

Once Again 311

Chapter 311

“Are you sure you didn’t get hit for real?” Yoojin asked as she took her eyes off the TV.

“Of course I didn’t. It was planned beforehand.”

“Really? It looks realistic, though.”

Maru felt like he had become a monkey at a zoo. He turned around to the left. The students of Bosung Girls High quickly turned away. Even though he had met eyes with them, they turned around and pretended they were never interested from the beginning. Maru sighed.

Just as Woosung High was about to do their part after Bosung High’s practice, Daemyung talked about the drama in passing. Maru was about to gloss over it, but Yoojin ended up overhearing it. In the end, they turned the TV on and watched the drama together. It was quite embarrassing to watch his own acting with many people at once. This was why monitoring had to be done alone. His face became hot.

“Aren’t we here to practice?” Maru asked Yoojin, since she held the remote.

“You don’t appear anymore?”

“I’m just an extra, so that’s the end of me.”

Yoojin nodded and turned off the TV.

“So? How was it? Your first drama debut.”

“Is this the time for that? Let’s get to practice before it gets too late.”

Maru glanced at Daemyung. Yoojin thought that what Maru said was plausible and told her juniors to clean up.

“But I don’t think there’s anything they can gain from watching us. I mean, they didn’t do bad.”

The play acted out by Bosung Girls High didn’t have any major flaws. It was a play for the festival. There wouldn’t be any problems as long as it was enjoyable to the audience. Maru spotted some trivial mistakes here and there, but those flaws would instead grab the audience’s attention and make them focus more. They weren’t doing a play for a competition but for a festival, so it might look like a good event instead.

“Not bad means not good either, doesn’t it? Since we’re doing it, we should do it perfectly. Don’t you think so?”

Hearing Yoojin’s words, the girls all replied ‘yes’. Although it was past 8 o’clock in the evening, the girls’ concentration did not waver at all. It seemed that they had no intentions of doing things moderately just because it was a festival they were doing the play for. Maru changed his mind seeing their eyes. Since they were giving it their all, his side couldn’t do things moderately either.

“I don’t know if it’s going to be of any reference, but we’ll show you anyway.”

Maru looked at Daemyung. Daemyung looked at all the rest of the members and had them get ready. This was the first time they did 'I've been really wronged' in a place other than their clubroom.

The first years' faces were a little flushed. The most stable-looking was Jiyeon. Her personality was changing ever since her family matters were solved. Meanwhile, Aram, who was ever so confident in the clubroom looked very nervous. Normally, she would be joking around and playing pranks, but she hadn't spoken a word ever since they arrived at this school. Bangjoo was taking calm breaths. Although he had shrunken back slightly, he wasn't stiff.

Dowook was gulping endlessly. He was the type of person that would become nervous in unexpected situations. He needed to get used to being seen by others.

"This might not be the competition itself, but I wish you can think of it as the real deal."

Daemyung consoled everyone and told them to take deep breaths. Don't mind them and just do the usual - were his words.

* * *

"Watch well," Yoojin spoke to the junior sitting next to her.

This junior played the role of the company employee, the same as Maru. She told her to focus on Maru as an individual rather than the play as a whole. The junior nodded her head carefully.

Although Maru shouldn't be aware of this, director Choi Joonggeun sometimes mentioned his name after his shoot. The fact that a director of a movie was putting an extra like him in his mind was something out of the ordinary. Additionally, who was director Choi Joonggeun? He was a star movie director that produced several hit works one after the other. He was remembered by such a man, so he must have been great back there. He should also have improved from when he did the read-through.

Yoojin leaned against a wall and watched Woosung High's play. Unlike practice, there were a few hiccups here and there. The mistakes mostly came from the first years. It was an unnoticeable mistake for those that didn't know the play, but even Dowook made a mistake.

Meanwhile, Daemyung showed very stable acting skills. Although he was usually shy, he switched into a completely different person once he started acting. The way he crossed his legs and yawned was without a doubt a lazy policeman.

Compared to Maru, however, Daemyung's presence was definitely more faint. She turned her gaze to Maru, who was suppressing his voice slightly at the center of the stage. If other people were asked 'what do you think that actor's age is' after Maru dressed up in a suit and covered his face, anyone would reply that he was in his late forties. It felt so disconcerting that a high school student had an expression befitting of someone that age. It would in fact sound more realistic if he was a middle-aged man wearing special makeup to look young.

He was that natural. It didn't feel like he was acting at all. No matter how stable Daemyung looked during acting, it was noticeable that he was a high school student acting. The others didn't even need mentioning. They were obvious.

It was just Maru that was different from others. He became one with his role - this expression couldn't fit better than in a situation like this. The only flaw, if there was any, was that he looked too young. How could he be so good?

'Also, he's even better now that it's not practice.'

Ordinarily, it's easier to bring out one's fullest skills in a comfortable environment. The audience's gaze was that scary. The pressure given off by those watching would make most people flinch back.

However, Maru seemed to take that pressure as his motivation instead. Perhaps he was someone that became better under pressure.

She had originally invited Woosung High to help out her juniors, but now she thought that she was instead doing the opposite. Her original intention was for her juniors to watch Woosung High's completed play and find their own flaws, and improve on themselves, just like how singers would listen to guide songs and eventually make the song theirs. She thought that her juniors were smart and were plenty capable of doing that, and it seemed that it was true to a certain extent as well. However, she felt that it wouldn't be helping the junior that had the same role as Maru.

She would be able to gain some confidence and strive to do better if the target was someone within reach, but it was likely that her confidence would waver instead if she was seeing someone that was way out of her league. Yoojin had a glance at the junior sitting next to her. She was one ambitious junior. She had taken one of the major roles for the winter acting competition. She had enough skills to match her ambition, but she had a very serious look on her face right now. It didn't look like she was understanding anything. She looked like she was looking at something foreign.

"Let's just watch. He's a strange one. So just think of him as an anomaly."

In the end, she had to change her words. She felt that the knowledge her junior had complied until now regarding acting would collapse if she told her to try imitating him.

The words Yoojin heard the most when getting acting lessons from her instructor was to not follow things that she couldn't catch up to. A sparrow wasn't capable of catching up to an eagle. Looking at the peak at the bottom of the mountain and then climbing would tire one out very easily. People needed to focus on closer objectives like reaching the next tree. Only then would one arrive at the top of a mountain.

Yoojin's junior couldn't accept it for a moment, but she had to. It was after she had seen Maru's monologue.

Maru, who was supposed to be doing things 'moderately' was looking as though he was about to swallow everyone whole. Yoojin wondered how that was 'moderate' at all. She was thankful that he was putting in his full effort, but thanks to that, she killed her junior's motivation. Now she wanted to ask him to do things moderately. He was even better than during practice, which made her laugh awkwardly.

"Hm, was that of any help?" Daemyung asked after they finished.

Yoojin saw that her juniors' expressions weren't that good. It was natural - they were lacking compared to Woosung High.

“Of course. Thanks to you, I think we can improve ourselves for the festival.”

“Really? That’s good. Though, we shouldn’t be that much different since we made mistakes as well.”

Daemyung scratched his head as he laughed.

“Are we done here?” Maru asked.

Yoojin crossed her arms. It was just past 9. There was still some time until the last train.

“Can I ask you for one more thing?”

Maru looked like he clearly couldn’t be bothered. His will to go home now that his work was done was clear for everyone to see. Yoojin quickly looked at Daemyung.

“Sure.”

When Daemyung gave the permission, Maru sighed as though he had given up.

“I want you to tell us our good points and bad points. Even trivial things are okay. These girls have never received feedback from people other than their colleagues. It won’t take long. I want everyone to say just a few words.”

There weren’t that many acting competitions targeted towards high school students. Although there was quite a number nationwide, due to regional restrictions there was a limited number of competitions students could participate in each year. The most well-known one was the National Youth Acting Competition that was held once in the summer and once in the winter. Only a portion of the 40 people in the club could stand on such a stage. The rest would all be staff members.

