

Once Again 231

Chapter 231

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“Yes, redirect all PPL calls to the marketing department, and reject anyone who tries to sneak something extra in. Also, call the actors and make a list of all items that they get sponsorship from. Since they’re all veterans, there shouldn’t be any problems, but take measures so that no one brings strange clothes to the scene. Yes, yes. Please work a little harder. Ah, also, what happened with the meeting with the special effects company? Buksanjeong? Order a good course meal and look into if there are any reservations in the tables next to us, and try to cancel those if you can. The distributors may join us midway, so save some room for them too. Don’t forget to call me once you’re all done.”

Junmin exercised his stiff neck and looked down from the rooftop. He was reminded of when he first bought this building. He thought that the matters of the world were really unpredictable. Who would’ve known that an unknown actor like him would eventually possess a building in such an expensive place? Although he wasn’t able to spread his name around as an actor, he was able to support those that would become real actors. Although it was a little pity that he was getting further away from his dreams, he did not have any regrets.

“Haejoo, am I really doing well?”

Although he wasn’t able to become the best actor, he now possessed the environment to raise those that would become the best. Junmin wanted to raise the best with his hands. Of course, he was well aware of how difficult it was since that was what he was doing all this time. Jung Haejoo. She had a god-sent talent for acting. He created countless acting curricula in order to replicate her, but it was impossible to replicate a god-sent gift as a man.

“Just one step. All that remained was just a single step...”

Junmin admired that woman. His feelings towards her were on a completely different level to the respect he had to numerous senior actors. She was a woman that he did not dare to use an expression that would put himself on the same level as her. There was no need to package her to look great, her very existence as an actor would wow any person. When he first saw that woman in a bankrupt theater, who introduced herself as an actor, Junmin caused a fuss, calling everyone he knew saying that he finally found the one. She was a woman who dazzled him with her light from the moment he looked at her. He disdained all the people who threw her away without recognizing her value and grabbed her. She was the woman who understood ten if you told her one. She absorbed all the acting knowledge that Junmin had and sublimated it so that it became her own.

At one point, Junmin even had the impulse to hide her from the world and hog her to himself. However, an actor’s worth and respect could only be gained on stage. When he used all of his powers to get her the best possible debut piece, she...died. It was an ordinary car accident. Dozens of people die to car accidents every day, and hers was something that didn’t even make it to the news. Agony shook Junmin to his core when he thought that he couldn’t even prevent such an ordinary accident. When he regained himself a little after her funeral, Junmin put all of his passion into raising new talents as though he was possessed. He no longer attended to his social circles and looked for new talent that could replace her

while spending time with the dogs that she loved. He spent 3 years like that to finally realize that there were things that simply couldn't be replaced in this world.

Now that time passed and he was in his 50s, he had an unreal amount of real estate in his hands and he was in a position where he could eat and drink with superstars. The days of pain and suffering that he thought would last an eternity eventually passed and now he was the Lee Junmin who could smile and laugh again. Just until a few years ago, he thought that humans were really evil, but now, even that faded out. What was left of her was his admiration towards that woman as well as the desire to meet an actor of her level once again. The days of agony and pain changed to memories. It was a bitter thing for him to accept, but it was the truth. If that didn't happen subconsciously in the brain, many people would be in their coffins right now. Junmin blankly stared at the skies before turning around and heading towards the 7th floor.

"Why are you wandering around like that?"

The 2nd meeting room was occupied by Taeho alone. It seemed that the matter he asked him to do had been finished.

"Looks like you made your decision since they aren't here."

"Yes. I made a clean decision."

"Who did you give delinquent 2 to then?" Junmin asked as he sat down.

"Han Maru."

"Why?"

Taeho smiled and gave him two pieces of paper. One had horrible handwriting, and the other had a neat handwriting.

"The one that's hard to read is Jiseok's, and the other one is from Maru. I told them to write what meanings the lines of the delinquents had, and that's what they gave me. I made an immediate decision after reading them. Have a look."

Junmin had a look at Jiseok's first.

"Thinks that the drunkard old man is pathetic since he's sleeping in the streets at that age."

He read it out aloud. It wasn't wrong. The lines themselves implied that. Junmin put down the answer that Jiseok wrote and had a look at Maru's.

"Jiseok's answer isn't bad. After all, that's what the script entails. Just looking at the line 'Man, your sorry ass has achieved nothing even after all these years. What kind of shit life have you been living, gramps', you can see how the delinquent is looking at the old man. But Maru decided to take a step further and write where those feelings stem from. For me, I want the delinquent to be nasty, underhanded, grumpy with the world, and twisted to the point that he couldn't be any more twisted. Such a delinquent can't just be 'simple', don't you think?"

"Even though you say that, it'll be just a single cut. Can this boy really imbue all of it into the line?"

“You know better than anyone that many cuts make a scene and many scenes create a sequence. You don’t know how things will go. You might tell me that that decision was the best choice I made in my life. And hey, what’s up with you? You don’t like him?”

Hearing that question, Junmin smiled and put down the paper on the table.

“So you’re picking on him even though you like him. Hyung-nim, people should be a little honest with themselves as they get older. Only then can you get married and have children and eventually grandchildren.”

“And so, are you married?”

“...I’m fine since I’m in my prime 40s.”

“You’ll be in your 50s before you know it, and your 60s if you daze out for a little. If you wanna get married, do it now.”

“Is that advice from a senior in life who couldn’t get married?”

“That’s right.”

“Haah. I don’t want to grow old with a dog like you are, but I don’t see any suitable ladies around me. I can only get married once a good woman appears.”

Junmin played along with Taeho’s grumbles before standing up. Taeho was an actor who was always on the top of the scout list in Chungmu-ro. His name was well known amongst the masses, and he had a good personality as well, so sometimes he would get offers to attend a marriage interview, but he had never heard of him going to one.

“Rather than that, hyung-nim.”

“What is it?”

“When are we doing the read-through? I know you’ll hold one after the get-together.”

“I am.”

“So when will it...”

“Within next week. But hey, why are you looking forward to the read-through? I thought you hated that.”

“When did I hate it? Anyway, see you then. I’m going to go back and have some sleep.”

“You’ve been sleeping until now and you’re sleeping even more?”

“I’m going to gain just 3 more kilos. Since my face is so handsome, gaining weight doesn’t really do much to my sharp jaw lines. Just look, my jaw lines are as sharp as ever.”

Taeho left with a grin. Junmin picked up his phone and told each department to reschedule the get-together. He had to go find someone to do some rituals, someone to pray for the piece, and even do some fortune telling. He wasn’t going to find someone to do a gut(shamanist exorcism ritual). In his last

piece, he held one, and that didn't even cross the break-even point. Ever since then, he never went to do one.

"So he got the role he wanted."

Junmin put the two papers into the bin. The cast was over. The main roles had already gotten their scripts and started practicing. Right now, there were no changes to schedule. Although changes would be made to the schedule again and again once the filming began, the start was good.

Suddenly, his phone started ringing. He heaved a deep breath before answering.

"What? The mob scene's location was cancelled? Why? Have you called the location manager? Fuu. Get the newbies in the production team and the special effects team to look for a similar location nearby. Don't just use your phones and do some actual work. Get it done by tomorrow. Take photos of the location and send them to the director and to me. And also, what?"

Junmin scratched his head and picked up his pen. He suddenly regretted that he decided to command the filming scene. The saying 'the old should just point their fingers from the back' slowly crept up his mind.

"Double-check and get that confirmed. Get their fingerprints stamped so that they can't back out later and..."

It seemed that he was going to get overloaded with work again today.

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"A movie?"

"Yeah. You know Maru's been busy lately. That's all because of the movie. He even passed the audition. Isn't that great?"

"Wow."

Jiyoong looked at Daemyung and exclaimed in a small voice. The fact that Maru passed the audition was definitely something celebratory, but to her, the fact that she was talking with Daemyung was something happier to her.

"The others aren't coming. Wait a moment, I'll go get them. Where's everyone? Practice will be starting soon," Daemyung spoke as he stood up. Jiyoong had a look at the time. It was 10 past 5. The practice began at 5:30. There was still 20 minutes left, so there shouldn't be any real reason for him to be in a hurry.

"Wouldn't they come when the time comes?"

"D, do you think?"

Daemyung wandered around the empty classroom while looking around all over the place, but eventually, he left the classroom saying that he would go look for them. Jiyoong found herself reaching out to him when he left and then sighed to herself as she put her hand down.

These feelings, it probably came from back then. The senior that listened to her while being very flustered. Jiyoong felt her heart throb when she saw that. It was a completely different feeling than when she saw Maru. It was the difference between admiring someone from afar and watching someone who cared for her. She had good feelings towards Maru, but that all felt unreal to her since he felt too distant. Perhaps due to that, she didn't feel anything when she found out that he had a girlfriend. In fact, she found it so natural that she smiled to herself.

On the other hand, the first feelings she had when she found out that Daemyung did not have a girlfriend was relief. At that moment, Jiyoong realized. She realized that she held more than just good feelings towards him. It was a secret that she hadn't told anyone yet. She felt that the secret would lose all worth once she said it out loud.

"Should I be a little more proactive?" She muttered to herself. However, she couldn't continue thinking because just imagining it made her feel like her head would burst. Jiyoong absent-mindedly looked at the door that Daemyung left through.

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"I think Jiyoong is uncomfortable with me."

Maru frowned when he heard Daemyung's groans. What kind of BS was this?

"Ah, no. I must be mistaken. It's nothing. Ha, haha."

Daemyung smiled and entered the classroom. Maru had a peek inside. Daemyung and Jiyoong were sitting far apart. That distance didn't originate from discomfort, but from the immense pink-colored heat that was about to cause the two to burn. It was immensely obvious to him, but the two people in question, no, to be precise, Daemyung, didn't seem to understand at all.

'I did have my doubts, but they're still like this...'

He was well aware that Jiyoong's eyes when she looked at Daemyung was unlike anything else. Maru thought that Daemyung would take notice of that and that there would be progress between the two soon enough, but there was neither progress nor regress. There was still the awkward distance between the two. Jiyoong was a timid girl. The problem was that Daemyung was just as timid. It was understandable since both of them were more timid than most others, but still...

"Geez, they're amazing, in a sense."

He didn't want to mention it in front of them and receive their glares. It would be good if the two went well, but if things didn't go well, it would be a pain for him. Maru sat in the corner of the classroom and had a look at the two. Both of them were looking his way when they talked, but while Jiyoong sometimes took glances at Daemyung, Daemyung didn't look at Jiyoong even once.

'If you have good observation skills, please look at her.'

Maru felt dizzy from the smell of love, which made him leave the classroom for a moment. Daemyung was about to follow him out, but Maru kicked him back in. He then went to the window at the end of the corridor.

"Han Maru. What are you doing over there?"

He heard a voice from the direction of the classroom.

“You’re early today.”

It was Suyeon.

“I’m here to hold a party to celebrate your passing of the audition.”

She was holding plastic bags in each hand and waved at him to come.

Chapter 232

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The club members gathered around. In the center were the items that Suyeon bought. They were snacks and drinks. They were perfect for this small celebratory occasion, but there was one item that caught Maru’s eyes. Maru wordlessly stood up and grabbed those cans. The voluminous silver cans were things he would have welcomed if he was outside, but right now, he was in school.

“What?”

Suyeon asked with a bright smile. Maru smiled back at her before going to the bathroom and pouring all the beer into the toilet. When he returned with empty cans, he saw Suyeon pouting.

“Alcohol isn’t allowed in school.”

“Those were mine though.”

“Drink them outside.”

“You’re no fun. Beer at school! Isn’t that every man’s dream? Isn’t that right, everyone?” Suyeon looked around at others as she asked. Everyone smiled awkwardly and looked away.

“Not a single one is on my side. How bitter.”

“You can keep sulking. We’ll start practice after eating these.”

It was obvious that she would start something strange again if he played along with her. Maru gathered everyone up and started opening the snacks that Suyeon brought.

“I bought them.”

“Then come and eat.”

“At least say thanks, will you?”

Suyeon took a seat. She turned up around 3 times a week before, but after May started, she came every day. Thanks to that, she became closer to the other students and was now able to talk to them without reserve. This was the mood that Suyeon wanted. The club members should be thinking that she was a good instructor who was humorous and friendly. It wasn’t bad. There shouldn’t be any problems as long as Suyeon kept her inner snakes under control. Although this was a relationship based on false appearances, if it was maintained for long enough, it would eventually become the truth within everyone’s hearts.

'It's not like anyone would notice her true nature either.'

Once everyone found out about Suyeon's history, they would become biased towards her. They might suspect her even if she truly wanted to teach them. Right now, the leader of this group known as the acting club was Suyeon, no matter who tried to deny it. Her kind-looking face was not allowed to shatter.

"Bangjoo, wanna do a love shot with me?"

"Eh, what?"

Bangjoo became flustered with his usual loud voice.

"Don't tease him too much," Maru spoke with a smile. Suyeon and he were in a business relationship. They were tuning the relationship between Suyeon and the rest so that the falsities did not get revealed. As long as it was Junmin that asked Suyeon to look after the acting club, she would not try anything funny. It was clear that she would lead the kids as an ideal instructor.

Suyeon approached Bangjoo. She giggled and tapped on Bangjoo who was stiff like a rock. Jiyeon chuckled and Aram slapped Bangjoo's back saying 'do it!'. Holding her drink up, Suyeon smiled with her eyes and looked at Bangjoo. Bangjoo raised his paper cup as well. His slightly nervous face contained expectation. After all that's said and done, Suyeon was an actress. Although she was usually down-to-earth, that didn't make her beauty disappear. As a man, this was a situation where he would gulp subconsciously. Maru gave Suyeon a glance. Suyeon had a disdainful smile for a brief moment but she soon returned.

"But I like Jiyeon better. Come here, you cute little one."

The hand approaching Bangjoo switched directions towards Jiyeon. At first, Jiyeon backed away, feeling embarrassed, but she eventually raised her hand when Suyeon kept closing in on her. Jiyeon's cheeks became red. After crossing each other's arms together to drink, Suyeon came back to her seat after patting her head. Maru spoke to her in a low voice so that others wouldn't hear him.

"Don't glare at me like that. You're scaring me."

"Don't tease her too much."

