

Once Again 401

Chapter 401

He violently opened the water bottle and poured water into his mouth. He felt his thirst calming down a little before his mouth felt dry once again. Due to this unknown unease, he opened another water bottle. He felt that he should calm down after this.

“Uljin.”

Uljin, who was drinking water, quickly put down the water bottle and looked in front of him. Producer Changsung was there.

“Y-yes.”

“What’s up with you all of a sudden? Are you tired because you shot for too long?” Producer Changsung asked with a smile.

He grabbed Uljin’s shoulder as though he didn’t need to mind it that much.

“No, it’s not like that.”

“Then did you eat something bad during dinner?”

“My stomach is fine.”

“Then are you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m really fine.”

“Then there are no problems, right?”

“Yes...,” Uljin barely replied.

“Then let’s resume the shoot after five more minutes. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Yes, I can do it.”

“Good. Get yourself together. You did well during the day, so you should do just that. There’s no need for you to do as well as the beginning. You just need to show what you can do. After that, the direction and editing will do the rest. Okay?”

Producer Changsung patted Uljin lightly on the back before turning around. Uljin gulped. The bitterness in his mouth did not disappear. He had a bad premonition that he would repeat the same mistake if he started the shoot as he was now. He was going to drink the remaining water thinking that he was worried for nothing, but the water bottle was already empty. He had emptied two bottles, yet his mouth still felt bitter.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Giwoo asked with a worried expression.

“I just dazed out for a second there.”

“You’re okay, right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Uhm, I need to go to the toilet, so if the producer looks for me, please tell him for me.”

“Okay.”

Uljin went to the public bathroom which was a little distant from the set. He turned on the tap and stared at the water gushing down. He had the urge to get some water and splash it on his face.

He put some water on his palms and put it against his eyes. He felt a little clearer now that he came into contact with cold water.

Uljin had a look in the mirror. He could see himself making a vacant expression. It would be the worst if he had the same expression in front of the camera. No wonder the producer approached him and asked him if he was sick. He slapped his face. He had won this role with difficulty. His parents, as well as his academy, had a lot of expectations of him. He couldn’t make a mistake in such an easy scene.

“You seem nervous.”

He flinched when he heard a voice behind him and turned around. Maru was coming inside.

“I had to pee. No, this little one had to pee.”

Maru stood in front of a urinal as he whistled. Uljin stared at Maru.

“Is this the first time you saw someone else pee? Your gaze is too hot.”

“It’s not that...”

“What, you have something to say to me?”

While Maru washed his hands next to him, Uljin tried his best to analyze the mysterious emotions bubbling inside him. This unease and anxiousness. He had none of those before the shoot began. If he was asked when he started having such emotions, he would say that it was after he started acting with Maru.

Those eyes that stared into his soul as he was grabbed by the collar. He had received many of such gazes since he had shot fighting scenes before. No matter how much killing intent they had while looking at him, it was acting in the end. It was possible for him to return the act without being shaken. Then, just what was the problem?

Even as he thought that he kept reminding himself of Maru’s eyes for some reason. Whenever he blinked, the image of Maru’s two eyes staring at him appeared in front of him like a residual image. Uljin looked down at the ground, avoiding the eyes of the residual image. It somehow felt rather unpleasant to meet it head on.

“Washing your hands?”

Maru asked from next to him. Uljin replied awkwardly before opening the tap and starting to wash his hands again. He put some soap on and rubbed his hands to the point that they started making skidding sounds. He wished that these emotions would be washed away with the water.

“Can I just continue like last time?”

Maru asked as he wiped away the water with a paper towel. Uljin carefully shook the water off his hands and asked back.

“Like last time? What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? Acting of course.”

“Oh, acting.”

“I think we got along pretty well.”

“Uh, yeah. I think so too.”

“Then what happened to you all of a sudden? Did a bug enter your mouth or something?”

“No, it’s not like that.”

He felt thirsty. Uljin wiped his mouth with the back of his hands. His lips felt rather rough from what he felt from his hands. He tried to stick his tongue out and wet his lips, but even his tongue felt rather rough as though all the moisture had dried out. Did he suddenly get dehydrated or something?

He breathed out slowly and wet his hands before bringing them to his lips again. This time, though, his lips felt very moist as though it wasn’t dry at all in the first place. Now that he checked himself, he didn’t feel thirsty either. However, he still felt stuffy. He swallowed his saliva which had accumulated beneath his tongue. Just what was wrong with him?

“Are you okay?”

He saw Maru slowly reaching out to him. Uljin subconsciously swung his arm violently to slap Maru’s hand away. He felt a sharp pain from where his hand hit Maru’s. Only after he hit Maru’s hand did he realize what he had done.

“S-sorry.”

“Whoa, that startled me.”

He saw Maru faintly smile as he covered his hand.

“Are you okay?”

“I am. But aren’t you too much? I wouldn’t like another man’s hand to touch me either, but there was no need for you to hit me, was there?”

“Y-yeah. I wonder why I did that. I must be out of my mind.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

“...Maybe.”

Was smiling such a humiliating thing to do? Uljin forced his lips to curve upwards to smile. When he slapped away Maru’s hands just now, he could see a glimpse of what his inward emotions were like. Right now, he was afraid of Maru’s hand.

Uljin felt as though that hand would approach him, grab him by the collar, and start strangling his neck. He felt scared. For that moment, he seemed really dangerous. Only after he slapped Maru's hand with all of his strength did Maru's surprised expression enter his eyes. He had done something absurd.

"Let's go. The shoot must be resuming soon."

"Uh, yeah. We should."

He saw Maru wait outside the bathroom. Uljin stood next to Maru. He had to be tired since it was his first time being a main actor in a historical drama. Believing that he should return to normal after he took in the fresh air of the night at the set, Uljin started walking.

"I can just do my acting like last time, right?" Maru asked.

"Like last time?"

This was the first time 'like last time' sounded so threatening. Uljin hesitated. Honestly speaking, he couldn't remember what Maru's acting was like before. The only thing that remained in his mind was the scary eyes.

"...Yeah. Just like last time."

"Please take care of me. I'm entrusting my hope in you, lead actor."

Maru's laugh reverberated inside his ears. Uljin clenched his fist and stood in his standby position. The staff that had left momentarily to take a break could be seen returning to their stations. Producers Changsung and Jinhyuk also came to the monitor.

Uljin looked at the camera placed in front of him. How much had he admired that black silhouette? He prayed that he could be captured by it and practiced a lot, eventually reaching this place. He couldn't be shaken. The world of child actors was just as cruel as the realm of adult actors.

"Uljin," producer Changsung called out.

"Yes."

"Play to your heart's content, okay?"

"Yes!"

That was right. This was the mood. Uljin calmed down his breathing. He must have been confused slightly because of the pressure. His acting should soon come back, and as long as he focused, his mentality should soon return.

He stretched out his mouth before straightening his shoulders. I can do it - he shouted inwardly.

"Let's do this," Maru said from the side.

Uljin nodded and looked at the two eyes in front of him. Although they looked a little sharp, it wasn't to the point that he was scared. There was no reason to be afraid of them.

Uljin smiled back. Maru smiled back as well. Only then did he feel that the stuffy air had cleared up a little. His confidence came back to him. He thought that he would be able to show a clean act and make everyone forget his embarrassing moments once the cue sign fell.

“That’s the expression. Minor actors, get ready to go in. As for the 2nd beggar, it’s up to you to induce Uljin to get his emotions together. Don’t just fool around because you aren’t on camera.”

Producer Changsung clapped. The atmosphere became a lot better as well. The slight sense of tension that spread out across his body disappeared. He felt excited. Just as he felt that he could do anything, he saw Maru’s eyes.

They were different. Something had changed. Even though his expression was loose until 5 seconds ago, they were taut right now. Although it was a small change, just that was enough to make his mouth go dry.

He felt as though he was thrown into the wavy waters without a single rope attached. He fidgeted his fingers in nervousness. He put his toes together and tensed them.

Just then, he heard the word ‘cue’. Maru approached him. Maru’s two hands approached his neck. The moment those hands touched his body, Uljin ended up clenching his eyes shut. His lips were tucked back, and his body shrunk back. He instinctively crossed his arm and guarded in front of him. He felt that he might be strangled to death if he didn’t do so.

His brain knew that they were just in a set and that they were acting. However, Maru’s eyes clearly weren’t acting. He clearly looked like he intended to kill him.

Was he jealous? All sorts of thoughts filled his mind. There was a lot of news talking about people dying due to an accident on set. There was no reason why the same thing couldn’t happen to him. Han Maru. He was a stranger. Perhaps he had a history of possessing a mental illness or something. Perhaps he really did suddenly become crazy.

His eyes. They were honest. They were the eyes of someone that was about to strangle someone else. Even his hands were strange. Was there a reason to grab so strongly?

Danger - he didn’t know why, but Maru was really about to strangle him. Uljin pushed back with the arms he had crossed. At that moment, he heard a sharp ‘cut!’ and a ‘hey, what are you doing!’, but he couldn’t retract his actions now.

‘I have to explain. As long as I explain how much danger I was in....’

Uljin saw as Maru’s hands were pushed back too easily. Maru, being pushed back, made a confused expression as he fell backwards. There was even a loud thump as he fell backwards. Uljin sighed after he saw Maru struggle to get up.

“Hey!”

Producer Changsung’s shout could be heard from afar.

Uljin was shocked. What had he done? He felt his neck go stiff. He felt as though he would start creaking. He could hear the producers walking towards him from outside his field of vision, but he couldn’t turn his head that way.

“What are you doing?”

Producer Changsung grabbed his shoulders. He saw producer Jinhyuk approach Maru and pull him up.

“No, the thing is....”

“Are you crazy? Don’t you see that there are stones behind Maru? Are you going to take responsibility if he fell head first? No, in the first case, what the hell did you push the kid for? Huh?”

“It’s not that... I just thought it was dangerous.”

“Dangerous? What’s dangerous is you pushing him so suddenly. What the hell are you doing? Are you here to cause an accident on my watch, huh?”

At that moment, Maru dusted his pants and approached producer Changsung.

“Producer. I’m okay.”

“Are you really okay? There was a really loud thump.”

“Yes. I have a sturdy body.”

“Hey, you don’t know for sure. You fell on top of rocks. No one would be okay.”

“I’m really fine since I exercise a lot. Look.”

“Are you really okay?”

“Yes.”

Uljin couldn’t say a word. He couldn’t even understand his own actions. It was an act, it was just a drama shoot, yet he couldn’t differentiate that and ended up going too far. Just as Uljin was about to apologize to Maru who asked him if he was okay, Moonjoong, who was wearing a gat and a white dopo approached Maru and scanned him before sighing in a low voice.

“Young fella, don’t startle this old man so much. I thought you were injured badly.”

“Elder, my body is very sturdy.”

“Since your blabbermouth is okay, I guess you really are okay.”

“Of course.”

Uljin couldn’t say anything as he watched the two who seemed to be on close terms with each other.

“Why don’t we stop the shoot for now and look at this boy’s state?”

“Of course.”

Uljin watched as Maru walked towards the rest of the staff along with Changsung and Moonjoong. When he met eyes with Maru for a brief moment, he had a feeling that Maru was smiling at him for some reason.

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Maru, who finished receiving medical attention with just a patch on his elbow, returned to his spot. Changsung had planned to go to the hospital if necessary, but fortunately, Maru was okay.

"I was worried since there was a loud sound, but it seems that his reflexes are quite good."

"He should have learned a lot of things after all," Moonjoong, who was watching Maru from the side, spoke.

He was the first one to rush up to Maru, even before the staff, when Maru fell down.

"Uhm, sir. I mean, senior."

"Hm?"

"You said there was someone you know. Is it him?"

"It is."

"I see. Then is he a member of your family?"

"No, he's just a drinking friend."

"What? A drinking friend?"

Moonjoong put on his gat as he smiled in satisfaction.

"A drinking friend, you say? Isn't he only a high school student?"

"When drinking with an adult, age doesn't matter," Moonjoong spoke with a serious expression.

He didn't look like he was joking.

A drinking friend? Changsung didn't know whether he was supposed to laugh or get confused here.

"He's young, but he has a deep heart. It's to the point that I can't believe he's at the age he is. Perhaps that's why I don't get bored when I talk to him. If you have the time, you should come to my house and drink over some pork belly, producer Han."

"If you call me, I'll be there anytime."

Replying, Changsung followed Maru with the corner of his eyes.

"He caught my eye during the audition, and it seemed that there was really something to him."

"Since we're talking about him, I'll tell you this: Watch him well. He'll be very useful. If you deem he's okay, then you can use him, and if not, then that's that."

Moonjoong seemed to be soliciting him, yet not soliciting him. He didn't sound like he was using his name to pressure him to use the boy. It sounded like he should use him since there was a lot to get out of him.

Moonjoong, one of the big elders in the movie industry, was well-known for not recommending people easily. Even though he spoke as though it was nothing much, from how it contained a hint of recommendation, it could be seen just how much he cared about Maru.

"I saw him for the first time on the drama side, but sounds like he's a promising youth on the movie side, I mean, you're looking after him."

"Promising? Nah. He's just a youngling that only shows his face as a minor actor. It hadn't even been that long since he started acting. He wasn't coached from the days he started learning to walk like the others these days but rather, he learned to act after he had a grasp of what's going on around him. I think it's been a little more than a year now."

"Really? I thought he must have studied since young. Then, how did you meet him? Was it a movie? Or..."

"I got to know him through a junior of mine. The junior being Lee Junmin."

"You mean president Lee Junmin of JA production?"

"Yeah, the puppet president of that place."

"Haha, a puppet president? You must be the only one who can call him that."

"Just saying. Rather than that, I thought you knew already. Maru, he belongs to JA as well."

