder that called him here.

Just as he was thinking about that, Junmin spoke.

Chapter 366

“Have you watched historical dramas?”

Maru replied as he looked at Junmin who was taking in the smell of the tea.

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“I’m watching all the recent ones that are airing.”

The only TV programs he watched were the news and long-running historical dramas.

“The one on YBS?”

“Yes.”

“That’s rather fortunate. Isn’t that right, sir?”

Moonjoong nodded. Maru wondered why Junmin was talking about this. Maru looked at Moonjoong who had a satisfied smile on his face. It seemed that he held the answer to this.

“A director I’ve known for a long time is starting a historical drama soon. It will be airing on RBS.”

“An RBS historical drama?”

YBS historical dramas were called the ‘traditional’ historical dramas. It was mainly targeted towards the older generation and recruited heavyweight actors to do it. Meanwhile, historical dramas on RBS were mainly targeted towards the younger generation. Rather than talking about the sharp conflict between political people, they mainly dealt with romance or heroism.

“Yes, a historical drama on RBS. I was planning to rest a little, but this fellow asked me to do it. When I received the script, I became interested since it was a character I’ve never done before. And that’s

where you come in. Maru, do you want to try doing a child character in a historical drama?" Moonjoong asked as he leaned back in his chair.

"A historical drama?"

"Yes."

"Well, for me, I'd love to if I have the chance, but wouldn't I have to go through an audition?"

"You won't have to do an audition. I already said that I guarantee your acting skills. Also, it's not that big of a role."

"Can I ask what kind of role I'll be doing?"

Moonjoong smiled before replying,

"A beggar."

* * *

"You can go back now."

"I'll drive you home."

Junmin said that, but Moonjoong waved his hand in refusal.

"It's fine. I'm not so weak that I have to have the support of others. Then Junmin, see you next time. And Maru, see you in a while."

Moonjoong left after saying that he'd go home after looking around for a bit. After watching Moonjoong walk away from the building for a while, Junmin spoke.

"I have some more to talk about. Let's go in."

"Yes."

He followed Junmin to the coffee shop on the first floor. He could see company employees eagerly waiting next to the counter. It seemed that they were new recruits at their respective companies.

They sat at a table in the corner. Junmin took off his flat cap and spoke.

"I heard that Suyeon asked you a favor."

"She told me to play a minor role so I went."

"And it was doable?"

"It was just a couple of lines while chopping with a knife, so it wasn't that hard."

"I see. You're becoming more used to it now."

"I kept doing it and I guess I'm learning my way around."

"How is it compared to shooting movies?"

“I can’t say for sure since I only shot one movie, but from what I felt, shooting a movie was a lot harder.”

“It must have been harder since it was your first time. Then how about in the perspective of interest?” Junmin asked as he took out a notepad from his pocket.

Maru thought about it a little before replying.

“It was hard, but I felt more fun and there was a bigger sense of achievement when I shot the movie.”

“Why is there such a difference even though you were a minor actor in both?”

“I think it’s a matter of concentration.”

“So you focus less on dramas?”

“It’s not about focusing less. I just didn’t need to focus as much because not many expectations were placed on me. During the movie shoot, I felt that each and every frame was mine. There was a lot of pressure as well. However, the drama shoots weren’t like that. I could’ve done better, yet the producers that shot the drama just shout cut and go to the next scene, so it’s actually not fun at all. It’s not like I can ask the producers to shoot again when I’m just a minor actor.”

What he found out through playing minor roles in dramas was that shooting dramas was a war against time. There were almost no dramas in South Korea where they started shooting with a finished script and shot everything before the first episode. First, the main and secondary writers will write their scripts after every episode, then the shooting team will have to get ready in a busy fashion, and the actors will have to prepare, no, do their acts in a short time, as though it was fast food. No producers would want detailed acting from a minor role. They had it busy enough already. Minor roles were fine as long as they were decent in the background.

“Like that, my part goes by in a flash so I got used to that flow. I focused on not making mistakes as much as possible, so it does feel a little mind-numbing. When I went through that a couple of times, I realized that what I’m doing now is just work.”

“That’s a good realization you have there. Many actors expect too much from what they’re doing, not realizing that it was just work. Those actors will fall and not be able to climb up again.”

“Is it a good thing?”

“It is a good thing. You’re not going to live as an actor for plays.”

“I do want to do plays, but as I expected...”

“You want something that can earn you money?”

“That’s how it is.”

“Then you’ll have to get used to the TV media that much more. When you’re a minor actor, you at least have the time to think that your work is boring, but once you climb up to the ranks of supporting actors and lead actors, you won’t even have time to think about that. There will be scripts upon scripts upon scripts. At worst, you’ll receive the script just as you’re starting to shoot, so there’s no time to be bored. Mini-series and planned dramas are a bit better, but in the case of morning dramas and daily dramas,

there are plenty of occasions where the scenes change due to advertising issues. That's why actors that don't adapt to the speed of daily dramas become thinner every day."

"My mother used to talk about that as well. About how some actors looked very tired."

"It is a tiresome matter. Everything is like that. There's a line. Once you cross that line, you're treated differently. When planning a shooting schedule, unless they're borrowing a location for a specific period of time, everything is adjusted to fit the main actors. The actors that can't climb up sometimes have several shoots away from the city. If they rest just a little because they're tired, then cheaper, and better actors climb their way up. There's no worse red ocean than this."

"Aren't you a little cruel towards a youth that's just about to step into that industry?"

"I'm saying it because you're serious about this. There's no need to show fantasies to someone who's serious."

"Well, I guess that's true as well."

Just when they were in the middle of their conversation, a lady that seemed to work here approached them carefully.

"Excuse me, customers. I'm really sorry to tell you this, but you can't be sitting in our store if you do not order any drinks due to the changes in the store regulations."

The lady seemed very worried as she said that. It seemed that she was worried that a fight would break out. Maru smiled back awkwardly at her.

"I'm sorry about that. I didn't know. I'll order green tea then. Maru, what would you like to drink?"

"I'll have a latte, please."

The lady apologized again before confirming their order.

"Uhm, may I bring you a cup of green tea latte instead? There's no green tea on our menu."

"I'm okay with that."

"Yes."

The lady turned around with a smile.

"You don't say stuff like 'I own this building!' like in the dramas."

"Do you think a person with a proper mindset can say something embarrassing like that?"

Junmin smiled and called someone. Even when their drinks came out, Junmin's call continued. Maru drank his latte and waited for Junmin to finish his call.

"Sorry about that."

"No worries. But was that all you were going to tell me when you said that you needed to talk to me?"

"No, I just asked those as someone that will give you work in the future."

Junmin sipped his green tea latte before continuing to speak.

“Now, I’m going to ask some personal things.”

“I’m not sure if I’m understanding.”

“So you’re practicing action for the movie you’re about to shoot?”

“Yes.”

“Have you met the director?”

“We had dinner together a while ago.”

“With director Park Joongjin?”

“Yes, him.”

“I see, what kind of a person is he?”

Junmin crossed his arms. He looked quite serious.

“He was peculiar.”

“Peculiar?”

“Yes. Just the casting process was strange. He picked people on our first meeting. He never had us try some lines, and just picked people based on their body shapes. Ah, there was also one more criterion. His intuition.”

