

Once Again 251

Chapter 251

Dongwook waved goodbye to the distant manager Yoo. Manager Yoo was returning to the TV station with his hands holding a plastic bag in each hand and the contents were all bought with Dongwook's own money.

"Tsk."

Dongwook's smile disappeared. He managed to induce manager Yoo to reveal the facts, but he could not see any hope of an exchange. An exchange only happened when each party knew what the other party wanted. However, that inflexible manager Yoo was loyal to his company until the end. Meaning, he did not want to reap profits from the news.

The offer Dongwook proposed to manager Yoo was simple. He asked manager Yoo for the name of the member that was cast in the movie. From the moment a rumor became a fact, it would have value. Dongwook thought about talking to a management-level personnel in the company behind TTO before he wrote the article. Usually, the company would respond in one of two ways.

The first response would be when the company cannot reveal the name of the member due to a non-disclosure agreement. In this case, the company would pay him to keep it in secret. The second response would be when it wouldn't matter even if it was known to the public. In this case, he could just write the article and post it. He would then receive his manuscript fee and the extra pay for the article being exclusive.

In either case, he would be earning money, so he said that he would give some of the profits to manager Yoo, but he was rejected.

"Should I just post?"

Dongwook took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. It was easy to post the article. The editor was blinded by money. The article would be given the okay without even a single edit once it was deemed profitable. However, the problem came afterwards. The company behind TTO might take action.

"I can't do that."

He spat out a sigh that was mixed with smoke. There was no fool in this world that would start a losing fight. Dongwook wanted to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the company behind TTO. Though, they wouldn't see it as a symbiotic relationship but a parasitic one.

In the old days, journalists had power beyond imagination. In the days when newspapers were the only sources of the news, journalists were treated as VIPs regardless of whether they specialized in entertainment, political, or economical journalism. There were times when a single article from a journalist finished off the career of a bigshot politician, or ruined a popular celebrity. In those days, the tip of their pens had power.

However, as time passed, the glorious days of journalists met its end. Information became more accessible than before. The reason why journalists had power was because they could add their own opinions on top of the facts. They could use their opinion to cause a dramatic shift in the opinions of the

general populace. However, ever since the introduction of the internet, the authority that journalists possessed decreased dramatically. Other than a few journalists that staked their lives to write articles against the government in the past, very few journalists received good treatment in the recent years.

On top of that, the quality and the nature of the articles changed as well. Before, articles received praise for the deep consideration of the words used and the intent behind it, but now, speed was everything. No matter how great an article was, once it was posted on the internet, it would instantly be copied and pasted before being posted somewhere else. In the newspaper era, companies required a whole day to catch up with other companies on some exclusive news, but now, it was done within mere minutes.

With that being the case, what would the journalists themselves feel about their articles being copied and pasted somewhere else and lose that 'exclusive' title even after all their painstaking effort to create it?

They thought that the era of depth was over, and that now was the era of speed.

The result of that was the birth of private internet news companies. Even the big 3 news companies were constantly refreshing each other's websites to scour for news. As soon as something went up, the articles would be copied with the header 'some other media claims'.

However, speed wasn't enough to receive the clicks of the viewers. Without clicks, the company would lose ad revenue and eventually go out of business. As such, they now poured more effort into making titles. The journalists did all the hard work, so the next task at hand was to quickly monopolize the clickbait titles and attract attention from the readers.

Dongwook once also aspired to be a 'true' journalist. He grew up watching journalists that saved scapegoats that were unjustifiably deemed political criminals and resolved that he would one day too become someone like that. This was why he prepared for the journalist exam and eventually passed it. When he practically lived in police stations as a crime journalist, he realized that it was far from his ideal journalist life, but he endured, thinking that it was because he was just a new recruit. He had faith that he would eventually be able to get closer to the police and work with them to write good articles. His thoughts didn't change even when his probation ended and was given a proper job to do and was able to make a living off his job. He thought that he was still capable of writing a passionate article. He frequented police stations and fire stations like it was his own house to write articles. Although his articles were small and were very insignificant compared to the rest, he couldn't feel more proud than seeing his name at the end of his section.

Like that, he slowly climbed the ladder of success and believed that he would one day be like his senior journalist, until one day, due to a coincidence, he looked back at himself. He was absent-mindedly sketching out a story about an incident that his seniors had instructed him to in front of the computer. His pen was no longer writing about the pains of the public that was hidden under huge scandals that everyone focused on. He was not writing articles that changed the views of the public but just an updated version of the article posted the day before.

His first article to feature the 'exclusive' title was about a man who intruded on a popular celebrity's private life. When he was still writing the article, he felt that he had finally done something for the public, but when some time had passed, he saw that what he had written was a huge piece of crap.

'What do I want to write' - flashed by in his head, turning over everything he thought was 'normal'. He seriously thought about it and resolved that he should start again with a renewed mind.

Like that, another two years had passed, and Dongwook discovered that he had become a self-protectionist. His monthly salary as a TV station journalist kept piling in his savings account, and just watching the number rise became his sole happiness. He sighed when he saw his colleagues teaching the juniors about the 'journalist mindset'. He even talked behind their back, saying that they lived a hard life. After seeing his slogan, 'True Journalist', which was at the corner of his desk, stained with coffee, he threw it away. He didn't even wonder what made him like this. He even rejoiced a little when he was transferred from the general section to the culture section. After all, he was removed from those headachy incidents.

A stable job - that was what journalism meant to Dongwook, nothing more. He didn't even have a sense of crisis about it anymore. He just accepted it as something natural. Reaching the age of retirement before actually retiring became his dream when he was put in charge of a few people in probation. There was a murder case that shook the entire country but there were no longer any of his seniors in the general section.

Hearing orders from the head manager, he went to meet those little chicklings. When he saw that they were burning with passion while looking around the TV station, he smiled in self-loathing. He instructed them as he thought that they would eventually turn out to be like him.

Not long later, Dongwook quit his job. He was unable to comprehend what was happening even as he was handing in the letter of resignation. He would no longer have a source of income once he left, yet his body was already cleaning up his desk at the station. The trigger that made him decide to leave was nothing special. He just saw a probationary journalist being hospitalized after being reckless. It was nothing special. After all, that rookie was sent to the police station the day after. This kind of matter was commonplace. It would instead be strange to stay healthy while being a crime journalist. Dongwook had decided to resign after seeing such a common scene.

He had no clear vision of the future nor did he have any plans. It wasn't that he dreamed once again of being a 'true journalist' when he was in his 30s. That kind of dream had already disappeared into the deepest abyss of his mind.

Then why did he leave?

Dongwook couldn't answer that himself. However, the thought that he could not live with the money given to him by his company filled his mind, which drove him to leave.

After he left, he lived with the money he saved up for a while. He had no family to support, so he was actually quite well off. However, after fooling around for half a year, he was starting to become worried.

After wondering what he could do again to make a living, he started journalism again, because that was the only thing he could do. Of course, he did not have any of the ideals that he started the job off with. His only aim was to make a living for himself.

Some of his acquaintances asked him why he left his previous company if he was going to start working in the same field again, but what frustrated Dongwook was that even he didn't know the answer. He

had no dreams, nay, he had thrown away those dreams, yet he did not know what made him resign from his job that paid him well.

And now, Dongwook had become one of many journalists that chased after celebrities.

“Should I probe them out just in case?”

Dongwook flicked his cigarette and took out his phone.

* * *

“Then let’s leave that at that.”

Park Narim, president of NL Company, made a smile of satisfaction. People frequently used the term ‘Big 3’ to refer to the 3 entertainment companies that pretty much monopolized the industry. Yellow Star, Jewel Entertainment, and NL Company. Although JA Productions was showing its edge recently, it was still ways off until they built a full infrastructure.

Narim had raised numerous artists in the past decade and focused all of her know-how into TTO, and set the stage so that TTO would be the topic of conversation when talking about the best idol of the era. She went as far as to bow down to the producers of TV stations and even give presents to the staff members on their birthdays to have her own people go on camera, and the results were starting to show.

The only idol artist group that managed to sell a million copies of their album CD in this era where CDs were on the decline was TTO. Moreover, she had just set the schedule for TTO’s introduction in Japan in one of the best TV shows there. Right now, the media was all over this new ‘Korean Wave’ thing. Japan, who Korea was usually hostile towards, was attracting a lot of interest, and the same thing was happening in Japan as well. As long as this new market could be made use of, she would get her hands on a huge amount of money that she could never dream of making in South Korea. Narim believed that that step would be the first step for NL Company to become the single best company in South Korea.

Narim’s dream was for her company to become the number one entertainment company that every aspiring entertainer living in Korea would want to enter, not a company exclusively catered towards idol artists. Right now, idols were treated as just eye candy in the entertainment industry. Moreover, companies behind idols had less power than the ones that possessed superstar actors. As long as she was able to change that trend, as long as idols filled the places for the star actors, it would be an easy thing for her to change the image of her company. As such, Narim decided to make a bold move.

Idols in movies.

In the movie industry, idols were the icons of failure. Ever since three years ago, idols with hundreds of thousands of fans started shooting movies, but their popularity was always rock bottom. From that time onwards, the rumor that movies with idols as the main character would always fail started floating around. It was ‘proven’ that the barrier of horrible acting couldn’t be filled by fandom alone.

From there, Narim saw an opportunity instead. The breakthrough point always lied in the middle of the problem. She looked for aspiring actors and had them become idols instead. TTO was a general-purpose idol group. Dancing and singing were just the basics, and acting was included in their evaluation criteria as well. She signed a partnership with one of the best acting schools in Gangnam, ‘Film’, to raise ‘actor

idols'. Of course, the other companies were doing similar things, but Narim believed that she was the most meticulous and the quickest.

"This debut will be the turning point of our company. You know that, right, head manager Choi?"

"Yes."

Idols were all about their image. Without their image, there would be nothing left. Narim had no thoughts on repeating the failures that the previous pioneers had made. She wouldn't let an idol start at the top, but from the bottom, as an extra. She would attract attention from the public through the idol's acting skills.

The information revealed to the public regarding 'Who Gave the Elder His Hammer' did not contain the news about the participation of a member of TTO. She had asked to leave it out on purpose. The fact that Sungjae of TTO was debuting in a movie had to be done by the audience. As such, she was planning to not reveal the information until the day it was released. After all, silence was sometimes the best method of advertising.

"Oh, president. A journalist had called saying that he wants to speak to you."

"A journalist?"

Narim pouted slightly. Head manager Choi was a capable man. He would not make useless reports. The fact that he made this report meant that it was something that he deemed that the decision wasn't up to him.

"Give me your phone."

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It was lunch time. Maru grabbed the mouse attached to the class computer. Although a computer was installed in every classroom to be used during class, the teachers did not use them. The teachers were fine with using chalk and chalkboard, and computers were a hassle for them. The students were given permission to use the computer during lesson breaks, and most of the time, they played games. Although they would get scolded if the teachers found out, no one seemed to mind.

Maru opened an internet browser. When he did, someone else turned on the TV connected to the computer. This class usually visited comedy and humor sites during lesson breaks. Sometimes, they had people stand guard at the door and look for sites with lewd pictures. Other times, it was mostly used for battle games.

"Maru, playing a game?"

"No."

"Then porn?"

"Keep dreaming."

People started gathering. Maru clicked on the ticketing page. He was planning to buy the tickets for his sister early on. If she actually entered the top 5 in her class, he would give them to her right away, and if

she didn't, he would eventually give them to her after some hassle. Since she was smart, it would be likely that she would enter the top 5. TTO tickets were on the line, so she would probably try harder as well.

"A concert to TTO?"

"Why are you trying to get them?"

The others were curious about his actions and asked.

"I have a use for them."

"A use for TTO? Those guys aren't even that good at singing or dancing."

"Those same guys that aren't good at singing and dancing are earning much more than you. Did you know that?"

"Dammit," this guy then just started sleeping on his desk.

Maru clicked around to buy tickets for TTO's concert in June. He made an account and then clicked on the reserve button. However, he was given a notification window stating that all the tickets were sold out.

"The concert is in June, and it's already sold out?"

Maru laughed. There were still about 3 weeks until the concert, and the tickets had already been sold out. Perhaps idol concerts were all like this. He looked for other websites just in case to look for remaining tickets, but the other websites did not sell the tickets at all. This meant that the first website had an exclusive contract.

"You want concert tickets?" Another classmate of his, who was eating ice cream, spoke. Maru nodded.

"Then you should have tried on the day the ticketing began. It's almost impossible to get them after a week. You'll have a hard time getting any unless you buy them off resellers or scalpers."

This guy seemed very knowledgeable. Maru asked if there was a way.

"Wait a minute," saying that, he took over the keyboard and went to one website.

"If there are any in stock, they should appear on this website."

"You're quite knowledgeable."

"My sister is a hardcore fan. She had me refresh the website so many times the night before the ticketing began. She's a total maniac who goes to PC bang because the internet is faster there," saying that, he shook his head several times. It seemed that he didn't even want to think about it.

"But you'll have a really hard time getting tickets for TTO, you know? There aren't just one or two people like my sister so even the resale tickets might be bought out the moment they're out."

Maru said 'hmm' before clicking the refresh button several times. It took around ten seconds for him to find something pop up on the webpage.

“It’s selling. That wasn’t that hard.”

Maru clicked on the post, thinking that this might go easier than he had expected.

“...”

It hadn’t even been five seconds since it was posted, yet there were five comments saying that they wanted to buy the tickets.