"Really?"

"You didn't know that?"

"I didn't. He got through the public audition after all. We already held an audition for the agencies, so I thought he naturally didn't have an agency."

In the case of public auditions, although they received the resumés of the applicants, they were overlooked, most of the time. That was because talks with various agencies would finish before the audition stage.

The big agencies introduced their minor actors when looking for the lead actors, as though they were a set. Like that, most of the roles that had any weight to them were taken by actors or agencies who had name value. After that were actors that came through connections, then would be the auditions of various acting academies, and only after that were minor roles picked through public auditions.

Due to this method of selection, most of the people that came to the public auditions didn't have an agency to speak of. They were either just members of a theater troupe or people just starting out acting. There was no need to go through their resumés so they were differentiated according to their facial features and attire during the audition, and were picked after looking at their acts.

Changsung asked for Moonjoong's understanding before calling the TV station. He ordered one of his juniors to look for contracts with the name Han Maru.

-Ah, here it is. He belongs to JA Production. What about it?

"It's nothing much. I'm hanging up then."

-Yes. Please take care.

Changsung looked at Moonjoong as he put down the phone.

“Han Maru, is this kid abandoned by the company or something? They shouldn’t neglect him so much if they’re planning to raise him.”

“That’s just how Junmin works. He doesn’t handle low-quality goods. He’s a picky guy who only deals with mid-rate, no, high-quality goods.”

“Well... JA Production is a long-standing company, but I guess it’s been only half a year since they started adding actors in their ranks. The people they possess are all actors that other agencies are greedy for. I heard a rumor that you’ll only get used when you’re big, and from what you’re telling me, it’s true.”

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t need to mention how good Junmin’s business skills are. He might be visiting the various TV stations in a while, who knows.”

Moonjoong stood up from his seat.

“I think people are waiting. We should get started.”

“Yes.”

Changsung also put back on his hat and stood up. It had been around ten minutes so things should have calmed down a little. He walked towards the camera director with the script in one hand. He tapped on the shoulder of the camera director who was instructing his assistant on the position of the tripod.

“Director Jang.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Did you see what the situation was like when you were shooting last time? I was looking through the monitor, so I don’t know exactly what happened.”

The camera director shrugged.

“I’m also very confused. That guy suddenly pushed the boy in front of him. I thought you ordered him to do it.”

“So it wasn’t an accident? Like he misstepped or something.”

“He pushed intentionally. You might not have seen it since it happened off-camera, but it was definitely not a mistake.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m also curious, so why don’t you go and ask?”

Changsung replied yes before going to Uljin. He called out to Uljin, who was walking around on the spot nervously.

“Yes, producer.”

“What happened to you? I’m sorry I shouted at you, but I just couldn’t understand. Why did you suddenly push someone like that.”

“I’m sorry.”

"I'm not here to hear you apologize, but I'm curious as to why you did such things."

He almost injured a completely fine man. There were no signs of it either. It shouldn't have been that the two were on bad terms. They did the shoot together during the day as well without any accidents.

Uljin was a very polite boy. There was no way he did such actions without any reason.

"...I'm sorry."

"Are there some circumstances?"

"No, it's not like that."

"Then why can't you tell me?"

"The thing is...."

Uljin's eyes moved. His gaze was directed at where Maru was sitting.

"Did you two get into a fight?"

"No. It was just my misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?"

After hesitating, Uljin made a teary face as he spoke.

"I thought he was really trying to beat me up. I must have been crazy for a moment. I'm really sorry."

Changsung laughed in vain. That was because Uljin's response sounded serious. It didn't sound like he was making an excuse. He looked as though Maru's actions were really threatening and so he took action to defend himself.

"Geez. Get yourself together. This is not a playground."

"I will."

After watching Uljin dejected for a while, he told him to cheer up. People made absurd mistakes when they were nervous. Uljin must have been like that as well. Nothing good would come out of shouting at him, so he had to encourage him, though that sounded a bit absurd as well.

Changsung turned around and approached Maru this time.

"There really isn't a problem, right?"

"Yes. I'm really okay."

"Then let's start the shoot. Tell me if there's a problem. Also...."

Changsung gestured for Maru to come closer.

"I want you to loosen up a little."

"Loosen up?"

“Yes. I think Uljin’s very nervous right now. He said he pushed you because you looked like you were really picking a fight.”

“Really?”

“It must be rather absurd, but I’ll have you look after Uljin for a moment. When you see him, just grab his collars softly. Just so that he doesn’t get surprised. Okay?”

“I’ll loosen up as much as possible, then.”

“Alright, I’ll leave that to you. Geez, you are having a hard time.”

Even though it wasn’t a complex scene, they wasted too much time. At the start, it looked like they were able to finish the night scenes without going too late into the night, but it seemed that they had to stay up the night after all. This was the first day of shooting too. Changsung put on a bitter smile.

“Everyone on standby! Since it’s getting late, let’s do this quickly.”

* * *

It was past 10 o’clock. However, the lights at the set did not turn off. Maru let go of Uljin’s collars when he heard the cut sound. Uljin spoke with confused eyes.

“Sorry about last time.”

“You shouldn’t be. People make mistakes. Rather than that, are you okay?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Maru patted Uljin before pointing at the lights with his chin.

“Let’s go. It’s time to shoot the next scene.”

Moonjoong and Giwoo walked in front of the camera. Uljin, who had a dumb expression on, quickly followed Maru.

“Looks like you’re really tired. I mean, you didn’t make a single mistake during the day.”

Uljin didn’t reply.

His mind had to be quite messy right now. After all, he wouldn’t be able to understand why he took such actions. Maru was inwardly surprised as well. His original objective was to mess up his acting. If he beat the guy up just because he didn’t like him, he would take damage instead. The only legal way to pressure him was through acting, so he put all of his efforts into acting, and then that happened.

When Uljin pushed out, he could have dodged as long as he wanted to. If he was at a level where he would get pushed back from someone who reflexively swung out, his practices of weaving at the boxing gym would be in vain. He thought that getting hit would be much more profitable for him than dodging, so he let his body go with the flow. Even when he fell down, he kicked off the ground with his heel, so that it would make a loud noise. He wasn’t injured since he was fully prepared to fall down, but it must have looked quite dangerous in other people’s eyes.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Uljin sighed as he massaged his eyes.

“The producer said to me that you thought I was really going to attack you.”

“No... it was just my mistake.”

He couldn't say that he overreacted due to fear when he was a fully grown-up man. It would be much more comforting for him to say that it was his fault.

Uljin looked at the producer with a nervous expression. He was probably worried. He acted so strangely in front of everyone else after all. A rumor about a crazy guy in the drama 'Apgu' might start floating around.

“It's done. Senior, can we go over to the next part?”

“Okay then.”

Since the shoot was delayed, producer Changsung sped up just as much.

“The two of you!”

Producer Changsung waved at the two. Uljin flinched as though he had done something wrong before shouting yes. Maru laughed in a low voice as he saw Uljin run towards producer Changsung.

They started the rehearsal without taking a break. This scene was where Moonjoong, who played the role of Han Sang-jil, rejoiced when he saw the friendship between Han Myung-hoe and Gaeguk. It was a simple scene where all the beggars had to do was to just exclaim 'wow' in the background.

With a 'cut' sound, Giwoo blocked Moonjoong who told him not to hang out with filthy people and said his line. He nervously told him that Gaeguk was his friend and that neither age nor status mattered when it came to friendship. He was in a situation where his respect for his great uncle and the friendship between him and his friend clashed, so he could neither shout nor shrink back. Giwoo was controlling the balance between those two emotions well, but producer Changsung didn't seem to like that.

The shoot continued. Since this was the most important scene for the day, the producer did not give a refreshing okay that easily. Even while apologizing to Moonjoong, who he called 'senior' every time, producer Changsung requested adjustments over and over again. As Giwoo became better with feedback, producer Changsung's voice became brighter, but he still did not give an okay sign for quite a while.

At that moment, Moonjoong raised his hand to halt the shoot.

“Producer Han. Let's talk a little.”

Producer Changsung and Moonjoong started having a conversation. Maru stretched his arms out and looked up at the sky. He felt his fatigue disappear as he looked at the night sky that didn't have a speck of cloud in it. Just as he was going to tell the other beggars to look up at the sky,

“Maru.”

He heard Moonjoong call out to him.

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Maru wondered why he was called. For now, he went to where producer Changsung was. Moonjoong and Giwoo stared at him from the side.

“Did you call for me?”

“Yeah. Uhm, can I ask you for a favor?”

Producer Changsung looked at Giwoo for some reason as he asked Maru. Giwoo smiled in embarrassment.

“I want you to do some acting.”

“I’m not in this scene though.”

“Not as the 2nd beggar, but as Han Myung-hoe.”

“As Han Myung-hoe?”

Maru realized why producer Changsung was giving glimpses at Giwoo. Maru looked at Giwoo as well.

“Please. I just can’t get a grasp on it,” Giwoo spoke in a small voice.

“Producer. I don’t think anything will change just because I’m the one doing it.”

It wasn’t that Maru was feeling pressured. It was just that Giwoo, who played the role of Han Myung-hoe, was right in front of him. He felt like he was eating out of another’s plate.

“Why don’t you just try it once?”

“Elder.”

Maru looked at the elder who said to him that it was okay. From looking at how things were going, it seemed that Moonjoong mentioned him first. While Maru felt thankful that Moonjoong was saying good things about him, he would only receive jealous stares if things kept going on like this. The producer was one thing, but he was worried about his relationship with Giwoo.

“If you can’t, I guess producer Han needs to do some hard coaching.”

Moonjoong spoke with pity.

“Uhm, Mr. Maru.”

“Yes.”

“I asked the producer to ask you since sir Moonjoong told me that it would help a lot to watch your acting. The producer told me the general direction of the scene, but I can’t get a grasp on it. Rather than doing fixed acting, I want to try to solve it, and the producer wants that as well. Please help me out just this once.”

Giwoo scratched his head as he smiled. It didn’t look like a childish smile.

"I know that it's too much to ask of you, but I want to see it anyway. Although sir Moonjoong taught me, it'll be better for me if there's someone around my age that I can refer to."

"Are you really okay with that?"

Acting was an actor's pride. It was really not easy to make such requests on set like this, but Giwoo seemed to be worried more about the fact that he wasn't able to show a satisfactory act than his own embarrassment.

"Please. I want to see it."

The person in question gave permission. Maru made a bitter smile before looking at producer Changsung.

"What do I need to do?"

"The cut where Han Myung-hoe exchanges a conversation with senior. The lines are..."

"I remember them from watching."

"That's good. Let's try it out for now, and if I still don't get a satisfactory picture, I will go into the details. Giwoo, you're okay with that too, aren't you?"

"Yes. Sorry for asking you to do such a thing. Everyone's being delayed because of me."

"It's because of my desire to get a good picture, so you don't need to feel sorry. Well, then senior. Please."

In this dark place where there were no lights, he had to show a short skit without a camera rolling. Maru stood in front of Moonjoong.

"This is the first time we are acting together after the movie, huh."

"Yes."

"Then, I'll have to ask you to take care of me."

"Please don't say such a thing. You're giving me pressure."

Maru looked at Giwoo who stood next to him. Giwoo nodded his head. Maru also replied as he pulled in his chin.

"Then I'll start."

"Yes."

Maru straightened his chest and his waist. When he was playing the beggar role, he had shrunk his body back even while he wasn't on camera. It was to create a contrast to Gaeguk, who was bold despite having a status that wasn't welcomed by anyone.

However, the role he had to play right now was not the 2nd beggar, but Han Myung-hoe. He was a greedy child who dreamed of becoming successful from young so that he would never get abandoned again. It wouldn't make sense to show a shy attitude.

Maru looked at Moonjoong and calmed his breathing. Various emotions were surfacing on Moonjoong's face. The gentleness of one who took in someone whose brother had abandoned flashed by before anger overtook it when seeing that very boy hang out with a group of beggars.

"The reason I permitted you to stay when you came to ask me for shelter was because I saw the light in you. I believed that your extraordinary talents would make our family rise again. Yet, you're here hanging out with a beggar. Aren't you embarrassed?"

There was a hint of worry in that scolding tone. The tone of words didn't one-sidedly lash at the other and instead, induced the listener to think. It was possible to figure out that hint from Moonjoong's expression and tone of words. The form of the emotion was clear enough to be transferred to the viewers who would be watching through a screen. Maru inwardly exclaimed and prepared his next line.

If the producer had a specific request, he would follow, but right now, it was up to him. He had to dig deep into the character with just the text and express the character as much as possible.

Han Myung-hoe. He was someone who walked on the line between a heroic vassal and a disloyal subordinate. However, that evaluation was given to him by the later generations. In his time, he was very powerful and well-known. Whether it was a disloyal subordinate or a heroic vassal, the ones that climbed up to the top were not ordinary. He became a gatekeeper only in his 30s after failing the national exams many times, but he became a meritorious vassal after displaying his stunning intellect in the coup of 1453.

What he was acting now was the younger days of such a person. He shouldn't be such an obedient guy.

Maru looked back at Moonjoong in the eyes. He predicted that the young Han Myung-hoe was bold enough to go against the adult of his family that took him in. However, he also thought that Han Myung-hoe should have some nervousness because of the fear that he might be thrown out to the streets again along with his little brother if he went against the will of the man in front of him.

He wondered how he should express the two clashing emotions. Under the condition that the camera was shooting his entire body, he had two options.

His face and his body.

Expressions were direct. It would give the other party raw emotions. On the other hand, the body was subtle. If a smiling man was shaking his legs, then he was trying to cover up his nervousness by showing a leisurely front.