“Intuition?”

“Yes. He told me that he trusts his intuition the most. He says that intuition is everything. He is definitely eccentric.”

“Eccentric, you say. I guess that’s the most suitable word that describes him.”

“You know of director Park Joongjin?”

“I do. I’ve been acquainted with him for a long time as well. No, I guess I shouldn’t really call it ‘acquainted’. We aren’t on good terms.”

Junmin turned his head to look outside the window. Maru waited since Junmin looked like he was in deep thought.

“Did you hear what word people use to call director Park Joongjin?”

“Yes. They call him a genius.”

“Yes, a genius. I’ve met many people when I dived into this business, but there were only five people that I call geniuses according to my standards. Director Park Joongjin is one of them. He, like you said, is eccentric. He looks at the world in a different way from others.”

Maru nodded. The conversation he had with Joongjin, as well as his actions, were still clear in his mind. There shouldn't be that many people that press all the sides of a steak with their fingers just to get a precise feel of what the sensation is like.

"I met him a while ago. He said he's taken a liking to you."

"Am I supposed to be happy?" Maru asked with a smile.

"You can be. After all, a genius likes you. Steal as many things as you can from him. It won't be that easy. He has a completely different thinking circuit than us. But think about the same things he is thinking about, and think about the instructions he gives to the actors. You'll definitely gain a lot of things."

"I'm not a man of many talents, but I am a little good at learning things from others."

"Yes. That's the attitude. A director's mindset is very different from that of an actor's. It's much more inclusive. If you learn that mindset from him, it will help you out a lot throughout your actor career."

"Understood."

"Also, one last question."

"Yes."

"...Have you heard him mentioning the name Jung Haejoo?"

"Jung Haejoo? No, this is the first time I've heard of that name."

"I see, I see. Alright."

"Is she someone you know?"

Junmin slowly nodded.

"She was one of the geniuses I knew of."

For a brief moment, Junmin looked very fragile when he said that. Maru thought that he must have been mistaken and shook his head before looking at him again. As he had expected, he could only see the perfectionist Junmin in front of him. Just then, Maru thought that the name Jung Haejoo didn't sound that unfamiliar to him. He thought that he had heard that name somewhere. However, he couldn't remember. He could have been mistaken so he decided to stay quiet about it.

"Ah, also, there's someone I want to introduce to you today. He's one of the reasons I called you here."

Junmin looked at his watch and said that it was about time. At the same time, the automatic entrance to the building opened and a boy walked in. After looking around, the boy looked at the coffee shop before walking towards it with quick steps.

"I've arrived, president."

The boy bowed. He seemed a little shorter than 170cm. His stature was rather thin. He looked mature, but his face looked quite young. Maru greeted the boy that seemed to be around the same age as him with a slight nod.

“Go ahead and introduce yourselves. This is Yoo Sooil, and this is Han Maru.”

“Hello. My name is Yoo Sooil.”

“Nice to meet you. My name is Han Maru.”

They stood up and shook hands.

“Wow, you have thick hands.”

“Yeah, well.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m eighteen this year.”

“Oh, I’m eighteen as well. It looks like we are the same age.”

Sooil joyfully shook hands.

“Stop shaking hands and sit down.”

Sooil brought a chair from the next table over and sat down. Maru wondered who this boy could be. It was likely that he was one of the artists in JA. Perhaps he was an actor who was doing activities. He was a little dumbstruck that Maru didn’t recognize him.

“Is the three hundred million won you talked about last time this fellow here, president?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Wow. I always wanted to know who it was after I heard that. Oh, and when you told me to deceive journalist Dongwook, was that also related to him?”

Junmin nodded his head. Maru couldn’t follow the conversation. It seemed that they were talking about something that only the two of them knew about.

“It’s really nice to meet you. You might not know me, but I’ve heard stories about you. Oh, you should also know that you have a small debt towards me.”

“A debt?”

“Yes.”

Sooil was smiling.

“You’ll meet a lot in the future. You are the two people I plan to push,” Junmin spoke as he raised his cup.

Chapter 367

“What do you mean by I have a debt towards you?”

“Oh that, do you know journalist Dongwook?”

“I do.”

“A while back, the president suddenly called me saying he wanted me to do some acting. Me, being an actor, of course told him yes. I then asked him if I was for a play. But the president told me it wasn’t. He told me it was also not for a movie or a drama. I asked him what I had to do then, and he said I had to deceive someone. Honestly, I was a little scared back then. The president is unpredictable after all. Anyway, that’s how I got to meet the journalist.”

“With journalist Dongwook, you mean?”

“Yeah. It seems like he was digging into our company. I don’t know about the details, but, from what I felt, it was related to stocks. You know, the stock market price changes dramatically in the entertainment industry according to what kind of entertainers they have.”

“So, what did you deceive him about?”

“Now that I think about it, I think I pretended to be you.”

“Pretended to be me?”

“I think I’m right considering the circumstances. When you got your contract, president Park Narim from NL Company was with you, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I must be right. That’s the day I met journalist Dongwook. I leaked to him a few stories that the president told me to. In my opinion, it was a test of sorts. From how he is the exclusive journalist for our company, he probably passed that test.”

“Why would the president have you do something like that?”

“I don’t know the details either. Our president is the type to plan everything himself and give out orders,” Sooil said as he sliced the cupcake in front of him with a fork.

After Junmin left, Maru and Sooil got closer. They were at the same age and Junmin said that they would see each other a lot in the future as well. They didn’t talk about anything in depth, so Maru couldn’t be entirely sure, but Sooil seemed reasonable. He also seemed to have a lot of social experience as his word choice wasn’t like a child’s. It suddenly came to him that other people would look at him and think the same.

“Sweet things are the best.”

Sooil finished off a cupcake in a flash.

“Take this as well.”

Maru pushed the cake with cream on it towards Sooil. Honestly, the cake didn’t suit his taste buds. It was too sweet and cloying. He preferred more plain snacks.

“Really?”

“Take it.”

“Why are you not eating it?”

"I don't like it that much."

"No way. You don't like cake? I can't believe you."

"If you don't want it, then just say so."

Just as he was about to pull the plate back to his side, Sooil stabbed the cake with his fork.

"You're a little hasty. Anyway, thanks."

Sooil cut and ate the cake with a happy expression. Maru felt pleasant seeing him eat. It was said that luck comes from eating since the old times.

"So, what's your major?" Sooil asked as he finished half of the cake in a flash.

It seemed that he was planning to save up the rest.

"Major?"

"Play, drama, movie. Which one of the three?"

"I'm a newbie, so I don't really have something I can call a major."

"Then what have you tried?"

"A little bit of everything."

"Really? I haven't tried plays yet. Performing live is quite nerveing, isn't it? In dramas, you can just reshoot if you make a mistake, but the same can't be said for plays."

"It's not that different. You have to practice anyway. Oh, there's one thing that's different."

"What is it?"

"A play is not fun if the audience does not react."

Sooil nodded as he bit on the empty fork.

"I think I get what it's like. Then you must've seen senior Ganghwan as well, right?"

"I learned a lot from him."

"Isn't he a little strange? I tried to find him for something a while back, but he disappeared into thin air. He wouldn't pick up his calls, and I got a message later and I just laughed because I was too taken aback for words."