Thanks to that, there weren’t that many opportunities to show their skill in front of others. Among the first years gathered here, there might be some of them that might not get to stand on stage even until they graduate. After all, Bosung Girls High was strict when it came to who could go up on stage.

Thanks to that, an opportunity where they could get feedback was quite important, especially if the ones giving them criticism were people like Maru and Daemyung, who had great analytical skills. She could give her opinions as well, but it wouldn’t give as much stimulus as other people saying it.

“Everyone did so well though....”

Daemyung spoke as he looked at her juniors. It seemed like he was put in a tight spot. Yoojin asked again. Only then did Daemyung accept saying that it might be something trivial.

“Thanks.”

Yoojin smiled.

* * *

Chaerim got in the car driven by her manager.

“Shall we go?”

“Yes, oppa.”

The other members had already returned to the residence. It had been two years since they debuted. Their first song, which had a 'cheerful girlfriend' theme to it received much more love from the public than the initial expectations. The president of her agency said that they would be able to stand and sing on a big stage after two years of hard work, but they took first place in a public TV station's music programs just three months after they debuted; in all three channels as well. Thanks to that people often said that the top male idol group was TTO while the top female idol group was BLUE.

After the unexpected sudden success, they went around the country singing in various places. It was then that Chaerim found out that there were so many colleges in the country. The president of her agency said that they would receive backlash if they acted like superstars just because they became famous instantly, and scheduled all sorts of events, and thanks to that, they very rarely even met their parents for a whole year after their debut. In fact, their parents came to their residence and consoled them from time to time.

Thanks to the one year of a busy schedule, she rarely had time to go to school. Just as she had almost forgotten the faces of her classmates, she transferred to Myunghwa High School upon the recommendation of the president. It was a school commuted by many students that were also celebrities, and it was one of the few schools that acknowledged attendance for leaves that was due to a celebrity's schedule. Of course, not going at all was no good, but there was definitely more liberty than her previous school.

Even in Myunghwa High School, she was a superstar. At first, she was pressured and was scared by such gazes, but she became used to it after a year.

While most people of her age trembled because of the approaching college exams, she trembled because of her packed schedule.

The gazes of people that made her flinch now made her smile instead. She couldn't feel happier that she was at the center of attention. The president of her agency told her that it was the qualities of a celebrity. In the drama she started recently, she was given a lot of insults at first due to her lack of skill, but now, more and more people were cheering for her instead. The presents given to her by the fans started increasing as well. This meant that the public's interest in her was growing. Before, it was just the people of her age that recognized her, but ever since she started shooting the drama as one of the main characters, the adults recognized her as well. She felt happy every day since she felt that she was expanding her domain.

"Hm."

Chaerim rested her chin against her palm and looked outside the window. In the drama episode that aired today, she had a lot of appearances. It was an episode that briefly showed the romantic interests of the two main characters. She visited the school because she slightly wanted to boast about the fact that she was acting together with two boys from quite popular idol bands. She had gone out of her way to visit. She wanted the acting club to praise her and wanted them to be envious of her for meeting male actors.

However, it didn't go as she had intended, and she didn't like that. On TV was her figure, yet the others were looking at someone else. It pissed her off that things didn't go according to her plan.

“Oppa, can you turn on the radio?”

“Radio? Alright.”

Chaerim thought about the girl that looked like she was in a tough spot but eventually shook her head. They weren’t comparable at all. That girl was just a student in an acting club in a high school while she was an idol loved by many. Yes, they weren’t comparable at all.

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Not everything could be completely satisfactory. There were some downsides that had to be taken with every choice. For example, there was this chocolate. It would be sweet the moment it entered the mouth. There was even caramel cream on the inside so it would be even sweeter. However, she would regret it by the time she was about to sleep.

This body wasn’t just her own. Chaerim kept reminding herself that and pushed aside the chocolate given to her by a fan of hers as a present. What she picked up instead was a cucumber that her trainer put inside her bag. When she was young, she detested them due to the yucky smell, but she got used to them after eating them for a long time. Just what was the difference between watermelon peels and cucumber? At least watermelon peels had some taste to it when there was a red part. Cucumbers were tasteless no matter how you ate them.

She bit a chunk off the cucumber to stave off her hunger. Ah, there it was. The only good point about cucumber was its crunchy sound. She then ate a handful of almonds and a slice of roasted kabocha squash. Although these were given to her to eat little by little across a number of meals, she couldn’t do that since they were no different from emergency rations. She wondered if there was any pill that would make her feel satiated without gaining any weight. She wanted to say goodbye to dieting forever.

-Good evening, Moon’s Reflection on the Window listeners. I’m your host Ahn Joohyun. I was supposed to meet you in the morning, but today is a special occasion and I get to see you during the evening. The DJ, Miss Gong Yeonsoo is absent for the evening for personal reasons, so I am doing this in her stead today. I’m sorry you have to listen to my voice instead of Yeonsoo's relaxing voice. If this was my program, I would’ve said anything I wanted to, but this is a more formal program, so I’ll try to restrain myself. Well then, why don’t we look at the moon’s reflection on the window as we go into our first corner.

Chaerim looked at the radio. She thought that it was a familiar voice, and it turned out to be Joohyun-
unni.

“Oppa, raise the volume a little.”

“Alright.”

The volume became louder. Joohyun was currently reading a user-submitted story.

“Have you ever spoken to Joohyun-unni, oppa?”

“Me? No, other than when we talked in passing during a get-together. As you know, our company separates the actors and the singers.”

Chaerim nodded her head. Although they both belonged to Yellow Star Entertainment, she had never spoken to Joohyun either. She did greet her though.

- The docile me sounds too foreign? I think so too. Well then, let's listen to a song before we continue....

A song that was like the spring drizzle then flowed out. Chaerim looked outside the window. There was a big full moon outside. Just like how the thin crescent gradually became a full moon, she became an idol from her tragic trainee days. Whenever she went to school, others recognized her and came up to her, and people waved at her whenever she went to do an event. She felt touched every time she was at the center of attention.

Recently, she thought that being an idol was insufficient to maintain that level of attention. The number of entertainment companies releasing idol bands was increasing from just the three major agencies: Yellow Star, NL Company and Jewel Entertainment. She felt this every time she went to a television music show. At least three teams came to greet her and make themselves known every time she went there. Sometimes, there were more than five.

As the idol world had a strict sense of hierarchy, she also went around greeting people. Whenever she went to greet her senior idols that did not become popular, she felt very nervous. Although they both encouraged each other, the atmosphere was very hostile. Unpopular idols, new idols, and popular idols. The idol industry was full as it is, yet there were more idols every day.

Chaerim was oftentimes surprised when she looked at some of the people that came to greet her as trainees. The kids in elementary school that were preparing to become idols didn't just have the nationality of Korean. There were several of them who actually had citizenships in other countries. Also, they all looked cute and pretty like dolls.

Since she lived in a world where she herself was a product, she had become very sensitive. She was completely different from the days she just blindly put in effort without knowing anything. She often thought that her popularity would end very soon. After all, she had seen too many people that became rocks from being stars due to a single mistake.

She once read from a magazine article that idols were, put in a bad way, consumables. When she read that article, she thought that that journalist was clueless, but now that time had passed, she deeply sympathized. This was the 2nd year of her debut. The group was still popular right now, however there were signs indicating their downfall. An example was that their third album did not have good sales after it was released. Above all, they couldn't take first place in all of the three major TV stations' music programs. They were first in two of them, but they were overtaken by a new idol group in the third one. The members that thought that first place would be theirs ever since TTO started individual activities were shocked as well.

Of course, it was still okay. The exclusive concert that was held at the beginning of the summer holidays was sold out as soon as the ticketing went live. It was an indication that they were still popular, but the tinge of discomfort in her heart was still there.

That was the reason she turned her eyes to acting. Chaerim could no longer imagine a world where she didn't receive attention. She wanted to be the loved and cute girl forever. There was a limit to that while she was still an idol. There were many instances where senior idol groups split up due to disharmony

among the members. She had to be prepared for such circumstances. She had to receive the love of the public even if she became independent.