Maru was wary of Suyeon becoming too close with the other students, as well as becoming too distant. Right now was the perfect distance where they could joke around with others. Suyeon made her view of life very clear. She would make use of any man if it benefited her. The dangerous part about her was that she did not care what the method was. Maru estimated that something happened between her and Geunseok as well. Geunseok was already walking down the wrong path, and Maru believed that she was the reason Geunseok strayed even more drastically. He didn't care about Suyeon's way of life. In fact, he wasn't qualified to say anything as long as she didn't do anything illegal. However, he wasn't kind enough to let her do as she wished to people related to him.

"You want to put me in check, huh?"

"It's better for both of us to keep the instructor-student relationship. Isn't it?"

"You're rather old fashioned."

“Kids these days are quite naive, you know? I’m worried that they won’t be able to get a hold of themselves when a fiery fox wags her tail at them.”

“Haha, and I’m the fox?”

“Calling you a fox is an understatement. I don’t dare compare foxes to you. You’d roast any number of foxes.”

“You’re unexpectedly protective of them.”

“Because they’re higher on my priority list than you. I like making lists like that.”

“I’m a little disheartened. You even know my shameful side. Weren’t we better than this?”

Suyeon got closer to Maru while others were busy. She was wearing a silk blouse, and her cleavage could be seen below her top button which was undone. Maru smiled and blatantly stared at her breasts. When he did, Suyeon curved her lips and moved back.

“Why don’t you just strip if you plan on showing me? You’d make good eye candy.”

“Aren’t you a little too harsh on a lady? I almost felt ashamed.”

“You wanted me to look, so I looked. I was looking quite seriously since you were so adamant. But it’s a bit of a pity. You aren’t voluminous enough. I wonder if you can make a B cup.”

“...Do you want to die?”

Maru shrugged his shoulders and turned away from Suyeon. A lady aware of her own beauty was bound to be scary. Suyeon was someone who was capable of weaponizing her beauty. She probably shouldn’t flirt with the kids, but there was nothing bad with being cautious.

“But seonbae, are you really going to appear in a movie?” Aram asked, taking a bite from a chocolate cookie. Maru nodded.

“What role are you?”

“A delinquent.”

“Ek? You?”

Aram laughed while saying that but eventually, she narrowed her eyes and spoke.

“Actually, it might suit you.”

“It’s not just ‘might’. He’s the very definition of a delinquent,” Dowook spoke from the side. Maru made a hand knife and lightly hit the back of Dowook’s neck.

“I don’t think it suits him at all...,” Jiyeon spoke while blinking.

“No, Jiyeon. If you have a closer look at Maru-seonbae, he looks like he has a bad personality.”

“Hey, don’t say it straight to my face.”

“You know I can’t hold back things like this, seonbae.”

“You mean you don’t, not that you can’t.”

“I thought I hid that well, but I guess I was found out.”

Aram giggled. Jiyeon was very flustered in the middle. She eventually grabbed Aram’s arm and shook her. Her small voice, saying ‘you should stop’, could be heard.

“We became closer, don’t you think?” Daemyung spoke as he watched that. It wasn’t that surprising since they had spent over a month together. Last year, the first thing that happened was disharmony, but this year, there weren’t any conflicts between the members. As long as practice went well, they would be able to achieve good things in the competition as well.

“Then when is the movie going to be released?”

“We didn’t even start filming yet. I don’t know the exact release date. I’m not in a position where I can find out either.”

“Then for how long are you going to appear? Are you the main character? A delinquent who eventually has a change of heart and turns good?”

“Nope, I’m a minor role. A passing by delinquent. I only have two lines of speech as well.”

“Oh, that’s all you h...ufpppf!”

Jiyeon couldn’t take it anymore and covered Aram’s mouth. She looked at Maru with an apologetic expression.

“I’m sorry, seonbae-nim. She just doesn’t know how to hold back.”

“She’s not wrong though.”

“But even so....”

Maru scratched his eyebrows and turned around. Jiyeon’s pitiful expression was more pressuring than Aram stating facts. It would be quite a sight to see once Daemyung realized Jiyeon’s feelings for him. He could already imagine the two of them sitting far away from each other, very awkwardly.

“Who else is in the movie? Is Yoon Hyuk in it? How about Choi Jihoon? How about Jang Min-oppa?”

Aram stated actors known for their handsome faces.

“All I know is that there will be a middle aged man with a fat stomach.”

“Isn’t there anyone with handsome faces?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know who is participating.”

“How about actresses?”

Daemyung sneakily asked.

‘Daemyung, don’t you see Jiyeon biting her lips behind you, you douche?’ This guy is the type to run away with all of his might if he sees an apple falling above his head.’

"I don't know anything about that either. Do you think they'll tell anything to a bottom-of-the-rung actor like me?"

At that moment, Suyeon crossed her arms and spoke.

"But I know."

"You know who's appearing, instructor?"

"Yeah. I can tell you that there's a really sexy, cute, and pretty actress."

Suyeon paused for a breath before continuing,

"And that's me."

Maru felt his eyes twitch. Suyeon was practicing her act of the second daughter when they met at the villa last time. The audition ended last week. Meaning that Suyeon passed the audition as well?

"Then you're appearing in the same movie as seonbae?"

Aram made a curious expression. Even Jiyeon became surprised and looked his way.

"I guess things turned out that way."

"Are you filming together then?"

"No. We won't be meeting each other. After all, we don't shoot the same scene together."

"What role are you then, instructor?"

"The granddaughter of the main character who's in high school. She is tragically killed by the main character. There will be blood too."

"A high school girl?"

"I guess it's one of the advantages of having a younger looking face. This unni's skin is very good. I'll look like a high school girl once I wear a uniform."

She grinned as she stretched her own cheeks out. Aram exclaimed and approached Suyeon and poked Suyeon's cheeks.

"Instructor, tell me your secret later."

"Sure."

Aram locked her hands with Suyeon's and shook it in joy. Suyeon glanced at Maru. She had a slight smile on her face.

"So we aren't filming together, huh?"

"Yup."

"That's very fortunate."

"Why is that? You're making me disheartened."

Aram, who was next to her, said “that’s right, seonbae.” It seemed that Suyeon’s art of seduction didn’t exclusively work on men.

“Oh, I know one other person. It’s someone you know well, too, Maru.”

“Who is it?”

“Geunsoo-oppa. He’s the youngest son.”

“I didn’t know that. But when did you decide to drop the honorifics? I thought you called him with a ‘mister’.”

“That’s my business. Don’t you worry about that. Mister Han Maru.”

He had contacted him regarding the audition two weeks ago, and it seemed that Geunsoo had won the role as well. The youngest son was the first to be killed by the main character. There were some action scenes as well. In the novel, he dies after struggling against his father, the main character, who appears and hits him with a hammer.

“I guess we’ll see once during the read-through.”

“There are read-throughs for movies too?”

“Just once. The production team and the actors all gather around and do a complete read-through together. They get to listen to what the director wants there.”

Suyeon let go of Aram’s hands and stood up.

“Well then. That’s enough chat, so we should get to practice. It’s not good to be so strict, but we shouldn’t play for too long. Let’s read through the script once and move according to the movement lines we decided on last time. No one’s forgotten their lines already, right?”

The acting club had done practically nothing but looking at the script for the past month. Everyone here was confident in reciting the lines.

“Then let’s clean up and start immediately. Oh, Daemyung, lead everyone and do some stretching. We’ll up the difficulty for stretching today. Especially you, Jiyeon. Aram and Bangjoo are okay since they exercise, but you need to do some exercise. Let’s raise your flexibility.”

“Y, yes.”

“Alright, then.”

Suyeon clapped and had everyone stand up. She maintained the cheerful atmosphere and imbued vitality into the practice. She was a difficult woman to face, but her abilities had to be acknowledged. It was unbelievable that she had no experience teaching groups. She displayed excellent teaching abilities against these group of students.

“Let’s get things done today too, then, shall we?”

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Moonjoong took a deep breath. After that, he picked up the script in his hand and violently shook it from top to bottom. Something akin to thirst was rising inside him. He wanted to pour out his thirst right now.

After taking deep breaths, Moonjoong picked up his phone. There was a message from Junmin.

[There's a get-together the day after tomorrow. I'll come pick you up.]

Chapter 233

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Moonjoong, who was reading through the newspaper in depth, closed the newspaper. He stood up as he patted Dalgu's head, who was rubbing against his legs. It was time for his meal.

"Yes, yes. I guess you need to eat to live too."

He poured dog feed on the pet plate before lightly eating his own lunch. After washing the dishes, he poured a pack of red ginseng extract that he received as a gift from his daughter in some hot water. The light brown red ginseng tea gave off a sweet fragrance. Perhaps this was what happiness was. Moonjoong held the mug in his hand and left his house for a bit. The rays of the sun in May were hot. He sat on the wooden chair in his garden and drank his tea. After today, he would have to say goodbye to his leisurely days for a while. He would be returning to the industry again. It was obvious that the schedule would be tight, that his acting wouldn't go as he wished, and that there would be many trivial hiccups here and there, but he strangely felt happy. It felt like visiting his hometown after a long time.

"Maybe I should have gone with cold water instead."

He thought that hot tea wasn't suited in this weather. Just as he blew on his tea to cool it down a little, he heard Dalgu barking from the inside. It seemed that his phone had started ringing since the boy was usually calm. When he entered his house, Dalgu was barking towards his phone just as he had thought.

"Yes, yes. Thanks for telling me."

After tickling Dalgu's chin once, he answered the call.

-Sir, I'll pick you up at seven.

"Oh, the get-together is today?"

-Yes.

"Okay, then. The weather is hot, so don't push yourself."

After finishing his call, he had a look at the calendar. He could see the word 'get-together' written in small letters.

'Time sure flies.'

His eyes shifted a little sideways. First shoot. The filming would begin once the get-together was over. From that moment onwards, he would be very busy.

"So what's left is how well I do my worth."

Junmin had prepared the best of everything. He had set up a flawless environment. What was left now was for him to do his acting more passionately than anyone. He had been given a glamorous stage, so he couldn't just show something that was a school festival level. Moonjoong sat down on the sofa and closed his eyes. What was about to happen now was just basic repetition. He would first imagine the overall picture in his head, and act the part in his mind. He would then very objectively evaluate his own acting and throw it away if it wasn't up to standard. Only after repeating that process numerous times would he stand in front of the camera. If the director gave the okay, then that scene was a pass, and if not, then they would reshoot the whole scene. It was quite simple, so there was no room for excuses. Once the filming began, an actor had to prove their worth, as well as satisfy the producers.

Moonjoong's gaze headed towards a newspaper. An article he read in the morning caught his eyes. He found that these days, they used some interesting expressions. 'Pure' singers and 'pure' actors. Moonjoong found them funny whenever he encountered those expressions. It was the epitome of irony. A 'pure' actor? Why did such an expression come about? An actor is an actor only when he or she is able to digest acting. A 'pure' actor? As an actor himself, he was very embarrassed whenever he heard those words. Just how many people entitled themselves as an 'actor' and disappointed the audience for such a word to be created? Moonjoong wanted to show his juniors how an actor should be through this piece. He didn't consider himself worthy of teaching anyone, but he could give them some advice as their senior. He wanted at least the juniors he was working with to know how embarrassing the expression 'pure' actor was.

Perhaps noticing the owner's heavy mind, Dalgu approached and sat down by his feet. Moonjoong felt the warmth from his feet and smiled faintly.

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"Am I allowed to participate?" This was Maru's first question when he heard about the get-together.

- The staff is participating as well. It's not a heavy occasion like you think it is.

"If that's the case, I'll go. It'll be better for me to get to know more people after all."

- Then come to Seoul station by seven. I'll send you the exact address through text.

"Yes."

As soon as they finished the call, the text message arrived. The location was Gangnam, Seoul. When he looked it up online, he found out that it was a ball room of about 500 pyeong (150 sqm) in area. Maru opened his closet and took out a shirt and black jeans. He didn't know what the dress code was, but since it didn't seem to be a formal occasion, he thought that those would do.

"Are you going somewhere, oppa?"

Bada, who peeked through the door, asked.

"I am, in the evening."

"Where to?"

"Something like that."

“You can tell me.”

“It’s not like not knowing will harm you.”

“Ah for god’s sake.”

He avoided his sister and went to the kitchen. It was 3 in the afternoon. There was still some time. His father went to work, and his mother started working again since her wrist became better. She was looking after the counter at a local supermarket and said that it wasn’t that hard. Maru decided not to talk about the 300 million won in his bank account if possible. Money was something that people could do with little, as well as a lot. If his family was in a bad financial situation, he would have immediately told his family to use it, but it didn’t seem that necessary. Also, his 300 million didn’t come for free, so he had to be careful when he used it. It was the price Junmin paid for his three years of high school. This money would become his lifeline in the worst possible case where he wouldn’t be able to make a living out of acting.

“Oppa, do you want to eat tteokbokki?”

“No.”

“Say yes!”

“...Fine. Let’s eat it then.”

He nodded his head since he felt like things would go really awry really quickly. Bada immediately approached him and spoke.

“Go buy it. I’ll eat it for you.”

‘What a bold kid.’

Maru threw a cushion towards Bada who had a grin on her face. It was very likely that she was born to make her brother suffer. Considering that the only conversation the two had before Maru’s reincarnation was ‘dinner’s ready’, they had gotten a lot closer, but just because they got closer didn’t mean that they didn’t fight. Though, she was quite cute.

“Ah, dammit...”

“I’m pretty sure someone’s wallet has a card under my name. Oh, I also think that someone used 200 thousand won last month. A middle school 3rd grade using 200 thousand a month, huh.”

Bada, who was approaching Maru with an angry face, gently gave the cushion to Maru with a smile as though nothing had happened.

“Oppa. I’ll go buy it.”

“I’m not going to eat a lot, so don’t buy too much.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and throw the food waste out while you’re at it.”

“But that stinks and I don’t...”

"I see you don't need the card any..."

"Okay!"

"And buy some milk on the way home."

"...I'll get you back for this."

"Sure."

Maru pointed at the door with his chin and smiled.

* * *

Gangnam station. The place was packed with buses, cars and people.

"Why are you dressed in a suit?"

Jiseok turned around after hearing a voice from behind. He saw Maru standing there wearing a gray shirt and black jeans.

"It's a party. So of course, a suit is a must."

"Which country is that rule from?"

Jiseok followed Maru since he looked like he was going up by himself. The location was on the 3rd floor of a building not far away from Gangnam station.

"It must be huge, right?"

"Who knows?"