"You mean how he actually lived homeless for three months?"

"You know that too? Isn't he amazing? Who goes out and actually tries living homelessly just to play a homeless role? No, I guess there's something to be gained from doing it. But isn't three months too much?"

"Well, people have different values. To borrow his words, that's his way of immersion."

"I won't be able to do that even if I die. I mean, if you live homelessly, you won't even get to eat regularly, right? I'd rather do some other role."

Sooil shook his head as though just thinking about it made him feel horrible.

"What's your major then?" Maru asked this time.

"Me? For now, movies. Movies are the ultimate objective of actors, right? No, I guess it's commercials now?"

"Are you shooting one right now?"

"No, there was a problem so I'm resting for now."

"A problem?"

Maru asked as he grabbed his coffee cup.

"The movie fell flat on its face."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but apparently, there was a problem with the investment. There's a rumor that even the contract deposit that was supposed to be paid before the shoot hasn't been paid yet. It's rather normal here. After all, a movie is just a money-eating monster while it's being shot. There are many cases where people pay up the rest once it goes to cinemas, but since it's like that, there are a lot of problems."

"What happens to everything they shot until now if they don't get any more money?"

"It will be held indefinitely. If another investor appears, then they start shooting again. They can't exactly shoot a movie while sucking on their thumb. It's their jobs after all."

Even though he was eating cake, his words were quite cynical.

"But I'm not in such a bad position. My character doesn't have a lot of scenes. The ones in trouble are the lead actors. The actors who have a lot of money have it better off, but there are many movie actors who don't. It would be good if they had other schedules, but if they don't, the problem worsens."

"I guess they'll have to take up something else if they want to keep making a living."

Hearing that, Sooil smiled.

"You're right, but some people don't take up other jobs because of their pride as actors. Oh, don't get me wrong. Perhaps they can't take up other jobs. I heard before that an actor that frequently played supporting roles had no work for a while so he decided to take up another job, but the people around him really didn't like that. That person ended up having to rest until his next work because of that."

"People are too 'worried' for others. They just need to take care of themselves."

"Haha, you're right about that."

Sooil scraped the empty plate with his fork. It seemed that two pieces of cake weren't enough.

“Would you like one more?”

“You’re treating me?”

“I thought you said I’m indebted to you. I should pay back my debts as soon as possible.”

“Wow, Han Maru. I like that about you.”

Sooil raised his thumb up before running towards the counter. Maru, who was also feeling a little hungry, stood up. It would be great if there were plain cookies or something. Just as he was walking towards the counter while taking out his wallet,

“Hey! I ordered a bagel, why did I get a sandwich?”

A lady was shouting in front of the counter. The part time worker behind the counter paled and shrunk back.

“What?”

“Whaaat, you said? You’re funny. Do you think your customer’s words are nothing? I’m asking you why you gave me a sandwich when I ordered a bagel.”

“Y-you ordered a sandwich and a cinnamon mocha for a takeaway just now.”

“I did?”

“Yes. You said that while you were on the phone.”

“When I was on the phone?”

The lady frowned. Maru, who was watching from the side, clicked his tongue. She obviously realized that she made a mistake but did not want to admit to it. Most of the time, people like her would raise her voice even more.

“I should have told you to change it after I said that though.”

“N-no, you didn’t say anything...”

“Hey!”

The lady shouted so loud that the whole store could hear it. At that moment, her phone started ringing. The lady quickly answered.

“Y-yes, team leader. The thing is, the part time worker here made a stupid mistake. Yes. No, I mean it. Yes. I think I’m going to be a little late because of that... I’m sorry. Yes, yes. A pair of stockings? Do you need anything el... okay, I’ll do this properly. Yes, I’m sorry. I’ll buy one immediately and go up.”

The lady was very subservient to her phone and after she finished her call, she sighed as she put her phone in her pocket. Maru raised his hand and covered his ears. The events about to unfold in front of his eyes were quite obvious.

“Hey! Who the hell are you? Bring me the one in charge of this place. Bring me your manager!”

The part time worker apologized several times, but the lady did not know how to stop. She was a pathetic woman who did not know her priorities. She would be scolded even more if she was late, and yet she was doing this here. The part time worker was quite pitiful.

Just as Maru was about to tell the part time worker to go call the manager,

“Excuse me, but you can stop there.”

Sooil stood in front of the lady. There would be nothing good from confronting this woman since she wasn't capable of rational thought, so Maru was about to stop him, but he was a little too late. The lady glared back at him.

“And who the hell are you?”

“Then who are you to do this, ahjumma?”

“Ah-ahjumma?”

“Are you so daring because there aren't any people here?”

“How dare you talk to me like that when you aren't even that big.”

“I know that I'm not that tall, so I don't have to have you tell me that. Rather than that, are you really okay?”

“With what?”

“Haa, this is absurd. Looks like you don't get any education at the company these days, huh? My dad shouldn't be that lax when it comes to things like this.”

“...What?”

“Looks like it won't do. From the looks of it, you don't even seem to be an official employee. Are you really okay working like this? Do you take me for an idiot? Should I call my dad?”

Sooil took out his phone and started pressing some buttons. It was clear that he was intending to get back at her for this.

“You know the name of Hansung IT's CEO, right?”

Sooil spoke as he put his phone against his ears. The shouting lady clasped her hands together in unease as she replied.

“It's president Kim Jaechul...”

“Yes, president Kim Jaechul. Good. Then what's my name, huh? Think about it carefully with that smart brain of yours. Geez, how can you do something like this with an ID card around your neck? What are you going to do about the company's image? No, wait. In the first place, I'm eventually going to take over the company, so who the hell are you to ruin it? Geez, I only came here to visit dad for a little and I just had to run into this.”

“Uh-uh-uhm, please wait.”

“What is it?”

“Please, please let me go this time. It was all my fault.”

It seemed that she was quite desperate. She became very polite. Sooil scanned the lady from top to bottom before quitting his call.

“Please look after yourself from now on. Get that sandwich and buy those stockings and please get going.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll do that.”

“Did you pay?”

“I will do it.”

“While you’re at it, apologize to her as well. For the company’s image.”

The lady apologized to the part time worker behind the counter and rushed out of the café in a hurry after taking the sandwich. Maru scratched his head and approached Sooil.

“I thought your surname was Yoo.”

“It is.”

“Who’s Mr. Kim then?”

“I don’t know. Rather than that, what do I do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think I caused trouble.”

“You just realized that?”

“What was I supposed to do? That noona over there was being sworn at and it ticked me off.”

Sooil looked at the counter before walking towards it. The part time worker thanked him. Maru shook his head. He was an actor alright. His instantaneous improvisation was amazing. Someone not in the know would have thought that he was the son of a rich family. Looking at his arrogance and daringness, it was understandable that the entitled lady was totally fooled. If they were in a normal situation, she would’ve asked back in suspicion, but she wasn’t right in her mind at that time either.

“Maru, come quick.”

“Why?”

“Buy me this one.”

In that short time, Sooil bought a cupcake for takeaway. As soon as the packaged cupcake was out, Sooil ran away from the café. Maru had to run with him.

Only after they left the building did they stop.