In that sense, acting was something that went well with her. She nagged the company president and received acting lessons. The trigger for that was when she watched TTO. TTO was an idol band that was originally intended to be a multi-purpose group. The president of her agency said that he was also surprised when he saw the preparations that NL Company made.

Even a top idol band like TTO was preparing for the next stage. She thought that she had to be like that as well and immediately put her plan into action.

A spot for a protagonist in a drama came to her immediately. Although she was nervous and shaking, she was successful. She knew that she didn't receive good gazes from the people around her, but she thought that she could endure them. After all, they would disappear soon. She took the first step. Once she became popular enough in dramas, movie producers would start calling for her as well. Idols were starting to appear in movies, when it was considered an impenetrable area before, so she wasn't mistaken about that.

"The actress Chaerim."

Right now, though, she was more popular as the idol Chaerim rather than the actress Chaerim. She wanted to change her title as soon as possible. She wouldn't have to care about popularity once she became someone at Joohyun's level. Of course, she had no plan on becoming like Joohyun. That woman was too reckless. She was not afraid of the masses. Chaerim thought that she would disappear sooner or later.

'But wouldn't it become an issue if I was in the same frame as her?'

Joohyun was quite well-known for looking after her juniors. Wouldn't she help if she went up to her and asked for help? Then, she would ask the company president to let her be in the same work as Joohyun next time. Journalists would flock to write articles, and she would be able to make herself known.

If that happened, she would receive more love.

Chaerim reached into her bag. Her phone was ringing.

"Oppa, sorry, but turn down the volume a little."

"Okay."

She answered the call after looking at the caller's name.

"Yes, Sungjae-oppa."

It was Sungjae of TTO. The two became acquainted after coming across each other frequently in music programs, and became close after they did a TV show together. Recently though, she had heard that he was busy shooting movies and dramas.

-I had a look at the drama.

"Really? Now that makes me embarrassed."

-You were good, though. Oh, the reason I called is because of the party you told me about last time.

“Oh, okay, what about it?”

-I’m sorry but I don’t think I’ll be able to make it. I have an appointment.

“What is it about?”

-I plan to get some acting lessons. Sorry about that.

“That can’t be helped then. Instead, you should hang out with me later.”

-Alright.

After ending the call, Chaerim pouted. She boasted to the other members of her group that she had invited Sungjae, but things didn’t go as she had expected. Just until a year ago, she didn’t have any free time at all, but now, she had enough free time to book party rooms and play around with people close to her. She was capable of paying an enormous sum that was unthinkable for a student. The best decision she made in her life was that she told her parents that she would manage her own bank account. She regularly sent them living expenses, so they didn’t have any complaints either.

“Rather than that, to think that someone like him would take acting lessons....”

Sungjae always talked about how effort was useless compared to popularity, and always prioritized playing around.

‘Well, I guess he must have his reasons.’

When she dozed off for a little, she had arrived at the residence. She took the elevator to the 7th floor and opened the door. There were two pairs of shoes at the entrance.

“You’re back?”

She was greeted by the unnis that had face packs on.

“Where’s Dayoon-uni and Minji-uni?”

“They’re apparently guests at a radio program. They left all of a sudden.”

“Okay.”

Chaerim first took a shower. She washed off the sweat and she returned to her immaculate skin. She cleaned up her skin with the cosmetics in the bathroom before coming out to the living room. The two unnis were doing yoga while watching TV. She took out a face pack from the fridge. She had sensitive skin so she would have skin trouble no matter how much she looked after it.

She put the mask on and laid down on the sofa. During trainee days, they all slept together in a small room, but now that two years had passed after their debut, they were living in an apartment with four rooms. The restrictions placed on their actions were eased a lot and they were able to go out as they wished. Of course, they had to get permission if they wanted to sleep over. After all, their idol life might be over if a bad photo of them was taken.

“Chaerim, you were quite awkward.”

The big unni suddenly spoke. Chaerim pretended not to have heard it and did not react to her. However, she kept going with her sarcasm. Chaerim inwardly wondered if she was sane to speak like that as the oldest member.

She had to be jealous. That big unni liked the Woomin guy that she was doing a drama with. Chaerim sighed. During their trainee days, none of this was a problem. Everyone became the support of everyone else. They relied on each other. However, as they started doing individual activities, the crack within the team started growing. This was one of the reasons why Chaerim was doing her best in acting. She thought that this team might disappear into thin air.

‘Does she want to act so immature after spending 21 years in life?’

Of course, she didn’t say it out loud. She smiled back and said that it was difficult and that she was still bad. Although her innards were boiling, she couldn’t help it. There were rumors about disharmony already, so it would be hard to control her emotions in front of the camera if they actually started fighting here.

The eldest member seemed to know that and focused on her exercise again.

That’s right, they met each other out of necessity. It wasn’t like they were going to be idols forever.

“Thanks unnis. It’s like a dream now as well. I was able to become like this thanks to you all.”

“You’re welcome.”

It always ended like this. In fact, it was good that everyone was being hypocritical. Chaerim thought that she had to become successful as an actress as soon as possible. She couldn’t stay for a long time on a ship that was starting to be flooded with water.

The next day, Chaerim came across a boy one year younger than her before she went to the drama shooting location. He said that he would be appearing as an extra. It was one of the guys in the actor section of her agency, and his name was Yoo Jiseok. This was the first time she had seen him even though they both belonged to Yellow Star.

“Please take good care of me, noona.”

He acted very familiar even though it was their first meeting. Taken aback by his personality, she replied ‘okay’. Jiseok was a talkative boy. It was hard being his conversation partner.

“Why did you start acting?”

“Me? Uh, well, because I like acting.”

“I see. For me, I just liked coming up with imaginations. Then, I wanted them to become real. I don’t have any talent in writing, so I thought acting might be the thing for me. That’s why....”

He talked relentlessly without getting tired. Chaerim listened to him with a smile, but she was already fed up on the inside. She was sad at the fact that she couldn’t say anything to him because she didn’t want to leave behind a bad impression.

“Oh, yeah. I have a friend whose name is Han Maru, and I’ve never seen someone as good as him at acting until now. But he has this cold side to him.”

Now he started talking about his friends. Chaerim felt her lips aching. There was a limit to how long she could smile.

“I think you should’ve seen him too. I mean, you two appeared in the drama together.”

“Oh, really?”

She didn’t think much about it but replied anyway. Perhaps that guy was just a random ‘student 1’ or something. Just at that moment, they arrived at the set. It was Sangam High School, which no longer seemed big to her.

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“The atmosphere is not looking good.”

It was just as he said. The atmosphere at the drama set was rock-bottom. Although the shoot was continuing, it was unknown when a battle would erupt out.

The dispute between the camera director and the producer started from the first shoot. Two weeks ago, they were at the point where it made people worry that the drama might end just like that. Although they avoided the worst case scenario thanks to someone’s advice, they were still glaring at each other whenever the opportunity occurred.

When she thought about it, TV media was a happy world covered with lies. The people in the camera frame were all happy with each other, but the moment the camera turned off, they just shut themselves up and glared at each other. Chaerim thought that such was TV media after looking at two people, that were portrayed as being on good terms on a TV show she watched before, shouting at each other off camera. It was a world where stubborn experts were everywhere. Of course, she was also one of them.

“But are you alright, noona?”

“I’m fine. But can you stay quiet? I’m feeling a little dizzy right now.”

“Okay.”

After shutting Jiseok up, Chaerim closed her eyes. She was in a horrible condition today. Sharp gazes were hitting her from all around. Although annoyance was surging within her, she couldn’t express that out loud. After all, she was causing all the NG scenes here.

It was clear that today was just a bad day for her. First, there was the chatterbox, and then she started committing mistakes everywhere during the shoot. The producer from the TV station encouraged her saying that she shouldn’t be nervous, while the staff’s gaze towards her was incredibly hostile. The short break was about to end soon. She would have to stand in front of the camera again. She had no time to worry about things like committing another mistake. She had to get an okay sign this time.