"Aren't you excited?"

"I'm here for the food. Why would I be?"

Maru's replies were very dry. Someone meeting him for the first time might think he was a cold guy, but Jiseok knew that Maru wasn't just cold. Of course, that didn't mean that he was a warm guy either.

"Aren't there any stairs?"

"Why are you looking for one? There's an elevator."

"Because stairs are better for health."

Jiseok asked the security officer on the first floor, but got the reply that the stairs were only for emergencies. He had no choice but to get the elevator.

"I don't think going up three floors by the stairs will be any exercise to a kid of your age."

Hearing Maru's words, Jiseok replied with a 'it does for me'. Maru quietly stared at him. Jiseok made a thick smile when he saw Maru's gaze. He didn't want to talk about something depressing on a good day like this. However, Maru was really quick witted.

“Now that I think about it, you were sweating really hard when you helped out that lady last time. Are you sick?”

“I just lack a little stamina.”

“...Take care of yourself. You’ll find yourself suffering when you’re older.”

“Hahaha.”

While they were laughing, the elevator opened again. In front of them were two female staff wearing suits. Behind them was the entrance, made of glass, and beyond that was the ballroom.

“Do you have a reservation?”

Jiseok and Maru stated their names when the lady asked. The lady soon found the two names and ticked the names off.

“You may enter.”

Jiseok whistled as he opened the door. Inside, they could hear faint music. The lights on the ceiling differed from place to place, and near the entrance, it was bright and beautiful. Right after the entrance, there was a signboard. The main and sub roles as well as important staff members were supposed to go left, and the rest were supposed to go right.

“We should go to the right, right?”

“Obviously.”

Jiseok glanced towards the left. He saw a few people being guided by the staff to the room.

“What do you think they’ll talk about in there?”

“There shouldn’t be anything much, is there? They’re just separating people into levels. If there are extras like us here, then that means that there are all sorts of people in this place, and it would be difficult if they got into trouble with someone high up. That’s why they separated the zones.”

“Should I sneak in there?”

“You really shouldn’t. It’s not just actors but people related to the film production and the investors should be there too. If you ruin their mood, you’ll lose all hope of participating in the movie.”

Maru walked towards the right, saying that they shouldn’t get involved. Jiseok also licked his lips and walked towards the right. This role was something he got through a lot of effort so it would be frustrating if he lost it. On the right, they saw a buffet. Cheerful music flowed out from the speakers on the ceiling. The lights were generally dim. There were a lot of people. Everyone was eating something.

“It’s just a buffet?”

“What did you expect?”

“A party.”

It was a little bland, but it was still exciting since there were a lot of people here. Jiseok danced his shoulders according to the music and made rounds on the buffet. He grabbed all the things he wanted to eat and sat on an empty table. Maru also came to that table and sat.

“Everyone’s just eating.”

“That’s what they’re here for.”

“Then there was no point for me to wear a suit. What about the dance? What about the ball you can see in movies?”

Jiseok asked several questions, but Maru didn’t answer any of them and continued eating. He didn’t show any signs of answering. Jiseok sighed and forked a piece of chilli shrimp. He wondered if eating was all he was going to do today. He was looking around at the others while eating his food. A girl who just entered widened her eyes after looking his way. Jiseok cheerfully waved his hand. When he did, the girl started approaching him.

‘Yes!’

Let there be a fated encounter in this crowded place! A movie-like meeting, and love! However, Jiseok soon realized that the girl wasn’t coming towards him. The girl arrived at the table and her shadow was cast over Maru’s plate. Only then did Maru raise his head and look her way.

“Han Maru. It has been some time.”

Maru looked both glad and bitter.

“Why are you here?”

“What do you mean why? Of course it’s because I was invited.”

The girl then placed her clutch bag on the table.

“Look after this for me while I get some food.”

She made a proud expression and walked towards the buffet. Jiseok asked Maru immediately.

“Who’s she?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“We’d be eating together. So of course we need to know each other.”

“...She’s Lee Yoojin, and we used to do acting together.”

“Really? She’s cute.”

“Who’s cute? She has a high self-esteem and she likes peeking.”

“Peeking?”

At that moment, Yoojin brought her food and sat down. Jiseok looked at her and spoke.

“Are you Lee Yoojin?”

“Wh, what the? How do you know my name?”

“Maru told me. And I heard you liked peeking! What does that mean?”

Jiseok asked with a smile. He saw Maru put down his fork and palm his face with a sigh, but he couldn't help his curiosity. At that moment, Yoojin glared at Maru.

“Oh, I like peeking? Then you like confessing with a cheesy line, don't you? What about the rabbit ring?”

“I get it. So let's just eat.”

“What do you get!”

Yoojin glared at Maru with a scary expression. Maru scratched his eyebrows and avoided Yoojin's gaze.

“Hm, that's fun. Now that's what I call a party.”

Jiseok crossed his arms and looked at the two. This boring place became just a little better.

Chapter 234

* * *

Yoojin ate a portion of her tomato caprese. She wished she could eat the nicely sizzling ribs, some fried pork, or some steak that the chef was cooking, but she couldn't do so when she thought about the aftermath.

‘Calories, calories.’

The logic that girls of her age should eat because it was their growth period only applied to others of her age. As her dream was to become an actress, high-calorie food was like a poisonous goblet. It would bring her bliss once she drank it, but not long later she would regret it.

“Aren't you eating too many vegetables?”

Next to her, the guy named Yoo Jiseok spoke. Yoojin had never suspected her own sociability until now. She was confident that she would make friends even in a place full of strangers. Even to her though, Jiseok's sociability was something else. Although people of their age would become friends easily, Jiseok's attitude of asking the embarrassing questions straight to their faces made her admit defeat. He didn't seem like a bad guy, but he was a little uncomfortable to deal with since he asked personal questions.

“Oh! You're on a diet? You don't look like you need one though.”

Jiseok smiled as he spoke. Yoojin smiled slightly. Although it might have been empty flattery, it was still good to hear nonetheless.

“Were you close with Maru?”

“Were we?”

Yoojin redirected the question to Maru.

“We were close enough to prepare for a drama together.”

“And how close is that?”

“Then I’ll correct myself and say that we’re close enough to not care about a few months of not contacting each other.”

“Your way of speaking really hasn’t changed. You and I might not have been in contact, but I called up your girlfriend several times, you know? We even talked behind your back.”

“....”

“Pfft. Look at you frown. You act so sweet in front of her but you’re always so cold towards others.”

“What, you want me to treat you sweetly too?”

“Forget it! I might puke what I just ate. Your girlfriend can have all of it.”

A suitable distance. Yoojin believed that the reason she could talk to Maru with ease was because of that. They could feel glad to meet each other again, and they could just as easily part ways without feeling disappointed. Their relationship was lighter than that of a friend’s, but a little heavier than that of just acquaintances. It was hard to form such a suitable distance with other males of her age. Most of them either tried to close that distance, and some just distanced themselves after confessing to her.

“You two look like good friends,” Jiseok interrupted and spoke. Yoojin snorted at that remark.

“What good friends? Hey, you shouldn’t get close to that guy either. You just saw, didn’t you? I’ve never seen this guy act nice at all.”

“Isn’t that what’s good about him?”

Jiseok had a playful smile on his face, but Yoojin was able to discover a slight sadness behind his smile. She almost subconsciously asked what he meant by it, but she gained a hold over herself and stayed quiet. They weren’t close enough to ask such questions yet.

“Ah. I wonder if there’s anything exciting. It’s a party after all.”

Jiseok stood up from his seat, disappointed.

“Who the hell is he?” She asked Maru while Jiseok was away. Maru kept on chewing for a while before speaking in a low voice.

“We just saw each other twice during the audition. Oh, I guess we saw a play together.”

“You saw a play together? Isn’t that a little strange? I thought you two weren’t close.”

“Why don’t you try having him next to you? You’ll find yourself thinking that it’s much better to just have him do what he wants rather than refusing him all the time. Hey, why don’t you take him at this opportunity? I’ll yield him to you.”

“Hell no.”

“That’s a pity.”

Yoojin watched Jiseok who was walking around the hall by himself. He was greeting everyone he came across. Some smiled and accepted his greeting, but most people usually just scanned him from top to bottom before just walking away. Despite that, he did not relent and walked around to the table to strike up a conversation. Seeing that, Yoojin was flabbergasted. She didn't know if that guy just had no shame or that he had a good personality. Even so, he didn't seem like a bad guy from how he ended the conversations on a good note. He was an overly cheerful guy. Yoojin was satisfied with her evaluation of him and nodded her head.

"Looks like he wants attention."

"I don't think that's the whole story. If he really wanted attention, he would have kept going."

"Really?"

"Maybe he just likes people a lot, like, really a lot."

Maru picked up his plate and stood up. Yoojin, not wanting to be left behind alone on the table, also stood up. Maru headed towards the desserts section as though he was about to finish his meal. There were cakes, ricecakes and fruits all nicely displayed. Yoojin gulped. She could hold herself in against the temptation of meat, but the temptation of chocolate and bread was hard to resist. She especially couldn't take her eyes off the chocolate fondue in a bowl, as well as the cute cookies and marshmallows next to it.

"One dip with that cookie is a hundred calories at least, right?"

Maru spoke heartlessly from the side. All this while, he was dipping cookies into the fondue.

"I'm not eating it."

"It'll melt in your mouth. Though, it will also go straight to your weight."

"You're picking a fight, aren't you?"

When she glared at Maru with a frown, Maru suddenly held out the cookie sticks with chocolate sauce all over it.

"Wh, what?"

"One is fine. It says here that they didn't use flour to make this cookie. And they say chocolate is good for satiety. A little is good for the health, and the skin too."

"..."

"Appetite is something like a balloon, so it will burst if it's pent up too much. You should at least give yourself a reward. Also, you're too skinny."

"How am I skinny?"

Although that was her answer, her hands were already holding the cookie sticks. Her eyes were fixed on the shiny chocolate. Ever since she had passed her audition, she had started her diet and she was a month into it now. She had endured that long so perhaps just one was fine?

“It, it’s good for the skin?”

“You’re gonna eat it anyway, so let’s not worry about the details.”

“It’ll be your fault if I gain weight.”

Yoojin took a bite out of the cookie. At that moment she subconsciously gasped. It felt as though all of her tension was loosened. It felt as though something sharp pressing against her nerves had just disappeared.

“You shouldn’t be so harsh on yourself. Once others get worried about your health, it will no longer be a diet. Stop losing weight. You’ll be much prettier that way. I liked you better during the rehearsal. If you don’t believe me, you can ask my girlfriend. She’s much more plump than you, but she’s still pretty.”

“But she... doesn’t gain weight even though she eats a lot. And how is she plump? This is why men are no good. If she’s plump, then the majority of people in this world would be obese!”

“Well, my girlfriend does have a good body figure. And it’s not that she doesn’t gain weight. She swells a lot when she eats. It’s just that she exercises like mad. Hm hm, she’s my girlfriend but I gotta say, she’s amazing.”

“You pervert. You’re a huge pervert. And you’re hopeless too.”

“Men are all perverts. It’s just a difference of whether they show it or not. Any man has a fantasy or two in his head.”

“I should just stop talking with you,” saying that, Yoojin had a look at her hand. She had eaten the whole piece while she was talking. Groaning, she hesitated a little before picking up another cookie and dipping it in the chocolate.

‘Forget it, let’s have another one!’

“I think two will definitely make you gain weight though.”

“Shut up!”

Seeing Maru shrug, Yoojin took a bite out of her cookie.

‘I’m so calling her to talk bad about Maru,’ she felt that only then could she relieve her stress.

“...Still, it’s good,” only after realizing what she said did Yoojin shake her head. Maru had already returned to the table first with a plate full of food. He then started eating quietly by himself.

“Just what does she like about him...”

Although she mentioned that she would talk behind his back, it was usually nothing more than a joke. It was more of a grumble than an actual insult. Moreover, the topic changed to fluffy love stories most of the time. Yoojin didn’t particularly like talking about such things, but she always ended up listening to the end when she heard her friend’s lovestruck voice. Last time, it was about the shoes. Even though they stopped for just a brief moment, Maru had secretly remembered it and later bought it for her as a gift. He even said ‘I picked them up on the way here’, along with presenting it to her in beautiful packaging. Yoojin, who heard the story, felt that it was childish, but she also felt that she would be very

happy if she was in the same situation. Honestly, she felt like Maru wasn't ordinary when he gave her a ring as a present. She even thought that he might be a playboy.

She was at first worried that some bad guy was hitting on her, but she found out that she was worried for nothing after seeing how Maru acted. He made the girls feel at ease with some jokes, but he never went beyond that. Meaning, he never did things that might cause misunderstandings. She understood this deeply when they were in the amateur actor's class. The only person Maru acted seriously towards was that girl. It was so blatantly obvious so the other girls in the class never had other feelings for Maru. He was so good at drawing the line. It was easy to become his friend, but no one felt any feelings for him beyond that.

It was like that now as well. Others might see that they were on close terms from how they acted, but as one of the involved parties, she clearly knew that Maru was keeping his distance. It was only thanks to that that she was able to talk comfortably with him. Yoojin believed that a man and a woman couldn't be 'friends', but she also felt that Maru could make being friends possible. They were in a relationship that was neither serious nor light, yet they were close enough that they wouldn't feel awkward after not having seen each other for a long time.

'If I was to date anyone, it should be a guy like him, right?'

All girls dreamed of becoming the main character of their life. Yoojin wasn't that different. Perhaps adults would say that she was worried about unnecessary things, but 2nd year of high school was plenty grown up, no? Also, Yoojin grew up listening to scary stories from other actresses thanks to her mother. She considered herself pretty mature mentally. Though, she didn't grow up entirely of her own volition.

'I'm something, still trying to become an actress after all that.'

She was well aware of how underhanded, dirty and competitive this industry was. However, once she had admired it, she couldn't take her eyes off it. She wanted to become a top-tier actress even if it meant becoming controversial. Perhaps this movie would provide her a foothold for that.

"What are you thinking about so deeply?"

Suddenly, a voice called out from behind. It was Jiseok.

"Whoa, that startled me."

"It was that startling?"

"It was. Anyone would be startled if you come out of nowhere like that."

"I'm sorry if I startled you. It wasn't my intention, haha."

Jiseok took a step back with a smile. He was unpredictable. She wondered what kind of thoughts he had in his mind.