“It’s not that hard? I’ve tried doing that several times, and I can tell you, it is REALLY hard,” the classmate replied with a strange smile. Maru, for some reason, felt geared up instead. He refreshed the page several times. After seeing a new article, he clicked on it as fast as possible, but there were comments on it already. Things that can’t be bought with money are called ‘invaluable’, and it seemed that by that logic, TTO concert tickets could be considered invaluable as well.

“Don’t you care about the cost?”

“The cost?”

Maru looked up the price of the tickets on the ticketing site. The tickets to the concert that was held in the Olympic gymnastics stadium was 80,000 won.

“It’s 80 thousand won. What about it?” Maru didn’t think that it was that expensive. However, the others in his class thought that he was crazy.

“Is your house a gold mine? It’s 80 thousand won!”

“How many hours of PC bang is that?”

“With that much money, you can play a round of billiards, go to PC bang for a few hours and even stay the night out at a sauna. Han Maru, are you rich? No wait, why are you buying tickets to a male idol group in the first place?” His friends were very curious. Indeed, 80,000 won was a lot for a student.

“And TTO’s tickets are expensive because they’re doing well. Other idols only take around 40 to 50,” this classmate was very knowledgeable thanks to his older sister.

“Rather than that,” saying those words, his classmate pulled up the website again. Another article regarding TTO had just popped up. He clicked on that post.

“Look at this. Resell tickets like these are almost twice the original price. It’s twice the price right now but you might see it go for 3 times the original price later.”

150 thousand. It was almost twice the original price, and yet there were comments begging the seller to sell the ticket to them.

‘...Should I quit acting and start this business?’ Maru felt as though he just saw a golden egg-laying goose. He felt empty seeing that marketing logic was being applied here as well.

“Double the original price, huh.”

150 thousand was not a small amount of money for Maru. Moreover, he couldn't send his sister alone to the concert, so he was originally planning to buy some tickets for Bada's friends as well. He was planning to buy 7 just in case, and if he bought resell tickets, then it would be over 1 million won.

The ownership rights of having bought the tickets just a few seconds earlier was getting people almost double the investment. Were the companies aware of this? If they did, then they would be able to make some immense profits off this. They could use magic to stamp 80 thousand on the receipt and actually earn 160 thousand in cash. Of course, there was no way they would do that kind of thing to earn that small amount of money. However, it was very profitable on an individual level. After all, just a few clicks was worth a few dozen thousand won.

"I also earned some pocket money with this in the past, but I gave up since it was so hard to get the tickets. The server goes down on the slightest whim, and if I click on the seat to reserve it, it says it's already reserved. What's funny is that they never do offline ticketing. I swear there are scalpers that are profiting off this."

Maru smiled at that remark. They say the sparrow near a school sings the primer. It seemed that this fellow had a deep insight regarding this matter thanks to his sister.

"I don't want to buy them at this price. If these are individual sellers, the seats must be far apart, right?"

"Right."

"Isn't there a way to get five to six continuous seats?"

"There is," the classmate said with a suspicious smile.

"How?"

"But you'd have to be close to the company's president."

"That's the best method."

Maru tapped on the classmate's shoulders and took hold of the mouse again. He had to get the tickets through some method or the other. If Bada started grumbling at him, his everyday life would become a pain.

After looking at the screen with a serious face for a while, Maru suddenly raised his head. When he thought about it, he did have someone he could ask. He could've asked earlier as well. Maru put down the mouse and picked up his phone. The best skill in this world was connections. Since it would be rude of him to call so suddenly, he left a message. Actually, it was impolite of him to ask such a thing in the first place, but he had no other places to ask.

"I guess that is that, then?"

Maru sighed in relief after sending the next message.

* * *

Junmin chuckled when he read the text message he received from Maru. He never imagined that Maru would ask him something like this.

'Idols, out of all things, huh.'

And it was a male idol as well. Was this where Maru's preferences lay? There were aspiring idols who wanted to admire the actual idols that are doing well, but...

"Maru, idols?"

Junmin felt absurd when he uttered those words out loud. There was no way that was the case. He might suit the stage, but there was no way his smile was the same as an idol's.

While he was thinking, another message arrived. The message mentioned the reason why Maru wanted those tickets - his sister.

"I guess I'll let him be the nice big brother."

Junmin had a look at the contract paper on his desk. It seemed that there was a need for him to call Maru here for both his and Maru's matters. He texted back that Maru should visit before closing his phone.

* * *

"Yes, yes. Understood."

Dongwook hung up on the call before spitting on the ground. The other party was a sly old fox. Park Narim, the owner of NL Company that stood behind TTO. This woman was someone who seemed as though she was prepared to give up everything when he first met her as a TV station journalist, yet she treated him harshly as soon as she found out that he was just a no-name journalist now. Well, that was probably why she was able to climb to the top as a woman.

It seemed that he had to give up on the movie matter. If the president went as far as to say that 'they want to maintain a good relationship in the future', it meant that it wasn't something he could do something about. If a journalist didn't have a concrete source, then that journalist wouldn't be able to do anything.

And these days, companies behind idol groups were no longer powerless existences like it was before. There was an incident where one journalist was sued for writing a rumor-like article regarding an idol group, and that journalist ended up being called to many places. Although the law stated that an exemption existed for journalism that was written for public interest, it was hard to prove that for an article about celebrities. Moreover, the contents of the article were mostly rumors, not facts.

Before, entertainment companies usually did not go as far as to sue journalists in order to maintain a good relationship with them, but nowadays, they were ruthless. Of course, the majority of the journalists belonged to the KRF(Korea Reporters Federation), so they didn't drive the journalists to the brink, but these days they did not just sit idly.

Of course, they were still kind people to the three major news companies and TV stations. They only acted coldly to the internet journalists. Dongwook spoke as he looked at the setting sun.

"Dammit. I quit for nothing."

* * *

“There’s no practice today?”

“But there’s revision.”

“Haa,” Dowook, Dojin and Daemyung all sighed. Tomorrow was the start of midterms. Midterms of the second year of high school. The sad truth of Korean education where everyone aimed to get into a college was applied to engineering schools as well. Most of the students in class aimed for universities even if it had to be outside Seoul. Nay, some even aimed for one of SKY through special selection entrance exams, and were studying really hard.

“Go ahead.”

“Han Maru, where are you going?”

“I have some business.”

After parting ways with his three friends, Maru took a bus. Junmin told him to come up to Seoul. It seemed that there was something important as Jumin would usually have mentioned the business over the phone. His phone suddenly started vibrating. It was a text message notification. He opened it thinking it was Junmin, but it wasn’t.

-I heard you’re on midterms. Are you studying?

It was from her.

-I’ll be starting soon. How did yours go?

-Don’t ask.

-Bad, huh.

-I said don’t ask.

-Not being clever is not a sin.

-Wanna die?

-It looks like you should have some time since your midterms finished. Shall we meet on the weekend?

-Let’s meet once you’re done with your tests. I won’t forgive you if your scores are lower than mine.

Maru shrugged his shoulders and closed his phone. In his first year, his scores were good enough to get him into the top half. Ever since he decided that his future career would be an actor, he gave up on grades, but his scores were unexpectedly not that bad. However, he felt that his grades wouldn’t improve, so he was taking some slack on studying. They say a married couple are alike, and she wasn’t that talented in studying either.

‘Now that I think about it, did my daughter do well in studying?’ He suddenly felt sorry for his still unborn daughter because he couldn’t give her the good genes.

“...I should give her some good prenatal care, I guess.”

Another plan he must not forget was formed in his mind.

Chapter 253

“Manager Choi. Please look after the new recruits. I’m going over to JA for a bit.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Narim stood up from the sofa. Although the sofa was advertised as being ergonomic, she was still stiff after sitting on it for a whole day. She wondered if she was getting old as she remembered that she was completely fine after sleeping for a short time on a hard floor when she was still young.

Narim was reminded of her old days. She smiled while looking at the schedules of various artists on her desk. She had once dreamed of becoming a singer. When she was asked ‘won’t you try to become a singer’ on the streets, she thought that her dream was coming true. However, it was just a scam and she only lost money in the name of various fees and whatnot. Her family went into an uproar, and when her father told her to just find a good man and get married, she became angry and left the house. She came up to Seoul and lived on the streets despite being a woman and looked for workplaces.

After ups and downs, she managed to get a job in a TV station cafeteria. At first, the old ladies there told her that the job wasn’t for a young woman like her and that she would soon give up. However, she endured in order to earn money. She moved into a shabby house in the suburbs with her first salary. After she found a place to rest, she started studying again in order to become a singer. She went to practical music academies to take vocal lessons as well as to learn instruments. It was hard for her to do that alongside her job at the cafeteria, but she firmly believed that it was a necessary step to achieve her dream and endured through it.

She spent a year like that. By then, she had gotten closer to the ladies at the cafeteria. The ladies there cheered for her dream and sometimes cooked some food that was known to be good for the vocal cords. That affection was what supported Narim throughout her endeavour.

However, she always fell short of passing the auditions she took during that year. She won prizes in regional competitions, but that wasn’t enough.

To prove her skills properly, she had to display her skills in a large-scale competition. To do that, she had to aim to get prizes in the Gangbyeon Pop Festival or the College Pop Festival. However, she wasn’t qualified to participate in either of them. She had to belong to a college in order to participate in those two competitions, and colleges were unfamiliar places for her who went straight into society after high school.

Another half a year had passed and Narim had yet to pass an audition. Even new entertainment companies did not accept her. She had thought about how hard it was to release an album under her name. However, she still prepared for her next audition thinking that effort will not betray her. During another audition though, she came across the truth.

-Miss Narim. Your singing is decent. I can tell that you’re a professional, but have a look at the TV. Look at how pretty, innocent and refined those girls are. Their singing is crisp and clear as well. Have you seen Koreana in the 88 Olympics recently? If your voice had that much charm, we wouldn’t care about your looks but... that’s not the case with you. How about a duet rather than a solo artist? I think you’ll do better if your face is hidden a little.

At that moment, it dawned on Narim that her way of thinking that 'a singer must be good at singing alone' was wrong. She had taken it too easy. On her way out, she was given an offer for a trot singer, but Narim shook her head. It wasn't that she felt prejudiced. Even if she was the CEO, she would prefer someone with both the skills and the looks, not just one of the two. If she wanted to move the hearts of the people, she would have to have some overwhelming singing skills, but she did not even when she evaluated herself.

In the 90s, Narim's dreams had changed. She no longer wished to become a singer herself but someone who managed those singers. It wasn't that she was projecting her dreams onto other people. She just decided to go with the flow of the era.

If society wanted multitalented people so much, she would give them singers, nay, entertainers that could do anything. Narim did not consider the comments she heard during her auditions as insults. She found a path the moment she realized that successful people in the cultural business were not specialists but generalists.

Now that she had an objective, she started moving towards it. First, she looked for similar cases in other countries. The two top countries at the forefront of cultural business, especially music, were the US and Japan. When she studied cases from those two countries, she found out that the boundaries between different forms of entertainment were getting blurred. She saw that American sports stars and Japanese singers were rising to prominence in other fields such as movies, dramas and commercials in their respective countries. Thinking that cultural trend was something that just repeated itself, Narim predicted that the same thing would happen in Korea as well.

Around that time, Narim saw something revolutionary on TV. , an iconic figure that brought pop music's main target audience of 20s and 30s down to the teens. Narim witnessed for herself what kind of power the trendsetters possessed. Although it was an unfamiliar genre of music, their performance, the lyrics of their songs moved the younger generation. Their impact surpassed all imagination. Many people related to TV broadcasting looked down on the consumer power of teens, but they had to change their mind after seeing Seo Taiji & Boys.

Teens consumed an enormous amount of money through the medium that was their parents. When the youths became passionate about something, their parents' generation started focusing on Seo Taiji as well, and as a result, Seo Taiji had become an icon of culture.

Watching all this happen, Narim realized that by only stealing the hearts of the youths in their teens and twenties would she lead pop culture.

Then, she wondered what she should show to the public.

Narim believed that it had to be people around the consumer's age. It was obvious that people's skills got better as they aged, but if they were too old, the youths would not be able to project themselves onto the stars.

Icons were supposed to be the manifestation of what people wished to be. It was about watching someone of their own age that sang and danced well on top of being pretty. Only that would stimulate their desires. In other words, it was about making literal idols.

Narim started looking for investors with her idea and the money she had saved up during the past few years. She was well aware that the first mover would be the winner since everyone was likely to be thinking the same thing.

After visiting all sorts of places, Narim was able to meet a producer of a music program thanks to the help of one of the ladies at the cafeteria, and through him, someone who was working in management business. That was head manager Choi.

From that day onwards, head manager Choi and Narim started looking for aspiring singers that were good-looking. They gathered those that just lacked a little talent in singing and taught them. They ate ramyun in a shabby villa and watched star singers on TV to get their resolve together. Narim didn't even wish for singing skills on the level of being able to digest live singing. After all, live stages could be handled with lip syncing and pre-recording. Instead, she focused on things other than singing, like someone who's good at English, or at Japanese, or at cooking, or someone who was humorous. She picked characters that could do things other than just singing.

Eventually, she was able to get them to stand on a public TV stage thanks to some help from a music program producer. At first, the reactions were cold. After all, from the perspective of common sense from back then, the group was just 'a bunch of kids dancing along some weird music that's neither rock nor ballad'. However, another entertainment company came out with a band of similar youths.

Two similar girl bands of 5 people.