“Let’s resume shooting.”

Chaerim tapped on her cheeks as she stood up. The minor role characters were all smiling at her saying that it was okay, but she thought that they would be insulting her on the inside. They were probably thinking something along the lines of 'to think that someone like her is the main character' or something like that. She couldn't accept such a judgement. She had to not make a mistake this time.

Actually, the gazes of the staff and the minor characters didn't matter at all. The problem was with the students that were watching from afar. Chaerim decided not to go on the internet tonight. Although the students were restricted from taking photos, there was no way to stop them from taking pictures from afar. After all, the shooting location was something they were borrowing. She thought about the girls that would laugh at her while looking at her making so many mistakes. It was obvious that they would write things like 'I saw Chaerim today and she's god awful at acting' or things like that. Although she had seen numerous malicious comments on the internet during the past two years, reading them still made her heart thump from nervousness. Her stomach started aching and she started sweating coldly. She used to be extremely sensitive about such things to the point that she took medicine.

She didn't want her acting skill controversy that she put out with all of her effort to surface again.

"Good. Don't get nervous. Stand by, and cue."

The director spoke while clenching his fist.

* * *

"Right now?"

It was a series of confusion for Maru from the moment he received a call from a number he didn't know. The one that called was someone with the title 'liaising writer'. He felt that the voice was familiar, and then remembered the woman with the red cone during the drama. Before he even asked what happened, she asked if he could come to Sangam High School immediately. No, she was saying as though he had to be here. He asked what happened once again, and only then did the liaising writer reply to him that they needed a replacement actor because a problem had occurred.

-Please come immediately.

The current time was 3:21. He was in the middle of practicing the play with his club since today was extracurricular activities day. They were about to put an end to practice since Jiyeon had an appointment with her family, so there was no problem with going there.

"Did an accident happen? It's not like someone would suddenly be unable to act."

-Something like that. We originally intended to call someone else because we were in a hurry, but some of the staff here including the camera director recommended you. This is an opportunity for you. You'd be a minor character rather than an extra like before.

"Then do I get a guarantee as well?"

Since this was an important question, he asked immediately. The writer became silent. Following that, a flabbergasted voice came out from the other side.

-Is money important right now? I'm telling you this is an opportunity.

"I'm saying it because it's not up to me. If there's monetary gain, I have to talk about it with my agency, don't I? That's how it works."

-You have an agency?

"Yes."

-Which one?

"JA Production. I get that it's an opportunity, but things might become problematic if I accept without consulting them first. What are you going to do?"

-JA? You really belong to that place? Phew, wait a moment. Also, give me your manager's phone number.

She hung up. Maru wondered what happened on the set. From how they were looking for actors, it didn't seem like the drama stopped entirely. Since they sounded urgent, he sent the woman a message first. It sounded like he had some lines from what she said. Meaning, that this role required prior preparation to do. They were looking for a person that could urgently play such a role. Maru wondered if an accident happened.

"What is it?"

Daemyung asked as he got ready to leave the classroom. Maru explained to him briefly.

"That sounds like a good thing, but it does sound a little disturbing," Daemyung spoke with a worried expression.

"I think so too."

"What are you going to do then? We're planning to go to a meat buffet without Jiyeon."

"You can go by yourselves for now. I'll message you if I think I can't go."

"Alright."

After separating from the rest of the members, Maru first went to the bus stop. He sat down on the chair and looked at his phone. He spent about five minutes doing that when he got a call.

-I finished talking with your manager. Please come to Sangam High School as quickly as possible.

"But if I'm playing a minor role, don't I have lines to do? I haven't gotten anything though."

-We'll get everything sorted once you're here so come quickly!

It felt as though she would kill someone if he went there late. A loud shout could be heard behind the urgent-sounding woman's voice. Maru could imagine what was going on there. Since she said that she finished talking with his manager, there was no time to delay. He grabbed a taxi that was just driving past the bus stop.

"Sangam High School in Seoul, please."

The driver's eyes shone when he heard the word 'Seoul'. He pressed a button on his dashboard and started driving. Maru had a look at the horse on the taximeter that was galloping gallantly. Every time the horse kicked off the ground, another 100 won was added to the fare. He messaged Daemyung in the taxi. After a moment, the entire club messaged him 'good luck'. They were thankful people.

The taxi driver drove proficiently through roads that didn't get jammed with traffic and thanks to that, Maru was able to arrive at the school before 5 o'clock.

He got off after getting a hand-written receipt. After meeting eyes with the security guard he saw before, he entered the school. There were students gathered around one spot on the school field. It was obvious where the drama shoot was happening.

Maru brushed past the gaps between the students. When he entered a certain range, one of the security agents told him to step back.

"I'm here for the drama shoot."

Hearing that, the security agent called someone. The one that ran here was the liaison writer with the red cone.

"Quickly."

Although her speech was short, Maru decided not to mind it since it looked like the situation was urgent. He quickly followed behind the writer who was running. The shoot was happening in a corner of the school field. The guy named Woomin from last time was currently supporting a girl idol wearing a ragged gym uniform. The girl had straight, long hair, as though to represent that she was an innocent young girl. Perhaps she was the Cinderella of the story. Since he only watched the episode with him in it, he didn't know the story that well.

Woomin grabbed the heroine's hand and spoke - 'don't bully her any longer'. It seems that he had the role of the prince that put the glass heels on the girl's feet. Another male idol just laughed in disdain and turned around. That was the end of the scene.

"Producer! He's here."

Producer Lee nodded and approached Maru. He received a copy of the script from the staff nearby before giving it to Maru.

"There's no time, so let's go over the story first."

Maru listened to the overall explanation while flipping through the script on the spot with the producer. His role was the class president that was bad at talking. This kid was forced into the position by others due to a prank. He was a quiet and shy kid but had a small sense of justice. It was a minor role yet there was quite a lot of detail.

In the scene he had to act in, he was the one that interfered when one of the main girls looked down on another student and was scolded instead. There was also a scene where he got pushed. He had to fall down again. It seemed that he was somewhat entangled with this whole falling character.

"We're going to go to the classroom and shoot right now, so get ready for that."

He had a look at the script again. His lines were quite long. He had to reply to the main girl's every line. There were some lines where he had to say multiple sentences.

"Can you do it? We've already delayed it once, so it will be quite troublesome if you can't do it."

"Time is money after all. I'll do it."

"Very good."

Producer Lee patted his shoulder heavily before leaving. Following that, camera director Kim Jangsoo approached him. He looked much brighter than last time. Perhaps his salary problem was solved.

"Thanks to you, we all got paid. We had to beg to get two months' worth of payment, but that's still good."

"That's good. You should settle with them to get paid the rest of the amount."

"We should. Rather than that, you know that I put you here before it went over to someone else, right? That pays the debt back somewhat, okay? So do it well. I'll frame you well."

The staff also cheered him on. This was what was good about getting close to the staff members. Business was like that as well. Every single problem came down to manpower. Having a good set of relationships with other people would lead to success, otherwise, it would be very difficult to do anything. When Maru was young, he disdained that notion thinking that it was just dirty corruption, and didn't like it that much even after growing up. However, he had to acknowledge that everything came down to people in the end.

'If you can't go against the flow of the system, you can only ride it.'

Although he had stolen a spot that was probably meant for someone else, he didn't have a guilty conscience about it. He only felt a little sorry for the person whose opportunity was taken away. He was no saint. He was just one of the ordinary folks that would grab any opportunity that came by. He couldn't be a boat that went against the waves and capsized. If he wanted to, he had to become a massive cruise ship first.

Maru squinted and looked at the script. His concentration and memorization ability when it came to learning lines was incredible even when he thought about it, so he learned those lines soon. What was necessary now was to grab ahold of the character's emotions. He projected the image of the class president that producer Lee talked about in his mind. It was a stereotypical character, and precisely because of that, it was more difficult to act out. What he had to watch out for was that the character was shy, and the fact that he went against the main girl despite that. He could picture the scene in his mind somewhat. It was something like the temporary deviation from life from the perspective of an ordinary civilian.