“I probably won’t come across her again, right?” Sooil spoke worriedly.

“Think what you want.”

“Of course, there’s no way I’ll come across her again. It’ll be fine as long as I’m careful on the elevator. No, I won’t come here anymore. Then I won’t have to meet her anymore. Yes, that’s right.”

Maru chuckled as he heard him talking.

“Why? Keep acting like a rich young master.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You were really good at it though.”

“Really? That’s because I’m actually the son of a rich family.”

“Sure you are.”

“That didn’t work....”

Sooil sighed as he looked back at the building. For some reason, there didn’t seem to be any ordinary people around Junmin.

“Wait, where do I eat this now?”

He seemed to have decided that it was better to forget about things he couldn’t solve right now. Maru shrugged and told him to take it home.

Chapter 368

Jiyoona was depressed from the start and ended up crying. Maru poked Daemyung’s waist. Her boyfriend was supposed to help her out at times like this, right? He dragged Daemyung who wouldn’t budge and had him sit next to Jiyoona. Aram winked before pushing Jiyoona to his side. The two were now right against each other. Even Jiyoona, who was sniffing, realized the situation she was in and looked at the floor. Maru watched the two for a moment before leaving with the excuse that he had to get some fresh air.

“I don’t see anywhere we can go to either.”

Although they gathered to celebrate their silver prize, the essence was to console their failure to advance. He called Daemyung after separating from Sooil and heard that they were already gathered, which made him go to Suwon immediately. They were in a noraebang when he made the call, but they had switched places to an all-you-can-eat BBQ restaurant. It wasn’t bad since it was dinner time, but it was always the noraebang or a meat buffet. There were a lot of new buildings, yet the number of places that they could go as students kept decreasing.

“What are you doing?”

He turned around to see Aram.

“I’m getting some fresh air. What are you doing out here?”

“I left to give them a good atmosphere.”

“Are those two doing well?”

“I don’t know. Jiyeon was just looking at the floor until I left. Well, they should be doing well about now. After all, we got out of their way. But why the hell are those two not coming?!”

Aram turned around and had a look at the stairs. At that moment, Maru heard a laugh and saw Dowook and Bangjoo coming down. They looked like they were having tons of fun. Now, everyone except Daemyung and Jiyeon had left.

Maru looked at Aram and asked.

“Did she cry a lot before I came?”

“You mean Jiyeon?”

“Yeah.”

“No. She kept being depressed and just started crying right now. I thought that she’d cry a lot since she’s a crybaby, but you know what? When I saw her crying, I wanted to cry with her as well. I mean, if I was just a little bit late, I might have pushed Daemyung-seonbae away, hugged her, and started crying.”

Aram giggled.

“Watching those two was funnier than any comedy I’ve watched,” Dowook said with a giggle.

Bangjoo also nodded his head in agreement.

“Hey, let’s go there.”

Dowook hooked his arm around Bangjoo’s neck and headed to the arcade nearby.

“I think we did pretty well, but we still failed. If we were supposed to fall, I’d rather have us be last. I wonder why they placed us third to make us feel horrible instead,” Aram said.

“At least we got silver. That’s another line on our school report. You’ll be able to say a few more lines at your university interview so it’s not entirely a loss.”

“If you put it like that, then maybe, but still, it’s disappointing. If we got gold, we’d be performing in Seoul. I was going to tell mom to bring a camcorder if we went to Seoul.”

Aram clicked her tongue in disappointment.

“Try hard next year.”

“You should try hard next year as well, seonbae.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be in my third year next year. Even if I put my name in the club, I don’t think I’ll be able to participate. Just like the current third years.”

“What the heck is up with that? You and Daemyung-seonbae should stay until the end. You should still come even if you’re third years. Is uni more important or the acting club?”

“Is that even supposed to be a question?”

“What’s more important? For me, it’s the acting club.”

Aram said that with pride. She clearly said it as a joke. Maru felt rather good that she wasn’t acting dejected.

“Fine, you can bury your bones in the acting club. I’ll be going to uni.”

“Geez, aren’t you too much? Maybe I shouldn’t have come to the acting club and should’ve gone to an athletic club instead.”

“Oh?”

Aram had stretched her arm out and pointed at the punching machine in front of the arcade. Dowook was inserting money into it while Bangjoo was getting ready to hit.

“Let’s just watch that.”

Maru also nodded and walked towards them. Bangjoo exercised his wrist before punching out with all of his power. A leather-popping sound could be heard before the score started going up.

“Wow, Ahn Bangjoo, you’re quite strong,” Dowook said as he checked the score.

“This is nothing. Maru-seonbae, you should do it as well. You too, Dowook-seonbae.”

“Nah for me. You energetic boys can do it.”

At that moment, Dowook, who was jumping on the spot, jumped up and kicked the sandbag upwards. It seemed that the notice ‘don’t kick’ didn’t enter his eyes.

“Hey, don’t break it.”

Maru gave an awkward smile to the elderly that slowly walked out from the arcade and bowed in apology. He played with the whack-a-mole machine which was outside the arcade as well for a while before looking at his watch. It had been around ten minutes, so it would be fine even if they went back in.

“I’ll go back first then.”

Aram walked into the building. Dowook and Bangjoo were absorbed in a fighting game. The two really got along.

‘Looks like everyone is okay.’

As the acting club started off the year with a lot of trouble, it seemed that the shock from not being able to advance was quite small. Although they practiced very hard, it was nothing compared to last year. After all, they stayed behind at school until 10 or 11 at night to practice last year.

“Bangjoo, I’ll kill you if you press the button.”

“Seonbae-nim. You can’t do that in a game.”

Just as Maru chuckled while looking at the two fighting, Aram came back down. When he asked why with his eyes, Aram smiled awkwardly.

“I went up at the wrong time.”

“Why?”

“I went up and the atmosphere was so pink, that I didn’t dare interrupt them.”

“Aha, that’s how it is, huh.”

“Seonbae?”

Maru grinned before walking up the stairs. There were three kinds of joys in life. One was eating delicious food, another was watching a fire by the river, and the last one was to interrupt a lovey-dovey atmosphere.

“They should do it moderately. We haven’t even started grilling the meat yet.”

He gestured to Aram to follow. Aram raised her thumb before following him. They went to the buffet on the 2nd floor. Somehow, Dowook and Bangjoo had finished their game and were right behind them as well.

As he went into the restaurant, he saw the two people stuck right against each other at the table next to the window. They were talking about something as they looked into each other’s eyes. Like Aram said, the atmosphere was pink.

“Take out your phones, let’s go,” Maru smiled as he spoke.

* * *

“Go home carefully. Well done everyone, and see you after the holidays.”

“Yes!”

After waving his hand at the four people who walked in the opposite direction, he looked at Daemyung next to him.

“You’re still pissed?”

“Did you erase the picture?”

“I told you several times I deleted it.”

“I hate you.”

“Are you two in taboo love or something? What’s there to be so surprised about? Seeing you surprised made me want to record it just that much more. Your expression was just that good.”

“Haa,” Daemyung sighed and shook his head.

Such a young man was sighing, so Maru slapped his back. Daemyung gasped before twisting his body.