"The people here are all so interesting. Places with a lot of people are always fun."

"You're something too. Is it that fun just grabbing random people to talk?"

"Yup. It's immensely fun. It's always been my dream to talk to as many people as possible."

“That’s a rather small dream.”

“Right? I think so too.”

It was that sympathetic smile again. Yoojin pouted. She felt as though she wronged him. Jiseok immediately moved elsewhere and started chatting with other people.

“He’s a strange kid.”

Yoojin had a glance at the chocolate fondue before walking over to the table Maru was sitting on. She was approaching the table when she saw that someone had arrived first.

It was a lady who had a body figure that made her exclaim out loud. Her hair was thick purple. The night dress with an open back didn’t look inappropriate on her at all.

‘Who is it?’

Next to her, Maru’s expression wasn’t that bright. It didn’t look like he detested her though. It was his face when someone not particularly close to him approached him. Yoojin saw that everyone’s gazes had gathered towards that table. People started whispering amongst themselves immediately. Yoojin walked towards the two. Just at that moment, the woman sat down opposite of Maru, which was originally her own seat.

“So we meet again here.”

The woman’s voice could be heard. At that moment, Yoojin stopped her steps and widened her eyes. This voice was familiar to her.

‘Don’t tell me it’s...’

Yoojin quickly walked forward and stood in front of her. Then, she exclaimed out loud subconsciously. An actress she admired was standing in front of her. The lady general that only did pieces she wanted. The proud woman that never bent to the force of the media!

“Do you two want to have a talk? I’ll get out of the way.”

Maru pressed the part between his eyes with his fingers and spoke. Yoojin ignored Maru and stood in front of her.

“Unni, I’m a huge fan of yours.”

That was Yoojin’s first line towards Joohyun, who had a smile on her face.

Chapter 235

“A fan? Of mine?”

“Yes!”

“Really?”

“Yes!”

Maru looked at the two people as he ate the sliced cake with cashew nuts on it. Seeing Joohyun, Yoojin had a passionate smile on her face that was never seen from her before. From how her hands were shaking on top of her knees, it seemed that she was excited by no small amount.

“That was unexpected. There aren’t many in the younger generation that like me.”

“No way! I like you to the point that I’ve collected all the magazines that you did interviews with. I even remember what you said in QC.”

“QC? You mean that?”

“Yes, that!”

“You really have it? Even I don’t have one...”

“During the interview, you...”

“Told the media ‘fuck you’?”

“Yes! I was so refreshed by those words so I never threw it away. You were so cool, unni.”

“You’re embarrassing me.”

Hm, Maru didn’t know what that was about, but he tried to stand up so as to not bother the two. Both of these women weren’t ordinary. It would be a pain for him if he got involved. However, as soon as he tried to lift himself up from the chair, he saw Joohyun staring at him.

“Going somewhere?”

“I’m planning to go somewhere else so you can have a nice talk together.”

“It’s fine, you can stay here. Or perhaps you’re not comfortable with me?”

“Well, I kinda am.”

The other party was a top-tier star. Thanks to that, he could feel an uncomfortable amount of gazes hitting the back of his head. Some were even approaching them. No matter how much he didn’t care about other people’s opinions, he wasn’t capable of eating comfortably in the middle of attention from over a hundred people.

“That’s not good.”

Joohyun covered the part above her chest and stood up. Then, she said to everyone around.

“I apologize, but I’m here on a private matter today, so don’t mind me and do your business as usual. You know what I mean, right?”

A crisp voice resounded out. Everyone returned to their seats as though they were possessed by something. Although some of them were still giving them glances, it was solved with a glare from Joohyun.

Everything quietened down in less than a minute.

“Is that enough?”

“Unni, that was so cool.”

Maru smiled bitterly and sat back down again. A top-tier star sure was different. It seemed that anyone who reached the top of their field, regardless of what their field was, had a unique charisma to them. On top of that, Joohyun was known to express what was on her mind without restraint. No one here would want to get an earful from her just because they pissed her off.

“But hey, you look like someone I know. Who was it again?” Joohyun asked as she looked at Yoojin.

“Oh, you’re probably referring to my mom. Choi Jung’s Hair. Do you know about it?”

“Oh! You’re that unni’s daughter?”

“Yes!”

“No wonder you looked familiar. An aspiring actress huh. Are you cast in this movie as well?”

“Yes. Though, I’m an extra...”

“Really? Congratulations. I was obediently going to school when I was your age. You’re something.”

“You swept the awards by storm on your debut though, unni. Compared to that, I’m nothing.”

“No way. You’re so pretty. If you have acting skills down, then you’ll become bigger than me.”

“Not at all. How can I become bigger than you, unni? Heheh.”

Heheh? Yoojin had become completely defenseless. It seemed that Joohyun wasn’t as simple as an idol-like figure in Yoojin’s mind.

“Uhm, unni. Can we take a picture together?”

“Of course.”

“Wow, thank you. Hey! Han Maru!”

Maru grabbed the phone that was flung at him. She really was careless. Joohyun put her arm around Yoojin’s shoulder, while Yoojin reached out and hugged Joohyun’s waist.

“Here it goes. Say cheese.”

After taking about three photos, Maru gave the phone back to Yoojin. Yoojin received the phone as though she was handling her family’s hereditary treasure.

“Han Maru,” Joohyun called out to him.

“Yes?”

“I’ve seen your audition tape. You were good.”

“...Thank you.”

The flattery was rather unexpected, so he was a beat late in saying thanks. The conversation they had on the school stairs that day was a little emotional so he felt that he would feel uncomfortable with her, but there was nothing like that. In fact, Joohyun looked at him with a smile as though she had found an

interesting creature. Maru was very uncomfortable with that gaze. Yoojin seemed to have finished checking on the photos as her ears were perked up, listening to Joohyun's words. It seemed as though she would listen to any of Joohyun's words.

"I was a little surprised. I don't give advice like that often. Just as I detest others interfering with the things I do, I don't really like interfering with other people's lives. But when I looked at you, you looked like you just needed a final push. That's why I said a few things back then. Though... from what I saw in the tape, you only took in the parts you needed and threw away the parts you didn't."

"Is that how it seemed to you?"

It wasn't that Maru proactively tried to change something about himself. He just acted as normal. To a certain extent, he agreed with Joohyun's words that he should get to the bottom of his emotions, but he did not see the need to put it into action. That was because... he already had a taste of what it was like at the bottom, no, an even deeper abyss than that. Death, that felt like something the word 'brutal' or 'tragic' couldn't even begin to describe.

"It wasn't? I thought my advice to release everything you have worked on you. The act you did in front of the camera had depth to it that is hard to find from people of your age, so I thought that you had a moment of epiphany."

"That advice was definitely useful, but it wasn't that practical in my case. I just acted as I normally did."

"Really? That's strange. You were different from the time I saw your stage last year."

Different - Maru closed his mouth and thought about that word for a while. He was reminded of that peculiar moment back at the audition. The frustration about the unfairness of being driven to death welled up inside him and he released it in the form of acting. It was quite an honest self-confession, and he had never expressed his honest emotions like that other than when he had a drink with Moonjoong. Oh, there was one other occasion. It was when he confessed to her. However, the quality and level of emotions he expressed in those two occasions were drastically different to what he showed in the audition. His inner thoughts that he expressed to Moonjoong and her were pure. There was no malicious intent. To compare it to color, it was close to 'white'.

Meanwhile, the emotions that welled up inside him during the audition was 'pitch black'. Those dark emotions were things that even he couldn't describe properly. Releasing those emotions without filter was something like a gamble on Maru's side as well. An act was supposed to be an act. What people wanted from actors was realism, not the truth. It had to be an act full of malicious intent, not malicious intent itself. That was why he concentrated not to break the boundaries of acting at the same time he released those depressing emotions. When he had the pent up frustration and rage that he felt when he reminded himself of his death under his control, albeit with difficulty, he felt a completely different existence of rationale. It was a peculiar experience. It felt as though there was another cold-minded, rational existence of Han Maru that was watching down on the grievous, screaming Han Maru. Thanks to the existence of that rationale, Maru was able to camouflage his experiences as acting.

"Perhaps it really was different."

"What do you mean by that?"

“It’s a little hard to explain it in words, though....”

Maru then had a glance at Joohyun’s expression. He was expecting an answer on the lines of ‘that’s fine then’, but Joohyun’s eyes were saying ‘go ahead, say it’. He even saw that he had Yoojin’s full attention. Maru smiled bitterly and expressed what was on his mind.

“Until now, there was no need to face my dark side when I did my acts. There was no reason to give them a glance. Moreover, when I stood on stage, I had a nice sense of tension around my body so I did not have any leisure to think about anything else. I had fun just unfurling the things I have prepared. Though, my instructors thought that I was going overboard and that I should restrain myself. And yes, I agreed with them.”

“I understood that much. I heard about it last time as well.”

“But the audition this time was different to that.”

“Yes. The movie has a script already, but the audition was mostly about free acting.”

“Yes. I was thinking about what I should do, and I was reminded about the dark side of me that I never gave a glance at. I didn’t want to look at it, but I realized that showing that side of me would be better in gaining points. That’s why I tried. It was a bit of an adventure. When I uttered those words, I felt that my heart was becoming more and more urgent. The moment I thought that my emotions would go out of my control, I peculiarly felt another presence of myself that was calmly watching my boiling emotions. After that... everything was smooth. I was emotional, yet calm. It sounds a little weird to put it like that, but anyway, it felt something like that.”

After saying those words, Maru shrugged. It felt complicated now that he expressed the complicated vortex of emotions he felt back then into words. It couldn’t be clearer at that specific moment, but it became more complicated when he put it into words.

“Another presence of self watching over the uncontrollable self. You... say some interesting words.”

Joohyun didn’t seem to have anything more to ask and stood up. After being dazed for a moment, Yoojin followed suit.

“Then I’ll keep watching you in the future. That feeling you have, don’t forget those emotions and try to bring it out.”

Hearing those words, Maru nodded slightly.

“You’re going?” Yoojin asked Joohyun.

“Yeah. They should be busy on the other side too. What, do you find it a pity?”

“Yes.”

“I like honest kids.”

Joohyun pinched Yoojin’s nose.

“See you later. I’ll visit the hair shop some time.”

“Yes!”

“Then Maru, take care.”

“Yes. Please take care.”

Joohyun turned around. Only then did Maru notice that the back of her dress was wide open until the waist. Such a dress at an occasion like this - Maru thought that she was quite bold indeed.

“Urgh, pervert. Don’t look at her like that!”

Yoojin opened her hand and blocked his vision. Maru thought that she was going too far to prevent what his instincts were telling him to do. Maru moved sideways to see Joohyun walk away. At that moment, Jiseok walked up to Joohyun from the other side. It seemed that he was doing something else until now.

“Huh?”

That was from Yoojin who saw Joohyun and Jiseok together. The two seemed to know each other as they had a light hug after waving hands at each other.

“Wh, what?”

“Why are you so surprised? I think it’s more of a greeting.”

Joohyun and Jiseok’s hug wasn’t a deep one like that of a man and a woman but more of an expression of saying hello. Joohyun talked a bit with Jiseok as though she had met a cute little brother before waving her hand and moving on.

As soon as Jiseok came to his seat, Yoojin pried.

“What is this? How are you related to Joohyun-unni?”

“Oh? I belong to the same company.”

“What? You belong to Yellow Star?”

“Yeah.”

“Really? But I heard that only bigshots can go there.”

“Is that so? And I guess that makes me a bigshot too then? Hahaha.”

Jiseok laughed heartily while scratching his head.

“I can’t believe that you belong to that company.”

“Why? Maru belongs to JA productions too.”

“What?”

Yoojin then glared at Maru. Maru shook his head at first, but Yoojin’s gaze did not leave him.

“He’s close with president Lee Junmin. I heard from Maru that he signed a contract with him.”

“Like I said that’s...,” Maru was about to explain but he decided not to. It was half right and half wrong, also he didn’t care what these two thought about it.

“No way. The two of you belong to two of the three big entertainment companies?”

Yoojin frowned as though she was wronged. Maru sighed and drank a sip of the grapefruit drink he had brought.

‘Is this a conversation for high school students, you people? You’ve all been corrupted by capitalism. You should talk about hopes and dreams instead.’

“I don’t have a company I belong to yet!” Yoojin spoke with frustration.

* * *

“...He said the same thing as she did.”

Outside the restaurant, Joohyun turned around to look at the table Maru was sitting on. She felt strange. The two were so similar that she had the misconception of hearing her voice on top of Maru’s. After watching Maru for a while, Joohyun made a slight smile. The smile was a little sympathetic.

“Don’t you die early. It might traumatize me.”

Joohyun spat out a short breath before going to where the director was.

Chapter 236

“Actor Yoon, please do your best.”

“The sole reason I decided to invest in the movie is because I saw the name Yoon Moonjoong in the cast. I’ve always dreamed of success while watching your acts in the tent theater.”

“Yes. Back then, it was like that.”

The immensely drunk individual investors shook hands with Moonjoong’s hand before leaving. The director, investment manager Junmin, and Joonggeun uttered a short breath.

“Sorry that you had to go through all that.”

Moonjoong smiled faintly hearing Junmin’s words.

“What’s there to be sorry about? They’re all thankful people. They invested hundreds of millions of won just because of me. So an occasion like this is definitely necessary.”

“Senior Yoon’s popularity hasn’t cooled down yet. Did you see that the woman sitting opposite to you was looking at you affectionately?”

Joonggeun’s eyes twitched as he said those words.

“Joonggeun, you haven’t changed even after all the years you’ve been working. You’ll suffer a lot because of your indecent mouth.”

“Senior. I don’t throw words like that anywhere. It’s been more than five years already. I know my way round.”

“Sure you do. Rather than that, you should lose some weight. Hoyoung, who hangs out with you is getting fitter and fitter so why are you becoming rounder and rounder?”

“Senior. They say belly fat is a sign of magnanimity from the old times. These days, I’ve been learning the ways of propriety and wisdom so my belly became like this. Only when I am an evil man would I become a person again and lose weight, but I’m pure and kind.”

“Junmin, I think this guy is becoming less and less mature as he gets older.”

“It’s not once or twice that this fella is acting like this. But he has become a lot better recently. Ever since his kids became aware of their surroundings, he seemed to want to maintain his face as a dad. So he doesn’t act like that on formal occasions. Sir, do you still remember what this fella said in front of sir Kim Taewoo? You know what happened then.”