"Hey."

He raised his head up when he felt a hand smashing his back. There was an unexpected face here. It was Jiseok. Looking at his ever-smiling face, he felt energy draining away from him. This was the first time they met after shooting the movie. Maru hadn't called him since then, and that was because Jiseok called him all the time. If phone calls counted as 'meeting', he 'met' Jiseok just three days ago.

“Why are you here?”

“That’s what I want to ask you.”

“Me? A replacement.”

“I’m here as an extra. It looks like the tie-in sale worked well.”

“Tie-in sale, you say?”

Hearing that question, Jiseok pointed at the short-haired girl idol that was walking in the distance. Maru had seen her last time. She was the girl that became slightly annoyed when Woojoo made a mistake.

“We belong to the same company. Thanks to that, I got a role here.”

“Gotcha.”

Maru had heard about this before. Tie-in sales. There was no better mechanism than this to get new actors’ faces known. There was no advertisement better than having him stand next to a star belonging to the same company.

“But why is a spot suddenly empty? Do you know anything about it?”

“Oh, that?” Jiseok bitterly smiled.

He lowered his voice and started explaining what happened.

“You see, Chaerim-noona....”

“Who’s that?”

“You don’t know who Chaerim-noona is? The youngest member of BLUE and the main vocalist of the group.”

“I don’t know her.”

“...The noona from the same company I talked about earlier.”

Maru looked at the girl with the short haircut again. So her name was Chaerim.

“And?”

“Something happened.”

“I want to know what that ‘something’ is. I’m lacking understanding here.”

“Haa, the thing is, Chaerim-noona kept making mistakes during the morning to the point that there wasn’t a single good take. Everyone seemed extremely annoyed, but they couldn’t say anything to her thanks to the producer that came from the TV station, the director included. After a while, the anger exploded on the guy that was Chaerim-noona’s counterpart in acting. He did look pitiful though. He seemed older than us, but he walked out crying. Even I would have been like that due to frustration. The producer here didn’t say much, but the producer from the TV station caused a huge fuss about it.”

“So he ran mid way?”

“Yep.”

“A minor character did? A pro who signed a contract?”

“It was no joke.”

“I would’ve been even more scared about the consequences of leaving and would’ve never left. What if the production company decided to sue him for damages?”

“Not all people think like you, Maru. Anyway, if you’re here to replace him, I guess you’re the class president?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Will you be fine? There seems to be quite a lot of lines.”

“For now, I’ve memorized the lines.”

“What?”

“I’ve memorized the lines.”

“...Even though you just read the script for a brief moment as you walked here?”

“I’m a bit smart, you see.”

“Wow. Did you really memorize it all?”

Maru asked Jiseok to help him out with practicing the lines. He wanted to look at the general flow as he walked to the classroom. He did his lines and Jiseok said the rest.

“So you weren’t joking when you said you memorized them.”

“You don’t have anything to do, right now, do you?”

“I don’t.”

“Then why don’t you help me out before the shoot starts?”

“Alright. But treat me to a meal later.”

“Okay.”

“...But can I ask you just one thing?”

Jiseok looked down. He looked very awkward since he always looked like an excited puppy running across the snow. Maru could guess what he was about to ask. After taking in a deep breath, he spoke,

“If you want to know about Geunseok, he’s doing well. Some things happened, but from what I’ve heard, he’s stable now. You should try calling him if you have the time. He should probably pick up.”

“Really?”

He brightened up visibly. The world worked in strange ways considering how someone like him had a friend. Maru looked at the script as he walked. There wasn’t much time.

Chapter 314

He could hear some native English speakers. He flinched and turned his head around only to see a blond foreigner speaking to students in English. Today was a Saturday, and it was currently 5 in the evening. Despite that, the heat of studying did not seem to die down in this prestigious independent school.

Apparently, that was an extracurricular activity. Here, even hobbies were studying-related. Maru clicked his tongue as he walked along the corridor. The shooting set was inside the furthest room on the 3rd floor. Outside the window, the sports field with green grass as well as the entire scenery of Seoul could be seen. As this was a school built mid way up the mountain, the scenery was really good.

The class motto and the national flag was hung up in front of the school. Succeeding Through Studying Is The Easiest Path. He agreed with that motto to a certain extent. The desks were lined up neatly. There was only enough space left for one camera to go in.

A staff member holding up a reflector got into position before the main characters went in. The minor roles took their places as well. Some of the students that were here to help had arrived as well. The liaising writer politely told them good luck. Since the location was their school, the staff looked extremely careful about confronting them.

The students moved according to the assistant director's words. They switched seats around a couple of times. The assistant director moved back after deeming that the main actors were emphasized the most. During that time, one of the tall students left the set. It seemed that they weren't planning to shoot someone who was taller than the main actors.

"Okay then. Let's do a rehearsal first."

Maru stood in front of Chaerim according to the instructions. Unlike when he saw her at the sports field, she had become quite pale. It was clear to him that she had become nervous.

"Let's go slowly but surely. The writer will give hints about your lines behind the camera, so if you can't remember, don't panic and look there."

"Okay."

"Good. Everyone makes mistakes when growing up."

"Okay."

Director Lee sighed a little as he turned away from Chaerim. Maru was able to see that. Right now, the director was more tired out than the actor. He couldn't begin to imagine how many NG scenes happened during the morning.

"We're doing the same scene we did in the morning, so let's get this done quickly and go home."

The rehearsal proceeded a little too slowly. Director Lee slowly explained the scene to Chaerim as though teaching the alphabet to a toddler. Maru had a look at the faces of the staff members while listening to the explanation. They clearly looked tired and some people even sighed. It seemed that they were drained of their energy, since they were doing the same thing they did in the morning.

"Then let's try."

Director Lee sat down and was about to get ready for the cue sign when he stood back up again. It seemed that he was very wary. The camera started rolling, and the extras walked past Chaerim as they talked to each other. An ordinary break time scene was produced. Meanwhile, Maru waited while wearing the non-prescription glasses that the staff handed to him.

Chaerim chatted with another student before suddenly using her finger to push the back of the head of another girl who was just reading a book. It was the main heroine that Woomin protected in the sports field. Chaerim kept pushing on the heroine's head before grabbing her long hair.

Along with a faint groan, the main heroine flinched. The students that were chatting until now all became silent. The writer told them the precise time to become silent with the sketchbook. The extra that were within the frame slowly walked away from Chaerim. Their gazes were all directed at the floor, and they looked submissive. Just from this alone, it was clear that Chaerim was the boss of this class.

Maru stood up from his seat. He did not mind the camera that was to the right of his face and quietly walked up to Chaerim. The character he was acting was not a provocative character. He was a shy and quiet boy that was pushed on the role of the class president by others. He gathered his hands in front of his stomach to portray himself as an awkward, shy boy. Since he was told that the camera would shoot his entire body, he had to be wary of his actions as well. He reduced the distance between each step to a minimum and stood upright.

He expressed with his smile and body that although he stood up to get justice for the heroine that was being bullied by Chaerim, he had no intentions of going against her in any way. Since they were minute movements, he didn't know how much of it would be captured on camera, but he did his best.

"What is it?" Chaerim asked.

The correct line in the script was 'who're you?'. It was obvious that she tied the first knot wrong. Maru fixed his gaze on the tip of Chaerim's indoor shoes.

"Uhm... I'm wondering if you're going too far with your bullying," while talking, he moved his eyes left and right.

"Did you just say that to me?"

"No, no, not at all. It's not that, but... looks like I was mistaken. I didn't say that to you."

"Then what are you talking about? Are you kidding me?"

Chaerim abruptly stood up. Maru immediately raised his hands to cover his face. The following line was 'hey, someone might think that I'm trying to hit you'. He was waiting for those words, but he couldn't hear anything. He raised his head a little in order to find out what was happening. He saw Chaerim whose mouth was half-open. Maru could imagine the writer holding up the sketchbook with all her might behind him.