How was he supposed to express the mental disparity of standing up for his friend Gaeguk and the wish to look good in front of Han Sang-jil? Maru decided to follow the textbook. He loosened his fist and clasped his hands to show that he was compromising, he showed his attitude by not avoiding Moonjoong's gaze, and he showed his fear with his slightly shaky voice.

"I am aware of what you're worried about. However, I do not want to become a cruel person that throws away his friends. When you took me in, great uncle, I was also an abandoned baby. I do not think there's a difference in me being thrown out by my family, and this fellow being thrown out into the streets."

"So you're saying you will stand up for him and hang out with him until the very end?"

"I just do not want to become a shameless man who loses a good friend."

When he said his lines, he ended up changing a few words because he was swayed by his emotions, but he didn't think much about it. It was just practice anyway. It would be fine as long as he showed Giwoo that this was the general gist of it. Though, he didn't know how helpful this would be.

"I think that's about it," he said as he looked at Giwoo.

"Mr. Maru.... You're good."

Giwoo clapped in applause. Maru awkwardly smiled and turned around to look at producer Changsung.

"Is that enough?"

"I think it's enough. I feel sorry for Giwoo, but if I got that on camera right now, I would have given an okay immediately. Senior, this one's good."

Producer Changsung approached Maru and patted Maru's back strongly. Maru quickly ran away when he felt the sharp pain from his back.

"Well done."

Only after he heard Moonjoong's compliment did he feel relieved.

"But you weren't as good as you were in the movie. It's just lacking."

"If I want to do that, I would have to hang onto this line for days. Please let me go this time."

"There you are sounding weak again. You should always be ready to show it when people order you to."

"I'll prepare more next time so that you can order me with a press of a button like a vending machine."

After exchanging jokes, Maru walked away. He walked towards the rest of the minor actors when Giwoo came to him and started walking next to him.

"Thanks for the help. I got a grasp thanks to you."

"That's good. But I was really awkward so it shouldn't be very helpful."

"Not at all."

Maru clicked his tongue as he saw Giwoo turn around. He was young, yet he had the air of a pro around him. It was surprising how he admitted what he lacked and tried to improve himself. People around his age would usually have a hard time doing such a thing, but he looked very trustable due to his kind-looking face.

As soon as he returned to his place, the shoot resumed. When the younger actors asked him what he was doing there, he just said that he stood still.

Maru sat down on the ground and rested his chin on his hands before watching Giwoo and Moonjoong. The camera captured the two. The scene that made several NGs started again. He wondered how it would be now.

"...When you took me in, great uncle, I was also an abandoned baby. I do not think there's a...."

Giwoo's line could be heard.

Maru frowned a little. Giwoo's tone, posture, and expression were surprisingly similar to the act he just did. His lips were softened, his eyes were raised, his neck was tense, and his hands were clasped. Maru stroked his chin with his left hand. It was quite curious. It was as though Giwoo had done dozens of practices.

Maru thought that Giwoo would interpret Maru's own act in his own way, but he was creating a completely identical scene. It was to the point that it didn't feel awkward at all. Maru clicked his tongue as he watched Giwoo. He felt like he was the one standing there instead.

"Cut! That was very good!"

Producer Changsung's satisfactory shout could be heard. The shoot was finally over now. The staff thanked each other for their efforts and started putting away the equipment. Maru also got changed and got ready to go to the residence that the TV station had booked for the actors.

"Thanks."

Giwoo, who had changed into casual clothes, approached Maru and said. Maru smiled and replied.

"You were really good back there."

"Not at all. Rather than that, how was I?"

"What?"

"Did I look like I imitated you too much?"

"No. It didn't feel like that at all. It was perfectly original."

"Really?"

Giwoo smiled and extended his hand.

"Please take care of me in the future too."

Maru grabbed that hand lightly.

"Likewise."

"I'll have to ask you for a favor from time to time then. I'm not very good, so I have a lot to learn. Then see you tomorrow."

Giwoo went on first while leaving behind a hearty laugh. Maru also let go of his hand and went to return his clothes.

"Giwoo!"

Just then, he saw Uljin hurry and catch up to Giwoo. The two looked like they had something to talk about. Maru just looked at the two without thinking much, but at that time, he met eyes with Giwoo. Giwoo nodded with a courteous smile before turning around again. Uljin followed him once again. He looked like he was explaining things to him.

Maru shrugged his shoulders before starting to walk. It was probably nothing much. Uljin was probably making excuses about his actions on set or asking him not to tell others.

“Hyung, let’s go!”

“Alright.”

Maru headed to the residence with the younger actors who were waiting for him.

Chapter 404

“I’m not sure about anything else, but let’s wash our feet at least before we sleep.”

“I don’t want to suffocate overnight.”

The staff and the background actors giggled as they started to take off their socks. They were in a rental house near the shooting location. The people gathered here were either background actors or part-timers. Maru and the younger minor actors had to stay the night here as well. As for Bitna, she went off in her mother’s car after the shoot.

“It’s like we’re here on a field trip.”

“Hey, let’s go wash ourselves.”

“Aren’t you coming with us, hyung?”

Maru shook his head. Even if they went now, it was obvious that they would have to wait in front of the bathroom. He waved at the younger kids that left the room and unloaded his luggage in a corner. He took out a book, a change of clothes, and a chocolate bar.

“Where’s the lighting team that just came today?”

“Here!”

“Come out. Let’s drink.”

A man who sat quietly in one corner took his jacket and left. Following that, the main and camera teams visited in succession and took their part-timers.

“They have it good.”

“Isn’t there anything for us?”

“Nope. I saw that the lighting team had a good atmosphere. I should have joined them as well.”

“Don’t say that, and let’s drink together with just us. I saw a supermarket nearby.”

Six men left together to drink.

Although they were people who met for the first time today, they soon became close perhaps due to the fact that they went through a hot ordeal together. The group that tried to call some food delivery ended up sighing and giving up, and the people that laid out their blanket early thinking that sleep was the best medicine, were wrestling with the heat.

30 grown men with beards would crawl into this place throughout the night and end up sleeping in empty spots. It was just like the military barracks.

“You have to wake up at 6 tomorrow and finish breakfast by 6:30. The shoot begins at 7 so bear that in mind. Don’t be late, and tell the others who aren’t here right now.”

“Yes, I understand.”

A woman left with a smile along with words of encouragement. She seemed to be part of the main team, but Maru didn’t recognize her. Since there were so many staff members for this drama, he didn’t know the faces of most of the staff members, much less their names.

“She’s pretty.”

“You saw her face in that short time?”

The usual male banter started, but it soon died down. It was 11 p.m. Around five people left the room saying that they couldn’t get any sleep due to the heat. It seemed that they needed some alcohol to compensate for their hard work.

“Hyung, there aren’t any people now.”

Hearing the younger actors’ words, Maru took his towel and change of clothes and went to the bathroom. When he entered the public shower, a stuffy heat assaulted him. He smiled subconsciously.

After having a light shower, he returned to the room. The lights opposite the entrance were off, and below them were people who were sleeping without any blankets. Mosquitoes entered through the ripped portions of the mosquito net, but the windows were all wide open. The outdated air conditioner clearly wasn’t enough to cool down all the people here in this weather.

Smelling a faint fragrance of mosquito-repellent incense, Maru opened his book.

“What are you reading? A comic book?”

The younger actors approached him and showed interest, but they soon lost interest and went away.

“You should read some books.”

“I don’t want to.”

The five younger actors sat around in a circle before starting to play some games. They giggled as they hit each other’s hands, but they soon seemed to have gotten tired and lied down on the spot.

Maru smiled and threw the chocolate bars he brought at them. Even though they were yawning until moments ago, they rushed to grab the chocolate bars immediately. They were at an age where they were constantly hungry.

“Guys, quiet down a little.”

A man who seemed to be over fifty, who was getting ready to sleep, spoke. Maru apologized in everyone’s stead. The man yawned and lied down. The younger actors also stopped chatting.

The TV on the TV stand was talking by itself. It was an entertainment program, but he couldn't understand a single thing it was saying. The man who was rolling around under the TV probed around in the dark and turned it off. Only the sound of breathing could be heard in the room.

"It's hot."

One of the younger actors spoke. It definitely was summer. The people that Maru thought were sleeping all sighed and stood up. It would be incredibly stifling once people who left came back. Maru seriously considered sleeping outside.

"Looks like everyone's sleeping."

Just then, the door opened and a voice could be heard. Giwoo was standing under the lights in front of the door. He seemed to have found Maru who was sitting in the corner and gave him glimpses.

"If it's okay with you, would you like to eat some watermelons? It's cold."

People reacted to the word 'cold'.

"Watermelon sounds good."

"There's sikhye as well. Can some of you come with me? I won't be able to carry it by myself."

Maru closed the book he was reading and slapped the backs of the younger actors who were next to him.

"If you think you should be the one to go, then you should go."

He told the adults that he would do it as they were about to stand up and walk outside. There was a truck outside the house, which still had its engine on.

He unloaded some watermelons and sikhye from the back. They were cold as though they were just taken out of the refrigerator. He took the watermelons and the sikhye back to the room. Everyone had woken up and pushed the blankets to one side of the room.

"Wow, they're big."

A man, who tried tapping one of the watermelons with his palm then sliced down with the knife he was holding. The insides of the split watermelon were a ripe red.

"Hey, you kids should eat first."

The adults let the kids eat first. Maru also picked up a slice. It was cool enough to blow away the heat of the summer in an instant, and it was also sweet.

"Who's buying it? Did we get the budget for it?"

One of the men, who was drinking sikhye, asked Giwoo.

"It's... me. I mean, the shoot was delayed because of me. Sorry about that. It was hard, wasn't it? The weather is hot as well," Giwoo spoke in a careful voice.

The people in the room started laughing as though it was nothing to worry about.

“Anything can happen while shooting.”

“He’s right.”

“But it definitely feels good. Thanks to you, we get to eat watermelons.”

Giwoo said ‘that’s good’ in a small voice before sighing slightly. Maru put down the watermelon peel and looked at Giwoo. He was such a good kid. There were two types of apologies: One where it was pleasant to listen to, and one where it made people frown, and Giwoo’s was the former. If he just dumped some food on them as though he would treat someone lower than him, he would have sworn at the guy, but there was no one who would blame him for anything when his attitude was like this.

“Keep that up in the future. Social life is nothing special. If you act like that in the future, you’ll be doted on by the adults.”

“Yes, please dote on me in the future as well.”

Giwoo poured some sikhye for the people with a smile.

“You too, Mr. Maru.”

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you for last time.”

“Nah, don’t keep bringing it up. You’re embarrassing me.”

“I received a big help, so I can’t really just forget about it after just saying thanks. Please take care of me in the remaining shoots as well.”

Maru nodded and drank his sikhye. Giwoo poured sikhye for one last person before sitting down next to him.

“Mr. Maru.”

“Yes?”

“How long has it been since you started acting?”

“I’m not sure. I guess I’m in my second year now.”

“Really? I thought you would’ve started much sooner. You’re amazing.”

“I’m not that great.”

“You showed a perfect act you didn’t prepare for in a perfect manner in front of so many people. Normally, people call that amazing.”

“It’s something that everyone’s doing. I’m happy that you’re looking at me in a good light, but I don’t think it’s worth complimenting.”

“Aren’t you too humble? You’re skilled too.”

Maru smiled and stared at Giwoo. His bad habit of becoming suspicious of too much flattery was flaring up again. He knew that it wasn't a good habit, but it was a habit he developed just like how herbivore animals would perk up their ears to scan for danger. Giwoo could have said those words out of goodwill, but Maru always raised his guard up subconsciously when someone he didn't verify talked good about him.

He looked into Giwoo's eyes. A speech bubble started forming behind Giwoo's head. He couldn't read deep into his heart, but he could see what he was thinking about Han Maru.

-Am I disturbing him when he's tired?

"You must be tired right? I guess I talked too much."

Giwoo smiled as he stood up. Maru slapped his left cheek. He was too suspicious of everyone. Of course, he couldn't evaluate what kind of person Giwoo was with just that, but he found out that he wasn't someone that would think about something else when talking to him. If he talked to Maru with the intention of looking down on him, the speech bubble would have contained something else.

"Uhm. Mr. Giwoo."

"Yes?"

"Let's do our best tomorrow."

Giwoo nodded before leaving the room.

"Ooh, hyung. Aren't you going to become a lead actor at this rate?"

"Don't betray us when you do."

"Don't talk nonsense and go brush your teeth. Your teeth will rot if you sleep now. Don't lose millions in cash later in life and manage them well while you still can."

He tapped the younger actors with his feet before getting his own toothbrush and going to the bathroom. Just then, his phone started vibrating. After telling everyone else to go ahead, he sat down on a bench outside the house and took the call.

"It's late, why are you calling me now and not sleeping?"

-No reason. I just called you because I was worried. Is the shoot over?

"Yes. It is."

-It's hot, isn't it?

"Just a while ago, it was unbearable, but now I can take a breather. Rather than that, you should get some sleep. Your first shoot is tomorrow, isn't it?"

Maru leaned against the backrest and looked up at the sky as he spoke. Tomorrow was the first day of shooting for the sitcom that she was shooting. Apparently, the shoot happened on a set in Paju.

-I want to sleep, but I'm not sleepy.

"You nervous?"

-Of course I am. I feel like my heart will jump out of my throat.

"What's up with you? You're so good on stage."

-This is different from a play. Moreover, there are adults as well. There will be seniors everywhere around me. Just thinking about it makes me dizzy.

"Appeal your cuteness by smiling. At least you will hear fewer swear words that way."

-Sounds sooo helpful.

"Then what, should I sing a lullaby for you or something?"

-Go ahead.

"What's up with you?"

-Don't switch the subject and start singing. I'll listen to it with my eyes closed.