After seeing that there was a strange rivalry between the group of fans of these two bands, Narim thought that this was an opportunity. With that, she went to the rival entertainment group and suggested to them to bring the rivalry to the surface. As the other party seemed to have the same thought process, the plan was set without a hitch. That entertainment company was none other than Yellow Star, one of the other current big 3.

After that, things started snowballing by themselves. The fans showed an overwhelming amount of action for the artists they liked. They agreed upon a color that represented their artists and wore such colors to the concerts, and it somehow became something like a ceremony for the fans. The girl band from Yellow Star was represented by yellow, while NL company's girl band went with blue.

The group of fans started growing from just a group of teens and eventually, the word 'idols' was used to refer to these bands on TV programs and the group of fans became fandoms in the late 90s. They succeeded, no, did even better than the predecessors in the 80s that led 'oppa brigades'.

Narim immediately prepared for a followup group. Although she wasn't able to invest much in her first idol group, the second was different. She held official auditions to pick the youths that were good at both singing and dancing and also looked for other traits as well. This time, she also prepared some humanities classes for them as well. To become a literal 'idol', they couldn't be lacking in any area.

Time passed and in the early 2000s, the 3 big entertainment companies solidified their positions, and the fans reached a point where they could directly support their idols. Now, it was no longer the singers that had name value, but the companies themselves.

Then came the final stage. Narim poured everything she had earned and learned in the past decade into TTO. A five person boy band. She selected not only aspiring singers but also aspiring actors and grouped

them together. Then she taught them harshly. She had the aspiring actor focus on singing and the aspiring singer practice acting.

An all-capable entertainer. Coincidentally, TV programs were also shifting from 1-man talk shows to comedic action shows, and TTO became a certified cheque for TV programs with their excellent physical capabilities.

And eventually, Narim went beyond TV shows and tried her idols out in dramas as well. The directors of those dramas objected saying that they could not allow mere singers to be casted in their piece, but they were not able to block the idol's participation. After all, dramas weren't made for free. The people working in the broadcast industry were aware of how frightening an idol fandom could be. Their blind faith towards their idols meant that they would watch the show and an increase in view rate meant that the ad revenue would go up as well. The TV broadcasters did not miss that.

Narim had meetings with the director of the drama to persuade them and at the same time, instructed the idol to do properly. Everything would go down the drain if they screwed up here.

Fortunately, that boy, who had once aspired to become an actor, did surprisingly well. He was complimented for being better than most new actors. It was to be expected. He was trained and prepared for it. Moreover, he already had experience smiling in front of hundreds of thousands of people and knew from which angle his face would look the best.

When the producer of the drama that derogated the boy as a 'mere singer' called her in a warm voice, Narim felt that she was a step closer to her dream.

After that was the world of idols. Although screen actors were still infallible, Narim was sure that it was a matter of time before that changed as well.

* * *

The JA building during the weekday was a lone shining star. Inside the cafe on the first floor lounge were some employees who seemed to have some work left, drinking some coffee over a conversation. There was still around half an hour left until the meeting time.

'Should I get some dinner before I go?'

Maru thought about getting some Gukbap outside, but decided to have something light at the cafe since there was the possibility that Junmin would treat him to dinner. He ordered a cup of americano and a bun before grabbing a seat. A woman wearing round glasses entered the building. She seemed to be in her late 30s and was wearing a semi-formal suit.

"Two cups of milk tea for takeout."

She finished her order and turned around. Two office ladies who were conversing with each other bumped into the lady wearing glasses. It seemed that they weren't paying attention to the front. The paper cup in one of the office ladies' hands became crumpled and coffee flew everywhere. Neither party frowned as the coffee wasn't that hot.

"Excuse me, please watch where you're going."

It was natural for the party with more people to have the louder voice. Maru stared at the two office ladies that were complaining despite the fact that they were clearly the ones that were wrong. These kinds of people were everywhere where the offender packaged themselves as the victim.

“Excuse me, but I was watching where I was going. You’re the ones who bumped into me.”

“Stop lying. It’s because you suddenly stopped and turned around that we bumped into you.”

“Oh, it’s my fault?” The lady with the glasses put her hand above her chest and spoke.

“Isn’t that obvious? Rather than that, how are you going to compensate for my clothes?”

The office lady showed her shirt. The one with the glasses groaned in a low voice. The cafe staff tried to mediate between the two but the two office ladies clearly didn’t seem to have any intentions on relenting.

Right at that time, another staff member spoke out that Maru’s order was ready.

“Uhm, excuse me, coming through,” Maru spoke to the three ladies blocking the counter. The woman wearing the glasses apologized and moved out of his way, but the two office ladies did not.

“Kid. Find another way. Don’t you see what’s happening here?” Hearing those words, Maru smiled bitterly. This woman was so entitled.

“Uhm ahjumeoni, I saw what was going on, and it was clearly you two that weren’t watching where you were going. I can understand that you’re trying to get some laundry fees but don’t block other people’s way.”

“Wh, what? Did you just call me ahjumma?”

“No, I didn’t. I clearly called you ahjumeoni.”

“You damned kid!”

Just as one of the two office ladies approached Maru with a hand raised,

“What’s going on here?”

A voice could be heard behind Maru. It was Junmin, wearing his trademark Beret and holding a notepad. The office ladies, who had nothing to do with JA productions, seemed to have recognized the owner of the building and ran away.

Maru shrugged his shoulders while smiling at Junmin.

which is explained below.

is used to refer to middle-aged women, and younger women find the term offensive. These two terms are in the glossary already so go check it out!

Chapter 254

“You should’ve come upstairs if you were here.”

"I was a little early, so I decided I should go up after this."

Maru showed him the coffee and the bun.

"Ok, let's leave things at that. What brings you here?" Junmin then spoke to the lady wearing round glasses who was standing behind Maru. Maru also turned around and looked at the woman. It seemed that the two were acquainted.

"I'm here to invite you out to dinner, president."

"What were you going to do if I had other plans?"

"But you don't, do you?"

The woman approached Junmin with a smile. A weird tension seemed to form between the two, but it disappeared with Junmin's smile.

"Fortunately, I don't. Let's go up for the time being. Oh, you should greet her. This is president Park Narim of NL company. This fellow is Han Maru and he's a new actor under me."

Narim then pushed down her glasses a little and looked at Maru. The round eyes behind the round glasses changed into a sharper expression.

"It sounds like you two haven't entered a proper contract yet."

Narim extended out her hand. The moment Maru shook her hand, he exclaimed slightly. Her hands were quite rough. People's hands were a representation of the life they went through, and Maru could tell that her life wasn't that smooth.

"My name is Han Maru."

"I'm Park Narim. You have a good name. But I'm a little disappointed. It would have been good if you at least pretended to be surprised. I like that kind of stuff."

"Pretend to be surprised?" Maru asked back after shaking hands. He did not know what she meant.

"Don't you know NL Company?"

"I'll have to apologize. I don't know the structure of the companies around here."

"Oh my word," Narim chuckled. She didn't seem to be in a bad mood.

"Looks like I'll have to put more effort in the future. I'm a little disappointed that someone that's about to join JA Productions doesn't know what NL Company is. President Lee Junmin, don't tell me he's doing this to me on purpose?"

"This fellow probably really doesn't know. In the first place, he didn't start off as an aspiring entertainer. He was just a student up until a year ago. Though, he still is one right now. But hey, if you want the things you asked me for, you should try to give her a good impression."

Junmin smiled and looked back at Maru. Maru thought about what that meant. Try to give her a good impression? The things Maru asked of Junmin were some tickets to TTO's concert. Narim was the president of NL Company. It seemed that the president of the company behind TTO was Narim.

“Let’s go up for now.”

Junmin guided Narim. Taking the elevator, Junmin pressed the 16th floor. Maru was a little confused since he thought that they would be going to the 7th floor.

Soon, the door opened again and Maru was able to see a soft cushion mattress on the floor. Stone pillars that seemed to be taken from the Parthenon decorated one of the walls, and at the front was a counter made of marble.

“Welcome,” a neat-looking man behind the counter greeted. It seemed that he was notified beforehand as he called for an employee as soon as he saw Junmin’s face. A lady wearing a neat uniform led their way with a smile.

The first scene they saw when they entered was the night scenery of Gangnam. The lights from the buildings and the cars made quite a spectacular scene. The tables had guests and the lady offered them to be seated at one of the closest tables to the window.

“You knew I was coming?” Narim asked in surprise.

“I was planning to have some dinner with this fellow here,” Junmin smiled back.

Maru thought that it was the right decision to not get a meal before meeting Junmin. A handsome staff appeared out of nowhere and pulled out Narim’s chair. Although only two sets of cutlery were prepared on the table originally, Narim’s set was prepared in a blink of an eye. From how the staff prepared all that without Junmin’s instructions, the amount of attention Junmin received could be seen. Well, he was the owner of the building, so it wasn’t that surprising.

Maybe power does come from money after all.

“Welcome.”

When the people clad in uniforms disappeared, a man with a well-built body appeared. He was wearing an outfit different to the servers in the hall. He seemed to be the chef here. His name was stitched on his chest.

“I wonder if I was interrupting you on your day off.”

“It’s your request, so I don’t dare ignore it. I would come even if I was resting at home.”

“You’re embarrassing me here,” the two seemed to be on close terms. Thinking back, Junmin was close to the owner of the restaurant in front of the Myungdong theater.

‘Is he interested in the cooking industry?’ Maru wondered.

Meanwhile, Junmin and the chef talked for a bit more. The topic of conversation was about the course menu.

“Well then, if you’d please excuse me,” the chef walked away after a polite remark.

“I’m envious. I’d like to receive such treatment from a restaurant like this too,” Narim smiled as she spoke.

"I think it's about time you tell me what you came here for," Junmin made his intentions clear but he stayed polite.

"You're in a hurry. Can't we leave that for later?"

Maru saw that Narim was giving glimpses to him. It seemed that it was business-related and she didn't want an outsider here.

"I don't have any time after the meal since I have a prior engagement with this fellow here," Junmin did not relent.

'A conflict?' Maru had a look at the two CEOs in depth. JA Productions and NL Company. As he was not aware of the internals of each company, he did not know whether these two were in a symbiotic relationship or whether they were in a competitive relationship, but from Junmin's attitude, it seemed that they weren't as close as it seemed on the surface. The fact that he was giving her face despite that was probably because of the place they were in.

"Hm. It'll be somewhat awkward to come back at a later date..." Narim fiddled with her fork but eventually nodded after having made a decision.

"Since you called this fellow all the way here, it seems that he's not the type of person to tell everyone secrets so I'll say this here. It's nothing special. It's related to my kid participating in your movie this time."

"You mean Ahn Sungjae from TTO?"

"Yes, Sungjae. From what I've heard, you haven't started creating the movie poster yet..."

Narim did not finish her words and smiled. Even Maru, who was not related to this matter, realized what was going on. She probably wanted that idol from NL Company to appear on the poster.

'Wait. She said 'your movie'...?'

There was only one movie JA Productions was creating. Only then did Maru realize that there was an idol appearing in the same movie he was cast in.

"I'm not saying he should be at the front. You're going to create many different versions of the poster for advertising purposes, right? I heard that each character gets their own posters with different fonts."

"Hm, posters, you say."

"Of course, the poster displayed in cinemas should be the ones with the main actors. However, I think it'll be okay to create different ones for advertisement. Of course, the profit doesn't just go to us. Once the advertisement starts after the movie is released, Sungjae's fans will flock to the movie as well."

"So you're saying that you want a poster for those fans."

"Yes. We'll cover the expenses for that as well. It's mostly for fan service and not for advertisement, so I don't think the main actors will take offense from it."

Narim stared at Junmin.

Maru was well aware of the impact such considerations had on the fans. In his distant memories of his company days, there was an event where one of the cooperating companies did not miss one of the complaints that a customer had and fixed their item, and that led the touched customer to write a good article online, leading to the company's rise.

Offering the customers something that they didn't even realize that they wanted. Narim seemed to understand how to touch the hearts of the customers. Her abilities in making a profit off that seemed incredible.

"That's no problem. It's to be used in the advertisement of the movie, so I see no reason why we can't do that."

"It's good that I can get through to you. Phew, that puts me at ease."

Narim slowly tasted the wine that the staff poured for her. While the food was being prepared, Narim used her unique conversation skills and did not allow for a moment of silence. She was well-versed in all sorts of areas, not just entertainment.

"Is divorce such a bad thing?"

"If it was someone else's divorce, I couldn't care less, but if it was related to one of my family members, then I would of course mind."

"Then Maru, you're saying you'll agree if someone close to you says that they want a divorce?"

"Probably. If that person deemed that it's impossible to live with the partner even after the consideration period, then that family is already beyond saving, so it's better to part ways as early as possible. If both parties are young, then they can just look for new love, and if it's too late for them to get married again, then they can just enjoy their remaining lives with the money they saved up."

"President Lee, this boy knows his stuff."

Narim smiled and scooped up the jelly that came out as dessert. They talked a lot during the past hour. Maru respected Narim on the point that she was able to lead the conversation in a relaxing manner. There was a lot to learn from Narim's conversation skills. She had the power to bring out the other party's topic of interest and lead the conversation without getting boring. Her conversation skills would make anyone look at her in a good light.

'A smooth talker, and a politician.'

Maru stored two words associated with Narim in his head.

"Then I'll take my leave first. You don't need to see me off. After all, you're busy. And Maru, see you later. I'll send you the tickets by email. If you print it out, it should work as a ticket. They're R-seats so you should thank me."

Narim was comfortable with Maru's presence already. After seeing Narim leave the restaurant, Junmin spoke up.