"Cut," director Lee's bland voice resounded out.

Chaerim sat back down on the chair as though collapsing into it. She kept staring at the floor as though she was in a panic. The students of the school that were brought in for this started whispering among themselves. The staff just shook their heads or just looked away from the scene.

“Ah god da...”

The insult that almost escaped director Lee’s mouth stopped. Director Lee shut his eyes and took off the cap he was wearing before clenching it tightly. The crumpled baseball cap seemed to speak for his mind.

“Can’t you do just a little better? Please? You were doing well until now, weren’t you? Just like a main actor,” director Lee forcefully smiled as he spoke.

At that moment, one man, who was quietly staying on the side approached Chaerim. It was director Choi. Director Lee clutched his head and took a step back.

“Chaerim. Don’t think about it too hard, yeah? You can do it. And you did good until now too.”

“Y-yes.”

Director Choi consoled Chaerim who looked pale. All of the staff took a break again. Maru sat down on his chair and opened the script. This scene didn’t have any difficult lines. It wasn’t that hard to imagine the emotions of the character either. Chaerim just had to be forceful and condescending the whole time. Perhaps she had gotten trauma thanks to the mistakes she committed in the morning. It seemed that any further shooting was not going to happen.

“So we meet again,” it was Woojoo.

Maru smiled seeing the familiar face.

“Didn’t know you were still here.”

“Things turned out this way. Rather than that, you had the character who fell over, and here you are, with a similar role.”

“I can’t argue with that. But was she like that since morning?” Maru asked as he pointed at Chaerim.

Woojoo made a mixed expression as he nodded.

“There were a lot of words about her until now too. I mean, she did cause quite a lot of NG scenes. But she was never this bad. Perhaps she is feeling complicated because of the guy that just ran out.”

Woojoo told Maru that the atmosphere on the set was extremely fragile since morning. When one of the minor roles left the scene after getting insulted by director Lee, it was bad to the point that most people had the notion to give up the shoot there. Woojoo also told him that they continued to shoot because there would be problems in airing the episode since it would be a long time until the main characters could gather on set again.

“And yet, here we are.”

“That sounds chaotic.”

“Well, for us, we just get more pay if things get delayed, but the staff members aren’t like that. It must be hard for them.”

The staff members that had to hold heavy equipment were staring holes into Chaerim. They were practically begging her at this point.

“Rather than that, you were good back there. What happened? Didn’t you just arrive?”

“I memorized the lines after I got here. Well, I do have a ‘wronged’ face, so I’m good with acting roles like that.”

“Like hell you have a ‘wronged’ face. But wait, you memorized all that in such a short time? You’re quite smart.”

Maru shrugged once. At that moment, director Choi finished consoling Chaerim. She looked a little calmer now.

Director Lee gave the cue sign with a mixed expression. The exact same occurrence unfolded out on the set covered in heavy silence. Maru also repeated the same thing he did before. He said his line in front of Chaerim. He just had to wait for Chaerim’s line, but she froze up again this time.

Director Lee did not get angry. It seemed that he had no energy to become angry at this point. Maru heard the staff member holding the reflector swear in a small voice. It wasn’t that surprising. The lights turned off again. It seemed that they were planning to take a longer break this time.

“Uhm, director. We have a schedule to attend.”

“Us too.”

The managers spoke apologetically to director Lee. Director Lee frowned. The man that seemed to be Chaerim’s manager was standing in front of director Lee with his face looking down.

“Sorry about that. I’ll finish as soon as possible, so please endure for now. Please, I’m saying this because there will be problems if we don’t finish this shoot today.”

“Yes, I know that. Please tell us if you need anything. I’ll try to help out.”

The managers stepped away and director Lee started speaking with the camera director. The producers gathered around as well. Perhaps they were getting ready to change the scene, or remove the scene entirely.

“Writer Park isn’t here today, right?”

“Yes. Should I make a call?”

“Yes, ask if we can change this scene. If writer Park gives permission, well, the rest of the writers will come up with something.”

Maru was able to hear their conversation since he was standing close to them. So the scene was going to be changed after all? After a call, the writer’s expression as she held the phone slowly darkened.

“Uhm, director. I don’t think we can do that. Writer Park said it can’t be fixed.”

“Urgh, a no means a no from that person.”

Seeing director Lee in a tough spot, Maru thought that the writer must be a stubborn person. Both the staff and the actors fell into a panic. Maru had a look at Chaerim, who was sitting at the back of the class. Even other idols did not approach her. They probably didn’t want to be hated along with her.

Chaerim looked like a lonely island within the class. Even director Choi seemed to have given up as he couldn't be seen anywhere.

At that moment, his eyes met Chaerim's when she just raised her head up. Her eyes were wandering everywhere. It was clear to Maru that she would make a mistake if they started shooting again. He didn't want to waste his time here. Maru walked up to Chaerim, who was isolated from the others. The murky eyes looked up at him.

"Hey."

Maru looked into Chaerim's eyes. For a while, nothing happened, then a speech bubble popped up above Chaerim's head.

-Is this boy interested in me?

It wasn't an ability that could read other people's minds, so it wasn't omnipotent, but he could deduce her psychological state with what he saw. He usually didn't use it since it wasn't that useful normally, but it was quite useful when talking to a complete stranger. Though, most of the time the speech bubble would say 'who the heck is he'.

After looking at the speech bubble, Maru spoke in a small voice.

"If you want others to be interested in you, then do your job properly."

"...What?"

"Choose one. Either you do this properly and receive everyone's love, or you can become tragic. You see the people around you right? They're not looking at you with good will at all."

Chaerim looked around.

"Not a single person here likes you. You're inconveniencing them after all. So, are you going to end it like this? Unable to do anything?"

Chaerim bit her lower lip. Maru extended his hand out.

"Give me your hand."

"...What are you doing?"

"I'll tell you a good trick, so just give me your hand."

Chaerim unwillingly held out her hand. Maru pressed on the soft part between the thumb and the index finger very strongly. Chaerim frowned and pulled her hand away.

"What are you doing!"

"It hurts, doesn't it?"

"Are you out of your mind?"

"You can't think of anything, right? It hurts like hell, so you're not thinking about anything else, right?"

"...."

“Also, you are annoyed because of me as well, aren’t you? Pile that up and release it. If you still can’t do that, then just go back to being a singer, and don’t inconvenience others in a place you don’t belong.”

“Are you finished?”

“No, I’m not. I have lines to do here. If you’re so frustrated, then pay back with acting. You know, there’s a scene where you push me over, right? Why don’t you push me like you mean it?”

Maru curled up his lips before leaving. He returned to his waiting seat before giving a glance to Chaerim. For now, she wasn’t dazing out like she was last time, and looked like she was back to her usual self. She was glaring at him though, probably out of frustration. He hoped that she would continue that all the way until the end of the shoot.

“Let’s do this one last time,” director Lee spoke.

Chapter 315

If she was asked what made her start to dream about being a celebrity, she would reply ‘due to a coincidence’.

Her house was always noisy. It wasn’t that she wasn’t well off. However, just because she was well off didn’t mean that her household was harmonious. During elementary school, Chaerim always headed to her friend’s house after school. She only went back home at night after spending time there. Her parents did not say anything about that. In fact, they even looked a little thankful that their daughter was quick-witted and did not stay at the house. It was a mistake to think that children did not know. Even young children knew what they were supposed to know.

It wasn’t that she hated her parents, it was just that she hated quietly putting herself into the corner of her room away from her parents' fighting. One day, Chaerim did a dance in front of her parents thanks to a school event. That day, the house had some quiet. Instead of shouts, there were laughs. Thanks to that, they were able to watch TV together with the three of them in the living room. Coincidentally, there was a girl who was singing with a beautiful smile on TV. It was a high teen star.

Thanks to her dad’s urging, she danced along with the song sung by the girl inside the TV. Her parents praised her saying that she did well, and Chaerim vaguely came to a realization that her house became calm when she sang.