"Really? You really want me to sing for you?"

-Yeah. I think I'll only calm down if I listen to something.

Maru scratched his brows. *She* really wasn't like usual. It seemed that *she* was really nervous.

-Aren't you going to sing?

"There's a lot of people here."

-So you're going to retract your words?

"I know you hate things like this."

-I want to listen for today.

"Geez."

-Are you singing or not?

"Do you really want to listen? You know I can't sing."

-...Yeah. I want to listen.

Her voice didn't have any power. He could imagine *her* lying on her side with a depressed expression. They say people couldn't take the opportunity when they see it, and it seemed that Maru was the same. For some reason, his tongue felt dry and he was overly sensitive when he was told to sing a lullaby. At that time, her quiet voice entered his ears.

-I was just joking. You must be tired so get some rest.

The moment he heard those words, Maru started singing a lullaby in a low voice. 'The Baby in the House in the Isle', that started off with 'When the mother goes to pick oysters'. He heard *her* giggle once and then the sound of blankets rustling could be heard over the phone.

He felt that his body temperature rose by at least 2 degrees centigrade after singing.

-Hey.

“What?”

-Why is the song so depressing?

“It’s that kind of song. Also, get some sleep. Otherwise, you’ll have a hard time tomorrow.”

Just as he stood up after putting the toothbrush back into his mouth, *she* spoke in a small voice.

-You too, good night.

Good night. It had a different ring to it than goodbye. Maru put on a faint smile as he hung up.

* * *

“You’re going to finish the shoot here during the morning and go back to the set in Seoul in the afternoon, right?”

“Yeah. Rather than that, the art director was amazing. It feels like he’s going to grind his soul into this.”

“Thanks to him, the ones working with him are having a hard time. Just look at all that money. Have you seen the budget he’s asking for? It’s seriously no joke. Even though it’s a historical drama, I’m surprised that such a plan got approved. From the rumors, I heard that he is actually acquainted with the president.”

“Why don’t you get some work done if you have time to listen to rumors? And talk to some actors while at it.”

“It’s really hard for me to talk to the elders. There’s too much pressure.”

“If you keep acting like that, when will you ever become the main producer? Time flies you know? Before you know it, 1 year becomes 2 years, then 3 years, then once you look around, you’ll be doing your first piece and ruin it.”

“Fine. Oh, here, take this. It’s breakfast.”

Changsung put the sandwich that Jinhyuk gave him in his mouth. Since it was a self-produced historical drama, and he didn’t have pressure from advertisers, he was able to get 10 episodes prior to airing. Although it would change according to the flow of the shoot, Changsung’s objective was to finish 8 episodes at least before it started airing.

“Have you seen Uljin this morning?”

“Yeah. Well, he looked okay.”

“I hope nothing bad happens today.”

“Me too. Kids these days are so hard to handle.”

Changsung stuffed the sandwich in his mouth as he stood up.

It was time for work.

Chapter 405

“Don’t leave behind any food.”

A lady, who was mixing the hot soup said as he scooped a bowl of rice.

“It was a buffet yesterday.”

“And today, it’s like school food.”

Maru glanced at the younger actors who grumbled about the food before grabbing some mumallaengi with the tongs. It seemed that yesterday’s dinner was just special. Perhaps they were called as a special service to commemorate the shoot. He ate the sticky rice. This was fine. It wasn’t like he was here to eat food after all.

After finishing breakfast, it was 7. Even though the schedule stated that the shoot would begin at 7, no one seemed to be in a hurry. The schedule was just a schedule after all.

“I don’t think I apologized to you properly yesterday.”

He heard a voice when he was inserting some coins into the coffee vending machine. He grabbed the cup and turned around. Uljin was standing there with an awkward expression.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Uh, yeah.”

He gave him the coffee before buying another one. He gave some bills to the younger actors before moving locations with Uljin.

“I must have not been right in my mind yesterday. I thought about apologizing to you properly after the shoot, but...”

“It’s fine. It’s not like I’m injured. Don’t mind it.”

“Sorry.”

“I said you don’t need to apologize.”

Uljin seemed to have something more to say, but Maru just left after saying words of encouragement. There was neither a reason for him to stay close to him nor one to stay far away from him. Not liking someone was different from working with that person. Uljin was a business associate that he may have to meet several times in the future. Just because he didn’t like the guy didn’t mean that he should oppose the guy on every single thing. It was better to maintain a relationship of just ‘acquaintances’. Of course, he still wished for Uljin to stumble on a rock and fall down one day in his mind.

“Uhm, I said I’m really sorry.”

Uljin grabbed Maru’s shoulder. Maru looked down at his hand. Thanks to Uljin shaking his body, he spilled the coffee. The coffee was on the back of his hand and it was quite hot.

“Are you okay?”

Maru shook off his hand. Fortunately, he didn't seem to get a burn. Uljin's attitude ticked him off more than the spilled coffee. He could feel desperation from his apology. It was as though something big would happen if he did not get forgiveness from Maru. Uljin pushed the apology onto him. His eyes looked desperate. Just what was pushing this young fellow's back so much?

Just as he was about to ask something to probe his heart, someone interfered.

“Uljin.”

“Yes, Giwoo.”

“What are you doing?”

“No, the thing is-.”

“From afar, it seemed like you were forcefully holding him back. Do you have an ill will against him or something?”

“No! This time it was just a mistake. Maru, isn't that right?”

Maru nodded for now.

“It's your second mistake already. Mr. Maru almost got hurt again. Are you okay, Mr. Maru? I saw you spill some coffee on your hands.”

“It's nothing major, so don't worry about it.”

Maru drank the cooled coffee in one gulp.

“Uhm, Maru.”

“I'm really okay, and you don't have to apologize for yesterday's matters so don't worry about it. Is everything good now?”

“Okay...” Uljin replied awkwardly.

“I'm going then. Do your best too, Mr. Giwoo.”

He crumpled the paper cup and threw it in the trash before turning around. Just now, Uljin was glimpsing at Giwoo as he talked just now. Maru could see the gloominess of a subordinate standing in front of his superior. Perhaps the two weren't friends?

“Hyung. They told us to get makeup.”

“Coming,” Maru replied to the younger actor before turning around.

Giwoo was smiling back at him.

* * *

She took a deep breath and breathed back out. In front of her was a giant set. The entrance to the set, that was square like a storage vault, opened and the cars started driving in. *She* could hear the words 'slow down', which were shouted.

"Why do you look like you're out of yourself?"

"That startled me."

She was startled by Yoo Jiseok who just popped up in front of her face and walked backwards.

"Damn, that's a reaction that's worth teasing."

"Please, greet people ordinarily."

"I said hello from behind you and you didn't hear me. I crawled on the ground in front of you and you still didn't recognize me."

Jiseok dusted his clothes as he smiled. *She* was flabbergasted. He crawled on asphalt just to prank her? He really wasn't normal.

"It's my first sitcom! I'm insanely excited."

She made a powerless smile as she saw Jiseok hopping around everywhere. Jiseok also said that this was the first time he was doing a sitcom. He played the main character's friend who constantly visited his house. He was a minor role that had a lot of lines and appearances, almost to the point that he was practically a supporting role. If *she* was the one playing that role, she would have been staring at the script with nervousness right now, but Jiseok looked around the set like he was here on a tour and talked to the staff. There wasn't any nervousness around him.

"Aren't you nervous?"

"I am nervous."

He replied as though it was only natural. *She* chuckled.

"You're amazing."

"What is?"

"Your mindlessness. You don't even know nervousness."

"I said I am nervous."

Just where was nervousness in his smiling face? Looking at the excited Jiseok, *she* felt that she could calm down a little.

"I really should learn from you a little."

"I guess there's indeed a lot to learn from me."

"Geez, you just won't stop at anything huh. Are you always this talkative when you're with Maru as well?"

"I'm a consistent guy. I'm always ready to talk whenever and wherever. People say I'm the type of guy whose mouth would float when I drown, and that was good. What a compliment is that?"

"That's not a compliment. That's an insult."

"Tsk, ts. You live a tight life. Even if I drown, if my mouth floats, I will get to live at least. It's a good ability, isn't it?"

"I'm even more surprised that you're actually feeling that way. You've been like that since you were young, haven't you?"

"No."

"Lies."

"It's true. I used to practically live in a hospital so I was really quiet. I didn't have any friends at school either, so it made me even quieter."

The words he was saying with a smile were definitely words that shouldn't be said with a smile. *She* stared at Jiseok. *She* couldn't see a hint of joking from his face.

"Were you sick...?"

"I was really sick. I had a hard time breathing! But who do you think I am? I soon got rid of my illness and got up."

"And you're all okay now?"

"...Well, I'm definitely a lot better than before."

Jiseok spun around on the spot and shouted 'tada!'. People's hearts couldn't be read from the surface, and it seemed that Jiseok was hiding pain under his smiles.

"What is up with those bitter eyes? Are you pitying me? Then I guess I should say this again. If you want to pity me, give me money instead."

Saying that, Jiseok put out his hand. *She* chuckled before taking out a 100 won coin from her pocket and putting it in his hand.

"I guess it's good that such a wordless guy became so talkative then."

"It is a good thing. It's because there was a time I stayed in bed that I can do this now."

"How optimistic. It looks good on you."

"Of course. Since we're saying this, why don't you introduce me to a pretty girlfriend who's also optimistic?"

"Should I really introduce one?"

"Oh, who is it?"

"Yoojin."

"You're my enemy starting now. Don't talk to me."

"I thought you wanted me to introduce you to a pretty girl."

"I said don't talk to me."

Jiseok then stomped his way into the set. Seeing that, *she* burst out laughing.

* * *

"Man, a loyal man."

-What the heck is that?

"Your nickname from now on. Your girlfriend is doing very well. *She* looked a little nervous at first, but she looks okay now."

-That's good, thanks for caring about *her*.

"I don't dare disobey you, milord. How's it on your side?"

-Over here? It's been an hour since I started waiting under the sun.

"Watch out not to get sunburns. Remember to apply sunscreen."

-I can't because I'm a beggar.

"Then I guess you have no choice but to endure. Oh, and meet me next week. I heard you are starting a movie. This bro will help you out."

-Alright, I'll see what I can do. Good luck with the shoot.

"Thanks."

Jiseok hung up before looking next to him. He could see her who was watching the set being torn apart. Maru, who looked like he had no worries at all, asked him for a favor. It seemed that he really treated *her* as someone precious.

"Hello."

A greeting could be heard from the entrance. When he looked, he saw a woman coming in wearing a black dress.

'There she is.'

Lee Miyoon. The veteran actress who was known to be quite scary, appeared. She walked as she received the greetings of the people around. Jiseok also bowed and greeted her when she passed by. She was the last person to play pranks on.

"Over there, you."

Miyoon pointed a finger. Jiseok followed her finger and clenched his teeth when he saw her at that place.

"Aren't you an actor?"

“Ah, yes. I am.”

“You are? Then why aren’t you greeting me?”

“Sorry, I was just looking around the set.”

“Aha, really? Looks like the juniors treat the set as more important than the seniors, huh? Forget it, get going.”

Miyoon waved and walked away as she smiled with her wrinkly face. Jiseok approached her and whispered in a small voice.

“You okay?”

“No, I don’t think I am. I’ve just been targeted, right?”

“No way.”

“I’m not?”

“She told you to go, so it should be fine?”

Jiseok spoke as he watched Miyoon walk to the waiting room. He was a little worried since she was known to have a dirty personality.

“Ah, I don’t know anymore. If she says something, I guess I will have to apologize again,” *she* spoke as she shook her head.

“Sorry. I should have told you about it.”

“You shouldn’t be. I was the one who didn’t see her coming. Oh, and also.”

She took two steps away from him.

“Let’s not stay together.”

“Why?”

“Because you might get caught up in this. People say she’s a scary woman so let’s not stay together for the day.”

“Hey, what do you consider me as?”

“I get it, so don’t talk to me for a while, okay?”

“Hey.”

Jiseok smiled bitterly as he saw *her* walk to the other side. *She* was just sighing in nervousness until moments ago, and now she was worried about him.

“Please gather round! We need to check the clothing.”

The clothing team called for everyone. Jiseok walked up to *her*. *She* hinted to him to walk away, but Jiseok just smiled. Even if he received insults, how many insults would he receive? Ignoring a friend just

because he was scared was something unacceptable for him. Moreover, Maru asked a favor as well. He had to be insulted together even if it was just out of a sense of duty.

“Let’s go,” Jiseok spoke as he pushed *her*, who had a powerless smile on her face.

* * *

“The world sure has become better now, hasn’t it?”

“Sorry?”

Miyoon glared at the manager. This new manager, who had worked with her for a week now was in a worse state than the last manager. He always asked back whenever she said something, and always talked about something else when she was hinting him to suck up. The reason she still kept him around was because....

“Come over here.”

Miyoon saw her manager frown for an instant before he made a smile. Disgust flashed by on his face, but Miyoon did not mind. In fact, she felt better. Being able to do whatever she wanted to people who hated her gave her inexplicable pleasure. She couldn’t be happier when she found people that did not submit to power. It meant that she could see the moment of such a person’s collapse into depravity.

Miyoon looked up at the manager who stood in front of her. He was tall and burly. Above all, though, he had a girly face. She raised her hand and tapped on his chest.

“Manager Park, you did some chest exercise huh.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Who are you trying to please with all that muscle? You have a girlfriend?”

“Haha....”

“How cute.”

The way he acted was frustrating, but his looks were just to her liking. Just as she was about to extend her hand to his ass,

“Uhm, ma’am.”

“No, no. Don’t call me ma’am, call me noona. Why don’t you listen to my words?”

“...Yes, noona. There’s a call for you.”

The manager handed her her phone. Miyoon thought that even his flustered expression was cute before checking the name on the screen.