“But still. It’s good to see everyone in good spirits. I was worried that they would look like they were about to die like we did last year,” Maru spoke as he reminisced about last year.

They couldn’t even talk to each other properly, and could only awkwardly smile at each other. Just thinking about it made him smile bitterly. Meanwhile, the atmosphere this year was much better since everyone talked about what was on their minds.

“That’s true,” Daemyung spoke with a smile as well.

He seemed to have thought about last year’s events as well.

“What are you going to do about winter?” Maru asked.

Daemyung didn’t reply immediately. He had no intention of urging him to answer, so he just walked quietly. It was 8 p.m. Their shadows stretched out under the yellow street lights. Maru pushed Daemyung into a pojang-macha they came across.

“Let’s get something to eat here. Excuse me, ma’am, please give me a portion of tteokbokki and soondae.”

He scooped some eomuk soup into a cup and gave it to Daemyung. Daemyung received it with a smile.

“You were good at bowling back there.”

They thought about where to go after the buffet and Aram recommended bowling, so they went to a bowling club. As everyone was a newbie, they didn’t worry about the average and just rolled some balls in teams of three. Aram and Daemyung were pretty good. The best picture of the day went to Daemyung scoring a strike and doing a high five with Jiyeon.

“I was lucky,” Daemyung said as he ate some soondae.

They talked about Jiyeon for a while. Even though he never talked about her until a while ago due to feeling ‘sorry’, he was implicitly boasting about her now. They were a nice couple, so watching them was pleasant as well.

Just as Maru ate a piece of eomuk, Daemyung put down the toothpick and spoke,

“Maru. You’re planning to not participate in the acting club after the holidays right?”

After hearing those words, Maru opened his mouth wide and bit a large chunk of eomuk. Daemyung was really quick-witted. When he kept eating without saying a word, Daemyung started eating as well.

Maru said nothing as Daemyung ate five pieces of eomuk. Daemyung, let out a deep breath through his nose and looked at him.

“Are you really not coming?”

“I will be going to the club. But I think it will be hard to participate as an actor.”

He felt this while preparing for the regional preliminaries, but he definitely didn’t have a lot of time. Junmin said something to him before he left today - that he needed proper, professional training. He

didn't have enough time as it was already with other practices and appearing in commercial works as minor roles and extras, and Junmin was saying that he needed to put an extra lesson on top of that.

"During the holidays, I will be able to digest that entire schedule, but I think it will be difficult once school starts again."

Even during the holidays, where it would be normal for him to do nothing for the whole day, he had to plan his entire schedule. He was just that busy. Once school started again, he would have to be at school until at least five in the afternoon, so his available time would decrease even further. At the end of August, school would start again, and at the same time, director Joongjin's movie would start cranking in. That schedule wasn't set in stone, but he had to plan everything with that in mind. Moreover, there was that matter with the historical drama as well. Although they said that they would go over the more concrete details next week, he would probably end up doing it.

More work was piling, yet his available time was decreasing. In the end, he had to cut off some work and set his priorities straight, and right now, the acting club was at the bottom of his priority list.

"Well, I guess you don't really have anything to learn from the acting club anymore."

Daemyung nodded his head.

"Thanks for understanding. But it does feel better now that I've got permission from the club president."

"No, I didn't give you permission."

Maru blinked several times as he looked back at Daemyung.

"You should continue coming to the club, but you can minimize your acting practice. It's not that hard to come on Saturdays to practice, right?" Daemyung spoke with conviction.

His round eyes were very tense.

"You want me to do that?"

"Yes."

"I don't think that will be any good."

"Of course, I'm not giving you a role with a lot of lines. Instead, you'll have to do a role that has less importance."

"But for me to do that among the others that are putting their best effort in is just...."

"Hey, Han Maru."

Daemyung glared at him. Maru flinched. It wasn't that he never saw Daemyung being angry before, but this was his first time seeing him so serious.

"You should finish off what you started. They all came to the club because of you. If you suddenly quit and become a backstage staff, you're being rude to the juniors. You know that, don't you?"

Daemyung offered him a piece of eomuk.

“Also, I’m telling you to do it because you’re able to. You can do it. Honestly, you just came to practice because of everyone else’s practice, right? For the general picture. So come. You can do it. I guarantee it.”

Daemyung shut his lips and looked at him. Maru sighed a little before accepting the eomuk.

“And here I was just planning to take it easy, and you say no to that. What an evil president.”

“Well, I learned that from a certain someone.”

“The world must be nearing its end. Where did the generous Park Daemyung go and why is there a thug in front of me? Fine, I’ll do it. But I can’t guarantee the number of times I can come to practice. There’s a lot of things going for me right now.”

“I don’t care. You’ll still do well either way.”

“Where does your endless confidence come from?”

Daemyung shrugged.

Maru smiled faintly. The equation of efficiency had been solved by the formula of passion. What people learned as they grew older was to quit as fast as possible. Like how people quickly cut ties with stocks once they start making a loss - people learn to give up after receiving a lot of damage. There were too many things on their shoulders to keep doing something vague.

He was going to prune the less important things out of habit, but Daemyung ended up sticking it back on with glue. Like this, he had no choice but to do it. He had to split up what little time he had.

“Damn, I liked you better when you were still na?ve.”

Maru spoke as he dipped the eomuk in some soy sauce.

Fish cake, often included in tteokbokki.

Sometimes, toothpicks are used instead of forks in places like pojang-macha to eat tteokbokki and soondae.

Chapter 369

He was going to throw his half-burnt cigarette into the ashtray, but he couldn’t. The tower of cigarettes that had some sticking out and looked like a Christmas tree was about to fall apart. He finally remembered that it had been a long time since he emptied his ashtray.

“Is it about time I leave?”

Dongwook stood up with the ashtray in hand. He emptied the ashtray into the trash can before opening the window in the living room wide open. The sunlight blinded him. He basked in the sun in the veranda for a while. He remembered some doctor on TV saying how people needed to photosynthesize as well.

He sprayed some deodorant around the house before going to the bathroom. He stood in front of the mirror and looked at his face. He had a stubble due to not shaving for quite a while. He foamed it up with some soap before picking up his razor. It pricked him a bit, perhaps due to the blade being old. He

washed his face and hair before leaving the bathroom. He dried out his hair and shaped it with some wax and spray.

"I still look pretty decent."

He took out some clothes from the closet. He wore a light blue shirt and a pair of denim pants. He picked up his bag, which contained his camera and his notepad. With that, he was ready to go to war.

He drove out of his apartment's parking lot to the streets.

"First it's 'Number 8', huh."

He drove to a building in the outskirts of Seoul. Number 8. That was the name of a movie production company. It was known as a production company that steadily released many movies and didn't seem to have any management issues, but the company suddenly collapsed while shooting their current work. The management-level people just vaporized into thin air.

He parked the car in the parking lot of the building before grabbing the elevator. There were nameplates of the companies and stores that were in the building. Number 8 was on the fourth floor, and someone seemed to have written a large X on top of it with a permanent marker.

The elevator opened.

'I knew it.'

Dongwook could see a line of people in front of the elevator. They were blocking the entrance to the office of 'Number 8', which was located to the left of the elevator. They seemed to have caused a ruckus already as he could see some people lying on the ground.