"Scary, isn't she? She's shameless yet she does it in a way no one finds her repulsive."

“That’s true. Well, I’m going to see her in a good light. After all, I got six free tickets thanks to her.”

“That’s all a debt. A debt you must pay back later.”

“You’re completely right.”

Maru drank the grapefruit juice and had a look at the envelope that Junmin had prepared. He called someone when the meal was almost over, and the lady Maru saw during the audition appeared in the restaurant with that envelope. That envelope was currently in front of Junmin.

“I just thought that it’s about time we make things clear.”

“Make things clear?”

“About our relationship,” saying that, Junmin gave the envelope to Maru. Maru put his hand inside and took out the papers inside. It was a contract form that was 3 pages long. The title of it said ‘exclusive contract’.

“I was planning to watch you until you graduated, but I was a little worried. I thought about it after you took the audition last time. I raised him this far, what happens if he decides to go to another company?”

“Aren’t you in too much of a hurry? I haven’t shown you anything.”

“Results, not so much. But the man named Han Maru is worth having nearby. Also, I think it was about time I changed the way I talk with you.”

“From what I saw, it seemed that you were treating me as someone not under the contract.”

“Indeed. I don’t use polite speech to people that are under me. In that sense, I might swear at you a lot once you sign those papers.”

“That doesn’t sound too welcome,” Maru smiled and had a look at the contract. The contract stated a 50:50 split. It didn’t look that bad. The news was talking about slave contracts and stuff, and it was likely that he was receiving preferential treatment if a newbie like him was receiving 50% of the profits when he got all the support from the company. Moreover, the split ratio went up by 10% every contract renewal. The contract period was also a short two years. Above all, the third clause caught his eyes.

-“Actor” can break the contract with “Company” at any moment during the contract period.

“Is this a misprint?”

“Many people ask that.”

“You’ll see immense losses if you let people go without any restrictions like this.”

“Money is all I have, so I don’t mind such a small amount of money.”

“Even when you consider that I’ve done my part on contracts like commercials like it’s stated on clause 2, this is just releasing the captive spot free.”

Maru chuckled to himself after saying those words. Somehow, he was the one worried about the company. Junmin’s confidence could be seen from the third clause of the contract. This could be

interpreted in one of two ways. One is that he has the confidence to treat Maru well and maintain the contract, or two, he has the power to punish those that ripped him off.

It was probably both. Maru went through the contract meticulously. It was always important to read the contract through in detail, especially when it was with someone acquainted. After all, there were cases where they exploited that relationship to add poison pill clauses in there.

“Doesn't the entertainment business require a lot of upfront cost? With this, I might be leeching off company money while I don't make a name for myself, and not give you much money when I do make it big.”

“That means it's just as not likely for you to leave JA since the contract is good. I'm fine with that. And also, if we were in a situation where we would go bankrupt with just that, we would have gone bankrupt ages ago.”

Maru nodded and turned the contract over. He didn't need much consideration to decide.

“Once the shooting begins, you might not be able to go to school if things become big. You know that, right?”

“Classes are ultimately intended to give me a good job. It doesn't matter if I can earn money. Also, it's not like I'll be taking weeks off at a time, so there shouldn't be any problems.”

“So then, all that's left is permission from your legal guardian.”

“Oh...,” Maru sighed as he was getting ready to stamp his thumbprint. Junmin chuckled.

“Go show it to them. If you get permission, I'll visit them.”

“You're coming over?”

“The company I'm intending to form is not a company that purely pursues profit. What I want is a family. Though, yes, it'll be quite a noisy family with a lot of peculiar people. Anyway, I have to convince your family that the family I'm creating is safe and believable. That's what virtue is.”

Maru nodded his head and put the two copies of the contract inside the envelope.

“It's about time you get going, no?”

“Yes.”

“Have a safe trip home.”

“I'll see you on the weekend.”

Maru bid goodbye to Junmin and left the restaurant. After taking the elevator to the first floor, Maru stopped in the lounge and looked at his envelope. He had the mild thought that he would step into society again eventually, but now that he actually did, he was a little nervous.

“Society once again, huh.”

Maru tightly grabbed on the envelope as he left the building. For some reason, he had a smile on his face.

Chapter 255

“Phew, nice building,” Dongwook spoke as he looked up at the building. It was a skyscraper. He wondered how much it would cost to build a building here.

‘Hundreds of millions? Easy to say, hard to do.’

In dramas, the protagonists were scammed of hundreds of millions of won whenever it happened. However, how was it like in reality? Hundreds of millions was just a number in dreams and just a few million was enough to ruin someone’s life. Dongwook wondered if the building with ‘JA’ engraved on it was real even when he was standing right in front of it. It was too unrealistic. As his life consisted of having to juggle between thousands of won when buying lunch, this building was at the extremes of his fantasy.

Although he walked around in front of the building with the notepad he had been carrying since he first started working, he came across nothing.

The big 3 entertainment companies were causing quite a scene in the industry in the recent days. Especially NL Company and their TTO. Journalists could be seen flocking outside the NL Company building even now. They had their meals in their cars and observed who came to and from the company. If they found a trace of TTO, then they would immediately start following in secret. It was a secret investigation of sorts. Some said that entertainment journalists did more undercover missions than the police.

Dongwook was also aware that camping outside NL Company was the best when it came to writing articles, but he was also aware that he had to take action if he wanted anything big.

‘JA is quite suspicious these days.’

Lee Junmin was someone who everyone knew of in this area, but the same didn’t apply to JA Production. It was mostly seen as a company Lee Junmin created to handle his tax. However, it started investing in movie production from the beginning of the year. Even the financial district had rumors about Lee Junmin beginning to move for real.

The most well-known actor belonging to JA Production was currently Kim Suyeon. According to her profile, she was 26 this year. Although she was a young and relatively new actress, she made her name known through continuous appearances on several short drama series. However, she was only relatively well known compared to other actors of JA Production, and she was lacking compared to other well-known actors and their filmographies. She was never cast as a main role as well. Although the career of actresses was becoming longer and most actresses continued their careers into their late 30s, considering that the mid twenties were their prime time, the lifespan of actresses wasn’t that long.

Moreover, there were all sorts of bad rumors about her. Although there was nothing confirmed, she seemed to have relationship problems, so it seemed difficult for her to become mainstream.

As such, JA Production wasn’t that well-known to the public. Lee Junmin was also just a famous figure within the industry and was never introduced to the public, so both the company and its CEO were not well known.

Although it seemed somewhat lacking compared to the achievements that Lee Junmin had made, Dongwook came across an interesting fact while hunting down Lee Junmin recently.

Lee Junmin was known as the maestro of finding new talented trainees. There were many instances where a child actor or actress became a youth star through his hands. However, what was strange was that none of those stars belonged to JA Production. It would be understandable if it was five years ago since Lee Junmin hadn't created the company back then, but he easily gave away the stars that he recruited and raised to other companies even after founding JA Production. As a result, the only actors that belonged to JA were Kim Suyeon and some new actors.

What was interesting was that JA Production did not accept Lee Hyuk. Who was Lee Hyuk? He was a rising star that shot numerous commercials and caught the hearts of many ladies. The story that the shampoo Lee Hyuk modelled for doubled in sales was quite well-known in this industry. It was surprising that Lee Hyuk, who many companies were paying attention to, went to JA Production with his own two feet, but what was even more surprising was that JA Production rejected him.

After that story spread out within the industry, people started taking interest in JA Production. The majority thought that Lee Junmin was neither intending to make the company big nor planning to form the company with a small group of elites. They thought that he was focusing on raising new actors.

Companies without any issues meant that the journalists had nothing to write about them. It was a waste of time to hold a camera towards the companies without actors that caused trouble. However, Dongwook was suspicious. This was why he followed Junmin and found out that there were actually many actors that were not well known to the public that Junmin frequently met up with. Dongwook, who knew nothing about the industry, started investigating and found out that the actors in their 20s and 30s that Junmin frequently met with were actually quite well-known in the theatrical world.

Actually, the theatrical world in Korea was very small. He found out during his investigation that even in Daehak-ro, known as the holy land of actors, there were many theaters that were going out of business. Junmin was going around meeting actors from such places?

Dongwook investigated even deeper regarding Hong Geunsoo, Yang Ganghwan and Yang Miso, who Junmin frequently met with. Although all three of them were in their early 30s, their career was different from the rest.

The actor known as Hong Geunsoo was a talent well-known in the independent movies scene, and there were rumors about some companies giving him offers in secret since the talent he showed in the movie that won the Mise en scène Movie Award was incredible.

Yang Ganghwan was amazing as well. He left the Seoul Metropolitan Theater and went to Daehak-ro to do the acting he wanted to. Although his boldness in giving up a stable income and risking his life was surprising, he even participated in the production of many stages as well as acting in them, leading them to success. Although he was quite a minor actor since most of his acts were about social satire, there seemed to be many of his fans who went to watch his acts.

Next was Yang Miso. Although her acting career was quite lacking compared to the other two, her position as a trainer was very high. She used to be an instructor in Film Academy, which was one of the

biggest actor education facilities around. Recently, she was discovered to be coaching some theater companies or college-level clubs after having left Film.

Dongwook witnessed Lee Junmin meeting other actors that were not introduced to the mainstream media. Was Junmin going to let go of those people as well? From his investigation, he judged that that wasn't the case. They seemed to be really close and it seemed like they would continue to be so in the future.

Then why did he not take those actors under JA Production's wings? Dongwook was very curious but he couldn't pry open Junmin's mind.

In such a situation, he finally saw a movement. He saw that Hong Geunsoo was participating in the movie produced by JA Production.

Hong Geunsoo was a minor character in the movie everyone was talking about in the movie world, 'Who Gave the Elder His Hammer'. Dongwook believed that this wasn't a coincidence. He couldn't erase the thought that Junmin was trying to bring the actors under his personal wings onto the surface from his mind. He still remembered what Lee Junmin said in a prior interview.

-My dream is to meet an actor or an actress that I can only look up to.

He used the word 'meet', not 'raise'. From those words, it seemed that the actors he raised and sent to other companies were not those that he could only look up to.

Then what of the three that he maintained a close relationship with? What was the reason Hong Geunsoo and Yang Ganghwan still did not belong to a company yet?

Dongwook believed that the actors that Lee Junmin kept under his personal wings were the ace up Lee Junmin's sleeves.

Of course, up to this point, nothing seemed to be of value as a journalist. It was more of a 'there's a rumor that such and such is happening'. However, the story changes when considering that JA Production is still an unlisted company.

Dongwook had seen several instances of the stocks shooting through the roof due to a name value of a celebrity. The stock price would skyrocket during an M&A just with the fact that there was a famous celebrity among their ranks. This was a flow of money that was already proven.

Lee Junmin was an excellent businessman at the same time he was a capable teacher. He raised several buildings like the one in front of Dongwook in the past two decades. He should be aware of the power of money, and should also be aware of how to make even more.

If Lee Junmin decided to make a move, then the first task at hand would be to prove the skills of the stars he raised that 'still haven't received the spotlight'. Dongwook believed that this movie would be the start of it.

'If this is what I think it is, then this is huge news.'

Dongwook bought a cup of coffee from the vending machine in front of the building when he saw a youth coming out of the building. He was holding an envelope in his hand. Although he seemed quite

old from afar, Dongwook found that he looked quite young when he looked up close. He was a little short as well.

'Why would a kid like that be here?'

Dongwook had a glance at the kid passing next to him while drinking coffee. Due to his attention being focused on the kid, he tilted the coffee cup too far away from him, and thanks to that, he ended up spilling the coffee onto his shirt.

"Ouch, that's hot!"

He let go of the cup and swung his arms. The child passing next to him quickly got out of the way, but Dongwook's fingertips hit the envelope. The opening of the envelope was ripped as it fell down on the floor.

"Oops, I'm sorry," Dongwook shook his hands that became red from the heat as he spoke.

"Not at all. Is your hand alright?"

"It's a little hot, but I'm fine. How about you? Aren't you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm fine."

Dongwook nodded his head and reached out for the envelope since it fell in front of him. He was about to give the envelope to the kid when he saw the words 'JA Production' at the top. Dongwook flinched and quickly read what followed after it. It was an exclusive contract.

'This is....'

Dongwook looked at the kid in front of him while holding the envelope.

Chapter 256

'There is always a way out and this seems to be mine!'

He was lucky. He never imagined that he would come into contact with someone belonging to JA Production in such a manner. He checked the papers he saw behind the ripped envelope. It was definitely a contract form.

"You look like you got a burn. Are you really okay?"

The child looked at him worriedly. Dongwook decided to take back his words of being okay.

"It prickles a little, so I might have a serious burn."

"That's not good. There's a pharmacy nearby, let's go there for now."

"Sh, shall we?" Dongwook almost couldn't hold back his laughter. He thought that the effort he put into prying into the internal affairs about JA Production was finally receiving a reward. Now, he had to be careful. From how this child was worried for him despite the fact that his wound was small, it could be said that this child was a kind boy. If he convinced this boy well, he might be able to get some info about JA Production.

"It's not that serious, so this will do," Dongwook spoke as he applied the ointment he got from the pharmacy. The child still had a worried expression on his face.

"Are you really okay?"

"It prickles a little, but this won't hurt me."

"I'm really sorry. I should have watched where I was going."

"No, no, not at all. It's me who spilled my coffee after all."

Dongwook took out a laptop and a camera from his bag as he put the ointment inside. On top of that, he pretended to rummage through his belongings and dropped a few of his business cards on the floor. After seeing that the child saw the business card falling on the ground, Dongwook pretended to know nothing and kept looking inside his bag.