“Leave the room for now. And don’t let anyone in.”

“Yes.”

After the manager left, Miyoon received the call.

“Oh, it’s rare for president Hong to give me a call like this. What’s up? Ah, yes. Really? Hoho, that’s good for me too. You really know me too well, president Hong. Alright, okay. Phew, I was feeling bad just now, and your words made me feel better. Oh, it’s nothing. An ugly bitch didn’t even greet me, that’s all. Yes. That’s how kids are these days. They are so cocky. Yes, yes. Then see you after the shoot.”

Miyoon burst out in laughter as she hung up.

Chapter 406

The world below her was miserable. The only time the moldy single-room underground apartment could be romanticized was only in retrospect after achieving success. Or, when having gone to a level even lower than that.

Miyoon, who stared at the mirror in the waiting room, picked up the pack of cigarettes on top of her makeup table. The moment she took out a thin cigarette from the red package and put it in her mouth, she was reminded of the cheap domestic cigarettes that she used to smoke a long time ago. The bitter taste was engraved on her soul.

She put the cigarette between her lips before puffing a deep one.

“President Hong.”

The reflection of her face in the mirror looked cold. She had reached this place after entering the entertainment industry in her 20s without knowing anything and encountered many things. There were people that helped her out, and there were people that made her wake up at night and insult them. President Hong belonged to the former. Thanks to him glossing over an issue that might have gone viral, she was able to continue her career.

“But he keeps trying to climb up to my level.”

She could only smile back for now since the other party had her weakness that was ‘The Five’, but she did not plan to keep being dragged around by him. An executive of a super company or the president of an entertainment agency - those titles weren’t that great in front of Miyoon. After all, there were names of many politicians in her phone’s contact list.

“How dare he try to rip one off me. People should do a trade.”

She rubbed the cigarette on the ashtray to put it out. There were rules to bad guys as well. She was thankful that he gave her one thing, but he was asking for two from her, so she could only get angry.

She pushed the ashtray away and was just about to get some sleep, but just then, there was a knock on her door.

“It’s the clothing team.”

“Come in,” she spoke as she yawned.

The door opened and two people came in. There was a girl who she hadn’t seen before, as well as a member of the clothing staff that she had seen a few times before.

“Who are you, darling?”

“H, hello. My name is Lee Haeyoung, and I’m a new member.”

“A new member?”

“Please take care of me.”

“Alright, I’ll see how you do.”

Miyoon looked at the clothes that the two women brought. They were the clothes she was going to wear for the sitcom. She was a popular novelist in the drama. She was full of vanity, but her consumer patterns were akin to that of a housewife.

“Would you please excuse me.”

The senior staff asked for her understanding. Miyoon sighed once before standing up.

“We’ve brought five sets of clothes this time, and you just have to choose whatever you like.”

The new member raised the clothes on the clothes hanger to her eye level. Miyoon looked at the clothes in detail.

“Let’s see.”

The colors, quality and form. Those were all secondary. The most important thing were the tags on the clothes. She turned the clothes inside out to look at the tag that had the brand and price on it.

“Hahaha.”

Miyoon laughed and picked up the first clothes hanger. At that moment, the new member asked.

“If you like that, shall I get it prepared for you?”

Miyoon looked at the senior staff quietly. She should be aware of what she meant. The senior staff bit her lower lip in unease and tapped on the shoulders of the new member.

“Darling, go outside for a moment. I’ll talk to this girl for a while.”

“U-uhm...”

“Did you not hear me, darling? I said get out.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The senior staff did a 90-degree bow before leaving the room. Miyoon saw that the new member’s face became stiff and threw the clothes she was holding on the ground.

“Mommy....”

A quiet voice could be heard from her mouth.

“Why are you looking for your mother?”

“U-uhm...”

“Forget it, and give me the next one.”

Miyoon checked the tag on the second set of clothes.

“ULand logistics. ULand, huh. Do you know where you find clothes like this?”

“P-probably at the department store?”

“The department store? No. Clothes like this.”

Miyoon threw the clothes at the staff member’s face. Being hit, the staff member walked a few steps back. The clothes she was holding fell on the ground. The vinyl wraps that were there to prevent them from getting dirty made a loud rustling noise.

“These kinds of clothes can only be seen in charity shops. Or, you can see these in donations for kids in Africa. Do you get it?”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“I asked you if you get it. I didn’t tell you to apologize.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Hey, how much do you get paid? I mean, your monthly salary.”

“E-eight hundred thousand won.”

“Do you think you’re doing eight hundred thousand won’s worth of work? And also, aren’t you going to pick those clothes up? Those are all sponsored items, aren’t they? What are you going to do if there’s a problem? Are you going to report that I’m the one that dirtied them?”

The new staff shook her head and picked the clothes up. She was sniffing and looked like she was about to cry at any moment.

“Hey.”

“Y-yes!”

“Are you going to cry?”

“No.”

“Don’t cry. You shouldn’t cry with just that. If you cry just because of that, you’re not going to last.”

Miyoon picked up the third set of clothing. She could see her flinching. There was a small smile on her face.

“Hey.”

“Yes...?”

“You’re angry, aren’t you?”

“No. I’m not.”

“Why not? It’s not you who prepared these, right?”

“That’s true, but....”

“You’re getting scolded for something you didn’t even do. You were just holding the clothes that your superiors got, and you’re being disdained by me, getting hit on the face with clothes. You’re a precious daughter in your family, aren’t you? If you get angry, it’s not surprising that you get angry.”

“I-I’m okay.”

“You’re okay?”

Miyoon smiled and put her hand on the girl’s cheek. She could feel the girl’s cheek shaking. She raised her hand a bit before slapping her. The girl’s head was turned around.

“It must be annoying. You must be wondering what’s going on. And you must be angry since you’re getting this treatment when you don’t know anything yet.”

Tears started dropping from the girl’s eyes.

“Are you crying right now?”

“N-no.”

Miyoon looked at the fourth set of clothing and nodded.

“This looks decent.”

She hung the clothes on her chair before walking to the door and pulling on the handle. She twitched her finger at the senior staff that was standing at the opposite end of the corridor. The senior staff came in and clasped her hands together politely.

“This one’s quite good.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Did you pick this one?” Miyoon asked as she pointed at the set of clothes on her chair.

“Yes. I tried picking one according to your tastes.”

“You’re quite sensible. You were awkward at first, and now you look like you’re doing your job. Hm, but let me ask... who chose the other four? They’re quite ugly. I think the new member over here chose them. Am I right?” Miyoon sat down as she asked.

The senior staff looked around before saying ‘I had her do it to give her some experience in picking clothes’ in a small voice.

“So our newbie chose it after all.”

“...Yes.”

“Alright. You can leave now.”

When Miyoon smiled, the senior staff left through the door with a much relieved expression. The door closed, and Miyoon stood in front of the new staff member that had a complex expression on her face.

“Hey. You didn’t pick these right? She was the one that picked them, isn’t she?”

“...Yes.”

“But strangely, she’s saying that you’re the one who picked them. People are quite devious, right? If she’s going to say something, she should be up front with it like me. She’s supposed to be covering up for you, yet she’s leaving you like this.”

Miyoon took all the clothes that the staff member was holding and put them on the makeup table. Then, she grabbed her hand that was as cold as ice.

“From now on, listen to me, okay? I don’t like that woman, but you look decent. You don’t feel bad because I hit you, right?”

“N-no.”

“Alright. I hope we can work well in the future. I’ll give you my support.”

Miyoon called for the senior staff standing outside.

“Darling, you’re a bit too much, huh? You’re pushing your responsibilities to a young girl who doesn’t know anything yet.”

“Uh-uhm, that’s not it, but...”

“Forget it and you can get going. Oh, I don’t want to see you on set, you know what I mean, right?”

“No, ma’am, I...”

“Ah, for god’s sake. Do I look that old to you? Ma’am this, ma’am that. You’re damn cocky. Shut up and get going. I told you to not catch my eyes, okay? The moment I see you, I stop shooting. And I will say that I can’t work because of you. Understand?”

After chasing the senior staff out, Miyoon looked at the new staff.

“Bring good clothes in the future. Brand-name ones, or famous designer-made ones. If you do that well, I’ll give you full support. You know, I’m not a bad woman who abandons people that catch my eye. I don’t have a good personality, but you should follow me. I’ll let you meet all the famous people in the industry. What do you think?”

“Y-yes.”

“Anything else you want to say to me?”

Miyoon crossed her arms and stared at the new staff. Receiving her gaze, the girl did a 90-degree bow and thanked her. Miyoon softly stroked the back of her head.

“That’s right. Just do that in the future.”

The girl took the clothes and left. Miyoon yawned and sat back down. It wasn’t that she didn’t like the previous staff member. She sucked up a lot, smiled a lot, and her senses when it came to clothes weren’t that bad either.

“But it’s time.”

People that had become numb to change had to be switched out. People that didn’t fear her were inefficient as parts after all.

The new staff would probably go around looking for sponsorships for her. She would endure all sorts of insults in order to receive clothes from famous designers. Why? Because she was afraid of the woman named Lee Miyoon.

Miyoon smiled pleasantly and started picking her nails.

* * *

“Huff, huff, phew.”

Hong Janghae put down the baseball bat he was holding. He was just about to wipe his sweat with his handkerchief and leave in a pleasant mood, but the sack in front of him made some noise - whimpering noises, to be specific.

Janghae picked up the bat again. Then he swung it with all of his power towards the sack. Along with a loud pow noise, the whimper of the dog stopped as well. Thick blood dripped beneath the sack.

“Phew, son of a bitch. What a tenacious life.”

He felt much better. The sensation couldn’t be compared to hitting a sandbag. Beating up something living gave him a completely different sensation from hitting a pile of sand.

He pulled up the tie he had loosened and left with his suit jacket in his hand. The owner of the bosintang restaurant nodded his head and went inside.

Janghae did his top button and got in his car. Just as he was about to drive off, he got a call. It was from his company employee.

-President.

“What is it?”

-Uhm... regarding the actor I told you last time, the negotiations fell through. He said he’s going to NL Company.

“Hm, team leader Park.”

-Yes, president.

“Didn’t you say that you were certain?”

-I’m sorry, sir.

“Sorry, huh. Well, I guess you can’t do anything about it. Business doesn’t always go according to plan. Thanks for your work, you must have put in a lot of effort.”

-Not at all, president.

“Alright, look for the next actor. Anyway, well done, and see you when I’m there.”

-Yes, sir.

Janghae hung up and got out of his car. When he went around to the back of the restaurant, he saw the owner taking out a dog with all of its flesh mangled. The dog which had its eyes popped out of their sockets was dragged along the ground.

“Should I give you another one?”

Janghae didn't say anything and nodded his head. The dog keeper brought a golden dog from somewhere. As it was quite strong, he took some time to put it in a sack. The sack was then hung from the ceiling. Janghae rolled his sleeves up and picked up the bat.

The sack shook a lot due to the dog barking and struggling. Janghae stood in front of it. The dog keeper quietly closed the door and left.

“Team leader Park, you damned fucker.”

Whoosh, the bat made a sharp noise.

* * *

“Yes, team leader Park. This fellow looks good. Try getting him.”

“I will definitely succeed this time.”

“Of course you will.”

Janghae smiled as he saw team leader Park leave his office. In his head, the name ‘team leader Park’ was already erased. He would be advised to resign in one month. Reason being: receiving illegal entertainment.

Shouting at people did not fit the image of the ‘gentle’ Hong Janghae. He had to act smart, and do everything cleanly so that there wouldn't be any noise. Today, he felt much better, perhaps due to relieving all of his pent-up stress. Although it was quite a hassle, it was definitely worth driving all the way to Cheonan for it.

“It was better when Geunseok was still at home.”

Back then, there was no need to drive all the way to Cheonan. There was an obedient dog at home after all. Janghae stretched his neck left and right before picking up some documents.

* * *

“Uh-uhm, Giwoo.”

Uljin carefully called out to Giwoo who walked up front. Giwoo made a cold smile as he turned around.

“What is it?”

“Uhm, about yesterday.”

He wanted to explain properly. That it was definitely not his intention and that it was just a mistake.

“It's really just a mistake. I was not going to do the game you told me....”

“Game? What game?”

“G-giwoo....”

“Uljin. I don’t get what you’re talking about at all. I mean it. A game? Are you talking about a video game?”

“...Giwoo.”

“Why do you look so depressed?”

Giwoo approached him and hung his arm around Uljin’s shoulders. Uljin was creeped out by his actions.

“What are you mistaken about? What game did I tell you about? Tell me properly. Hm?”

“N-no, it’s nothing.”

“Right? It’s nothing, right? You were just mistaken, right?”

“Yeah....”

“Then that’s good. Oh, you did well in today’s shoot. See you next time, my friend.”

Uljin gulped as he watched Giwoo’s back.

* * *

“I’m back.”

3 p.m. Maru arrived at home. He greeted his mother who welcomed him home and went straight to bed. He wasn’t that tired physically, but his brain wasn’t working right now.

“And school starts tomorrow too.”

It seemed that he would have to prepare a lot of absence notes. He might not be able to go to school for the entirety of September. He was a little worried about attendance, but it seemed that he wasn’t at a stage where he should be worried. Things were going well too. His days were smooth without any worries.

Maru yawned loudly before closing his eyes.

Time to get some sleep.

Chapter 407

“Shouldn’t they let us turn the air conditioning on at least?”

“Wash your face with cold water or something.”

“Why do you say the same thing as my mom?”

Dojin, who was weak to heat, ran towards the window while taking his top off. The ones that were cooling their bodies off by the window pushed Dojin away with fright. For today, staying together was death, and scattering was the way to live.