“Ah, that I do. This guy had just entered the industry and all he was doing was hitting the slate, yet he went up to the main actor and straight up asked what horrible acting he was doing.”

“That was a legend, wasn’t it? Now that I think back, I’m surprised that this fella is still working in this industry.”

“It’s because it was senior Kim. If it was someone else, they would have said that they would quit if this guy wasn’t axed.”

Moonjoong thought back to the old times as he spoke. Although he could mention those events with a smile right now, the atmosphere at that time was quite tense.

“Why are you mentioning my youth? Oh, it’s the anniversary of Big Sir’s death. Is everyone going? I’m planning for a quick visit tomorrow.”

“Is it that time of the year already?”

“Let’s go together. I’ll drive. How about it?”

Moonjoong slowly nodded his head.

“Senior Kim liked Andong-soju a lot. I should visit and let him have a drink after all this time.”

Junmin also said that he would be going.

“Rather than that, senior Kim sure died early.”

“He was sixty-two, I believe.”

“Hah, sheesh. To think there would come a day I would become older than senior Kim. If I think of it like that, it makes me feel like my death is near too,” Moonjoong spoke as he looked at the ceiling. He was seventy years old this year. He wasn’t young anymore. Although people said that living until the age of 80 was not difficult these days, he couldn’t deny the fact that he was reaching his destination. He even had the thought that this film may be his last ever one.

“Senior. Why are you making that face again? Here, here. Have some fruit. Say Ah-.”

Joonggeun forked a piece of sliced watermelon and offered it to him. Moonjoong was about to decline, but Joonggeun approached him and said 'ah' once again.

"Why are you still like that when you're all grown up?"

"Senior. This junior wants to give you a piece of delicious fruit. Aren't you going too far by declining my good will? Is it because I'm a guy? Should I remove my dick?"

"Forget it. This guy is really becoming creepier."

"Aren't I cute? I can live this young despite being in my fifties."

Moonjoong ended up eating the watermelon. It was one tenacious relationship, both Junmin and Joonggeun were. These two were thankful juniors, no, little brothers who visited him every year.

"Sir. I don't think I can go that far, so don't badmouth me for not serving you," Junmin said with a smile. After talking with others for a while, Junmin picked up his phone. After a short call, he spoke again.

"Sir. I'd like to schedule an occasion with the actors. Are you alright with that?"

"Yes of course. I'm of course fine with it. That's the reason I'm here, so I would very much like to see them. Rather than that, there must be a lot of youngsters, so I'm worried that people may be uncomfortable with me."

"No way, senior. If anyone is uncomfortable with you. I'll threaten them to smile. So don't worry about it."

"That's what I'm worried about the most."

Moonjoong clicked his tongue seeing Joonggeun laugh heartily. This was a piece that he started after he had formally retired. As he had retired once already, he had almost no interaction with the younger generation that were leading the industry. He waited half worriedly and half with expectation. Soon the door opened and people started entering. People of both gender and of various age groups started filling the seats. Watching them made Moonjoong laugh for some reason. He was a figure that was forgotten along with the times, and they were popular actors on TV right now.

'Who am I to make them wait all this time?'

Boasting and showing off his authority were things he liked the least, and now that he looked at himself, he seemed to be in the condescending position.

"Did they wait for long?" He asked Junmin. Noticing something, Junmin shook his head.

"Everyone had fun in other places before gathering here, sir. I don't have that much power to keep them waiting here for so long."

Junmin was so quick witted that Moonjoong couldn't trust him. He then asked someone at the very end.

"Is it true?"

"Ah, yes. There are a lot of fun things here. We've been singing until just a moment ago."

The youngster replied with a smile. Moonjoong nodded slightly. It didn't look like he was lying.

“Sorry for this, everyone. I had this fellow call everyone here since we’d be making a film together and I thought that we’d be a little awkward to see each other for the first time during the read-through.”

Everyone quietened down and looked his way. Moonjoong wanted a relaxed atmosphere, but it didn’t happen so easily. Even he just stayed quiet and listened to his seniors when he was younger. He didn’t like the fact that a militaristic senior-junior relationship existed here, but that unfairness wasn’t something that could be changed by just one person. If the people above created a relaxed atmosphere, the juniors would have followed suit, but that did not happen. In this era where the juniors would have to lower their heads to the angry shouts of their seniors regardless of whether they were right or wrong, even saying “you can be at ease” might be a form of violence to them.

As such, Moonjoong only spoke for a short time. This occasion was for him to greet everyone. It wasn’t for empty formalities.

“I’m thankful for your visit even though all of you must be busy. The reason I decided to see you is, just as I said before, to get acquainted with each other since we’re doing the same piece together. I hope everyone can take care of me in the coming two to three months.”

“That’s for us to say. Please take care of us.”

“Please take care of us.”

Moonjoong had a look at the man in his 40s sitting on the left.

“What is your name?”

“My name is Park Taeho, sir. I’m your first son.”

“Is that so? Please take care of me.”

Park Taeho nodded his head. He then went to the next person. This person was an actress in her forties as well.

“I’m Jung Yoonhae. I’m your first daughter-in-law. Please treat me like family in the future.”

The actress greeted with a smile. Moonjoong got to know everyone like that. After listening to the name of the young actor at the very right, Moonjoong spoke in a quiet voice.

“Let’s enjoyably and passionately make the movie so that we do not embarrass ourselves. I’m glad I was able to meet you today.”

Moonjoong stood up and bowed to everyone. The other actors also stood up and bowed towards him.

“It’ll be rude of me to keep you here for any longer. Let’s talk about the rest during the filming, and please enjoy yourselves. You should enjoy yourselves without restraint when the organizers have planned this event. They’re doing this so that they can extort you later.”

It would be uncomfortable for everyone if someone like him stayed here for any longer. Even in company dinners, the best superiors were those that left their credit card behind and left the venue so that everyone could enjoy themselves without consideration for money. He was planning to talk with

Joonggeun and Junmin who he was familiar with before going home. Getting to know the youngsters could be left for when they actually started filming.

The actors stood up and left the room. Junmin and Joonggeun also left their positions for a brief time. Moonjoong, left in his wide room all by himself, drank a bit of soju in front of him. As he had to take care of his body before the filming began, he decided that this would be his last for a while. Although he liked alcoholic drinks, this movie contained quite a lot of dynamic action scenes, so he had to take care of his body to keep up at those times. With his seventy years old body, it might collapse on him the moment he became careless. It wasn't that he wasn't confident about health, it was just that nothing bad would come out of being cautious.

At that moment, he heard a knock on the door.

'Who is it?' He wondered.

"Come in."

The door creaked open and someone peeked inside. When he had a closer look, he realized it was the actor that introduced himself as Taeho. Junmin mentioned before he left that he was a talented actor who received the grand prize for the male character actor in the Daejong Awards this time.

"Sir."

"What is it?"

"If it's not too rude of me, may I pour you a drink?"

"To me?"

"Yes. Uhm, may I enter?"

"Please do."

Taeho entered the room. He had a smile on his face. Perhaps something good had happened to him.

"I'm not bothering you, am I?"

"No, not at all."

"That's fortunate. Actually, I really liked you when I was young. You won't know how many times I've played back 'Unending Night' that you played the main character in during my high school days."

Unending Night. It was a title he hadn't heard for a long time. The genre was film noir. The movie was filmed along with an actress known to be in the top 2 for beauty at that time.

"The movie should have been too lascivious for a high school student."

"That's why I watched it in secret. Anyway, I nicked my father's Burberry coat after that and got beaten up for it."

"Hahaha."

After that, Taeho spoke about movies that Moonjoong starred in in a great amount of detail and fun. Even Moonjoong was surprised as he listened. This person remembered details that even he, as the main actor in those movies, did not remember.

“Did I speak too much?”

“No, not at all. I’m having fun listening to you. It was a little surprising that there’s someone that knows my movies more than I do. And I’m also thankful as well. Thank you for remembering and liking all my pieces.”

“...Sir. I’m shaking like mad because I feel so excited today. I’m so glad that you’re back. Do you know what my dream was? It was to film a movie with you, sir.”

“I’m no one significant enough to be someone’s dream...”

These kinds of scenes were commonplace before he had retired. It was an honor; I admire you deeply - he had heard a lot of such words. However, ever since he had left the industry, all of his honor and glory disappeared. Only the thickest of relationships remained, and the ones with sweet words all left him. This was why he didn’t like people who flattered him so much. However, he didn’t feel like that at all when listening to Taeho. Perhaps it was because he heard some truthful words.

After speaking with Taeho for a few minutes, Taeho stood up. He left after saying that he would definitely visit his house in the future. After he left, Junmin came back. He looked a little tired. It seemed that the investors had given him a hard time.

“I think I just saw Taeho leave this room.”

“We talked for a little.”

“Didn’t he bother you? That guy was really stubborn in wanting to meet you. Actually, he’s the first one that rushed to me as soon as the rumor that you’d be participating in this movie spread around. I was worried about the guarantee, but he begged me to let him participate even if it meant not getting any.”

“What a peculiar fellow.”

“It just shows how much admiration and respect he has for you.”

Moonjoong made an honest smile.

“I’ve seen people that said they were a fan of mine, but it’s been a long time since I’ve actually seen anyone who knows any of my pieces so well. I feel both thankful and sorry. And here I thought I forgot about all those feelings.”

“You’ll have to get used to it since that’s how you’ll feel after this movie is released. I’m going to advertise big time that the actor Yoon Moonjoong has returned to the scene.”

“Whoa there. Please don’t go so far. I’d be embarrassed to look straight in public.”

“I’m an investor too, so I want some fun as well.”

“What a frightening thing time is. It turned a full-fledged man into a money grubber.”

“You’ll have to resolve yourself, sir. I’ll schedule everything tightly, even the press release.”

“Looks like I’ll get busy in my old years.”

Although Junmin said all those words, Moonjoong knew well that he wasn’t the type to be swayed by money. If profit was all he wanted, there was no way he would have brought back a retired old man like him back to the scene. It would be much more stable for him to pick youngsters with a concrete fanbase and those who appeared on TV frequently. When he thought about it like that, he did become a little greedy. He had the desire to tell everyone that ‘old soldiers never die, they just fade away’. It would be interesting too if that forgotten old soldier broke all the records.

A smile escaped his mouth. It had begun. He would be returning to that place again. The place he left because of his frustration towards all those meaningless commercial movies.

“I said this last time, but you might not even be able to break even. I’m going to spend the budget as I see fit. I will extract every little bit out of the film director to get the picture I want.”

“Please don’t worry. I have a lot of money,” Junmin spoke with a smile.

“Oh, and I called Maru here.”

“Is that child here as well?”

“Yes.”

“I guess we haven’t seen each other since our time at the villa.”

“He passed the audition.”

“Oh, really? That’s good news.”

At that moment, two knocks could be heard on the door again before it slowly opened. Maru, who became a little more manly, stood outside.

“It’s been a while.”

“Yes, elder.”

“You’re a bad boy who never called me even once.”

“...I’m looking for an excuse, but I don’t find anything suitable.”

“Haha, geez.”

Moonjoong laughed pleasantly and gestured for him to come in.

Chapter 237

“Yes, I heard that you passed the audition. Did you get the role you wanted?”

Maru checked that his glass was full before putting it back down.

“Yes. The person in charge seemed to think well of me and I was able to get the role I wanted.”

“Then you must be the delinquent.”

“Yes.”

“And that means you’ll be swearing at me.”

“I’m a very bad person so I’m confident in saying words that will make you feel bad. If you’re worried about bland insults, then you need not worry.”

“Haha, please go easy on me. Don’t bully this old man. I’m at an age where I can get sick from just getting emotional.”

Moonjoong gestured to him to raise his glass with a smile. Maru turned his face around to drink the glass. Although a high-class vodka would fit this place better, the drink on the table was soju.

“It’s a single scene, but it’ll take quite some time if you consider scene switching, waiting and filming itself. Prepare a warm jacket because we’ll be filming during the night, and don’t forget to take care of yourself. No one looks after bottom-of-the-rung actors on the scene.”

“Understood.”

This time, Maru picked up the soju bottle to pour Moonjoong a glass but Moonjoong shook his head.

“I thought I’d start to restrain myself since I’m at the age that I am.”

“If you say so.”

Maru put down the bottle and picked up the green tea contained in a plastic bottle. Moonjoong slowly reached out with his glass.

“Please stay healthy. Now that you’ve returned, you’ll have other films to do.”

“That’s not as easy as it sounds. It’s natural for me to become weaker as I grow older. But even so... thank you for those words.”

Drinking a sip of green tea, Moonjoong heaved out a breath.

“Maru. You should be aware that there is no such thing as an easy job in this world, actors included. Every year, tens to hundreds of thousands of people step into this industry in hopes to become an actor, but only a select few get to see the light of day. The rest become forgotten by the people without even getting their names known. That’s why the first feeling I have when I see youngsters wanting to become actors is pity. How long will that child be able to endure? And will he or she see the light of day?”

“That applies to everything.”

Hearing those words, Moonjoong chuckled.

“Yes. It does apply to everything. Everyone dreams of becoming successful, but not everyone can grasp it. Maru, what do you think is the most important to become successful?”

“I think the most important thing is the obsession with success. Usually the word ‘obsession’ is used in a negative connotation, but I don’t think it’s possible to become successful without staking that much on the line. Everyone wants the same success, so there’s no way someone not putting as much effort in can take it.”

“Yes. You’re right. One must be obsessed. Success, dreams, ambitions. One must try being obsessed with such things at least once. Only when they try their hardest to grab the success that’s floating afar can they fully realize what it actually is; whether they can reach it; or whether they have to give up. The ones that can reach it will take it, and if they can’t then they’ll have to turn their heads away. The principles of this world are quite strange and they do not allow one person to be in possession of two things. No matter how successful a person is, if you dig deeper into him, then you’ll find numerous things he or she gave up in order to become so successful. The obsession with success also means a resolve to give up other things.”

“Do you have things you gave up on too, elder?”

“I do. This is something I thought about recently, but giving up was always related to time. Others should be in a similar situation. As a result of investing my time for the public, I was able to become a decent actor, but at the same time, I became an insufficient breadwinner. Above all else, I became an incompetent husband. If I abandoned my desire for materialistic things earlier, I would have retired much earlier, but I would also have discovered my beloved wife’s heart disease much earlier as well.”