However, that peace lasted only momentarily. It was the age of cold war in her house. Chaerim needed the attention and love of her parents, but she couldn’t expect any out of them. That was why she chose to receive other people’s attention and love. She felt refreshed whenever other people had high hopes of her. She felt more energetic the more people looked at her. Around that time, she started writing ‘singer’ as her future career path. She thought that it was the best job that would allow her to receive the love of her parents and the attention of others.

When she entered her 6th year of elementary school, Chaerim entered Yellow Star as a trainee. What was once an abstract dream was now getting fleshed out. Although there was the opposition of her parents, they ended up allowing her after hearing from the agency that she had potential. Although practice was hard and exhausting, it was much better than spending time alone at home. After all, there were unnis who strived for the same goal as her and could sympathize with her at the residence.

After debuting and entering the ranks of top idols, Chaerim had never seen her parents fighting. Their relationship had recovered. She did not know if it was because of money or time, but in any case, Chaerim was satisfied. Every day was a continuation of joy for her. She received attention wherever she went, and she was at the center of everyone's conversations. Although it was hard to endure malicious comments, she soon adapted thanks to the fact that malicious comments were the minority compared to the comments that cheered her on. Everyone loved BLUE, and everyone loved Chaerim. That seemed like an unshakable fact.

However, there were signs of change recently, in a bad way, that is. They weren't able to grab a hold of first place, their team split apart, and there were a few other incidents as well.

Despite that, she thought that it was okay. She believed that people around her still loved her. However, that belief had shattered.

She was in a horrible condition since morning, so she felt apologetic that she made mistakes. She wasn't that nervous since the directors said that it was okay. She resolved that she would make a cool comeback, but things didn't go the way she expected. It was then that she had become conscious of the eyes of the staff that looked at her. They were filled with animosity and hostility. The moment she became conscious of that, her mind started playing its own game separate from her body. She felt like she was left alone in the middle of a jungle where low growls could be heard from all around.

She resolved to endure through that. This wasn't the first time it happened. There were people that were jealous of other people's success everywhere. From experience, she knew that there were many people that booed her after her singing performance. Just as she was about to console herself and get back on her feet, something unexpected happened. The director swore. It wasn't directed at her. He swore at the minor role actor that made a single mistake.

Chaerim saw that actor falling backwards in despair. She felt a little sorry. After all, it was obvious that the director was venting his frustration at him. At that moment, her eyes met that man's. His eyes were bloodshot and he was crying. To Chaerim's eyes, it looked like he was crying blood. Those eyes were filled with a viciousness that frightened her. She had never seen such eyes in her 19 years of life. That actor disappeared after leaving the words 'it's all your fault'. The people at the scene erupted out in an uproar. The shoot was suddenly stopped.

Those words from that actor reverberated in her ears. She consciously blinked fast because she felt that those eyes would stare at her if she closed her eyes for too long. Although there were many times where she received gazes filled with hostility, they were never so concrete. No one pinpointed her mistakes and looked at her like they would kill her. However, that man's eyes were truly frightening. At the same time, it dawned on her that someone was harmed because of her. The eyes of the staff became even more prickly. She intuitively felt that she wouldn't be able to endure anymore. She realized that she would collapse just like that actor the longer she dragged this on.

However, she couldn't avoid it. After all, she was one of the main characters. She madly regretted that she had acted arrogantly until now. If she said that she couldn't do it, and that they should try again tomorrow, not to mention the whole drama, her company would be flipped upside down as well. She knew that very well. Everyone here had their own schedule so it was impossible for them to allocate their time just for her. It dawned on her that she wasn't in a position where she could ask them to do

something. For a moment, the unnie at the residence came up in her mind. If it was back in the trainee days, she would receive heartfelt consolation from them, but that wasn't going to happen now. All she got back would be a 'so what' along with disdainful laughter.

Who else was there then? She thought about calling her manager-oppa, but that oppa also separated work from private life. She liked that about him, but it couldn't be more out of place right now. Friends? There was no way she had any since she rarely went to school in the first place. Her friends at her new school, Myunghwa High, were also mostly celebrities, so she didn't even see them that much. She didn't even think about the people she had seen during TV programs. Those people were those that cut off all contact once the camera stopped rolling. In the end, the only people that came to her mind were her parents. At that moment, her heart tightened. After going through all those people, she realized that this was a fight she had to fight alone.

She clenched her teeth and endured. She tried to forget that actor's face and kept reciting her lines over and over again. However, the more she did so, the clearer that man's face became in her head. She was in the worst possible state right now.

The lines she had memorized dismantled themselves and started flying around in her mind. She didn't know what she had to say, and she didn't know what kind of expression she had to make. The actors around her age approached her and told her that it was okay, but even they felt hypocritical to her.

She was aware that they were indeed hypocritical. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to endure it. Even she herself forced herself a lot of the time.

What made her even more nervous was the directors that kept treating her kindly. While she felt thankful for their kindness, she felt dizzy since their attitude towards her was a drastic contrast from the rest of the people at the scene. The more the director consoled her, the more ferociously the staff looked at her.

She had to do it - that was all she had now. There were ordinary students on set as well. Among them, there should be some anti-fans of hers. Just imagining what kind of things they would write on the internet tonight made her feel like she had to take more antacids.

She had gone through a tremendous amount of effort to take this place, this love, and this attention, so she didn't want to let it go. Nothing would be left of her if she was distanced from her fans. Only an empty shell would remain behind. Going further, her relationship with her parents might fall apart again. When that chain reaction occurred in her mind, she couldn't keep a straight sense of self.

Hearing the director finally erupt out, Chaerim thought that what had to come had finally come, but the director changed his expression and patted her. She felt chills behind her back. The director was consoling her with a twisted face.

No one approached her. The shooting scene was filled with chatter, but she felt like she was all alone. The words that entered her ears made her feel dizzy. She wondered if just fainting on the spot would solve things. She really wanted to just faint. If fainting would allow her to avoid this moment, she would gladly do so.

She carefully raised her head and had a look around her. Not a single person was looking at her. There was no jealousy nor was there any encouragement. She was treated like she was no'thing', not no'one',

but no'thing'. For a moment, her vision darkened. Being ignored was even worse than criticism. She received absolutely no attention at all. The fact that no one looked at her made her feel stifled. Her lines, her movement, her expression - nothing came up in her mind. Chaerim just looked in front of her in the perfect state of blankness. The break would soon finish, meaning that catastrophe was silently approaching.

"Hey."

Someone broke the silence. She didn't know when he had approached her, but the boy that replaced the man that left was looking at her. His eyes were cold. She was okay with that. After all, he was the only one that showed interest in her. Right now, she was in desperate need of consolation. It is okay, everything will go well. If he told her these words, she felt like she would be able to take a breather.

That wouldn't solve the problem from its roots, but it would allow her to escape the feeling of having sunken into the deep sea. Please, let me breathe.

However, the words that came out of the mouth of the boy in front of her felt like the frosty winter. She was expecting the warm breeze of spring, yet the words couldn't be any chillier. Her expectation, which contradictorily wanted him to treat her kindly yet not, broke apart and she felt animosity towards him.

Who are you to say that? What do you know about me that makes you say that!

At that moment, the boy that trampled on another's emotions and stabbed into other people's wounds suddenly told her to hold out her hand. She couldn't reject him for some reason. The reason was simple - what he said was the truth. It was the truth without any hypocrisy.

She felt a sharp pain from her hand. She was startled and pulled her hand away. The boy made a strange smile and said that pain drives away any trivial thoughts.

What the? She thought that he was here to console her, but she felt angry when he told her to just give up if she didn't have the confidence to do it. For a moment, she didn't sense any gazes from around her and only saw the back of the boy that just left her. If she could just strike back at him who looked like he lived in a world of his own...

Chaerim's jaws slacked slightly. The horrible feeling that tightly grabbed her body had disappeared. She could still feel the gazes from around her, but she didn't feel stifled like she did before. When she focused on the pain that stemmed from her hand, she could somehow calm herself down.