"It's been long past the beginning of Autumn, but it's still damn hot. Maru, should I fan you as well?"

"I'm fine. It's bearable if I stay still."

Daemyung fought the heat by fanning himself with a notebook. The fan installed above their heads had stopped working two days ago. Well, it was working non-stop under this heat so it wasn't that surprising. Their homeroom teacher told them that it was going to be fixed soon, but 'soon' was too abstract of a word.

"My brother-in-law Kang."

Maru poked the waist of Dowook who sat in front of him. Dowook got annoyed and pushed him away.

"My brother-in-law Kang, why don't you buy us some ice cream to stave off the heat?"

"You wanna die?"

"My, how disappointing."

Daemyung chuckled from the side. Maru grabbed his t-shirt and shook it around. This goddamn heat didn't have a break.

"I heard that you're starting the movie shoot this week," Daemyung asked.

"Yeah, apparently, the set is near Pangyo."

"You're not coming to school then?"

"I won't be able to if I don't have the time."

"Bangjoo's going with you, right?"

"Yeah. He's the problem, not me. The teachers won't see him in a good light if he starts missing classes in the first year."

"That's true. But Bangjoo's quite serious about it, isn't he? He's putting a lot of effort into becoming an action actor too. Wouldn't the teachers recognize his efforts?"

"A good teacher would, but from what I heard last time, apparently, he got hit on the head with the class register book. Apparently, he was told to focus on studying rather than doing meaningless stuff."

"That teacher clearly went too far there."

"Studying is one of the easiest ways to succeed, so you can't exactly blame the teacher for it."

Daemyung nodded.

"I guess you'll have to manage your attendance well from now on. You won't be able to advance into third year if you miss too much."

"I'll be fine as long as I attend two-thirds of the school year, so I can advance even if I miss about 60 days or so."

"Then I guess there's no problem then."

“Like this, I don’t have a lot to worry about. If it comes down to it, I’ll have to reject all the incoming work and go to school.”

“But what if you suddenly get many offers because you do well? You know, that’s a possibility.”

“If it’s like that, I’ll gladly drop out of school and take the qualification exams. But would such a thing happen to me of all people? There are many actors in the country, you know?”

“You don’t know what will happen. You’re good at acting after all.”

“Hey, at this age, the face matters a lot more than acting skills. Did I tell you this? I met a lead actor around my age while shooting the historical drama, and damn, he’s good-looking.”

“You’re good-looking too.”

Maru coughed and turned around. Sometimes, Daemyung said embarrassing things without batting an eyelid, and made him feel awkward. Maru didn’t know if he was pure or was just teasing him.

“You guys are bullshitting,” Dowook said, from his desk.

“Dowook is really good-looking, too,” Daemyung spoke as if he was waiting.

Dowook raised his head a bit and glanced at Daemyung before saying ‘you have good eyes’ before going back to sleep again. Maru raised his feet and kicked Dowook’s chair. Even though he’d usually get up and get angry at him, he was only laughing right now.

“Hey, Han Maru.”

Just then, a guy from the 2nd column shouted at him.

“What is it?”

“You’re shooting a drama right? Did you appear in ‘The Witness’ too?”

“What’s it about?”

“Huh? It’s not you? I was watching the drama yesterday and someone that really looked like you appeared in it.”

“Someone that looked like me?”

The guy seemed tired of shouting and approached Maru. Now, Maru had the attention of everyone in the class. Maru leaned back in his chair and looked at that classmate.

“Yeah. I was watching the drama yesterday and someone that looked exactly like you appeared in it.”

“Really?”

“Is it really not you? They looked so like you though.”

“I don’t remember shooting a drama titled ‘The Witness’.”

“Then was it someone that just looked like you? Damn, if it was you, I was going to ask you to get an autograph. Ahn Joohyun is in it, you know? She’s really pretty.”

“Ahn Joohyun?”

At that moment, he was reminded of the drama he was suddenly called for last time.

“Hey, does the guy that looks like me play something like an assassin’s role?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Then that’s me.”

“What? I thought you didn’t know what ‘The Witness’ is.”

“I don’t.”

“How do you appear in a drama that you don’t even know about?”

“Many things can happen.”

At that moment, all the people in the classroom that laid on their desks like dead people all stood up at once.

“Hey, Han Maru, you know Ahn Joohyun?”

“You know our honey Joohyun-ssi? Did you shoot with her?”

“Hey, hey. Out of my way!”

The back seat of the 4th column where Maru sat, suddenly became a warzone. They all pushed the desks away and shouted ‘Ahn Joohyun’. Dowook, who was sleeping, stood up while swearing, but the people that came to Maru like starved dogs didn’t even seem to notice him.

“Have you seen Ahn Joohyun up close?”

“Uh, yeah. That I guess I did...”

Maru replied as carefully as possible. He felt that something big would happen if he told them that he knew her. Peace for the rest of the day depended on this moment.

“Is she really pretty? It isn’t like a camera effect?”

“Well, she’s so-so.”

“How about her chest? Are they really big? Like you see on TV?”

“Hey, fucker. Is that the important part?”

“Of course it is!”

“You’re fucking crazy. Take your chests to porn. What good is celebrity chests?”

The one that shouted chests was dragged to the back. Any conversation that happened after that was about getting autographs from her.

“Was Ahn Joohyun always so popular?”

He knew that she was popular with girls, but he didn't know that she was also extremely popular amongst high school boys. He thought that she'd only have girl fans since she had a down-to-Earth and boyish image to her.

Hearing his question, the ones around him answered in unison.

"Her figure is killer."

It seemed that these guys didn't even care about acting skills or whatnot, and just cared about the face and the body. He knew that they were at the age where they would be absorbed in sexual things, but at this point, they were practically horny dogs. This was why engineering high school classes with 100% boys were dangerous. The concentration of their urges was completely different to classes like design where girls made up more than half the class.

"I can't get autographs."

Maru spoke firmly. He wasn't scouted officially, and he just happened to be there by chance. At this point, he wondered what would happen if they found out that Ahn Joohyun's little brother went to this school. Perhaps Bangjoo would be stalked by these boys here. What a horrible thing that would be.

"Why!"

"I just went there once. And that was the last time."

"...Really?"

What an interesting change of expressions. Maru wanted to capture this moment in a photo. 'At the tip of Despair' sounded like a good title for the photo.

"Maru, didn't you appear in Youth Generation as well?"

A crisp, high-pitched voice sounded out amidst the low-pitched noises. Maru turned his head around. Iseul, wearing a pink t-shirt, was standing at the back of the class.

The boys in class became quiet in an instant before taking steps back. Even those that looked like they would grow up to be part of the mafia in the future made shy smiles. Maru saw that clearly. Rather than a smile, he pitied them instead. What a pitiful group of people.

"I guess I did."

Youth Generation was the first piece of work where he got a proper character. He started off as a background actor, and ended up as a minor role. Since he had to wear glasses and talk in a really awkward way, he had some fun while doing it.

"Han Maru, you were in Youth Generation as well?"

The boys in class asked in surprise.

"I did."

"Who were you? An extra?"

"You know, the one that gets bullied all the time. The class prez."

“The four-eyed loser?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s you?”

The 37 people gathered around him stared at him in disbelief. Maru clicked his tongue and borrowed a pair of glasses from someone. He put on the glasses, pushed his chin forward, and made his lips look like he was getting bullied.

“Whoa! It’s really him.”

“Wow, Han Maru. You’re quite good.”

“I never missed an episode of Youth Generation, and I never knew that that guy was you.”

His classmates praised his acting for a while before smiling again in embarrassment due to Iseul’s presence. If Iseul told them that she’d date them if they jumped out the window, about 10 of them would jump out immediately without second thoughts.

Even in this mess, Maru kicked the sleeping Dojin to wake him up. Dojin shook and raised his head.

“What?”

“Your girlfriend is here.”

Iseul pressed on Dojin’s head. Dojin called for help, but Iseul lightly ignored him.

“Aren’t you here to see him?” Maru asked Iseul as he pointed at Dojin.

“Yeah. We promised to see each other after lunch, but I didn’t get any news from him. But well, he’s sleeping like this.”

“I was too tired from working at the restaurant all day yesterday...,” Dojin spoke in a tired manner.

“Geez.”

Iseul took her hand off. Dojin sat up with a foolish smile.

“I told you to go home early, didn’t I? I heard you stuck around until the end of cleaning the big pot.”

“How am I supposed to go home when your mom’s working by herself?” Dojin spoke as he scratched his head.

Iseul looked at him for a while before pulling him up by the hand.

“Drink this.”

Iseul gave him a bottle of bacchus. Dojin smiled like a fool as he received the drink. The two smiled at each other like baby birds and eventually left through the back door.

Maru thought that the two suited each other as he saw them walk through the corridor. It seemed that Iseul’s parents also saw Dojin in a good way since he was studying to get cooking certificates. Though, who wouldn’t like their daughter’s boyfriend if he helped them out in their business?

He thought that they were in the peak of youth and turned his head around. But when he did, he had to cough awkwardly. The boys that looked like they couldn't harm an ant were now sitting on the ground uttering whatever swear word that was in their mouths.

"Dojin, that bastard. We should solder his mouth shut."

"No, we should solder his precious part, so he can't use it."

"We're shooting a military movie here, and he's all by himself shooting a youth sitcom. The world needs to be fair, so we should castrate Dojin first."

They were filled with killing intent. Hell was unfurling in front of him.

Maru saw Daemyung amongst them, laughing in an uncomfortable manner. He was putting on a good act. His effort to survive by disguising himself as single was quite good.

However, the moment Maru saw Lee Jiyeon and Jeon Aram who were walking down the central stairs, he realized that Daemyung's act was about to be over. Aram was coming towards their class while leading Jiyeon, who was shaking her head, by the hand. It was obvious what she was up to. It had been quiet since the start of the semester. What should come had come.

Maru stood up from his seat. He had to escape this place before these boys started rampaging. He was very serious. He couldn't even begin to imagine what they would do when these boys, who were in desperate need(?) of feminine pheromones, found out that Daemyung had a girlfriend as well.

Just in time, he got a phone call as well. The moment he saw the name on the phone, though, he quickly looked away and at the boys around him. Some of the quick-witted in class flashed their eyes and looked at him. Maru immediately pressed the reject button. The three characters 'Ahn Joohyun' disappeared from the screen.

"Man, the weather is hot."

Maru stretched his arms out and sneakily left the classroom. Jiyeon and Aram waved at him from afar. Maru replied to them in a vague fashion before walking quickly. Moments later, he could hear some strange screams from behind him, but he pretended not to have heard them and kept walking.

He went down to the first floor and stood in the entrance from where he could see the school field. He took out his phone again to call Ahn Joohyun back. After some rings, he could hear Joohyun's voice.

Chapter 408

"Yes, senior."

-Are you free to talk to me now? I think I couldn't reach you just a moment ago.

"I had no choice since your popularity was through the roof."

-What do you mean?

"Haha, it's nothing important. But what made you call me?"

-Hm, to get straight to the point, I'd like your help again.

“My help?”

-I want you to appear again in the drama we shot last time.

“Wasn’t that a one-off thing?”

-They added an interrogation scene. It seemed that the director talked to the writer about it. Your pay is 80 thousand, and it should end within 3 hours.

“I’m of course okay with that. It’s an opportunity for me to show my face anyway.”

-Then come to YBS’s main HQ by eight.

“You mean tonight?”

-Yes.

“What were you going to do if I had a schedule and wasn’t able to go?”

-If that happened, we’d just get someone from the academies. We can’t provide you with comfort on top of the opportunity, can we?

He looked at the school field as he heard those words. He could see several students aiming for one ball. There were many people that wanted it, but there was only one ball. A minor actor who would be discarded after being used once had no choice.

-So you can’t come?

“I’ll be there even if I break my leg.”

-I thought you’d say that. Oh, I heard that the movie shoot starts this week.

“Yes. Have you heard that from Bangjoo?”

-Just yesterday. Please watch out for him so that he doesn’t cause any accidents on set. My brother has the tendency to go wild if he gets excited.

“I’ll tie him up and put him right next to me.”

-Bangjoo looked like he was looking forward to it since it’s his first shoot and all, but you know how hard it is. You’ll have to repeat the same scene over and over again until you get a good cut, and you’ll have to wait indefinitely if you aren’t playing an important role. It’s quite pressuring, isn’t it? Even though I know that he isn’t the type of boy who’d get pressured by anyone, I’m still worried. After all, he’s doing this as a job, not to play around.

“Those words, don’t say them to me and tell them to Bangjoo instead. It’ll help him out a lot.”

-He’s matured since a long time ago, so it’s not hard to joke with him, but it feels somewhat embarrassing to have a serious talk. It’s also funny since I feel like I’m overly worried for a grown-up kid. Actually, he doesn’t want to receive help from me. He said he wanted to take care of his own matters by himself. I felt this when I talked to him honestly before, but I think he’s grown up too early.

“He’s been living alone since middle school after all. There are many men who eat alone even when they’re old, and Bangjoo’s been way past that point for a long time now. It’d be strange if he didn’t grow up.”

-That’s true.

“He has a deep understanding of himself, so you shouldn’t need to get worried. Bangjoo should be well aware that this work isn’t easy since he grew up watching you. He’s challenging it despite knowing that so don’t worry too much about it.”

Joohyun’s laugh could be heard over the phone.

-Alright. Please take care of my brother then.

“Yes. Good luck with your work.”

After hanging up, he visited the school cafeteria to get some cold drinks. He returned to his class and peeked inside. Everyone had fallen asleep at their desks. It seemed that the storm had gone past. He sat down and gave his two friends a drink. As for Dojin, he put one inside his desk.

“You’re still alive.”

Maru looked at Daemyung who had half of his soul escape his body.