Moonjoong reached out with his glass again and Maru quietly filled it.

“Adults will always tell you the same thing - cherish your time with your loved ones. You might have had enough of it, but the fact that they always say those words to you is because it has to be remembered.”

Maru nodded his head a little as he heard those words. There was a reason that people said those words regardless of which era it was. In the end, time was limited and it was up to the people to divide that time. When he thought about her, and the child that looked like her, success didn’t seem to be something so special. After all, any sort of success was intended to protect that warmth.

“However, therein lies a contradiction. What comes first, the success, or the person? I cannot deny the fact that the quality of time I spent with those people went up thanks to my success. People are very greedy and do not know what satisfaction is. The poor Yoon Moonjoong’s love and the successful Yoon Moonjoong’s love, as much as I hate to admit it, were different.”

Moonjoong slowly laid back on his chair as he reminisced about the past before closing his eyes.

“Peculiarly, when I look at you, I only want to say words like these. I don’t think words like ‘do your best’, ‘endure until the end’, ‘effort will not betray you’ and other hopeful words will help you out in any way. You don’t even look like a youth but someone who’s had a fair share of life.... Sheesh.”

“Elder. Do I really look that mature?”

“I’m saying that your mind is old, not your looks.”

Maru smiled lightly.

‘You’re right on point, elder’.

After that, Maru listened to a few more warnings about this movie and realized that it was about time for him to go. Moonjoong also told him to go.

“Then I’ll take my leave first.”

“Yes.”

After bowing, Maru walked towards the door. The moment he turned the door knob, a voice sounded out from behind.

“There’s one more thing I need to tell you.”

Maru turned around to look at Moonjoong.

“Since you’ve decided to take that first step, take a big one.”

After that, Moonjoong closed his eyes again as though he was about to sleep. Maru quietly left the room and closed the door.

At that moment,

“I was wondering why you weren’t coming out.”

When he turned around, he saw Suyeon standing next to the door. She was wearing a fancy pearl-colored one-piece dress that made her look younger. Well, that was probably the reason why she was able to get the role of a high school student despite being in her mid 20s.

“What did you talk about inside?”

“I was advised to be wary around women. Especially those wearing pearl-colored one-piece dresses.”

“Really? I wonder who that is.”

Suyeon smiled.

“If you don’t have anything to talk to me about, then I’ll be going.”

“You’re going?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you in a hurry? There are big-name actors gathered over there. Aren’t you going there?”

“There are two kids waiting outside. It’s a real pity. I wanted in too.”

Maru smiled slightly before trying to get out of the way. At that moment Suyeon reached out with her hand and blocked his way.

“If you mean those two, you can see them over there.”

Yoojin and Jiseok were in the place Suyeon was pointing towards. Yoojin was locking arms with a woman with a short haircut and a strong impression, and it looked like she was her mother.

“That unni is not ordinary. She’s introducing her daughter to the people in the industry, and as expected of someone who knows her way around, the way she holds conversations cannot be smoother.”

Yoojin’s mother ran a hair shop in Gangnam. It was one that top stars visited.

- Apparently, Yoojin’s mother is very famous. There was a drama press release at the same time as your school play, and apparently, she was there too.

She talked to Maru about this when they talked about Yoojin before.

“Okay, I get Yoojin, but why him?”

“The one next to her, was it Jiseok? Quite a lot of people recognize him as well. There’s an academy called Film, which many famous actors are affiliated with, and apparently he’s a prominent actor there so a lot of the actors are taking care of him. Though, I guess his affiliation with Yellow Star also has something to do with it.”

When he thought about it, those two had a more concrete foundation in this industry than him. Although they were all of the same age and this was their debut, the quality of gazes they received seemed to be different. Though, to be specific, Yoojin did debut in a drama as a child actor. The fact that Jiseok was contracted to a company was also a proof of his abilities.

- Tens to hundreds of thousands of people step into this industry.

And those two already passed through a hurdle. Maru thought about his own position for a minute.

‘Not bad, I guess.’

When it came down to it, he had a few places he could ask help from. He did not have any thoughts on becoming successful all by himself. That was just inefficient. It was much easier to climb the ladder with sufficient, but not too much, help from his connections. It wasn’t his style to solve everything by himself like how drama protagonists did.

“How about it? Wanna come by?”

Maru glanced at Suyeon who sneakily locked her arms around his. This woman wasn’t someone who would say all those words without any intentions. She should have a motive, and since it would be a loss on Maru’s side to be dragged around without knowing anything, he had to find out what she was thinking. She was obviously trying to use him, so he couldn’t just follow along. At that moment, he saw a familiar face beneath an artificial tree that stood afar. It was Geunsoo, and he was talking with two other men with sturdy builds. Maru had a glance at Suyeon and then looked at Geunsoo once.

“You want a sidekick? A topic of conversation, perhaps?”

“Quick-witted kids are so adorable.”

“Didn’t you get rejected back at the villa? I think it’s about time you gave up.”

“You don’t know when and what will happen between a man and a woman.”

He could imagine what happened. If Suyeon approached Geunsoo by herself, based on Geunsoo’s personality, it was likely that he would smile and immediately go somewhere else. That man was also a man that didn’t mind the gazes of others after all. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been nicknamed a ‘lunatic’ when he first created Blue Sky.

However, she would be able to hold a conversation if Maru was with her. This was the situation that Suyeon wanted.

“Give and take.”

“Of course. How about a pair of tickets to a movie that’ll be released soon? I heard that you have a girlfriend, right?”

“I can buy movie tickets with my own money though.”

“When did I tell you that it’s an ordinary ticket? It will be for the premiere. There’s also a talk with the cast right after it. I don’t think it’s a bad deal considering that there’s even a meal ticket for the restaurant above the theater.”

“What’s the genre?”

“Horror.”

“I would have passed if it was romance, but I’ll take the deal since it’s horror.”

“You know your stuff.”

To make it clear, she was the type of person to go out her way to find horror movies despite absolutely detesting them. She would probably like it. If he got a pair of meal tickets on top of that for hanging out with her for a brief time, then the calculations worked out.

“I’ll just start the conversation, so follow up by yourself.”

“Alright.”

Suyeon locked her arms around Maru’s. Maru shrugged and started walking towards where Geunsoo was.

* * *

“What’s he up to now?”

Yoojin looked at Maru who was walking with the actress Kim Suyeon by his side. He had told her that he would be meeting an elder, so what was he doing with her?

‘She’s the elder?’

Yoojin tilted her head and looked his way. From what she saw, it didn’t seem that the two were close. No, it was a little strange. Maru had a flat expression while Suyeon had a bright smile.

“What is it?”

“Oh, mom. It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.”

Her mother looked towards where Maru was.

“If it isn’t Ms. Suyeon.”

“Mom, you know Kim Suyeon too?”

“I do. I’ve seen her a few times. And girl, call her Suyeon-uni. You should be close with everyone.”

“How can I possibly be close with everyone?”

“Sheesh, you really don’t know your stuff since you’re so young. Rather than that, who’s the guy next to her?”

“He’s Han Maru, and he’s a friend of mine.”

“Oh, really?”

There was a handsome, yet prankful-looking man in the place Maru and Suyeon arrived at. When the three got together, the sturdy-looking men left the place after saying goodbye.

“Oh, if it isn’t Hong Geunsoo.”

“You know him too, mom?”

“I don’t know him personally. I just heard a few stories about him. But watch over him. There’s a rumor that he’ll become a big-name actor in the future. He’s close with director, I mean, president Yoo Chulmin as well as president Lee Junmin. Rather than that, that friend of yours knows a lot of people.”

“Well, I’m not so sure.”

“Stay close with him. Affairs between people are mysterious. He looks a little stiff, but he looks okay.”

“Mom, he has a girlfriend already.”

“So what? I’m telling you to stay close as a friend.”

“Geez, mom.”

Yoojin shook her head and looked at the three again. All three of them were not the main characters, yet they seemed to be shining brighter than where the main actors were standing. She wondered if it was because they would all become big-name actors, just like what her mom said.

“Yoojin. The film director is coming. You should go greet him.”

“Again?”

“You should always greet people when you get the chance. Believe in mom. Have I ever done something bad for you?”

Yoojin sighed but she still followed her. Just as she said, she had never done anything bad for her.

Chapter 238

“You had a lot of acquaintances back there,” Yoojin spoke under the orange-colored sodium street lamps.

“You’re talking about me?” Maru asked back as he walked by her side.

“Who else is here?”

“Him?”

Maru pointed towards Jiseok who was on Yoojin’s right side. Yoojin shook her head as though that wasn’t the case.

"I'm talking about you."

"I just got to know them by chance."

"You looked rather close to them to be just that."

"If you think so, then maybe I am."

They were on their way back home from the get-together. Maru tried to quietly leave the two alone and go home quietly, but Jiseok followed him like a ghost and Yoojin was with Jiseok as he had dragged her with him. Jiseok's reasoning was that 'it's a pity to separate ways so early'.

"Let's go to the noraebang! Or maybe the arcade?"

"It's 8 o'clock. Aren't you going home?"

"There's still time. Let's have a little fun before we go home."

Jiseok was very excited since the moment the get-together started. No, he was in an excited state from the moment Maru met him. He had never seen Jiseok being quiet before. Jiseok sought new events as though every second mattered to him.

"What are you going to do?" Maru asked Yoojin for her opinion.

"My house is not far from here, so it doesn't matter."

"My house is not far either."

It seemed that both of them lived in Seoul. Maru suddenly felt a little unfair for living in Suwon. Just as the desire to go back home and lie down on his bed slowly crept up his heart, Jiseok spoke cheerfully.

"I see an arcade over there."

Jiseok dragged Yoojin by the arm as he walked forward. Yoojin sighed as she was dragged along. She seemed to have realized that resistance was futile. 'I'll kill you if you run by yourself - Yoojin's eyes seemed to say those words as she glared at Maru.

'How young.'

He decided to hang out since there was still some time until the last train. Although it was only for a short time, they were now colleagues who would perform in the same movie. There was no need for him to be so heartless.

Having entered the arcade, Jiseok immediately changed a few bills into coins. Yoojin was dragged by Jiseok like a marionette to do a shooting game.

'It's been a long time,' Maru walked around the noisy arcade for a while before stopping in front of the claw machine. Perhaps because of his age, he liked games that had rewards rather than those that required him to move around a lot. After giving the machines a glance, he put a coin in. He moved the crane around for a while before moving it towards a cat doll.

'I wonder if I can do it.'

He remembered doing these kind of machines a lot as there was an arcade right in front of the bus station. If his body still remembered the tricks, then it should work right now. He slapped the joystick a few times to give the crane a jolt before lowering the claw towards the cat's head. The claw swung around like a pendulum as it lowered and precisely grabbed the cat doll by the neck.

"Oho."

The cat doll slowly lifted into the air. It was quite unstable as though the owner of the arcade had set the grip of the machine quite low, but the doll did not fall back down. It slowly moved towards the exit and the doll fell right into it.

"...This doesn't feel too bad."

Maru didn't even glance at the doll inside the exit and inserted more coins. That sensation of the claw grabbing the doll wasn't something to be looked down upon. Even in an indoor fishing pool, it would feel good to catch a fish. The claw machine was similar. Maru held the joystick as he stared beyond the acrylic wall.

* * *

"Phew, you're really good at this."

"How can you be panting already after a round of Pump? And how are you so bad at it?"

"Hahah, I'm not good with things like those."

Yoojin had a look at Jiseok who had a smile on his face. She wondered if Jiseok was a super expert at arcade games or something because he was so good at a first person shooter game, but he was incomprehensibly bad at games that required him to move around. Especially Pump. Jiseok's breathing became ragged a few seconds into the game when she selected a song that was a little fast.

"You should train yourself a little more. An actor requires stamina as well. Especially new actors like us."

"Right? Phew!"

Jiseok straightened up as he took deep breaths. It seemed that he became alright.

"You're done playing?"

"Yeah."

"Then let's go. I thought you wanted to go to the noraebang."

"Wow, you're being considerate?"

"It's just that I realized that you are not the type to give up even though I saw you for the first time today. I know you're going to drag me there even if I said I'm not going."

Yoojin hit Jiseok's chest with her fist before turning around. Although this guy was unpredictable, he wasn't a bad guy at heart. If she really didn't like him, she wouldn't let him drag her around in the first place. He was someone of her age aspiring to become an actor just like her. She wanted to cheer him

on. Moreover, seeing how Jiseok was so happy despite her playing with him for such a short time, she didn't feel that left out. It was also good to have come to the arcade after a long time.

"But where did Han Maru go? He's really good at playing by himself."

Yoojin looked around looking for Maru. Next to her, Jiseok tugged on her clothes.

"What?"

"Over there. Isn't that Maru?"

People were gathered up where Jiseok was pointing. Maru's face could be seen among them. It looked as though he was in deep focus.

"What's he doing?"

Yoojin walked towards that place. It was hard for her to approach since all the people in the arcade seemed to be clustered up here. She had only heard of a 'human barricade', but never thought that she would see one for herself.

"Excuse me, coming through!"

She tried forcing her way through, but it wasn't easy to shift around in such a crowd of people. At that moment, Jiseok stepped forward. He blocked her way with a confident expression before saying 'I'll go.' Seeing that, though, Yoojin did not have the slightest bit of expectation. And just as she had expected, Jiseok used all of his strength but could not get past the first two hunks.

"Why are all these people here?" Yoojin grumbled before bringing a chair from a nearby machine and stood on top of it. Jiseok held her from the side and she was able to see where Maru was safely.

'Claw machine?'

Maru was focused on the claw machine. Whenever the silver crane moved, people exclaimed. It was a marvel to see so many people following the movement of the crane with their heads. The slowly moving crane then lowered down and picked up a doll. The crane then moved towards the exit. When the doll fell down right into the exit hole, another round of exclamations could be heard. One man even clapped.

Maru took out the doll from the machine and piled it on one side. There were at least ten dolls piled up in that mountain. Yoojin immediately went there and grabbed the doll.

"You won all these?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. I heard it was difficult to win these."

"The machine's settings were good. Oh, if you like anything, you can pick one."

"Really? Can I?"

Yoojin grabbed the cat wearing a pink apron.

"Not that one."

Maru shook his head.

“Why?”

“Because it’s for my girlfriend.”

“...Tsk.”

She gave up on the cat and grabbed the dolphin. Maru asked Jiseok if he needed one but he said he didn’t need one.