Dongwook showed the people that looked at him his camera. Whatever little hope they had on their face disappeared immediately. It seemed that they were individual investors. There were quite a lot of old ladies. He bypassed the people that lied on the ground without any energy and opened the door to Number 8's office. Fortunately, it wasn't locked.

There were people inside as well. They all had vicious eyes. He took out his camera when he received suspicious glares, but it didn't work this time.

"Who the hell are you?"

"A journalist."

"A journalist? Why would a journalist be here?"

"Why would I be here? Because there's a case here."

"A case? Are you kidding me? Do you not see these people here? You journalist seem to take laughing at other people's misfortunes as your jobs, huh?"

A calm-looking man in his fifties shouted at him. He looked like he wasn't the type to get angry usually, but now he looked like he would send a man to the afterlife if he was given a knife.

"Sir, please calm down."

The other people restrained him. It seemed that those people still had some reason in them.

Dongwook approached the middle-aged man who tried to shake off the hands of the people around him.

“I’m not here because I want to take joy in your misfortune. It’s not about money either. Our company took a bit of a hit because of the movie, so I’m here to investigate. Understand?”

Dongwook had been a journalist for 12 years. He had to smile back at vicious-looking policemen when he still worked for a TV station. He wasn’t that weak to be pushed back at a rage-consumed man.

The middle-aged man shut up and took a step back. Dongwook walked past him and went inside. There were various office supplies left inside. Though, the expensive items like computers and other machines seemed to have been taken by the investors already.

Dongwook picked up a piece of A4 paper which was on the ground. On it was a list of investor’s bank accounts.

“Man, they gobbled up a lot.”

Number 8 was producing a blockbuster movie with a scenario created by director Han Jungho. The production budget was 15 billion won. It was an unprecedented budget in the history of South Korea.

Number 8 was a pretty well-going company in the industry, and director Han Jungho was someone who sold two million tickets for his first movie which was a comedy. The actors were well-known as well, but the estimated production budget of 15 billion was too big. That was why they started taking individual investments. The minimum investment was 10 million won, and they promised to return shares in profits as well as secondary products. The people that were walking around in and outside the office were the individual investors. They were people that spent at least 10 million won, and some in the hundreds of millions, so the news that the production company went out of business had to be shocking for them.

“What do they think that money was... it was my daughter’s house deposit...”

A lady’s wail could be heard from the outside. Dongwook clicked his tongue. People like her always appeared in places like this. They would be fooled by the sweet words that they would get profits without losing any money and end up using money they shouldn’t, then ending bankrupt. What kind of investment in this world was without risks?

Dongwook looked around the office. He had heard that a police investigation would start today. He looked around to see if he could get anything before that, but it was too clean, as he had predicted. With that, it was clear to him that this was a scam that was planned.

Just then, he received a call.

“Yes, Mr. Geunsoo.”

-Journalist. Are you at Number 8 right now?

“Yes, I am. But I’m not getting anything.”

-I thought so. Oh, the staff that never received their pay is at our company right now. I thought you wanted to interview them.

“About that, can you please do it in my stead? If it’s too much for you, I’ll call the president. I have a lot of places to go to today.”

-Then, for now, I’ll record the things I get. Is there a specific question you’d like to ask?”

“I just want you to ask how hard their lives are right now in general. I’m going to use that emotional part when writing an article. But why are you doing that, Mr. Geunsoo? You’re an actor.”

-Since the movie stopped, I should do something at least. I emptied my entire schedule because of this, so I don’t have anything else to do.

“Haha, then I’ll leave that to you then. Do leave behind a phone number if anyone knows where the former president frequents.”

Dongwook hung up before leaving the office. JA Production was also involved in the movie that Number 8 was shooting. Geunsoo and Sooil were participating as lead and support roles respectively, and from what he knew, JA production also invested quite a bit of money into it under its name.

-Even if they do get caught, it’s not likely we will get our investment back like most other scams. But we can’t just stay around doing nothing because of that. We can’t just end things with a loss, so we need to do something.

Dongwook remembered back to the conversation he had with Junmin. Junmin didn’t seem to mind that he had lost some money. No, honestly, it felt like he even welcomed this situation. He was reminded of the words he heard from a senior journalist in the past. Businessmen like chaos more than peace.

After leaving the building, Dongwook had a look at the time. He had scheduled an appointment in a nearby coffee shop. He drove his car to the coffee shop which was around 10 minutes away. When he grabbed a table and emptied about half of his coffee, a lady opened the door to the coffee shop and entered. Seeing her looking around in unease, Dongwook realized that she was the one he was waiting for.

“Over here.”

Dongwook waved his hand. The lady bowed slightly before coming over and sitting in front of him.

“Are you journalist Kim Dongwook?”

“Yes. You’re someone who used to work for Number 8, correct?”

“Yes. But my name is really not going to go on it right? You’re not going to reveal things like where I live and things like that, right?”

“Of course. It’s one of our rules to hide the identity of the informant in this profession. So don’t worry about anything and just tell me. Rather than that, you look very tired. Let’s grab something to drink before talking.”

Dongwook ordered a warm drink on purpose. The animals known as humans were quite simple and oftentimes made their decisions based on their feelings. A cup of warm tea would relax a person's guard and would soften their lips as well.

After emptying about half of the tea, the lady sighed.

"I came to work and was just working like usual, but the president didn't come. As a production company, it wasn't that uncommon to have business meetings outside, so I didn't think much about it, but he didn't turn up for two days. It was around that time we received calls for payment, so all the employees looked for the president, but no one could reach him."

"That happened a week ago, am I right?"

"Yes."

"When did those people come to the company then?"

"Three days after the president vanished. By that time, we employees were feeling uneasy as well and some people stopped coming. I was uncertain about what to do and it was then that they came."

"You must have had a hard time."

"Don't even start. Some weird lady started pulling out my hair saying 'give me my money back', and I was scared to death back then."

"People become violent when it comes to money, after all."

"Yeah, you tell me."

"What happened after that?"

"I didn't leave the office and kept calling the president. But the only thing I got back was that his phone was off."

"How was the state of payment?"

"Actually, I haven't received my salary for four months as well. It should amount to around 7 million won. It's not much compared to the people that were scammed, but right now, I'm about to be driven out into the streets because of that money."

The lady sighed while shaking and eventually burst out crying. Dongwook pulled out some tissue and handed it over. After a while, she calmed down again before continuing her story.

"Three days ago, we started looking for where the president might be in secret, but we couldn't even catch a glimpse of him. We even asked the owner of a restaurant that the president was a regular at, and the owner swore at us instead. Most of us employees haven't received our salary so we are pretty desperate."

"The president told you that you'll receive a bonus once the movie shoot was over, right?"

"Yes. It's a movie with more than 10 billion won invested into it. We thought that we'd receive our salary soon. Then, this happened."

Dongwook consoled the woman before finishing up his interview.

“Here’s the list of stores that the president frequented.”

“Thank you.”

“Uhm....”

Dongwook handed her the interview fee. Although it was only 50 thousand won, the woman looked like she was about to kneel in gratitude.

“Then I’ll call you again later.”