“I barely managed to cling to life.”

“That’s karma for you having a girlfriend.”

“But you have one too...”

“I don’t go to the same school as her. Alright, what did Jiyeon say?”

“She just greeted me. The problem was Aram. Thanks to her, I’m like this.”

Daemyung spoke as he pulled on his tattered shirt.

“Good. Since it’s like this, you should hold hands when you walk together. Since you’re public and all.”

“...Should I?”

“Whew, that was fast.”

He drank the drink he bought from the cafeteria before patting Daemyung on the shoulder. Daemyung smiled in embarrassment before scratching his head.

“Is that your phone ringing?”

His phone, which he placed on the table, was vibrating. Maru picked up the phone and held it against his ears.

“Hello?”

-Oh, Maru. It’s me, Byungchan.

“Yes, hyung.”

-I called you since you got some work. But I can't give you a ride since I have to drive away from the city with Sooil. Oh, you know who Sooil is right?

"Yes, I met him before. Also, don't worry about me. I can just take the bus or the train or whatever."

-Thanks for saying that.

"So? When is it? I guess it's not tomorrow since there's the historical drama."

-It's today. You don't have anything to do right? The TV station was looking for you, oh, I mean YBS, by the way. I don't know the reason for that, but it's a public TV drama. It's just one scene, but apparently, there's a part where you'd be on screen by yourself. For now, I hung up after telling them that I'd look into it. How about it, you can do it, can't you?

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

-Why? You don't have any schedule today. Is there something else you're doing? This is too big of an opportunity to give up.

"I got a request."

-A request? What request?

"For a drama. A senior I know wanted me to appear in it."

-Really? What drama is it?

"I think it should be The Witness."

-Huh? The Witness? That's the place that called me too. Wait, I just got a call. I'll call you right back.

Byungchan hurriedly hung up. Maru narrowed his eyes and put down his phone.

"What was that about?"

"I got a call due to some work, but I think something's gone wrong."

"Is it serious?"

"No, it's not like that."

When he rested his chin on his hand and stared at the phone, he got a phone call again.

"Yes, hyung."

-Maru. I just got a call saying that they got a confirmation already. Did you contact them?

"You mean the TV station?"

Just then, he remembered the conversation he had with Joohyun. It seemed that Joohyun gave them a call immediately after her call with him.

"Hyung, I don't think you should be worried about it. There aren't any problems."

-Really? Then you're shooting today, right?

“Yes.”

-That’s good. The Witness on YBS has a 28% viewing rate right now. It’ll be past 30% by next week. You are lucky that you can show your face in such a drama. Good luck.

“Alright. You should drive safely too, okay?”

-Okay. See you around.

After finishing the phone call, Maru thought for a moment. The liaison team called for him. Meaning, there were already talks about him. There was no need for Joohyun to call him and ask for his confirmation.

“Geez, she’s a sister who dotes on her brother,” Maru smiled as he spoke.

It seemed that the liaising matter was just secondary, and she wanted to talk regarding Bangjoo instead.

“Boys, get up,” Taesik spoke as he came in.

The zombies started raising their heads. Maru also put away his phone and took out his books. He had to focus on classes for now.

* * *

He could see the Omokgyo bridge outside the train window. The time was when the sun slowly hid behind the horizon. Maru folded the newspaper he was reading and put it in the luggage area of the car before getting off.

He got on the bus in front of the train station that would take him to the YBS building. Since it was rush hour, the people on the bus seemed very tired. A girl that seemed to be in college was dozing off in the seat in front of him before bashing her head against the window. There was a loud thud, but the girl continued to sleep. She must have been in deep sleep or was too embarrassed to lift her head.

When he got off the bus, he saw a huge building in front of him. Across the street was a TV station for religious channels. Unlike RBS, which was very wide, YBS’s building was very tall. It seemed that they stuffed all the facilities into one building unlike RBS, which had separate buildings.

He entered the building and called the number he got from Byungchan. A moment later, someone appeared calling out to him. However, she wasn’t calling from within the building, but from outside.

“Are you Mr. Han Maru?”

“Yes.”

“You’re here for the shoot for The Witness, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“This way, please.”

The woman that seemed to be part of the main staff didn’t go to the main building but circled around the park in front of it to go somewhere else. They walked for around 5 minutes before another building with the YBS logo appeared.

“This is the set for the drama.”

“Ah, okay.”

He followed the woman inside. People, who were running around with rolls of tape, whizzed past him. They seemed to be in a hurry. He could also see people that looked uneasy as they held clothes in both of their hands.

He followed the woman throughout the corridor. On his left were posters of popular dramas produced by YBS.

“Please wait here.”

The woman smiled kindly and pointed at the waiting room. Maru felt rather awkward because of her attitude and smiled back. He was already used to the ‘hey, you’ treatment.

When he went inside, he saw adults who were all very old. They all gave off strong impressions. They were absorbed in their own thing as though they didn’t know each other.

Among them were some people that he saw in the tunnel set last time. That man played the role of the police.

Maru greeted the people who he met eyes with before sitting down. There were some food and drinks prepared on the table in front of him.

‘What good treatment.’

Many places didn’t have this treatment. Maru picked up a pack of cookies before opening it. He looked around the room as he munched on the cookies. It seemed that the building was finished being constructed not too long ago as he saw that the walls were still clean.

“Please get ready. We’re moving.”

The woman that guided him here opened the door as she spoke. The people sitting in the room all stood up in unison. Maru grabbed another packet of cookies before putting them inside his pocket. When he did, everyone else followed. It seemed that they were used to feeding themselves in such situations.

They followed the woman to the set. The set had been created already. There were acrylic panels on all four sides, and there were a bunch of photos on them. On one side was a map, and there were lines that seemed to be someone’s movement line messily drawn on top of it. Perhaps this was the investigation HQ?

In the middle of the set was Joohyun wearing a suit. She was exchanging lines with the opposing actor with sharp eyes. Joohyun, who played the role of a female detective, suddenly loosened her face and burst out laughing. Due to her laugh, the atmosphere changed in an instant. The actors around her also started joking around with each other. The atmosphere looked good.

“The shoot isn’t that long, so please focus.”

The staff that got mad at the background actors last time spoke in a kind manner. Maru wondered if everyone had repented or something. Maru looked at the expressions of the adults around him. They

were just like him, looking at the staff member with uneasy expressions. The sudden bout of kindness wasn't exactly welcome.

At that moment, he heard a clap from one side. When he turned his head around, he saw people that seemed to be civilians entering the set.

"This is the set for The Witness. The investigation headquarters you see on TV is this place."

Maru understood the situation the moment he heard those words. The reason for the sudden change in the work environment must be because of tourists. They were setting things up so that those people wouldn't see or hear anything bad. It was just like how trash and laundry would disappear from sight when a star appeared in a military base. Anything dirty was pushed out of sight first.

"There are the actors. Should we go meet them?"

"Yes!"

The tourists followed the staff like pre-school children on a field trip.

"Well then, please sit down while you wait."

The staff offered them to sit with a smile. The adults around him made a weird expression as they sat down. Maru looked at the people that looked around the set. He could slightly understand what monkeys at the zoo felt like.

Chapter 409

The king of dramas was its ads - Maru heard these words before. A drama with a sturdy scenario, godly acting, and incredible direction did not look for viewers, but advertisers. The individuals that created the drama are said to participate in its production with the ideal to create something worth watching, but the objective of the sum of those ideals was ultimately the ads.

The food he was eating in a drama, the clothes she was wearing in the drama, the location they went to, the life they enjoyed. All of that became products and subsidized into ads.

"I hope you can concentrate on the acting of the actors while the shoot is running. Watching them in real life gives you a different enjoyment than watching through a screen."

The tourists that were guided to one side of the set nodded as they listened to the staff's explanation.

There was no way the production team wanted to let tourists in when the drama production stage had many sensitive actors. This was also a facet of advertising. The things they hear and see here would be spread to many other people in the form of stories and rumors. If the viewership went past 30%, the costs of ads would increase as well after all.

Maru had a look at the expression of the actors. They didn't seem flustered since they seemed to have been notified beforehand, but they clearly did not seem pleased with it. The lead actors, who were right in front of the viewers, were getting ready for the shoot with a smile, but the supporting actors were just clicking their tongues as they looked at the audience.

"I thought we'd be starting the shoot soon, but it looks like we're going to have to wait a long time," said a man with a stubble.

He looked like a stereotypical undercover detective.

"Yeah. I think I heard that Entertainment Show Weekly is coming as well."

"What? The Entertainment Show Weekly? You mean the one on YBS?"

"Yes. They should be making a report about it. I mean, those people are doing well nowadays, aren't they?"

A skinny man pointed at Joohyun with his chin. The stubbly man nodded in agreement.

It seemed that there was another event other than tourism. Maru took out his earphones from his pocket. It did look like it was going to end within three hours, but it seemed that he would have to stand there like a prop for two out of those three hours.

He was killing some time while nodding according to the beat when some people walked on the set with quick steps and told the producer a few words. After that, a camera entered through the entrance.

"We'll start from the entry part."

Along with that shout, a man holding a wireless microphone entered the set with careful steps. The man said 'shh' with a humorous face as he put his finger on his lips. Entering the studio, he pointed at Ahn Joohyun standing on the set.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Nam Joongyeon, reporting to you from the field. Today, we're here at the studio where they're shooting the popular drama on YBS, The Witness. It's just nearing 30% viewership, so the atmosphere here is very different from others. Our reporter team came to visit the location without any prior notice."

Then, the cut sign sounded. The producer sent the reporter back out in dissatisfaction. It seemed that the two were on close terms as the reporter blatantly expressed his displeasure. Only when the producer said 'one more time' with a smile, did the reporter nod.

"Geez, you're too strict on me, Park-hyung."

"Please give me less work. Go out already. I need to finish this quickly since I have a shoot for Hometown Six after this."

"Hyung, you're running double jobs?"

"It's not two jobs. I'm just working my ass off while I still can."

"You'll ruin yourself. You told me that you didn't get any sleep too."

"I'm more scared of not being able to earn money than ruining my body. Go back out already. We need to pull out quickly. They're giving us glimpses as well."

The conversation between the reporter and the producer could be heard. Nobody seemed to mind him since they knew that he was just here as a background actor. The reporter came back in again with a smile. His comment was no different than before.

“They’re showing us blatantly that they’re being watched. And who came here without prior notice?”

The stubbly man spoke.

Maru laughed a little when he heard those words. Even though everyone on the set was looking at the reporter right now, the reporter was saying that he was here in secret. He wasn’t fooling anybody. Anything without prior notice was on the schedule and anything unexpected was not.

The camera shot as the reporter went on the set with a small camera. The actors, who acted like they knew the reporter until just moments ago started doing their act as though they didn’t notice him. They were pretending to act so it was somewhat awkward to look at.

Meanwhile, Joohyun looked straight at the camera that was closing in on her. The other actors acted as though they were surprised by the coming camera, but she made a shameless smile as she faced the reporter. The reporter seemed to have judged that it was impossible to control Joohyun as he went straight to the interview.

“Renewing records every day! Here, I have the actors of The Witness who have contributed to the drama.”

The interview proceeded on the set. The reason they didn’t change places seemed to be to show the vitality of the field. The tourists were looking at them with excitement outside the camera view.

Just as they shot the greeting, the staff that guided the tourists spoke.

“Well then, please let me guide you to the meeting room where the writer is waiting.”

“Can’t we see the actors’ acting?”

“Of course you can. But right now, they’re shooting something else. Once you come back from your talk with the writer, you’ll be able to see them again, so you can watch them at that time and take photos as well.”

The staff spoke in a loud voice as though he was a tourist guide. He seemed to be telling everyone else that these people were going to leave. When the guide left with the tourists, the interview began.

“Please look at the questions. I’m telling you the questions beforehand, and if you think any of them is unsuitable, then please tell me. I’ll skip that question.”

Reporter Nam Joongyeon showed the actors the question sheet he had in his hand and went over the questions. After a few words of goodwill, Joohyun spoke.

“I’m going to reply as it is no matter what you ask, so ask away.”

“O-of course. Your honesty is quite well-known. But please take it easy. We couldn’t use most of the interview we took from you last time.”

"I don't care. My image can't get worse than this. But I don't hate you, reporter. At least you didn't attack me when I shot ads like mad."

"Haha."

The reporter was clearly sweating. A male actor next to her tapped on her shoulder to let him go, but Joohyun didn't bat an eyelid.

"Her face is definitely decent, but her personality is shit."

The stubbly man next to Maru spoke. Maru carefully asked him a question.

"Sounds like she doesn't take interviews that often, huh?"

"Ahn Joohyun? She doesn't. Last time, a journalist from KBS or RBS came and tried to get an interview from her, but she snorted and rejected, even though everyone else accepted. She didn't budge no matter how hard the producer tried to persuade her. Well, she did get attacked by many people before that, so it'd be strange for her to maintain a good relationship with journalists and reporters."

"I don't think there's any good in getting on a journalist's bad side, is there?"

"That's because you don't know this area that well. To actors that are above a certain class, journalists are no different from mosquitos trying to suck their blood. Journalists are only thankful when you haven't made a name for yourself. People like Joohyun don't need their presence to spread her name around. In simple terms, the one in the inferior position is not her, but the journalists. Though, even though I say this, that woman is still incredible. Normally, people don't go that far. They would usually not take such drastic action, but she clearly isn't someone like that."

The stubbly man crossed his arms in satisfaction.

"You sound knowledgeable."

"I'm a fan of her after all."

Maru was dazed for a second when a man in his mid forties replied so boldly.

"What, an old man like me can't be a fan of someone?"

"No, I was just envious of her. It's always reassuring to have fans that look at you in a good light."