The child bent down and picked up the business card.

"Uhm, here."

The child gave him the business card. Dongwook smiled as naturally as possible as he received it.

"Are you a journalist?" The child asked with curious eyes.

He fell for the trap. Rookies were especially vulnerable to journalists. It was because they didn't know anything. They always had the expectation that the journalist would write a good article about them.

"I once worked in a TV station. You know YBS, don't you?"

"Of course I do. Wow, you're actually a journalist."

Although he quit that job a long time ago, he wasn't exactly lying. After all, there was a time when he was a journalist at YBS. After seeing the wariness around the boy disappear, Dongwook started speaking about his true intentions.

"Uhm, it was kinda unintentional, but I kinda ended up looking at something that I shouldn't have."

Dongwook carefully looked at the envelope that the boy was holding. He could not be hasty here. He had to look as though he was at ease. He had to show that he was only slightly interested in the contents. After all, if he showed too much interest, the boy might suspect him.

"Oh, this?"

The child pushed the envelope towards him as he spoke. It seemed that he wanted to boast about it. Dongwook inwardly rejoiced.

"I signed a contract recently."

"With JA Production?"

"Yes."

"Is that so? Hm, I'm writing an article about the entertainment industry recently and...."

“Oh really?”

“You can call it a special edition article talking about new actors that still haven’t received the spotlight despite being in famous companies.”

The boy widened his eyes when he heard the words ‘special edition article’. Yes, there was a reaction. He didn’t seem that shy and he seemed to be somewhat ambitious as well. In cases like these, he would start spilling out all sorts of information with a bit of a push.

“It would be really good if my name got on it, right?”

“That’s right. What, are you interested?”

“...Hahaha,” The boy laughed awkwardly. Dongwook pointed at the cafe across the street and spoke.

“Then let’s have a little talk then, shall we? Something that we can both find profit in.”

Dongwook put his arms around the boy’s shoulders.

“My name is Kim Dongwook, what’s yours?”

“Ah, that’s right. My name is Yoo Sooil.”

“Sooil? That’s a good name.”

Dongwook smiled and walked towards the cafe.

* * *

“You look tired.”

Junmin smiled back at the chef who said those words to him as he put down the tea.

“Looks like decreasing my sleep just a little is showing its effects already. Looks like I’m getting old as well.”

A bittersweet smell came up from the tea. It seemed to be ginger tea. The chef left after saying that health was the most important thing. Junmin replied that that was the case as he drank the tea. The sweetness from the dessert was washed away. The tea made him breathe some hot air out subconsciously.

“I’ve confirmed the two leaving.”

Junmin nodded his head when he heard the words that came from behind him.

“Head manager Kang. What of Maru?”

“He just left.”

“How about president Park?”

“She couldn’t be seen anywhere.”

“Looks like I was worried for nothing. I thought she’d probe some more.”

“She’s not foolish enough to do something that displeases the party she came to ask something from.”

“You’re right. Head manager Kang. Have you had dinner yet?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Then have a seat.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Junmin raised his hand, one of the female staff approached him quickly. He asked head manager Kang what he wanted.

“Ramyun and eggs. Is that possible?”

The staff made a slightly awkward smile at those words.

“Just give him what he wants. Sorry for the weird request,” Junmin followed up. The staff bowed before going away.

“Don’t you ever get tired of ramyun?”

“I probably won’t get tired of it my entire life.”

“Someone might make a mistake and say that you’re paid badly.”

“Don’t worry about that. I have proper meals when I’m outside. I had beef barbecue for lunch as well. Though, I feel a little oily now thanks to that. My taste buds are really craving for some ramyun and eggs.”

Junmin smiled back as he drank his tea. After the ramyun came out, Junmin looked outside the window while head manager Kang ate his meal. According to his report, it was about time he got a call. Indeed, his phone started ringing just at that time. Head manager Kang looked at the phone that was vibrating on the table.

“Keep eating. I’ll take the call.”

Junmin picked up head manager Kang’s phone.

“Hello?”

-Oh, president.

“Is that you, Sooil?”

-Yes, but why are you picking up the phone, president?

“I’m with head manager Kang right now. Rather than that, what happened to the thing I asked you to do?”

-For now, I’m talking with him at a cafe. As you’ve instructed, I was planning to drop the contract form right next to this journalist named Kim Dongwook, but things went better than I expected, so I was able to show him the forms without becoming suspicious.

“How did he react?”

-It's just as you predicted, president. He's overjoyed to death. I had a hard time concealing my emotions. I almost ended up laughing with him.

Junmin could picture Sooil's prankful smile. Yoo Sooil. He was one of the youths that Lee Junmin was raising with all of his support. Junmin had big expectations of him so he already had a verbal agreement with him on their first meeting.

“Are you with him right now?”

-Yes. I pretended that I got a phone call and briefly left him for now. I can see him smiling over the window. I should really smile back at him.

“He doesn't find you suspicious?”

-He doesn't. I don't think he's as sharp as you make him out to be, president. I don't find him that reliable since he's showing off how he's a 'great man'.

“That's because he isn't at his prime yet. He was a scary man before. He was really capable up until he quit his former job. He's a capable journalist that wrote five exclusive articles when he was still new.”

-Really? Why does he look so shabby now?

“He must have his reasons. In any case, he's the only one that's following us, so we should give him something.”

-Aha.

“What kind of questions did he ask you?”

-He didn't ask anything yet. He's just telling me about the recent matters in the entertainment industry. You know, like, there was this news, but it actually turns out it was something else, and the like.

“He didn't ask anything about our company yet?”

-He didn't. If you didn't tell me, I would've thought of him as a smooth talker. Oh, he's looking at me now. Do you think he might get suspicious of me?

“It's just a phone call. Rather than that, act as I told you. If he mentions the company, you can leak the news to him.”

-But president. Isn't it a matter of time before it's released to the public? I think we can just tell him the information now.

“If we do things like that, then he will have a voice as well. We have to make it so that he has to put in the effort to make out proper information from the things we give him by coincidence.”

-Haa, I don't get it. I'm really stupid after all. I'm more comfortable with doing the things you tell me to rather than thinking about complicated things. Then president, I'll keep doing what you told me to do.

“Alright. Then, please work hard.”

-Yes, sir!

Junmin finished the call and put the phone back on the table.

“I think of this all the time, but Sooil really needs to learn some manners.”

“What? He’s cheerful and I like it. It’s better to be free than mind about useless manners.”

“That’s on the condition that he has the skills, no?”

“Naturally.”

Head manager Kang spoke after eating a mouthful of ramyun.

“But weren’t you planning to have a meeting with that journalist later? We’re about to start our activities soon so we do need a main journalist to spread the news, don’t we?”

Then he finished off his ramyun.

“That’s true. But since we’re going to work with someone, it’ll be better if that person is competent, don’t you think? For now, I have my eyes on him, but we don’t know whether he can bring out the skills he had in the past,” Junmin spoke as he looked outside the window.

Entertainers and journalists were ultimately in a symbiotic relationship. Although there were times where they competed with each other, most of the time, they worked with each other throughout their careers. Without entertainers to write news about, journalists would not be able to make a living, and the opposite was true as well. Without journalists to write articles, entertainers would never make an impression on the public. It was one of the very few win-win scenarios in society.

The world of entertainment journalists was filled with hyenas. They competed with each other for prey, but they gathered up and prepared to attack together in front of a common enemy. But even then, when a nice prey appears, some will leave the pack in secret to hunt alone.

It was an incredibly hard thing to work together with such people in pursuit of the common interest. There were many CEOs that had scandalous articles written about them by the journalists they trusted. There were also malicious journalists that wrote malicious content after being paid by a rival company.

However, there rarely existed some that were above the rest of the pack. They were journalists that were both capable and faithful. With a connection to such a person from the media, it would become very easy to build up a good image of the company.

Junmin came across the journalist named Kim Dongwook a long time ago, but it was only recently that he thought of using him when he found out that that journalist was chasing after him.

“What are you going to do if that journalist goes and writes random things based on the things Sooil tells him?” Head manager Kang spoke in a worried tone.

“Then he might get attention in the short term, but that’s it. But that journalist, from what I read from his previous articles, does not write things unless he’s entirely sure. Even after entering an internet news company that mostly writes baseless rumors, he still writes proper articles. He’s a hard journalist to come by these days. If he really knows what he’s doing, he’ll probably stay quiet with our information

for a few months. Then, he'll burst out with the article and attract a huge amount of attention right about the time we start making a move."

"...Sheesh, you test people too much, president. There's a possibility that he might turn his back on us after finding out that he was fooled."

"I'm not that worried since I have a huge ace up my sleeve known as money. And if I'm right about who he is, then I don't think he'll feel deceived with just that."

"Money is not omnipotent."

"But it gets people to work. The reason you're here with me is thanks to money as well."

"Oh, that's how you see me? I'm disappointed. I'm here because of my loyalty."

"Then how about I shave your salary down a little?"

"I meant loyalty towards money. You knew that, didn't you?" Head manager Kang chuckled.

Junmin put on his beret again and stood up. It was about time he called in the sheep he let graze freely in the plains. Right now, he still hadn't found actors that gave him electric shocks like Haejoo, but they had the potential to become like that in the future. What he needed to do now was to provide them a path for them to experience a wider world.

To do that, he needed more connections and money. There were times when relationships didn't go as people wanted to, but money wasn't like that. Junmin was preparing in order to make sure that money wasn't the thing holding him back.

'And that's my job.'

Junmin had a look at his watch before turning around.

"Then go rest."

"Yes, sir. Please have a good night."

Chapter 257

"Keep your promise, okay?"

Bada became a little proud of herself as she held up her four test papers. She scored above 90 points for all of them.

"There are two days left. I'm really going to be in the top 5," she made a resolve as she left.

"Did you do something to her?"

"No."

"Then did she grow up all of a sudden?" Maru's mother looked at the door puzzledly.

"You're starting your exams today aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You should do the basics at least, okay? That's if you don't want to be seen with contempt once you enter society. Movie shooting is good and all, but since you're a student and all...."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Lee. Don't worry about that. Your son isn't that stupid. Rather than that, mom, you aren't going anywhere this evening, are you?"

"I don't have anything after work. What is it?"

"How about father?"

"Your dad should come home after work as well."

"That's good."

"Why do you ask?"

"I have something to talk about with you two."

"Something to talk about? What is it?"

"I'll talk about it once I get back from school. If you see entitled customers at the mall, then don't listen to that person's request. We're well-off enough that you don't have to work, aren't we?"

"Worry about such things after you grow up. You should get going. You might be late."

Maru's mother saw him out until the door closed. Having brought his bike outside, Maru rode it to school. The head-of-the-year teacher, who would usually be standing guard catching any misfits, couldn't be seen today.

"Wanna go to the PC bang after tests?"

"Sure."

"But hey, did you study?"

"Do you think I did?"

The atmosphere was definitely not as serious as normal schools. All he heard as he went up to his classroom after locking his bike was which PC bang they were going to go to today.

"Maru, did you study?"

"I did, a lot."

"Really?"

"You believed that?"

Dojin put his thumbs up, saying that Maru was a true friend. Dojin's desk was clean, despite the fact that other classmates at least had textbooks open on their desks due to conscience. Dowook and Daemyung were looking at their textbooks, revising.

"The first and second in the class sure are different."

Dojin tried to interrupt the two by poking on their waists, but the two did not budge.

“Don’t try to drag others into hell with you and just sleep.”

“Dammit, you’re saying that to me as well? Are we still friends?”

“If a friend requires failing life with you, then I’ll politely stop being friends with you starting today.”

Maru smiled and rebuked him. Dojin eventually took out a notebook and started revising as well. Although his handwriting was neat in the top left corner, it became illegible around half way through. That was the result of dozing off halfway through writing notes.

“I can’t read a single thing.”

“Then memorize this. This is for last-minute cramming.”

Maru threw him a notebook. It was his notes that he wrote throughout the night after coming back from Seoul yesterday.

“Traitor. You did study after all.”

“Don’t talk back at me and start memorizing. Culinary arts require brains as well. In this world even chefs require degrees you know?”

“I’m gaining experience by cleaning dishes like the masters on TV, you know? To hell with studying.”

“What if you end up breaking up with Iseul?”

“...”

“Stop bullshitting and get studying. Remember the history teacher’s words when he said he’ll beat you up with a PVC pipe if you don’t get above 60 points.”

“You’re right. I almost screwed up there.”

As PVC pipes were very common in engineering schools like this one, most teachers loved to use them as rods of love. One of the teachers even wrapped a pipe with tape and praised it for its striking feel. Of course, the students preferred getting hit with PVC pipes as well. It was hollow, so it was loud but it didn’t hurt that badly. In contrast, wet hardwood produced almost no sound and hurt like hell.

“I might actually end up dying if the history teacher decides to hit me for real.”

“So memorize those well.”

As they would be able to attend junior colleges even if they don’t do that well, there weren’t that many people focusing on studying. Only the students aiming for full universities within Seoul were revising really hard. After morning homeroom, tests began immediately.

“Don’t roll your eyes. You’ll be consulting me if I hear you rolling your eyeballs around.”

The teacher appeared with a cue stick.

Maru heaved a deep breath out before reading the test papers. The first subject was Korean. These were mostly common sense questions that he didn’t need to revise to answer. He marked the answer sheet and then started resting. He could hear Dojin having trouble with his test.