After sending the woman off, Dongwook drove his car to the next employee. It was a woman this time as well. She was a university student who had taken a semester off, and she said that it was her first ever job. Her circumstances were similar to the lady before. The president suddenly stopped coming, and people just barged in a few days later. He didn’t expect that much from her in the first place, so he ended the interview quickly before leaving. When she asked him if she could get her delayed salary, Dongwook smiled bitterly and shook his head.

“Once the police get involved, it might become an issue.”

There was no bigger incident than this in the movie industry. After all, 15 billion won disappeared into thin air. It shouldn’t amount to that much considering the payment that was already paid, but from estimation, the president probably ran with at least 6 billion won or more. For now, he had to talk to the huge businesses, actors, and the staff.

“I wonder what my president is planning to do with this.”

Once a journalist starts digging deep into a case, their job would become similar to that of a detective. They would start digging into someone else’s personal history. Dongwook wondered what Junmin was going to do with this information.

He took out a cigarette before looking up at the sky.

“What nice weather.”

Just as he was about to get back in his car after smoking, he received a call. The caller ID was Choi Miyeon. It was his junior journalist who was currently working for a women’s magazine named Sharon, and she was also the one that was digging into a stinky, dangerous case.

“Yeah, what is it?”

-Senior, have you learned anything about the things I told you last time?

“No. I told you I’m not going to touch on it. I only lent you an ear back then.”

-I thought you’d say that. Then free up some of your time tomorrow. I have some things to tell you.

“Hey, don’t tell me you’re still digging into that? You should really stop it. If a magazine company keeps digging into the dark side of the entertainment industry, you won’t get any more ads.”

-I told you, didn't I? That I'm resolved to quit. Anyway, we're partners in crime, so free up some time. I found out some things about the woman titled 'madam' in the entertainment industry.

"We aren't partners in crime. But wait, madam, you said?"

His junior hung up before he finished his question. Her personality still hadn't changed. Dongwook clicked his tongue before getting in the car. He hated himself for becoming interested even though he knew that there was nothing good from sticking his nose into it.

He drove off. He still had a lot of places to go to.

Chapter 370

"Yes, yes. Then let's delay our meeting by an hour. Alright, understood."

Dongwook hung up and sighed. One of the most frequent occurrences when doing interviews was delaying the interview just before the appointed time. In cases like this, it was always money that was the problem. The interviewee was probably undergoing an interview with another journalist at a different coffee shop right now.

"I guess it's no good."

Since it was clear that it was a scam, the social journalists would rush to get a piece of the pie as well, not just entertainment journalists.

"Hello? It's been a long time. You haven't changed your number, huh. I was just going to ask something. Did you guys put some people on Number 8? So you are moving after all. How about the other TV stations? They look like they're busy as well? Alright, that's how it is huh. Hey, do you have any useful news? Don't be so cold. Hey, Hey."

He had called a junior of his who still worked at a TV station but he got nothing. The guy that always followed him, calling him 'senior' had disappeared.

"Did you really have to cut off the lifeline of a freelancer like me?"

He scratched his head and got in his car. He messaged the person he was going to interview to cancel their interview. When he did, he immediately got a reply back saying that the person was available right now, but he simply ignored that text.

"You shouldn't try to double-time me."

He drove his car to Daechi-dong in Gangnam-gu. The president of Number 8 and his family lived there. When he turned into the street with villas lined up on the side, he realized that he was too late. There were many people that seemed to be journalists. Dongwook got out of his car and joined them.

"Is there any news?"

"News? Do you think we'd be here if we got any?"

He handed over a vitamin drink that he always carried with him in secret. The journalist thanked him. The fact that he received it meant that he had some intentions of telling him what happened here.

“Are there any people inside?”

“I don’t think so. There are teams that have been staying here since yesterday, but they never even saw a shadow.”

The journalist opened the drink and drank it in one gulp.

“They’re quite daring, thinking about hoggin more than 10 billion won to themselves.”

“You tell me. Thanks to this incident, I think there will be some chaos in Chungmuro. The entertainer’s labor union will probably rise as well. Geez, the actors have it better at least. At least some of them received some money beforehand. There are probably those that received absolutely nothing among the staff. It’s always the people that clean up after others that die out.”

The journalist gave Dongwook the empty bottle and disappeared after thanking him. Dongwook placed the bottle on the fence of the villa and got in his car. It seemed that any further investigation was going to be difficult. He probably had to look into something else until he got another source of news.

He took out his phone and pressed the number he didn’t want to press.

-Yes, senior.

“Let’s meet today.”

-What?

“Let’s meet today. It’s today or nothing. Do you have the time?”

-What’s up with you all of a sudden?

“Nah, it’s fine. Let’s not meet. I’m sure I’ll get into something troublesome if I get involved with you.”

-No. I’m going to meet you. Where are you now?

“Aren’t you busy? Don’t you have work to do?”

-You’re the one who called me, senior, why are you taking back your words now? Oh wait, you have a car, don’t you? Then come to my company, I’ll be waiting for you outside.

He hung up and threw his phone on the passenger seat.

“Alright, let’s act like a journalist once in a while.”

He smiled bitterly as he started the car.

He thought that he’d probably regret his decision.

* * *

After separating from Daemyung, he got a call from Suyeon. He asked what it was about so late at night, and she told him to free up some time tomorrow.

“Time?”

-Yeah. You remember the drama you shot with me last time, right?

“Yeah.”

-I think you need to appear once more.

“Me?”

-Yeah. The madam appointed you.

“The madam?”

The three characters Lee Miyeon appeared in his head.

“Why would she want me?”

-Looks like she’s taken a fancy for you. She wants you as the youngest member of the restaurant. Apparently, she would like ‘the affable kid from last time’. She told me directly as well. It’s not like you have something to do, right? You guys didn’t advance into the nationals.

“Your words are quite direct despite being our instructor.”

-It’s not like packaging it well right now would do anything. Anyway, you’re coming, right?

“I am. It’s not like I have something better to do.

-Okay, then come to Yeoksam station tomorrow. We’ll be shooting at the Korean restaurant there. As for clothes, we’ll be giving you a uniform, so don’t mind that. Then see you tomorrow.

* * *

Just as he was thinking about what Suyeon said last night, the buzzer rang. The door opened and some people got off. Maru had a look at the outside scenery. Since she told him that it was exactly 10 stops away from the train station by bus, he had to get off at the next bus stop.

The bus drove for a while before stopping at the next bus stop. Maru put on his backpack and went out the back door. There were tall buildings as far as his eyes could see. There wasn’t a single low-story building in the vicinity. Even the one that was being built seemed to be at least 20 stories tall.

He started walking. Suyeon had told him that he should go to the left from the bus stop and turn around at the convenience store, and he’d see it immediately.

“I guess I did see it immediately.”

It was a mansion with a tiled roof. It was only 4 stories tall. It was a traditional Korean restaurant that overwhelmed the glass buildings around it. He’d probably be able to fool a foreigner if he told him that it was a historic monument.

In front of the restaurant were some cars from TV stations. He walked towards the sign that said ‘Soo-ryeo-jae’ in hanja. The automatic doors opened and as soon as he walked inside, a lady approached him. She was wearing a neat hanbok that was not too colorful.

“Welcome.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Did you make a reservation?”

“No, I came here because I heard there was a shoot here today.”