"I look at her in a good light because I'm a fan. Actually, I hear a lot of bad things in the field. I hear that even some actors avoid her because of her personality."

Maru nodded. The stubbly man wanted to talk more about Joohyun, but the interview started at that time.

"Mr. Lee Junghoon, the handsome actor that's in a passionate love in the drama. Please say a word or two for the audience."

"Hello, viewers of Entertainment Show Weekly. I am Lee Junghoon, who plays the role of Hansoo in The Witness."

"Miss Ahn Joohyun, please say a word too."

“I’m Ahn Joohyun.”

She replied in the worst manner possible, but reporter Nam Joongyeon smoothly brought the conversation to Lee Junghoon. He only asked Joohyun for her reactions from time to time and didn’t ask her any questions.

While the interview proceeded, Maru went into makeup. The minor actors next to him also changed into dark-toned clothes. The makeup artist touched up his face a couple of times and then there was a big bruise around his cheekbone and lips. The makeup artist also applied something sticky at the tip of his lips, and when he had a look in the mirror, his lips looked like they were scabbed. He tried to touch it out of curiosity, but the makeup artist glared at him with a sharp inhaling sound, so didn’t.

When his makeup was about done, the producer waved his hand. It seemed that he was signalling for reporter Nam Joongyeon to finish things up. After that, the tourists that had left a while ago had returned to the set.

“Can I take an interview with these people as well? A simple ‘good luck’ is enough.”

The reporter for Entertainment Show Weekly who looked like he was about to leave came to where the minor actors were and said those words. It seemed that they were taking some footage since the interview was short.

“Both of the actors are kind to us.”

“They’re so good at acting.”

“They look after people like us. I’m always grateful for them.”

When they stood in front of the camera and the microphone, they all said the answer that the producer asked them to say. The reporter also came over to Maru.

“Are you in high school?”

“Yes.”

“Is your dream to become an actor?”

“Yes.”

“Well, please reply quickly this time. What’s your reason for trying to become an actor? Three, two, one!”

Maru replied without hesitation.

“To earn money.”

“Hahaha.”

The reporter laughed loudly before looking at the producer. The producer nodded once. The camera was turned off and the reporter thanked them for their conversation.

“It’d be much better for you to focus on studying if you want to earn money.”

The stubbly man came over and talked to him.

“That’s not entirely true.”

“Well, I thought just like you when I was your age. You can only dream while you’re still young. Good luck.”

Maru replied with a smile to the man who acted like he knew everything.

“We’re starting the shoot. Please get moving.”

The staff still put on a kind smile that Maru couldn’t get used to. They went to the set where acrylic panels were put up. The stubbly man Maru was talking to sat down at a desk, while the others were located throughout the office.

“You’re here.”

The producer acted like he knew him. He seemed to have something to say but did not, and it was probably because he couldn’t remember Maru’s name.

“It’s Han Maru, sir.”

Maru said his name first. The producer said ‘yes, that’s right, Han Maru!’ before shaking hands with him.

“You’re here.”

“Yes.”

Joohyun also came to him and greeted him. It seemed that the very act of Joohyun greeting someone else first of her own accord seemed curious to everyone around as the other actors came and had a look at his face. Maru smiled awkwardly and greeted all the actors present.

“This is him?”

“Wow, he looks scary. I heard that we got a new record in viewership the moment you appeared on the scene. You’re the lucky mascot for this team.”

Some actors smiled as they spoke. Maru wondered if it was real and looked at the producer for answers. The producer just held his thumb up.

“Just do what you did last time. It might be hard since you don’t have any lines and you have to do everything with your eyes, but since Miss Joohyun said that I can believe you, I will believe you.”

The producer shouted at everyone to get ready before turning around.

Right next to the investigation HQ set was the interrogation room set. When Maru walked towards the interrogation room, he passed in front of the stubbly man. That man stared at Maru in a daze.

Maru nodded his head before walking past him.

Chapter 410

It could be expressed as a classic interrogation room. There was a metal table that didn’t budge as well as metal chairs which likewise did not move. It was impossible to stand up directly from a sitting position

due to the fixed position of the chairs. Trying to do so would make the person hit their knees on the table. It would hurt quite a bit if someone tried standing up abruptly. It was positioned such that you could only slide out sideways to stand up properly. Maru wondered if it was like this in a real interrogation room.

“You’re a murderer who knows nothing. A pure murderer. You were raised on an island and you don’t have any rejection towards killing. You were raised that way and you lived your life that way. Oh, and you can’t talk. The only thing you can say is stuff like uh, ah, oh, and stuff like that. Do you get what kind of character it is?”

“Yes.”

Maru spoke as he put his hands on the cold surface of the table. The staff put him in handcuffs. He thought that it was just a plastic prop, but it was actually metallic. A sharp metallic ring could be heard as it brushed against itself between his palms.

“I want you to express violent emotions. Just like a wild dog or something.”

“Yes, sir.”

While the producer went and talked to Joohyun, Maru took off his handcuffs and picked up his script. He glanced at the script to see what kind of emotions his character was supposed to express before practicing a bit with his lips. Since he had no lines, he had to find ways of expressing himself using something other than words. His actions had to be exaggerated, and his voice sharp. He tried moving around sideways a little and analyzed what kind of emotions he was going to express according to the script.

“Let’s get ready.”

The producer spoke as he walked in front of the monitor. The lights on the ceiling turned off. The light stand fixed on the metallic table turned on and there were reflectors installed on both sides of the set.

“Even if it’s a bit uncomfortable, endure it for a while.”

“It doesn’t feel that uncomfortable. Actually, it’s quite comfortable.”

Maru lifted his cuffed hands as he spoke. Joohyun, who sat opposite him, smiled back.

“Then let’s do this.”

Joohyun tapped on the table twice before leaving the interrogation room. Maru looked at the grey wall in front of him as he took in a deep breath. The back of his head prickled a little.

“Well then, Miss Joohyun, enter.”

The studio became quiet with a single ‘cue’ sound. Maru slowed down his breathing and lowered his head as he waited. Eventually, a creaking sound could be heard before the iron door opened. Joohyun, wearing an expressionless face, sighed in a low voice as she came in. She sat down on the chair and lifted the file she carried in with her. The sound of rustling paper created a strange sense of tension.

“You can’t talk, huh. Is it that you can’t, or is it that you won’t?”

Joohyun put the file upside down on the table quietly.

“Actually, I don’t mind. Whether you can talk or not has nothing to do with me. Maybe it's because I’m trashy, but I can read other trashy people’s minds. So I don’t need words to speak with you.”

Joohyun pushed the file away from her lightly. The file slid across the table and stopped in front of Maru. Maru looked at the yellow file cover before grabbing the file and twisting it apart. The handcuffs hurt him a little, but he didn’t mind. He then thrashed the messy file against the ground. Joohyun looked at the file once before speaking.

“Han Sunggoo, Choi Jaechul, Kin Jintaek. You might not be able to speak, but you can understand, right? These names. They aren’t that unfamiliar to you, are they? They shouldn’t be. That’s because you killed them all. For Han Sunggoo, you stabbed him with a kitchen knife six times. Cleanly in the chest too. As for Choi Jaechul, he died by strangulation. You used his necktie, didn’t you? Lastly, it’s Kim Jintaek. For him, you used a hammer. It’s quite curious. Usually, murderers have a weapon they stick to or a method of killing for that matter. But you just kill. With no form, no aesthetics, no nothing. You just kill.”

Maru slowly raised his head. The camera that shot his face entered his vision. The camera shot him from above. He had to be aware of the camera, but not notice it. He tensed the inner part of his cheekbones, where the nasolabial folds were. His upper lips rolled upwards and trembled.

Since he created the form of the expression, what was left for him now was to pour his emotions into it. He was a child who had nothing with him. He was a child that had no sense of guilt since killing people was akin to breathing to him. A kid who could only vent his frustration by running around wildly like a wild dog was tied up and imprisoned in a place full of metal.

He wasn’t afraid of punishment. He did not know such a thing. He was only annoyed at the reality that he could not do as he wished to. He was anxious. His hands were twitching. He wanted to leave this uncomfortable place this instant and run around wildly.

Clang clang clang. The handcuffs and the metallic table bashed and created a loud noise. He was a child that could not speak. His only form of expression was action. He hit the table according to a certain rhythm. He didn’t do it strongly though, since this was just a warning.

Joohyun stood back up again. She was Bangjoo’s big sister as well as an actress that was high above him. He knew that fact, but the rage he brought up did not dissipate.

He bared his teeth at Joohyun who approached him. He did not restrain his shaking body and gave it free rein. Joohyun faintly smiled back at him as well. She was also a fierce wild dog.

“You must have killed them. Yes, you did. But why? Because you like killing? No. Those three people have nothing in common. They even live in different places, and their ages are drastically far apart. It’s not from resentment, and it’s not like you have sadistic tendencies. Then what could it be? Just why did you kill those three people? You know, I don’t think of you as a crazy murderer. I can smell the scent of a pro from you. You killed those three too cleanly as though it was your job. What is it? Just who the hell are you? No, who the hell’s behind you?”

She approached a step closer. A shadow was cast over her face since she was facing her back against the light stand. Maru had a look at that shadow. In that darkness, Joohyun’s eyes glistened with lunacy. He

got goosebumps on his skin. If he met such eyes in a normal situation, he would've turned his head away subconsciously. Those eyes were supposed to be avoided. The wave of emotions that assaulted him from in front of him shook Maru's body.

At this rate, he would be pushed back. If it was impossible to return one hundred percent of Joohyun's acting, then he had to not break the flow of the scene at least. Maru stopped thinking and brought out more primitive emotions.

Until now, he had never brought out emotions without restraint when shooting for a drama. Even when he was expressing something violent, another 'self' was always watching his acting self. That self was the controller of his emotions, and the director that directed everything going on in his heart. Even when his acting self was angry, annoyed, or crying, that self always gave orders so that the acting self could maintain a certain level of sanity. Maru adjusted the level of his emotions that way. Maintaining the depth of emotions he could control. That was an acting philosophy that Maru treated as more important than anything else.

And right now, Maru's other self turned a blind eye. This was just pushing work onto his acting self. The observing self could not counter Joohyun's acting. Matching her was something only possible if he was on the same level. Matching Joohyun's acting and her emotions was still too hard, at least for now.

That was why he gave up on one part. Since his polished emotions were worse than Joohyun's acting, he had to push onto her his raw, unpolished emotions.

There was only one time that Maru acted recklessly like this.

-I'll receive anything you throw at me so go ahead and show me all you got.

Elder Moonjoong. He was someone that beautifully matched him even if he pushed onto him his raw emotions. Joohyun also seemed capable of filling what he lacked.

With this being the case, he didn't need to be focused on his lacking acting skills and could change his direction so that his opposing actor could be highlighted even more.

The script flashed past his mind. Despite his rationale's negligence, his mind thankfully still remembered the script. What was left now was to explode with his emotions.

Maru could no longer see how his facial muscles were moving. He only hoped that the boiling rage showed up on his face. All he felt was that his facial skin was being twisted.

Just then, Joohyun, who was right in front of his face, smiled as though she was happy. She wasn't someone that tossed emotions back and forth with him according to an agreement just now. She received the emotions protruding from Maru and heightened the flow of the scene.

The more violent Maru became, the more proficient of a hunter Joohyun became as well. Her eyes seemed to say thus: Go wild even more.

"Aaaaaaargh!"

He reached out with his cuffed hands and grabbed Joohyun by the neck. Every finger joint was tense. Joohyun's mouth opened wide as she was being strangled. She also bared her teeth and smiled.

Joohyun axed the bend in Maru's arm with her elbow. Along with a loud thud, Maru's arm fell on the table. With no time to feel the pain, Maru twisted his body immediately. His knees crashed against the fixed metal table numerous times and created a loud noise. He grabbed Joohyun's collars and shook them wildly, while Joohyun grabbed Maru by the hair. Maru pulled hard, and Joohyun did the same.

The two faces closed in on each other to the point that a fist could not fit between the two. Maru looked at her with a shaky breath, while she also shut her mouth tightly and looked down at Maru.

Maru kept pulling on her collars. A ripping sound could be heard somewhere, but it didn't matter to him. For a brief moment, the thought that he should stop flashed past in his mind, but the strength in his hands became stronger. A wave of uncontrollable anger was directed at Joohyun. The thought that he couldn't end things like this filled his head.

Just as a low gurgling sound could be heard behind his twisted lips, Joohyun pushed his head onto the table.

The desk closed in on him. Just before his forehead met the table, he felt Joohyun softening her strength. It seemed that she was perfectly controlling herself even during this violent act.

However, Maru did not stop. There was a loud thud. A sharp pain rang in his head, and at the same time, his immersion broke.

"Cut!"

Maru loosened his entire body when he heard the cut signal. He put his face against the table and did not move. No, he couldn't move. He felt that he had to stay like this for a bit.

His mind felt complex, and his heart did not calm down. He felt that he might get angry at Joohyun if he looked at her now. He needed some time to calm down his rampant emotions.

Just as he was calming his breathing as he looked down at the set, a hand was placed on his head.

"That was some good drive."

Joohyun patted Maru's head. Maru made a powerless smile and raised his head up. He saw Joohyun smiling in front of him. She didn't look messy at all. It seemed that the emotions she showed just now had been taken back in already. The disappearance of the female detective that was pressuring her assassin was quite swift.

"I think that's the bottom of my emotions."

Maru thought back to the acting methodology that Joohyun talked about before as he spoke.

"You're still far from it."

Joohyun tapped Maru's cheeks with the back of her hands as she spoke.

"Hey, hey! Han-whomever-it-was! Is your head okay?"

The producer ran up to him and asked. Thinking that this producer was really bad at remembering names, Maru replied,

"I'm fine."