“You’re going to take all of those?”

It seemed impossible to take all of them and get on the bus. Maru seemed to have known that already and said that he did not plan to take all of them.

“Then what are you going to do?”

“Sell them.”

“Sell them?”

Maru approached a man who seemed to work here and said a few lines. A while later, a middle-aged man came out and gave Maru two ten thousand won bills and Maru returned the dolls other than the two mentioned before.

“That man bought all of them?”

“Do you think they’re free? They should cost a few thousand won each, so two thousand won per doll should be quite cheap. That’s why the owner took them too.”

“You... Do you live in an arcade?”

“When would I have the time to play around like this? I have practice to do every day.”

“Then how are you so good at it? Should I try as well?”

Hearing those words, Maru jokingly replied ‘You should probably try being reborn before you do it.’

“Well then, we should go to the noraebang right?”

Jiseok interfered mid way and dragged both of them by the arm. Yoojin quietly praised his endless thirst for fun and followed him.

“For a kid lacking stamina, he’s good at moving around.”

When she grumbled, Jiseok looked at her and grinned. Yoojin resolved to have real fun since it was already like this as she followed behind Jiseok.

* * *

“The party was boring, but the after party was the best!”

Those words came from Jiseok as they left the noraebang. Maru glanced at Yoojin. Although she was glaring at Jiseok with a snort, it didn't look like she hated him that much since she hung out with him until the end.

"We should go out to have fun sometime again. No, wait. Let's invite a few more people as well. Since summer's coming, why don't we go to the sea together?"

"What an ambitious dream. If you're the one calling me, I'm never gonna go."

"Why? We're best friends now!"

"Who's your best friend, huh."

Jiseok approached Yoojin who was walking towards the bus station with her arms crossed and got her number. Seeing the number written on his phone, Jiseok looked as though he had just achieved world domination.

"Do you like her?"

"I do," Jiseok replied without hesitation. Maru narrowed his eyes and looked at him.

"And I like you too. You don't like me?"

"...Why did I even bother."

Maru put his hands inside his pockets and walked towards the bus station opposite to Yoojin's. Jiseok sneakily followed him.

"You had fun today, didn't you?"

"Just the claw machine, yeah."

Jiseok became depressed but burst out into laughter again.

"I hope we can chat later too. People really should live in the same place for a long time. I like this place. Busan, and the place I lived before that was good too, but there weren't as many people around as in this place."

"But you look like you can have fun all by yourself."

"Hm, I guess that's true. I am good at having fun by myself. But... it doesn't last a long time. Before I get bored of it, I feel stifled."

Jiseok was smiling despite what he was saying. Maru asked as he looked at his face.

"I think you're sick after all."

"Mentally, I'm not ill at all."

"What about physically?"

"Well... I won't die."

The reply was a little disturbing. He was about to ask a follow-up question, but Jiseok started moving backwards. Maru raised his head to look at Jiseok. He was waving his hands goodbye, with a face that did not contain the slightest bit of worry.

'Tsk.'

Perhaps Jiseok's bright side was a kind of defense mechanism to hide his weak side. From how he ran out of breath quite easily, he seemed to have a respiratory or cardiac issue. Though, from how he was active all the time, it didn't seem to be a big problem. Or perhaps it was a big issue in the past but not anymore. Crossing the road, Maru turned around for a moment and had a look at Jiseok. Jiseok was still waving his hands.

"He should act like a kid until the end if he wants to be a kid. He'll be in for a real pain if he decides to be a half-hearted grown-up."

Maru looked away from Jiseok. They weren't close enough for him to ask Jiseok the truth. Perhaps the situation would change once the man named Jiseok became significant within Maru's mind, but right now... they weren't that close yet.

Getting on the bus, Maru took out his phone from his pocket. He had two text messages. One was from Suyeon, grumbling about how Geunsoo didn't show interest in her at all, and the other came from Ganghwan.

[You should have reported to me if you passed the audition. Geez, you're impolite as always. I think you need a scolding so come to the Suwon practice studio after school tomorrow. I'll forgive you if you bring a fair lady. Otherwise, you should come prepared.]

Maru smiled and texted back 'Yes'.

A moment later,

[Oh, and congrats on passing.]

A short message arrived. Maru's smile became thicker.

Chapter 239

Jiyeon opened her eyes before her phone alarm. For some reason, she felt good on days like these. Jiyeon turned off her alarm that rang a beat late and got off her bed. A cold sensation sprang up from her feet. Her drowsiness disappeared.

"You're up early."

"Yes."

She scooped a bowl of rice beside her mother who was preparing breakfast. If it was a few days before, she would have prepared two bowls of rice, but now she had to prepare three.

"Where's dad?"

"He's out jogging. You can scoop his as well."

Her dad, who was working abroad in Japan, had returned recently. She had cleared up her misunderstanding with her mother and the absence of her father was filled in. After the small joy she longed for so much was achieved, Jiyoong was experiencing a new life every day. First up, she stuttered less. She always stuttered when something didn't go as she expected or when she was talking to a stranger, but she was much better now. She herself could feel that her bad habits were going away. Though, it wasn't that they had completely disappeared, and she still stuttered from time to time, but she no longer stayed quiet without being able to express her opinions.

"You should eat and go already. You'll be late."

"Yes."

She sat down and quickly finished her breakfast. She took her time since she woke up earlier than usual and now she was running out.

'I won't be late, will I?'

She took her bag and quickly left her house. She greeted the apartment security who was sweeping the grounds and quickly walked along the road that crossed the entire apartment complex. She checked the time with her phone from time to time and she thought that she wouldn't be late. She crossed the pedestrian overpass and walked along the road and turned right on the junction where the big bookstore was.

"You're just in time."

Aram was waiting for her there. She tapped on the back of her bicycle. Jiyoong smiled and sat at the back before grabbing Aram by the waist.

"Here I go."

"Yeah."

Jiyoong had ridden on the back of Aram's bicycle ever since she was late to school last time. Although she said that she could just leave home at an earlier time, Aram told her to not talk back to her and do as she said. She said something strange along the lines of 'it's for my exercise so you don't have the right to refuse,' or something like that. The headwind brushed past her ears. The scenery changed quickly, and they soon arrived at an 8-lane road crossing. Jiyoong looked around. It should be around time.

"Wait for me!"

A loud voice could be heard from afar. It was Bangjoo, who was riding his bicycle at full speed. After discovering that their way to the school was similar, Aram decided on a time to meet up here. The go-to-school club was successfully formed under Aram's not-so-order that the first years should stick to each other.

"Joohyun-uni is not doing the radio today," Aram, who had an earphone on one ear, asked Bangjoo.

"She took a day off since she has a schedule elsewhere," Bangjoo replied. He was wearing an earphone as well.

"Oh, I was worried that she was sick."

“My sister, sick? Not happening. She’s too healthy for her own good.”

“Geez, to think that there’s such a brother under that delicate sister. I really don’t understand what happened.”

“Delicate? You must mean tough.”

Jiyeon smiled slightly as she looked at the two. The two had identical personalities. Both of them liked to exercise, both of them were cheerful, and both of them had a loud voice as well. Oh, and they both liked their ‘Joohyun-uni’.

Although Bangjoo sounded fed up whenever someone talked about Joohyun, it was obvious that he cared for her a lot from how he listened to the live radio every single morning. He was probably just embarrassed to admit it.

Aram had a little brother as well, and as they were far in part in age, the little brother was going to enter elementary school next year. Aram sometimes talked about him and about how cute he was since she had looked after him since he was a little baby.

‘Perhaps that’s how Joohyun-uni sees Bangjoo?’

Jiyeon chuckled out loud as she found the two quarrelling to be so fun. When she did, Aram glared at her.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Nothing, I just... thought you two suit each other.”

When she said that, the two of them retorted at once.

“What? Me? And her?”

“Lee Jiyeon. There are things you shouldn’t say.”

Jiyeon even thought that the way the two got angry was identical as well, but she did not dare voice it out loud. It was obvious that Aram would tease her for the rest of the day if she did.

“I heard that we’d be making the props today and starting practice according to the movement lines. I wonder how that goes. Jiyeon, do you know anything about it?”

Aram’s voice could be heard over the wind. Jiyeon replied in a slightly loud voice.

“We’ll probably be putting everything we did until now into one piece. I’m pretty sure there’s nothing new!”

Although she wasn’t entirely sure, she thought that she was right. Watching the passing by buildings as well as Aram who was pedalling hard, they soon arrived at school. They got off the bicycle and bypassed the scary-looking head-of-the-year teacher. Although she was a little worried about getting caught since her hair came below her shoulder, she fortunately wasn’t caught.

“Go.”

“I’m going then.”

Jiyoong waved her hand to Bangjoo who walked to the mechanical engineering department at the end of the corridor, saying 'bye'.

She then followed Aram into their own classroom. Her classmates waved their hands saying hello. Jiyoong hung her bag on the desk at the very back, which was her seat. She sat at the very front up until middle school, but she somehow ended at the back seat due to the friends she made in high school. In the eyes of adults, they would seem like problematic kids, but Jiyoong discovered that the reality was different from what it seemed. They had rough mouths, but that was it. They were different from the so-called 'bullies' shown on TV. They were just awesome people who had a strong opinion and could not stand injustice.

"Jiyoong, you should eat this!"

A tall fellow threw something at her from afar. When she caught it, she found that they were cookies packed in a plastic bag. Jiyoong smiled. Her classmates did not have textbooks in their bags. Instead, they had comic books, cosmetics and food. Jiyoong did not have many opportunities to read comic books, but she read them quite a lot recently thanks to her friends. She liked stories about confident and brave heroines rather than those featuring delicate girls. She sometimes resolved to act like one of them, but whenever she closed the book, she returned to normal and rarely ever took action. The book she was reading now was a school romance book. The story was about two ordinary students falling in love secretly. Every time she flipped over a page, she imbued her own emotions into the book. The world made of lines and dots expanded and felt like the real world. She would be the heroine, and Daemyung would be the protagonist.

Whenever she did that, Jiyoong became startled all by herself and closed the book before opening it back again with a smile on her face. They say unrequited love was a painful thing, but Jiyoong was experiencing the exact opposite. Though, it would be a different story if the current situation dragged on for a long time. For now, she felt very happy.

"I'm suspicious."

Jiyoong became startled and closed the book. The time was right after lunch. She was fantasizing to herself while looking at the comic book with a drowsy body when she heard that voice. Jiyoong smiled back at Aram, who was looking down at her with crossed arms.

"I'm very suspicious."

"A, about what?"

"You've been reading that book for days now. With a bright grin on your face too."

"I was?"

"I'm suspicious. Veeeery suspicious."

With a suspicious smile, Aram suddenly turned around and started walking towards the others. At that moment, Jiyoong felt a tingle on her head. With a newfound strength that came from an unknown place, she pulled on Aram very strongly. Aram swayed a lot but she soon gained balance with her superior motor nerves.

“I, I’m sorry.”

“You’re quite strong.”

Aram glanced at her friends. Jiyeon shook her head with all her might. If Aram told them about it... she didn’t even want to think about the consequences. Those friends were the same ones that made her ride Aram’s shoulders around the school for ‘fun’. It was unknown what they would do if they found out that she had someone she liked.

Aram dragged a chair towards her as though she was some kind of investigator. Jiyeon was unable to look at her eyes.

“Now I’m 100% sure. Who is it?”

“Wh, what do you mean?”

“Then I’ll say it to all of them, okay? Once that happens, you’ll be forced to confess...”

Jiyeon reached out and covered Aram’s mouth. The others who were chatting amongst themselves looked towards them. Jiyeon laughed awkwardly and fidgeted. Only after the gazes dissipated did Jiyeon sigh and let go of Aram.

“How did you know?” She gave up and asked first. When she did, Aram grinned and spoke.

“What, so I was right?”

‘I was fooled!’

“...”

Jiyeon pouted and looked at Aram with wronged eyes. However, despite her expression, Aram pressed on.

“So, who is it? Tell me, tell me.”

* * *

To drive out the drowsiness, Maru went to the school cafeteria to get a cup of coffee from the vending machine. Thinking that vending machine coffee was the best, Maru took the empty cup and returned to the third floor, where his class was. The electrical engineering department was right in front of the central staircase. In front of the class which reeked of boys due to the lack of presence from the opposite sex, he saw two girls waiting outside. As everyone was sleeping on their desks, the class was quiet even though two girls were peeking inside.

‘Why are those two...’

Maru silenced his steps and approached them from the back.

“I don’t see him though.”

“Aram, let’s just go. This is a 2nd year class room.”

“So what if it’s a 2nd year class room? It’s not like we’re committing a crime. Rather than that, where is Daemyung-seonbae?”

Aram seemed to be enjoying herself to the fullest, while Jiyoong seemed to be very uneasy. Although it was a short conversation, it was enough for Maru to deduce what was going on. After all, there was only one reason Aram would bring the uneasy Jiyoong looking for Daemyung.

“What are you doing?” He voiced out from behind. Both of them were startled out of their wits and turned around.

“Ah! That startled me. What’s up with you?” Aram widened her eyes and asked. She looked as though she would hit Maru at any moment.

“It’s my class. Why are you asking that?”

“Aha!”

“Don’t ‘aha!’ me. You’re looking for Daemyung?”

“Yes.”

“No!”

The two answered differently to the same question. Jiyoong looked as though she was about to fall into shock at any moment. She was quite cute when she made that expression. The urge to stand on Aram’s side and tease Jiyoong welled up inside his heart, but he decided not to since Jiyoong was such a good girl.

“He should be in the container. He’s probably cleaning up since he has to create the props starting today.”

“Is that so?”

Aram grabbed Jiyoong’s hand and ran down the stairs. Maru looked at the two and spoke to himself in a small voice.

“Oh, youth.”

* * *

Bangjoo was walking down the corridor when he saw Jiyoong being dragged by Aram by the hand.

“What are you doing?”

He asked in a loud voice, but the only reply he got was ‘mind your own business!’ Jiyoong looked at him as though she was asking for help, but he ignored her since it looked like it would be more interesting to leave Aram be. As there were still 20 minutes until the 5th period, Bangjoo went down to the school field. He looked to see if there was anyone playing basketball, but the only ones he saw were people he didn’t know. They seemed to be seniors. The soccer field was filled with people as well. He could see four balls flying into one goal.