“Oh, if that’s the case, the drama is being shot on the 2nd floor. The third and fourth floors still have normal customers eating, so please be considerate.”

“Understood.”

It seemed that the management had prepared the staff to say that line beforehand. Maru walked up the stairs to the 2nd floor. People were walking around installing cameras and lights. It seemed that the shoot hadn’t begun yet.

“What brings you here?”

He turned around when someone tapped him and he saw the camera director Kim Jangsoo. Maru smiled and greeted him.

“I’m here as a minor actor again today.”

“Is that so? That’s good. You should make a good impression since you’re here.”

“Yes.”

“Then see you later.”

Jangsoo walked towards the rest of the staff. Maru greeted everyone he came across. There were some that greeted him with a bit of confusion, and there were some that just nodded back at him.

“You’ve become a yes-man.”

Suyeon waved her hand while smiling like a devious fox. Next to her was a lady that seemed to be her stylist.

“Unni, we need you to wear this since we got it as a sponsored product.”

“Alright. But I wonder if it looks good on me. Isn’t it a little too dark for summer?”

“Then why don’t we fold it and put it around your waist instead? After all, we’re just doing it out of courtesy.”

“That sounds better. It’s not like they’re a big company either. We can just bring out the style.”

“I’ll get that ready then.”

A lady wearing a baggy t-shirt swiftly walked down the stairs. So she was an actor who had sponsors as well.

“This place is massive, isn’t it?”

“It is definitely large. I thought it’d take up one floor of a building at most since I heard it was a traditional Korean restaurant, but I never knew it’d be like this.”

“Apparently, the Secretary-General of the Blue House frequents this place. The President has come here several times as well. On the first and second floors, you can eat without making a reservation, but I heard that you can’t even go to the third and fourth floors if you don’t make a booking.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable.”

“It’s our dining place. After the shoot, we’ll eat here as well.”

At that moment, a woman in her 60s wearing a pearl ring entered the 2nd floor. Behind her were 6 of the employees here including the lady in a hanbok that Maru met when he first got here.

“Ah, mistress.”

Producer Kim, the producer of the drama, quickly ran towards her. The assistant director that picked on the minor actor before was there as well.

“Hoho, producer. Is everything going well today?”

“Yes, it’s all thanks to you.”

“I wonder if our actor Nam is here yet.”

“He’s going to come here late today. I’ll tell him to go say hello if he comes, so don’t worry about that.”

“Oh no, I should come here instead. I watch this drama because of our actor Nam. Oh, you’re eating dinner here tonight, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then I’ll be paying for all of it tonight, so don’t worry about the cost and have a good time.”

“Oh my, thanks every time.”

The woman scanned the set once with a satisfied smile before going down. It seemed that she was the owner of this huge place. Rather than that, to think that the producer was acting so subservient... Maru thought that this producer Kim thought nothing of everyone except the old lioness Lee Miyoon, but it seemed that it wasn’t true.

“He’s probably getting something from her behind the curtains,” Suyeon spoke in a small voice.

When he looked at her, she smiled with a wink. Getting something huh. It was quite a common occurrence, so he didn’t think much about it.

Just as he was asking Suyeon about some of the company events, he felt a gaze and turned his head around. The assistant director, who bullied a minor actor last time, was staring at him. Since they met eyes, Maru faintly smiled at him. Suyeon also waved at him from the side.

The assistant director was startled and turned around before starting to pretend to work.

“I did well, didn’t I?”

“With that, I guess I won’t get involved with annoying things. Thanks.”

“If you feel thankful, then date me one time, with Mr. Geunsoo included.”

“You really are devoted.”

“Didn’t you know that already?”

Suyeon poked his cheek before walking to the middle of the set. Maru brushed off his cheek that Suyeon poked and had a look at the script that the staff handed him. It was a scene where he poured a lot of salt on the dish that the protagonist made and brought it to the customer. Maru wondered why all of the roles he got were like this. He thought that he got a decent role since last time, he was chopping up some ingredients like normal, but it seemed that he was wrong. Beneath his part, he could see ‘colleague 1’ and ‘colleague 2’. It seemed that the protagonist made a team or something.

From the scene where Suyeon gave him salt, to the scene where he served the dish to the customer and the scene where it was found out that he was the culprit - this was the longest role he had in his short history as a minor actor. It was something to be happy about.

“Huh? Han Maru.”

Just then, he heard a familiar voice. When he turned around, Gwangseok, aka number four, was waving his hand at him with a smile. Next to him was Gyunglim with a sour face.

‘Well, they were a set last time as well.’

The audience at home was really sensitive. If a minor character’s face was changed mid-way, they would start making reports. Thinking that the production staff was quite mindful about the details, he walked towards the two and greeted them.

“Hello there.”

“We meet again. How have you been?”

“I’ve been doing well.”

Gyunglim stood in front of him. She was staring at him with the question ‘why did you act like that back then’. Maru just shrugged once. This girl looked like a very tiresome person. Both Gwangseok and Gyunglim were people who he did not want to get close to.

‘Let’s just stay in a business relationship.’

Maru made a business smile.

* * *

(Warning: Following content might be disturbing. Reader discretion is advised.)

Hong Janghae looked at the three men sitting in front of him. It was 1 p.m. It was too early to drink, but they needed some drinks right now.

“There, there. Raise your glasses,” Janghae spoke.

The three men hurriedly raised their glasses. He shook the brown-colored vodka above his head before emptying it into his mouth. The three men followed suit. Not long after, the sound of coughing could be heard.

“Was that a bit too strong?”

“N-not at all.”

“You’re too stiff. Relax. It’s been quite a while since we became one family right? It’s about time you make yourselves comfortable.”

He said that as a joke. He would immediately throw the vodka bottle the moment one of them became even slightly lax. He had to put down those that wanted to climb up to the same rank as him as early as possible. To do that, words were no good. Animals used strength to communicate their intentions to others before language was a thing. The fear engraved into the genes was stimulated not by words, but strength. Janghae knew that too well.

“How is it with going to the psychologist these days?”

Hearing that, the man on the left flinched. But he soon spoke,

“It’s much better now.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Stand up.”

The man stood up. Janghae pointed at him to come. The man slowly approached him. Janghae looked at the man who was looking down at the floor. At the same time, he clutched the man’s testicles with his left hand. The man flinched and groaned.

“Are you embarrassed?”

“N-no.”

“It’s the same wherever you go. Without power, you become a plaything. You three were that woman’s plaything. And you chose to be her plaything. You got enough benefits from that, right? Then you shouldn’t consider yourselves victims.”

Janghae let go.

“Don’t feel humiliated with this. There are only two occasions when a man should feel humiliated. One is when there’s nothing in his hands, and two is when his woman is robbed from him. Don’t feel down just because some old hag played around with you. You climbed to that place precisely with that. Smile. Smile and endure. Later, you’ll be able to smile and slap your dicks on that bitch’s face. Oh, I guess you won’t have any reason to do that. Why the heck would you boys who are in good shape like an old hag like her? Right?”

“Y-yes.”

“Here, here. Have some more. You can get drunk today. Your activities start next week. You won’t be able to use the name ‘The Five’, but the public will call you such anyway. That’s what we need.”

Janghae raised his glass with a smile.