“Put your pens down. The ones in the back row, collect the tests.”

The first period ended without a hitch. The ones that actually revised properly took out revision materials for the next test, but most of them just went around marking their tests.

“Hey, hey, hey! I got 80 points!” Dojin shouted excitedly.

“Me too.”

“Me three.”

“Eh?”

Most of them scored above 80 points.

‘I knew it.’

The teachers gave out hints for the test starting a week prior. It was easy enough to get points by just memorizing the stuff they taught during that period. Moreover, the Korean test was really easy this time around. Naturally, the average scores would be really high. However, tests were made to differentiate the top from the rest. In this case, even a single point would be the deciding factor in grades.

“What the heck is this....”

This was the result of downward equalization. Like this, the ones that actually revised hard would be at a disadvantage since a minor mistake would cost them dearly.

“Ah shit, I’m doomed.”

“...Dammit.”

Although this was an engineering school, it wasn’t that there weren’t any students that studied. Maru made a bitter expression as he watched some of his classmates dejected. Those people entered this school with a purpose. They were plenty capable of entering normal study-focused high schools, but they entered this school with the mindset that they want to be the head of the snake rather than the tail of the dragon. However, they would become the tail of the snake with a slight mistake, so they were really on the edge.

“What the heck? Everyone got 80 points. What is going on?”

Maru covered Dojin’s mouth and gave him an intense glare. Dojin also became quiet after seeing someone studying hard. The noisy classroom quietened down in an instant.

“Let’s give them some quiet during the exam period.”

“Yeah, we should.”

Everyone was aware of each other’s circumstances. From that moment onwards, the class became quiet in order to not interrupt others from revising. Maru smiled after seeing that.

“These kids might not have the smarts, but they’re all kind people, yeah?” Dojin also smiled as he said those words.

After a break period, the next exam began, which was maths. Although there were some students that solved problems until the very end during the Korean exam, maths was different. Maru, who was sitting at the very back, saw that the majority of the class slumped down and fell asleep within the first 10 minutes. Even the teacher, who came to supervise them, was dozing off at the front. This class wasn't nervous about the test at all. Everyone was dozing off just like the class right after lunch.

Dojin, who sat next to Maru, was rolling an eraser he cut into the shape of a hexagon. Passion could be felt from the way he did his tests. Dowook and Daemyung seemed to be solving the actual questions. Since both of them were smart, they would be able to get some good results.

Maru also solved the questions he could answer before slumping down. He only found it pathetic that his smarts didn't work in this area.

* * *

"Why did they have to include the weekend? Shouldn't they let us off on the weekend at least? I don't know who made the time table, but that guy must be evil."

"You're saying as though you'll actually study for the tests during the weekend?"

Maru pushed Dojin's back. The tests for Thursday were over. Now, they had tests on Friday, Saturday and Monday. Although Maru could read the teacher's intentions of trying to bring up the test scores by putting the weekend in the middle, it was unknown if it would actually work.

"I got three wrong."

"Me too."

"Daemyung, let's go to the library."

"Okay."

Dowook and Daemyung went to the library in high spirits. The usually naive-looking Daemyung was gone, and Dowook looked sharper than ever today.

"Don't they get tired of that?"

Dojin clicked his tongue and went to the computer department where Iseul was. Maru also took his bag and left the classroom. Usually, he would go to the library along with Daemyung and Dowook, but his desire to study fell dramatically after receiving that contract form. Now that he decided that he would be an actor in the future, he just had to study enough that it wouldn't become a hindrance. He walked down the staircase where he met Jiyeon and Aram on the second floor. The two juniors came to him from their friends when they saw him.

"Hello, seonbae-nim."

"Seonbae, did you do well on your tests?"

Maru shrugged his shoulders.

"How about you two?"

“Don’t even talk about it. The class is in an uproar thanks to Jiyeon’s notes. You see them over there? We’re all going to Jiyeon’s house to study. Oh, we don’t have any meetings at the acting club during exam period, right?” Aram asked. Maru nodded back at her.

“Good. Jiyeon, let’s go. My mom told me that she’ll buy me clothes if I can get over 80 points average on midterms.”

“Al-alright. Seonbae-nim, please excuse us.”

“Okay, work hard.”

Jiyeon looked quite bright. It seemed that the pressure she felt during every exam period was gone. Since she was a meticulous person, she would be able to get a good score if she did the tests in good condition.

‘I wonder how Bangjoon is doing.’

He went to the central door and changed his shoes when he heard a loud voice from the school field. Some students were playing soccer despite all the exams going on. Bangjoon could be seen among them. He showed incredible skill and passed by many defenders and shot the ball into the net. He looked happier than ever.

“...Looks like he gave up already.”

Maru headed home with a small smile.

* * *

“The read-through will start at 11, and after that, there will be a meal with the journalists. It won’t be that long, though.”

“To think that the journalists will actually take videos of our read-through... Things have changed a lot these days.”

“That’s true. These days, they sell things called DVDs which include not only the movie, but the making film and some commentary from the director or the actors. The read-through is being recorded for the same purpose.”

“Are you talking about CDs when you say DVDs?”

“Yes, that’s right, sir.”

Moonjoong nodded his head in acceptance. Although he was using the laptop that his daughter had bought for him, it was mostly used for checking emails. Although people around him were willing to teach how to use it properly, Moonjoong refused them all. He felt as though he was becoming an idiot when he stared into a small screen for a long period of time.

“I’ve quit smoking, but I habitually pick one up during reading, is that fine?”

“That’s not a problem. The atmosphere isn’t that strict.”

“Sheesh. I’m just worried that I might screw up my lines out of embarrassment.”

“Hahaha.”

The young fella laughed quietly. This was his manager that Junmin had sent him. He stayed by his side for a few days after saying that he would look after Moonjoong to the best of his abilities. Moonjoong first liked his attitude, and liked him more when he found out that he had a deep knowledge about acting. The more he got to like this young manager, the more he realized how great Junmin’s human resources were. Junmin knew too well which person to put where for them to bring out all of their skills.

“Sir. You should leave after a warm breakfast.”

The two left after eating breakfast made by the manager. Inside the car, Moonjoong quietly flipped over his worn out script. From how he could clearly read the text despite the rumble of the car, he felt that today was going to be a good day.

“Mr. Park.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I think I’ll visit the supermarket before I go.”

“The supermarket? If you need anything, I’ll go buy it for you.”

“No, this has to be done by me.”

“Very well, sir.”

The manager stopped by a nearby supermarket. Moonjoong went to the groceries section with the manager. They saw tangerines behind the watermelons. Although it wasn’t the right season for tangerines, they looked quite delicious as though they were grown in a greenhouse.

“This is good,” Moonjoong bought three nets of tangerines before returning to the car. He took out one of the good ones and gave it to the manager.

“Although it’s for a short time, please take care of me.”

“Yes, sir. Thanks for the tangerine.”

Moonjoong nodded his head.

“Since I’ve finished bribing you, let’s get going.”

“Haha, that was a bribe?”

“Yes of course. Since you received one from me, treat me well, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

Moonjoong smiled while looking outside the window.

* * *

-Let’s go together.

That text arrived while he was still getting changed. Maru replied to Yoojin’s message.

-Are you a kid? Why should we go together?

-Shut up and come to Gangnam station by 10.

Maru frowned and called Yoojin.

“Oh? She’s not picking up.”

He briefly wondered if he should go by himself, but decided to obediently go to Gangnam station after thinking about the consequences. Her threat of occupying her every weekend so that Maru and she wouldn’t be able to go on dates was quite a scary one.

He put his script inside his bag and had a look at the time. It was 8:30 in the morning on a Sunday, and the weather was sunny.

‘Let’s go then, shall I?’

Chapter 258

Hopping on the bus, Maru sat on one of the back seats. He opened the window slightly and took out the script from his bag. Although he only had two lines, he read them again and again. He engraved each word into his tongue, his teeth and his lips so that he would be able to mutter the words subconsciously. When he kept reading those lines, he could finally feel the pressure from saying those few words. He wished that it would be longer so that he had some time to breathe. He had to express the disdain that the delinquent had towards the old man through those short words as well as the relative catharsis of being above the old man.

“What kind of shit... shit... sshiiit....”

There was a motto on one of the walls in the practice room he practiced acting with Ganghwan in - The quality of a line uttered once is different to the quality of a line uttered a hundred times. The word might be a fixed ‘shit’, but the nuance would be different according to the intonation, the accent, and the pronunciation of the word. What ‘shit’ actually fits with the line? He had a clear answer when he practiced alone, but now that he was on his way to the read-through, he felt complicated.

“Uhm, excuse me. Can you quieten down a little?”

Maru flinched when he heard that voice. Someone had sat down next to him without him knowing. When he looked outside the window, he saw that the scenery wasn’t Suwon anymore.

“Sorry about that.”

He put the script back in his bag. The lady sitting next to him smiled and looked towards her knees. She was reading some kind of workbook and it seemed that she was preparing for a license test.

‘Phew.’

Maru didn’t entirely like the fact that he was so absorbed that he didn’t notice someone sitting next to him. He needed to calm down somewhat. He heaved deep breaths and closed his eyes. He forgot about the script for a moment and focused on his breathing. His tense nerves calmed down somewhat thanks to that.

“Excuse me.”

He saw Gangnam station in front of him. He grabbed a handle and pushed himself up before getting off the bus. The overwhelming crowd made him realize once again that it was the weekend.

Maru opened up his phone and called Yoojin.

“I’m at Gangnam station. Where are you?”

-I’ll be there soon.

“And when is soon?”

-I said I’ll be there soon.

Yoojin hung up just like that. A woman’s ‘I’ll be there soon’ was just as vague and unreliable as a man’s ‘when I was in the military’ stories, so he decided to go to a nearby convenience store for now.

The convenience store was crowded as well. After looking at the tired-looking part-time worker here with pity he started going towards the table area. He drank some refreshing sports drink, watching the cars go by when a girl entered his view. When he squinted and focused on her, he saw that she was Yoojin.

Maru closed the lid on his half filled sports drink and left the convenience store. He saw Yoojin raise her hand from the opposite side of the road before putting it down.

‘What do you want me to do?’

Maru stared at Yoojin in front of the pedestrian crossing. When the lights turned green, Yoojin reached out for the sports drink after running towards him. Of course, he had no intention of giving it to her.

“Give me some. I’m thirsty.”

“Buy one yourself.”

“Is this how you wanna do this?”

“I’ve been drinking it.”

“What’s this, Maru? You’re worried about indirect kissing? Is that it? You see me as a gi... ouch!”

Maru hit Yoojin’s head with the plastic bottle since she was uttering nonsense. Yoojin frowned and took out her phone.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m making a report, of course.”

After tapping on her phone with her thumbs at blinding speed, Yoojin smirked. Just as Maru wondered what was going on, he got a text message. Maru frowned before taking out his phone.

-Don’t bully my friend.

It was from her.

Uhm, excuse me? I'm your boyfriend, you know? And also, your future hubby.

"I'm sorry, but she's on my side."

"...Haa."

With a victorious smile, Yoojin entered the convenience store and came out holding a drink.

"Let's go."

"Yes ma'am."

The two then headed towards the JA Building.

"Did you practice a lot?"

"I only have two lines. So I don't think they'll tell me off unless I make a huge mistake."

"Good for you. I have four scenes so I have a lot to memorize."

She definitely had a teasing tone in her words. Although they were both extra roles, the scenes they appeared in were drastically different. Yoojin was the second daughter of the second son. According to roles, she would be Suyeon's younger sister. Unlike her though, who dies a miserable death, Yoojin was used as a set piece to show harmonious family relationships in the beginning of the movie, and meet a bitter ending after witnessing the deaths of her father and elder sister. She was in charge of showing the audience that the consequence of violence was an innocent victim.

"Ah, I'm nervous. Joohyun-uni will be here today too."

"You two have a scene together, don't you? When the three sons have a meal together."

"Yeah. I'm really looking forward to that. That means I get to watch Joohyun-uni acting right in front of me, right? I might faint from joy."

"What's so good about her?"

"She's cool! There's no actress cooler than her in this world."

"You're a total fangirl, huh."

Maru was reminded of the fact that Bada liked Joohyun as well. Weren't girls supposed to like handsome male actors? When he thought about it, he realized that the fans of girl idol groups were mostly teenaged girls as well. Of course, those groups had a lot of male fans as well, but the ones that actually took action were all girls.

'Well, I guess that's why the marketing departments target teenaged girls as their audience,' Maru nodded to himself as he remembered his old memories with difficulty.

"I hope I can get close to Suyeon-uni as well."

"Human relationships are best when there's a suitable distance."

"What the heck are you talking about? A close relationship is of course better," Yoojin grinned as she said those words.

“Fine. That’s for you to decide.”

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

“No.”

“Is it about the bad rumors about her?”

Maru looked at Yoojin who just shrugged her shoulders. It seemed that she was quite knowledgeable about it.

“You haven’t participated in a drama even once, have you?” Yoojin looked at the distance as she spoke. She had an aloof expression. For a brief moment, she looked like an adult.

“Do you think I have?”

“Then as a senior who has shot dramas multiple times, I shall give you advice. Hm, hm, bear this in mind since it’s an expensive piece of advice.”

“I don’t like expensive things, so I’ll forgo it.”

“Listen to me. Let me act like a senior once.”

The conclusion was that she wanted to act like a senior. Maru sighed before looking at Yoojin. Yoojin raised her index fingers as she spoke.

“This is something that a senior actor has told me during shooting. ‘The camera only records the present’, and the other one is, ‘The one with more guarantee has more power’.”