He wanted to do some light exercise, but he didn’t see anything suitable. After contemplating for a while, Bangjoo decided to ride his bike around. Her sister had bought him an MTB when he entered high

school. He looked up the cost out of curiosity, and almost fainted from the number of digits. As that was the case, he had to buy a thick chain lock used for motorcycles. He went to the bicycle parking which was to the left of the front gates.

“Oh, seonbae-nim.”

He saw Dowook there. It was very unfamiliar to see him there sitting next to a bike with all sorts of tools. He only saw that seonbae sleeping all the time, and it was hard to talk to him since he gave off a scary impression, but after a while, he was able to talk to him comfortably as he knew that Dowook wasn't a bad person.

“Oh, Bangjoo.”

“Yes. What are you doing here?”

“I rode my bike to school this morning and the tire got punctured. I'm fixing it right now.”

“You do that by yourself?”

“I do.”

“Oooh! Can I watch?”

“Do whatever you want.”

Bangjoo sat down next to him. Although he saw it last time, Dowook's bike looked quite expensive as well. Dowook took out a wrench and a rubber pad from the pouch attached to the frame of the bike before proficiently removing the brakes and the front wheel from the bike. When those parts came off so easily, Bangjoo exclaimed out loud.

“Where did you learn to do all these, seonbae?”

“Self-taught.”

“Wow.”

Dowook then pointed at one of the bikes. It was Bangjoo's bike.

“If you plan to keep riding that, then you should learn about bikes too. It'll be nonsensical for you to not be able to do anything with a bike that costs several million won on the frame alone.”

Dowook seemed to be knowledgeable about bikes. He was able to tell the price of a bike just by looking at one.

“Can I learn things like that as well, seonbae-nim?”

“It's not hard.”

“Then you should teach me.”

“No.”

“Why!”

"It's bothersome. Also, quieten down a little bit. I feel like you're ripping my ears out."

Dowook gave him the cold shoulder. Bangjoo did not give up despite that. He stuck by his side and watched every bit of Dowook's movement. After wordlessly handling the tube for a while, Dowook sighed.

"I'll teach you later so please stop staring at me."

"Are you serious?"

"Ah, yeah."

Bangjoo laughed in joy. He heard Daemyung's voice from behind.

"Bangjoo, Dowook."

He saw Daemyung who was holding clothes wrapped in plastic bags. His voice was a little weak, and that seemed to be because he was holding onto some heavy things. Bangjoo immediately stood up and received the clothes from Daemyung.

"Thanks. I was trying to do it by myself but it was a little too scary."

"You should have called for me. I'm confident in using my strength."

"It's break time so I would feel sorry for calling you out."

He was the club president alright. Bangjoo thought that those who fulfilled their responsibility were cool. Dowook took some of the luggage as well. It seemed that he had fixed his bike in that short moment.

"What are you going to do with all this?"

"I'm planning to take it to the 5th floor for now. Can you help me out a little?"

"You should have told us beforehand about this."

Dowook walked forward. Bangjoo glanced at Daemyung's face for a moment and smiled at him before following Dowook.

Chapter 240

"What? Where did he go now?"

Aram saw that the container was empty and pouted. Maru had told her that Daemyung would be here.

"He's not here, right? So let's just go."

Jiyoona pulled on her arm. She had this thought before, but Jiyoona was actually quite strong. If she hadn't done any exercise, she might actually be forced around by Jiyoona instead. Aram said okay before taking a step back.

"But is it okay to leave this open?"

Usually, it would be locked with a padlock, but it was wide open right now.

“Perhaps it’s because he had business here? I don’t think Daemyung-seonbae is the type to forget about these kinds of things.”

“Oh? You flatter him quite a lot. You do like him after all.”

Aram chuckled as she watched Jiyeon blush. ‘Daemyung-seonbae’, was how she called him. On the outside, Daemyung honestly wasn’t that charming. He was a little beyond plump, he was physically dense, and he had a quiet voice as well. However, his personality was flawless. He was the one who took care of the first years the most after all. He was the kind of person who would carefully ask what problem someone had if that someone was frowning.

‘They do suit each other, I guess.’

Daemyung and Jiyeon. Jiyeon was a little too much for Daemyung in Aram’s mind, but the two weren’t a bad combination. If he was some trashy guy, Aram would have persuaded Jiyeon otherwise, but she could accept Daemyung. Well, the way Jiyeon looked at Daemyung wasn’t really ordinary, especially recently.

“Do we need to wait then?” Jiyeon spoke as she looked around. Aram told her that they should just go, but this weak-hearted girl was worried about the what-ifs and told Aram that they should return after he returned.

“Geez, you worry too much.”

“You’re the one who’s too relaxed, Aram.”

“Oh? You’re retorting back at me more and more these days. This won’t do!”

Aram started tickling Jiyeon’s waist. Although Jiyeon could withstand pain very well, she was very ticklish. She soon started giggling and started running away but Aram chased her to the end. They ran laps around the shipping container and started sweating. The news mentioned that the average temperature would be 2 degrees higher than last year, and indeed, it was quite hot. It was only the middle of May, but it was so hot.

“Let’s come back after eating ice cream.”

Aram grabbed Jiyeon’s hands. Since it would only be for a short while, Jiyeon thought that there should be no big problems and followed suit.

* * *

“When are midterms again?”

“In three days.”

“Today’s Monday, so, Tuesday, Wednesday... midterms start on Thursday?”

“Yeah.”

“Holy moly. Then it lasts until Monday?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s annoying. I won’t get to have fun on the weekend.”

“Yeah right. I know you’re going to have fun anyway.”

These guys giggled as they read the comic books they borrowed. Geunseok clicked his tongue and closed his notebook. The teachers started giving away the answers starting last week. They didn’t just tell them the pages the exam questions would be created from, but the specific lines as well. It was like that for every subject. Only their majors teacher told them the vague outline and told them to study everything, but for the rest of the subjects, the teachers made it so that blind memorization would be enough to get full marks in the exams.

If this was cram school, their teachers would not think well of doing such a thing. After all, a short range of revision materials meant that the questions would be really hard.

‘But this shithole school isn’t like that.’

As expected of an engineering school, they just fed you the answers. Thanks to that Geunseok never missed the first place in the exams. He did not remember studying hard for the exams, but he was still first place. In fact, the tests to get into a cram school was harder. On top of that, he had a lot of private lessons these days as well, so he wished that he could decrease school to just one hour.

No matter how hard these teachers tried to teach him using chalk, he had already learned them beforehand through other lessons. Square roots and whatnot - his cram school had already started calculus, while the school was actually following the national curriculum.

What was funny was that these guys were complaining that it was hard. He wondered if these guys had a brain in the first place.

“Uhm, Geunseok.”

He smelled something sweet. Geunseok smiled and looked at the girl that approached. She had a voluminous body, had small earrings on so that the teachers wouldn’t notice, and she also wore a pale layer of lipstick. In the class, there were two types of girls. The girls that were only biologically classified as ‘female’ as well as those that wanted to be an actual girl. This girl belonged to the latter. She was quite cute and she was well developed as well. Above all, he liked that she didn’t reject skin to skin contact.

“What is it?”

“Did you write all of it down? I was going to do all of it but it was getting too sleepy,” saying that, the girl pulled a chair over and sat down.

“Sorry, I didn’t make notes for this class.”

“Really?”

“The teacher was so good at explaining that there was no need for me to write anything down.”

“I didn’t understand anything though.”

“Isn’t that because you dozed off in class?”

“.....”

The girl pouted. Geunseok poked on the girl's cheek and spoke.

“Instead, I'll explain things for you. Just the parts that the teacher said were important.”

“Wow, thank you so much.”

Their distance was short enough that their shoulders touched, and Geunseok started explaining the class materials to the girl. After being humiliated by Maru, he had stayed quiet for a few days. Any laugh that he heard sounded like disdain for him, and any kind of gazes he received felt like they were looking at him as though he was a liar. He felt disgusted. Every day was an agony. The ones close to him treated him just like before, but Geunseok thought that they would be looking down on him on the inside.

However, after some time passed, Geunseok realized that those guys really didn't care. In fact, those guys came up to him and consoled him, asking 'you look worried these days, are you okay?' And other words like that. It was strange. He was humiliated in front of the entire class, yet no one seemed to change their attitude towards him. Those that outright ignored him were just those that weren't close to him in the first place.

After that experience, Geunseok realized one thing - that people generally didn't care about others. Unless it was someone really close, they did not care a single bit unless it affected them as well. After that, Geunseok started smiling again and acted kindly towards everyone again. He treated them to food, listened to their worries, as well as proactively did what had to be done. At one point, he realized that the evaluation of him became much better than before. His classmates offered him to play with them a lot more frequently before, and their members were a lot more varied as well. He even got close enough to the ones that simply ignored him before. No, he made it so.

He remade his kingdom. In this small classroom, there was no one that hated the person known as 'Hong Geunseok'. Not a single one. It was extremely pleasurable. He was acknowledged by the teachers and the others flattered him as well. The fact that some girls became more flirty with him was also an element that made him feel better.

'That's not right.'

The fact that there was no one that hated Hong Geunseok was a mistake. There was just one. And whenever he looked at her, Geunseok felt twisted. He looked at the cute girl smiling at him and naturally glared at the plump girl sitting behind her.

Kim Soyeon. She was someone that he didn't even give a glance at in the acting club, but right now, she was unpleasant as hell.

“What?”

The girl sitting next to him became curious and turned around. She also found Soyeon.

“...Are you interested in Soyeon, Geunseok?”

“I am, I guess.”

Hearing that, the girl frowned. Of course, she soon returned back to a smile. Geunseok found fun in probing others out like this more than anything. It was a process of confirming her affection towards him. The sense of superiority welled up inside him and made him smile.

"I couldn't help but be interested in her. She's all alone. I was wondering if something happened to her. I'm worried about her as her friend."

"What, it's like that? I almost misunderstood you."

"Misunderstood me? About what?"

He asked despite knowing what she meant. Geunseok was aware that these actions made him out to be a witty and positive man.

"No, it's nothing."

The girl shook her head before lowering her voice.

"But hey, do you know?"

"Know what?"

"The rumor."

"The rumor?"

"There's a bad rumor about Soyeon. She acts like she's a good kid, but the rumors make the others stay away from her."

"What's the rumor about?"

"You know that she had a boyfriend, right?"

"Taejoon? I do. He's a friend of mine."

"It feels somewhat off for me to say this, but she doesn't suit Taejoon, right? Just look at how handsome Taejoon is."

"He is."

"Right? But Soyeon is a little... I mean, I really don't like saying words like these, but you get what I'm saying, right?"

She was someone that didn't want to say the dirty words out loud. Geunseok sympathized with her. He understood her. People want to look good in front of everybody. Geunseok wasn't planning on embarrassing her either. He had to act kind. Who knows? Maybe she would pay back with her body one day?

"I do. Actually, I thought that as well."

"Right? It's a little strange. Someone on Taejoon's level must be able to meet someone much better than Soyeon. Of course, I don't mean that Soyeon is lacking in any way, but..."

"Mm... Oh, then what's the rumor about?"

The girl lowered her voice even more as though she was going to talk about a secret.

“Do you remember Yurim?”

“Uh... yeah, I do.”

Yurim, that was a name he hadn't heard in a long time. His 'ex-' girlfriend that transferred schools. He didn't mind it that much since he was almost fed up with her, but it felt somewhat new to hear about her again. It was a little fun since she was so proactive during kissing.

“She was friends with Soyeon, do you remember?”

“Yeah. Those two were always together in the beginning of the semester.”

“But from some time onwards, the two cut relationships and Yurim suddenly transferred schools, right? Apparently, that was all because of Soyeon.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Apparently, she bullied Yurim a lot. But Taejoon doesn't know the circumstances and thought that it was the other way around, so he was trying to help Soyeon instead. Apparently, he's going out with Soyeon out of sympathy.”

The girl said up to that point and made an expression as though she just made a mistake.

“...Oh right. You were dating Yurim, right? You won't like this story then.”

“Me and Yurim? No, not at all.”

“Oh, really? So I misunderstood the two of you?”

“A lot of people mistook our relationship. I hung out with Yurim to console her because she looked to be suffering. She was pitiful. Well, I guess others may think like that.”

“Oh, so that's how it was.”

“But I don't think I was of any help. I wanted to help her feel better, but she didn't find me so reassuring. If I treated her a little better, then perhaps she would still be here in the same school. I sometimes feel like it's my fault that she transferred schools... If I had been just a little better....”

“No, not at all. How is that your fault? You're not in the wrong at all, Geunseok. In fact, she's the problem.”

Geunseok shook his head as he acted as though he was in sadness.

“She must have her reasons. There's no way that Soyeon is such a bad girl. Don't you think so?”

“Me? Of course. I just wanted to tell you that such a rumor exists.”

“Okay. If Soyeon really is a good kid, then the rumors should die down soon. Oh, we were studying, right? Where were we again?”

They returned to their main topic. Geunseok laughed on the inside. It was obvious that someone who was annoyed by Taejoon going out with Soyeon spread such a rumor on purpose. Though, it was true

that the two didn't suit each other. Taejoon really had a low eye for girls. Geunseok wondered what made him want to date such a girl.

After replying 'yes' to the girl's question asking him out on a movie, Geunseok stood up. Leaving the class, Geunseok glanced at Soyeon. The two pairs of eyes met and Soyeon glared at him with hostility before just ignoring him. Geunseok gnashed his teeth. He didn't like this girl. Soyeon was aware of what happened in the acting club. She annoyed him to the point that she felt like a sore throat. It would have been better if she just disappeared like Yurim.

Geunseok went down to the cafeteria to score more points on that girl. He planned to talk with her over a drink. Just before he arrived at the first floor cafeteria, Geunseok saw two girls walk into it.

'Those bitches...'

Lee Jiyeon. The shock from when she dared to talk back to him still remained within him. As a result of that, Maru caught his mistake, eventually leading to his expulsion from the acting club.

The tanned bitch next to Jiyeon. That was the girl that threw her slipper at him when he tried to scout some people from the first year design department. He felt as though that the eye that the slipper hit still ached. The two bitches that he wanted to beat up so much were hanging out together.

"Let's get one quickly. The container is open."

"I get it already."

He overheard their conversation as he passed by. The container? At that moment, a brilliant idea surfaced within Geunseok's mind. The acting club was filled with people he didn't like, and now there was a way for him to get his revenge. Geunseok smirked and walked towards the back of the school.