“I don’t think that’s suitable advice for a young fellow.”

“What’s that? You’re not the type to believe in Santa Claus even now, are you? Little kiddy Han Maru?” Yoojin said in a joking manner.

“Santa does exist. It’s just that he doesn’t appear in front of evil people like a certain someone who uses someone else’s girlfriend as a threat.”

“Oh no, you don’t wanna go there.”

Maru shook his head after seeing that Yoojin was planning to threaten him by taking out her phone.

“Do you have a guy you like?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m gonna become his friend, and we’ll hold a bachelor party.”

“That’s just being childish. And also, what’s a bachelor party?”

“...Forget what I said. What the heck am I saying to a kid.”

Maru felt nauseous after that as well since Yoojin kept talking non-stop. Although she was a noisy girl usually, she was especially talkative today.

“Hey, are you doing this because you’re nervous?”

“Who’s nervous?”

Although she talked back as though it was nothing, it seemed that Maru had hit the nail on the top of its head from how she looked away from him. Well, she was about to act with actresses that she had admired for so long, so it wasn’t that surprising. Perhaps the reason she called Maru out like this was also for her to shake off her nervousness as much as possible by talking noisily.

“Do well and don’t get nervous.”

“I’m not getting nervous,” Yoojin grinned back at him.

“We’re here.”

They were in front of the JA building. Although Maru had visited this place several times in the past, today felt somewhat new. There were a lot of people in the first floor lounge, and they were split in half right in the middle. On one side, people with phones, cameras and recorders were clearly moving around in a fluster, while the other side was busy with phone calls. It seemed that the former side were journalists and the latter side were the managers.

The two passed by an employee who was explaining the situation and took the elevator upstairs. The read-through was going to take place on the 7th floor. This was the floor that JA Production was using. Like when Maru came here for the interview, he followed the guide and walked down the corridor to his right. He walked down the corridor with glass walls and turned left once. He saw many people underneath the sign that said ‘Conference Room 1’. Just like on the first floor, there were people with cameras and managers. Everyone was waiting with a cup of vending machine coffee in their hands.

At that moment, a man with a short haircut approached Yoojin.

“Look who’s here. It’s been a long time, Lee Yoojin.”

“Ah, hello, journalist.”

The two greeted each other warmly. Maru got off to the side. The two seemed to be quite well-acquainted as they were smiling when they were talking to each other. Whenever the journalist talked about something, Yoojin giggled while covering her mouth. She looked very polite unlike the very down-to-earth appearance she showed Maru.

After their conversation ended, Yoojin walked towards Maru.

“You’re popular. A journalist knows you.”

“We got acquainted when I did a drama a while back. But I don’t really like him since he’s quite trashy, but I didn’t think I’d see him here.”

“Trashy? You two looked quite close back there.”

“I don’t want to get on the journalists’ bad side from the get go. If you want to continue down this line, you should practice your smiles you know? You won’t get any photos taken with a stiff expression like that,” Yoojin spoke as she poked Maru’s cheeks.

“But do we need to wait here as well?”

“I don’t know. Since everyone’s over there, we should be there too, don’t you think?”

Yoojin looked around when the journalists erupted into an uproar. They emptied their paper cups and picked up their equipment.

“Journalists, you should know this by now, but you can’t cross this line! Please abide by the rules!”

An employee appeared out of nowhere and spoke as he pointed at the white line on the floor. Maru stood behind that line as well. Somehow, he ended up standing with the journalists. Not long later, someone appeared at the end of the corridor. She was holding a bottle of water in one hand.

“Ahn Joohyun is here.”

“It’s her first commercial movie in four years. Take a good photo of her. We’ll upload it on the article immediately.”

“Hey, don’t push.”

The journalists started taking photos. Despite the fact that they were indoors, camera flashes were everywhere. Maru saw that Joohyun didn’t bat an eyelid despite the blinding flashes, and thought that she was a true pro.

Joohyun walked towards Conference Room 1 after waving her hands once towards the journalists. Someone that seemed to be her manager opened the door for her. She turned around one last time before she entered.

“What are you two doing over there?” Joohyun pointed at Maru as she spoke. The journalists all suddenly turned around.

“When did you switch jobs?” Joohyun gestured towards the two to come to her. Maru scratched his eyebrows and walked towards the conference room.

“You should’ve waited inside if you arrived.”

Maru looked behind him before speaking.

“This is the first time I saw something like that. Rather than that, you’re quite popular.”

“I’m a pop star after all. But I don’t really like it. I know that there is at least one person among those journalists that wrote a bad article about me. Should I go tell them to erase my picture?”

Joohyun smiled and talked about things that would be controversial without batting an eyelid. An actress that could swear during an interview was really quite daring. Yoojin, who was following Maru, spoke.

“Unni, you were really cool.”

“You can just give them the fuck you later as well. The pronunciation is important. It’s not ‘Fuh Q’. You should clearly accentuate each word. FUCK. YOU.”

“Hahaha.”

The two ladies entered the conference room joyfully. There were many people already seated in the conference room. On the long central table were some name plates with the names of the characters in the movie. There were chairs lined up against the walls as well, and there were people with scripts on those chairs as well.

'Looks like extras are on the outside.'

It seemed that the central table was reserved for the main and sub roles. Joohyun boldly sat at the table. Of course, in front of her was the name of the character she was acting.

Maru sat down on one of the chairs in front of the right wall. One man who was sitting there, greeted him. Maru greeted back.

'It's definitely heavy here.'

The air was different. Although this wasn't exactly practice, but just a showcase event for the journalists, the atmosphere was different as the people here were professionals. Maru sighed deeply before taking out the script from his bag. He had to adapt to the atmosphere here first.

Chapter 259

"Those with cameras, please come this way."

Two people with cameras on tripods entered. The cameramen walked around the place to find a good angle. Like that, two cameras were set up. Following that, the journalists that were waiting outside entered. They took their seats without a fuss as though they had been instructed beforehand. Following that, people holding scripts in their hands entered. They seemed to be the producers of this movie.

People started filling the empty seats one by one and eventually, all the seats except for a few chairs reserved for actors were filled.

"Why is Jiseok not coming?" Yoojin asked. Maru also looked around the conference room. Jiseok and his casual smile couldn't be seen anywhere.

"Maybe he has a prior engagement."

"Are you not even worried?"

"We're not close enough for me to be worried."

"You're so heartless."

"If you're so worried, give him a call."

"I can't be bothered, so no."

Who was heartless now? Maru stretched his arms out to shake off his nervousness.

"It's Suyeon-unni."

Suyeon entered the room and greeted the actors that had arrived before her. The senior actors welcomed her. Suyeon sat opposite of Joohyun.

“Unni, please take care of me this time as well.”

“Okay. This is our second time since we did a drama together last time, huh? Please take care of me as well.”

Suyeon and Joohyun warmly greeted each other, but Maru could see sparks between the two.

“Oh, Yoojin. Why are you over there? Your seat is over here,” Suyeon called out to Yoojin.

Yoojin tilted her head and stood up to have a look at the name plates on the table. Maru had a look as well and indeed, there was a nameplate with the name ‘Second daughter/Lee Yoojin’ on it. Yoojin walked towards her reserved seat and sat down. The seat emptied by Yoojin was filled with someone else right after. Maru saw that Yoojin was looking at him apologetically. Maru just shrugged once though, since it was natural for Yoojin, who had many appearing scenes, to sit at the main table. After all, there were different levels of extras as well.

“Oh, you’re all here.”

Following that, Park Taeho entered. As he was someone who had received the best actor award in the Daejong Awards, Maru saw that a lot of journalists were competing to take photos of him. The actors all slightly stood up to greet him as well.

“Don’t stand. You should do that when sir Yoon comes here.”

Taeho laughed heartily before taking his seat. His lively personality hadn’t changed since the audition. Maru’s eyes met with Taeho’s for a brief moment, and Taeho winked at him. Maru also smiled back and took a light bow.

Not long later, Jung Yoonhae, who was Taeho’s wife in the movie, entered. She had casual clothes on, but had thick makeup on. Maru saw that Yoonhae was looking at Joohyun with animosity. It seemed that the two weren’t on good terms.

“Joohyun, your hair is still purple. It will be quite the scene to look at if you keep that hair during shooting, right?”

“Should I? I should ask the director if I can.”

“Pfft, you’re taking a joke so seriously.”

“I was joking too. Did you take that seriously?”

Joohyun and Yoonhae then started laughing and looked at each other warmly. Maru sighed. There was a sharp knife behind those warm smiles. The conversation between women was really scary.

‘They’re openly hostile towards each other. Is the relationship between the two that bad?’

It seemed that the two were on really bad terms with each other considering that they were causing this scene in front of the journalists. Thinking back, Joohyun seemed to have a lot of enemies. After all, she didn’t seem to be on close terms with Suyeon either. To a woman like Suyeon who had a lot of secrets, a woman like Joohyun, who openly revealed all of her thoughts might be an uncomfortable existence.

“Looks like the relationship between our actresses is quite good,” Taeho spoke as he picked up his script. Thanks to his words, the volatile atmosphere calmed down in an instant. Yoonhae chuckled and told Taeho that he got fat. The flow of the conversation shifted towards Taeho and Yoonhae, and Joohyun started reading her script as though nothing had happened.

“Phew.”

Maru saw that the man sitting next to him was sighing. From how he was looking at Joohyun nervously, it seemed that this man was her manager. Maru found him quite pitiful seeing that he was worrying about the actress he was in charge of making mistakes.

“Joohyun-noona, please have some restraint.”

Maru inwardly cheered for the manager. He was aware of the manager’s predicaments. After all, road managers were the ones who got all the insults regardless of what they did. He would have to run errands during the middle of the night at random, and call various places if he somehow drove the actress late to a schedule.

“Looks like everyone’s here. Nice to meet you all, haha.”

Choi Joonggeun entered. He was the director of this movie. Following that, Gwak Joon entered as well, wearing black glasses. He was the author of the original work and had participated in making the script as well, so he was qualified to be here as well.

Maru slightly nodded towards Gwak Joon to greet him. Gwak Joon lifted his hand towards him to greet back.

A little more time passed until the majority of actors including Geunsoo sat down at the table.

“So we’re only missing sir Yoon, now?”

Director Choi Joonggeun sat down and spoke. Gwak Joon sat next to him. There were still five minutes until the read-through time. Junmin entered at that time. A few people were following him, who seemed to be the people from the production company.

Everyone started conversing under the lead of the director. He seemed to know everyone here as he was comfortable when talking with everyone. He made sure that everyone got their turns to speak. He was the prime example of a director that didn’t just shout ‘cut’ and was someone that actually cared about the piece.

Just as everyone was talking and laughing over recent matters, the door opened once again. This time, everyone looked at the door in silence. Maru was the same. He closed his script and watched as Moonjoong entered the conference room. He was holding a black plastic bag in one hand. He was wearing a beige coat and a pair of brown shoes with their noses worn out. He seemed like just an ordinary old man one would find in a neighborhood as he entered the room with a kind smile.

“Sorry for that. I was a little late because I had to visit some place.”

“Not at all, sir. You’re just in time. No, you’re a minute early.”

Joonggeun jabbed at him lightly and led Moonjoong to the seat of honor.

“Wait.”

Before he took his seat, Moonjoong took out something from the plastic bag he was holding. They were tangerines.

Tangerines? Just as Maru was wondering what was going on, Moonjoong gave the actors around the table a tangerine each. The ones that remained were given to the people at the perimeter.

“Please take care of me,” Moonjoong took his seat as he said those words with a warm smile.

“Shouldn’t we all treat these tangerines as a family treasure?”

“No, they must be treated as good luck charms.”

“It’s such a pity to eat them.”

The actors all said something to praise Moonjoong. Meanwhile, Maru just peeled the tangerine and started eating it. The manager sitting next to him looked at him with surprise before eating his own.

“Well then, if you’re done eating, let’s start reading,” Joonggeun spoke as he pushed away the tangerine peels to one side.

The actors all lifted their scripts as well. There didn’t seem to be a heavy atmosphere. It seemed as though this was their everyday life.

Maru thought about the read-throughs that he did before. He did one with Miso, Ganghwan, and Suyeon. He held one under different instructors, but all of them were strict during read-throughs. During those times, he was always told that he had to practice like it was the real deal, yet this place seemed to be more lax than ever, which made him feel awkward instead.

As expected of pros, huh?

Joonggeun stood up. He briefly started the meeting by saying that he hopes that the movie does well. Gwak Joon, the original author, stood up next.

“Please be understanding even if I act a little arrogantly.”

Gwak Joon showed that he was not joking with his expression. The actors all groaned to themselves. Following that, everyone did their greetings starting from Moonjoong to the extras.

Yoojin, who took one of the main seats, did her greeting smoothly as though she was ready for it.

“Looks like that’s the end of our greetings. Let’s start now. I’ll do the lines for the extras. Let’s do a full read-through without rest. Let’s do this joyfully everyone.”

Maru raised his head after hearing Joonggeun’s words. He was doing the lines for the extras? Although he was slightly confused, he wasn’t in a position where he could ask, so he just waited.

A page flipping noise could be heard from the table. Maru was a little shocked when he heard the page flipping noise that occurred all at once in sync. This signalled the start of the read-through. The people sitting at the perimeter also flipped their scripts as well.

#Scene 1. Junk dealer’s. Noon

The movie started with a monologue from Moonjoong.

“Like I said, pay me 10 more won.”

The voice filled the wide conference room. Although the voice wasn't loud, it was clear as though it was spoken from right next to Maru. Moonjoong spoke his line as he looked at the script. His back was hunched. The voice from his comfortable position was a lot more compressed than Maru when he straightened his back and tensed his stomach.

“I said I can't, don't keep asking.”

The director's follow-up sounded very low-quality. His effort of not trying to make it sound bad could be felt, but it was such a drastic contrast to Moonjoong's voice, so the listeners felt rather embarrassed as well. Joonggeun knew that he was just filling in for the extras, but felt very weird when the atmosphere became so drastically different in an instant. It was as though the scene suddenly shifted from the junk dealer's to the conference room known as reality.

Despite that gap, when Moonjoong spoke again, the scenery changed back. The pitiful old man who begged the junk dealer to receive 10 more won appeared once again.

It was quite a peculiar experience.

Maru was flabbergasted by the weight of each word uttered by an actor that had formed an entire world. Maru was very dissatisfied with the fact that he could only look at Moonjoong's back. Had he taken a seat a little left of his current seat, he would have been able to see Moonjoong's expression acting as well.

The acting of the man once known as the best screen actor in South Korea was very different. The emotions in those words were not violent at all. It was just a conversation that could be heard in everyday life. Moonjoong was invoking deep sympathy within the readers with his ordinary speech alone.

Maru was reminded of the fact that masters were fundamentally different from novices.

‘Pathetic.’

Even Geunseok, who was evaluated for having the most stable act in the club, seemed trivial in front of this man.

The story progressed and more actors started joining the scene.

Maru followed the script with his eyes as he listened and tried saying the lines in his heart as well. He smiled bitterly when he found out that he was lacking compared to them.

The actors here seemed to be at ease. An actor that was smiling until moments ago became angry as soon as the scene switched, and one started laughing like a madman despite the fact that he was crying until moments ago.

The emotions switched in an instant. They didn't seem to need any preparation. What was surprising was that they even chatted with other actors when they weren't required in the scene.

Although the atmosphere was lax enough to the point that they could forgive any mistakes from junior actors, Maru had to consciously control his breathing since the lines said by the actors were so elaborate. He consumed too much stamina just trying to imitate those lines in his heart.

“Can you please remove ‘Rather than that’?”

“That’s too long to take out. Should I replace it with something else?”

“Then please go with ‘Or rather’.”

“Okay, let’s try that out then.”

Gwak Joon interrupted from time to time to fix some of the lines. He was probably fixing the discrepancies that came from words written as text becoming alive through the actor’s mouths.

“Dad, that doesn’t... Dad, that... I’m very sorry.”

Yoojin spoke for the first time amongst the bigshot actors. Although she always acted boldly, she looked stiff right now. She seemed pressured by the atmosphere of the actors sitting next to her.

“I might swear at you if you end up doing that during filming,” Joonggeun said with a smile.

Although the other actors just laughed it over, as the person in question, Yoojin froze up and only said ‘yes’ repeatedly. Maru pitied her to the point that he had the urge to pat her back.

“Hm, shall we have a break?”

Hearing the director’s words, everyone put down their scripts. When Yoojin panicked and looked around, Suyeon patted her shoulders as though to tell her that it was okay.

“Don’t be nervous. You can just do it like usual.”

“Yes. It’s not like someone will eat you.”

The senior actors all encouraged her. Yoojin barely managed to smile back and nodded her head. While they had a break, the cameramen started moving around and took photos of the actors’ scripts. They didn’t do any interviews though, since it might disturb the read-through.

“Well then. Let’s get back to it, shall we?”

Joonggeun spoke as he opened his script.

Chapter 260

She wasn’t supposed to shake this badly, yet the words on the white script seemed wavy as though they were dancing. This was the first time she experienced such a thing. Yoojin was angry not at the fact that she became nervous but at the fact that she didn’t have full control over herself. She spat out a breath and closed her eyes. Her intraocular pressure rose until a white light flashed in front of her eyes. In that state, she slowly opened her eyes. The words on the script had returned to normal.

“You get nervous unexpectedly easily,” Suyeon, who was next to her, spoke. Yoojin just nodded back.

The director had definitely said that they would do a full run-through without breaks yet she was the one who caused one. A junior like her had messed up the schedule of numerous seniors in the same space as her. Yoojin felt very sorry and embarrassed to the point that she couldn't look at the seniors around the table in the face.

"Well then, let's do that again."

The director, Joonggeun, signalled the resume. Yoojin licked her lips. She resolved that she would not make the same mistake.

"Let's start where we left off."

After Joonggeun's finger click, Yoojin reflexively started speaking. She mechanically uttered the words she had practiced many times before taking in a deep breath. She did not make a mistake, but nor did she exert any emotions into her words. The line did not contain the voice of the spoiled little daughter. She knew that herself, so she couldn't imagine what the other actors had to say about this.

"Don't be late to cram school, and don't make your mother worried."

Kang Sooyeol, who was the elder's second son and Yoojin's father in the movie, replied to her with his line. Sooyeol didn't look at the script, but looked at Yoojin in the face as he spoke, and he had a calm smile on his face. It was the smile of a father looking at his daughter. Seeing that smile, Yoojin felt embarrassed on one hand, and was relieved on the other hand. She could feel that her stiff lips had relaxed somewhat. She gained the confidence that she could do it.

"Dad, stop nagging me."

She recovered from her stiff face as well. She made a grumpy expression and looked at Sooyeol. Sooyeol nodded his head and followed up after.

"She's good. Kids these days are really good at acting, aren't they, sir?"

Hearing the director's words, Moonjoong said 'of course'. Yoojin was able to smile since she felt that she was praised. She was no longer nervous. Only now did she feel like she was doing a read-through with her senior actors.

Yoojin flipped over the page carefully as she looked at the expressions of the senior actors. Although this was supposed to be a simple read-through, everyone was exerting emotions into their words.

Taeho smashed the table with his fist as he did his line. This scene was where he got into an argument with the main protagonist, Moonjoong, and it was very lively as though someone not looking at the scene might believe that a fight actually broke out. What was surprising was that the two arguing people weren't even looking at each other in the face, yet those vicious emotions felt very real.

After a storm of words swept past, Moonjoong started his soliloquy after realizing that he was all alone in this world. Even Taeho, who was shouting as though he was about to eat someone, started looking at Moonjoong and the script alternately with a heavy expression. Yoojin had a glance at the other actors as well. Everyone was focusing on Moonjoong's act just like Taeho was. Of course, no one looked at him passionately. They only nodded from time to time as though they had learned a thing or two from him.

Another page was flipped over. Now, the scene shifted to where the elder, the main character, was walking around the streets while drunk. He no longer sounded angry like before, and just felt powerless. It was as though a portion of his soul was ripped apart. He didn't slur his words like a drunkard. In fact, the pronunciation became even clearer than before. However, each of those words felt a lot colder than before.

Yoojin saw that Moonjoong's face had turned bright red. Although his words didn't contain any power, his expression looked as desperate as a man pushed to the edge of a cliff. The drastic contrast between his words and his expression was splendid enough to go on camera immediately. Yoojin couldn't even think about looking at the script as she looked at Moonjoong. Moonjoong blamed himself for the attitude of his three sons, and eventually, he looked as though he was over it.

His breath was very thin. It was the lamentation of an elder who had lost his meaning of living. He felt ashamed of himself and angry at his children. At the same time, he felt empathy. Moonjoong expressed the moment that contained those complex emotions with a self-loathing laugh and a sporadic breathing, and Yoojin gaped her mouth slightly as she watched all of this happen.

Shocked? That wasn't enough to describe it. Overwhelmed? Still not enough. She couldn't use words to describe this situation. At the end of her contemplation, she arrived at an answer.

'I became the elder.'

She saw herself in the sighing elder's position, felt the same pain as him, and spat out that same pain with the same slow breath. The act did not show her, but made her understand, nay, sympathize with the old man. The acting skills made her look at that man and nothing else for a brief moment and made her forget about herself. She never understood when an actor was known for doing 'immersive' acts, and now she could finally understand what that meant. She simply didn't understand what it meant since she had never seen such an actor until now.

And right now, she understood the meaning behind the word fully.

'This is the best and the worst opportunity.'

Yoojin turned around to have a look at Maru who was sitting against the wall. The script was slowly heading towards Maru's lines. He only had two sentences. He had to interact with Moonjoong with just those. It was a great opportunity to act in the same scene as a great senior, but at the same time, there was the possibility that the act would pale in comparison to Moonjoong's. The director would want the best picture possible, and it was unknown what his standards would be after seeing a great act from Moonjoong.

She imagined for a second. Lights and reflectors, camera rolling. Numerous people in the staff would be looking at him, and a great senior would be acting in front of him as well. Eventually, the camera would focus in on his face and towards his mouth. How immense would the pressure be?

She shivered just thinking about it. Not many people blamed new actors for making mistakes, at least in the dramas that she had participated in. However, it would be a different story if that mistake was repeated several times. Sometimes, the director would go as far as to pause the filming itself then and there.

'Phew. This is why one has to start from the bottom of the ladder.'

A two shot with a great senior actor. If it was before she saw Moonjoong's acting, she would have accepted it gladly, but now that she had seen him in action, she did not have the slightest desire to do so.

Moonjoong kept acting like a drunkard as he read his line. He was lying down on a bench in the streets. Yoojin had a look at Maru. It was time for him to appear.

"Hey, I said let's get going. What are you doing over there?" The director spoke.

This line was supposed to be said by Jiseok. The director took his place since he wasn't here. The director said the following line as well, and now it was Maru's turn.

However, he took Maru's line as well.

"What kind of shit have you been doing all this time for you to end up there?"

The director said that line with a little bit of mischief. The actors chuckled. The atmosphere hadn't changed.

Maru was looking at his script without saying anything. Yoojin felt agitated. The person in question was sitting still, so she was in no position to say anything either. Moreover, he was just an extra. It was much more important to listen to the acting of the main actors, so it would be somewhat out of his position as an extra to break the flow.

Maru seemed to be aware of that and didn't seem to mind it that much. After all, how many people here would be aware of the fact that an extra like him had attended this event?

She was about to flip her script over when,

"Director," Moonjoong straightened his back as he spoke. The director looked at him puzzledly.

"The actor is right there, so why don't we have a listen to his lines?"

"Oh, he's here?"

The director looked around. Yoojin saw that Maru was waving his hand that was holding the script.

She thought that no one would recognize his presence, but the main character, of all people, called him out. Yoojin looked at Moonjoong and Maru alternately in surprise.

"Sorry, as far as I was aware, the majority of you were absent. Well then, let's have a listen, shall we?"

"Then let's start from the line before."

When Moonjoong flipped the page back, everyone in the conference room followed suit. Perhaps this was what it felt like to be a disciple of a master. Yoojin gulped before looking at Maru.

After a moment of silence, Moonjoong started his line again after a small cough. The self-loathing laugh of a powerless elder repeated itself and following that, the director said the delinquent's line with a bit of effort.

Then,

“What kind of shit have you been doing all those years for you to become like that?”

Yoojin felt very unpleasant the moment she heard those loathing words that came out from the twisted mouth that was Maru's. His head was tilted slightly sideways and was crossing his legs. He couldn't look more delinquent-like even when he looked like an ordinary student just a moment ago. No, 'delinquent-like' didn't fit him. He felt much more deplorable than that.

He was looking at the floor, and it seemed that he was looking down on 'something'. Yoojin had the misconception that there was an elder lying down where he was looking. Leaving aside Maru's attitude, his eyes looked as though they were looking at something real, not something imaginary, so Yoojin momentarily felt that she was the weird one for not being able to find anything.

When Maru's lips curved after that line, Yoojin frowned subconsciously. She suddenly had a feeling of disgust towards him. She even thought that Maru's disgusting inner self had manifested itself through the form of acting. Of course, she was well-aware that that wasn't the case, but the rejection she felt towards him was unbelievably real.

Maru's voice was immediately buried behind Moonjoong's following words. Moonjoong followed up too naturally. No one found a flaw, and no one laughed either. The cheerful atmosphere in the room became cold in an instant. It was as though someone had poured freezing water on them.

Yoojin glimpsed at the actors. Although she did not find any change within the director, Moonjoong, and Taeho's group, she could feel the faint tension from nearby actors. Suyeon especially - she was looking at the script with scary eyes, and she had a slight smile on her face. Yoojin felt a shiver climb down her spine the moment she saw Suyeon's expression and immediately had to shift her eyes to her own script.

The street scene ended after Moonjoong's words. The director, who was in charge of leading everyone, stopped there and crossed his arms as he smiled.

“Sir, kids these days are really good at acting. I mean, really.”

He had a satisfied smile on his face. The moment Yoojin saw that smile, Yoojin clenched her teeth. Those were the same words that he said when she made a mistake. If there was a difference, it was that before, he said those words as encouragement, and this time, he seemed to be truly surprised. She felt a scratch on her pride.

‘Yes, that's right.’

She had almost forgotten. Something similar had happened in the amateur acting class before. Although she had forgotten about those emotions after Maru left due to injuries, those emotions surfaced again today.

I will do better than you.

That was the objective she set for herself during the amateur acting class. Yoojin heaved a deep breath out through her nose and looked at Maru. He was muttering something to himself as though nothing had happened and was flipping to and from pages.

She felt fired up again. Although the atmosphere felt like there would be a break, Yoojin kept staring into the script without letting it go. She did not want to be behind her peers.

“Uhm, let’s have a break,” the director, Joonggeun, spoke as he stood up.