Now that she thought about it, she heard from her dad when she was young that pressing that part would make her feel better when she felt carsick. It was painful, but curiously, she indeed became less carsick when she did so.

Just as she was conscious of the residual pain, the director proclaimed that they would start shooting again. She felt like her heart was dropping to the ground, but for some strange reason, she had the confidence that she would be able to do it now. The pain that stemmed from her hand was pushing her back. Her breathing became more natural.

Moreover, when she looked at the boy that seemed to tell her 'come at me if you can' with his face, she felt obstinate. Yes, he did tell her to push him properly, didn't he?

Chaerim made the same smile back at him.

Let's do this then.

* * *

"Good! Very good. Yes, that's it!"

Chaerim was able to smile again when the director said those words. The staff that could finally go home loosened their expressions as well. She was able to digest all the scenes they needed to shoot without a single NG scene. They were able to finish in 30 minutes what they couldn't do for the entire duration of the morning. Some people in fact rejoiced that they could go home early. Only then could Chaerim sigh in relief. Everything turned out well.

"But you pushed too hard. Though, it did look good since it was realistic."

Hearing the director's words, Chaerim smiled awkwardly. Although she did put a little bit of strength into her hands, she didn't push that hard. In fact, it was the boy that overreacted to her push. It looked like she had pushed hard because he was 'flung away'. In any case, it was good that the shoot ended without a hitch.

The staff started packing up their equipment and she said her goodbyes to the other actors as well. Although they always had dinner together after their shoots, it seemed that everyone was going their separate ways due to schedules and whatnot. Chaerim sat down on a chair for a moment. Her manager had gone ahead to the car saying that he would start the car. Chaerim sighed after seeing that the classroom was cleaned up. It felt like all those horrible times were a lie.

"Sorry about that last time."

Hearing the apology, Chaerim turned around. It was that boy from before. He wasn't wearing glasses though. It seemed that the glasses were just props. Chaerim stared at the boy. She expected him to say more, but he just said his goodbyes before turning around. It looked like he was done with his work here.

"That's it?"

"Yes."

The boy just turned his head and spoke to her. He was looking at the clock, and he was clearly asking if he could go if there wasn't anything else. Chaerim felt flabbergasted since he acted like she was holding him up here. After all those words, all that came back was an apology?

"Well, then, if you would excuse me."

The boy left. Chaerim felt flabbergasted and just watched him as he did so. Her mouth unintentionally uttered 'son of a...' before she stopped. The reason she couldn't finish was because she saw Jiseok approaching her. The boy came across Jiseok just as he was about to leave through the back door. Jiseok raised his hand as though asking for a high five, but the boy just walked past him.

"Thanks, Han Maru."

Only after hearing his words, did the boy raise his hand above his shoulders and start waving. Han Maru, it felt like she had heard that name somewhere before.

“You know him?” Chaerim asked Jiseok.

Jiseok nodded back.

“I told you about a friend of mine in the car, didn’t I? The one that’s insanely good at acting.”

“Oh, him.”

She felt like she had heard that name somewhere before that event, but she couldn’t remember. She thought that it was perhaps just her mistake.

“Did you thank him?”

“What?”

“Did you thank Maru?”

“Me? Thank him? Why?”

“Why not, I mean....”

Jiseok was about to explain something but he tilted his head once before stopping as though he understood something.

“Let’s just go, noona.”

“What? What’s this about?”

“It’s nothing at all. Rather than that, you looked cool in that last scene.”

Saying that, Jiseok told her that they should go back to the car. Seeing him act that way, Chaerim had a suspicion in her mind. No, what she was thinking was probably correct. Only then did it make sense that he came back to apologize to her afterwards.

“You mean he did that on purpose?”

Hearing that question, Jiseok just shrugged. Chaerim frowned. It angered her, but it was indeed thanks to him that she was able to finish the shoot in time. If it wasn’t for him, that is, Maru, they would probably be stuck in the same loop right now. He should have at least told her if he was trying to help out.

Just as she was frowning because she didn’t like the situation,

“It’s his own way of caring about others. Well, I guess it’s more probable that he just helped because he didn’t want the shoot to get delayed so much. I mean, he’s quite a cold kid.”

Chaerim stared at Jiseok who spoke with a smile. It felt like she was indebted. She didn’t like that feeling.

“Let’s go for now.”

Chaerim stood up from her seat. Her manager had messaged her that it was time for them to go.

Chapter 316

“You didn’t want to see me?”

Maru looked at her, who was hesitating. He grinned when he saw that she licked her lips wondering about what to say. Actually, he was aware that it was her being considerate of him that they didn’t meet recently.

“Looks like I was the only one who wanted to meet.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then you wanted to see me?”

“Do I really have to say it?”

“That’s right.”

“Fine, I wanted to see you. Satisfied?”

Seeing her pout, Maru nodded his head. The place they were in was filled with the smell of pizza. It was the pizza restaurant they visited before. Right now, she was slicing a piece of pizza with cherry tomatoes and basil on top, and was putting it on a plate.

“Here.”

Maru received the pizza that she cut for him. The glistening surface made it look delicious. He took a bite before looking in front of him. She was eating her pizza with a happy face. She looked like a rabbit when she was chewing. Thinking back, a lot of her actions reminded Maru of rabbits. That was also why he gifted her a ring that was shaped like a rabbit.

“Wasn’t there a rabbit in one of your nicknames?”

“Didn’t you know that already?” She spoke as she showed off the ring she was wearing.

“Rather than that, how could you call all of a sudden and tell me to meet you? What were you going to do if I had acting club practice?”

“Who was the one that said there was no practice this Saturday when I called on Thursday?”

“...Did I tell you that?”

“I thought that was your way of indirectly threatening me that we should meet. It wasn’t?”

She turned her head away slightly and made a strange smile.

“It’s dark already.”

“It’s past seven.”

Maru looked outside as well. Lights were starting to appear from parts of buildings that were darkening due to the dusk. Various colored signs drove the darkness back, and people were walking in the

brightened streets. Most of them were students. There were also some young couples. The next block over should have some salarymen wearing suits. After all, that block was filled with bars and restaurants that sold alcohol.

At that moment, she, who was looking outside, flinched for a moment before turning her head around to the table. Maru wondered what was going on and looked at the place where she was looking. There were girls wearing the same uniform as her outside the restaurant. They were staring his way and they started whispering among themselves before entering the restaurant.

“I knew it!”

The girls shouted as soon as they came in. She raised her head and laughed awkwardly. It seemed that they were her friends.

“What. You told me you had something to do, and it was a date?”

“Uhm... yeah.”

She smiled in embarrassment. Maru waved at the girls that looked at him.

“I’m right. It’s the boy from back then.”

“Wow.”

Did these girls know him? Maru tilted his head. Her friends started giggling and started talking about the event that happened at the Center of Culture and Art in Ansan. He did remember shouting at her that he would go to her. Now that he thought about it, it embarrassed him to no end.

“Hey hey. Let’s get going. We can’t disturb them. Bunbun, see you tomorrow. See you later too, Mr. Boyfriend.”

Her friends then disappeared in an instant. Maru covered his mouth and chuckled. She also smiled.

“Your nickname is Bunbun?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s cute. I should call you that too.”

“Please don’t.”

Although she was saying that, her eyes were smiling. She didn’t seem to hate it that much. Thanks to her witty friends, their time together did not get reduced. It was a thankful thing.

“Oh right. I heard you went to a shoot suddenly today. What happened to that?”

“I did well.”

“An extra this time as well?”

“No, a minor role this time. I don’t know the specifics, but I might go there a few times more.”

“Really? Congratulations.”

She put down her fork and leaned forward. She rejoiced like it was her own matter. Maru thought that this was why he couldn't help but fall for her.

"You have lines too?"

"A few."

"That's good. Ah, I want to try shooting a drama too. It sounds fun."

She looked upwards and smiled. It seemed that she was imagining what it would be like at the scene. Maru watched her for a while before speaking.

"If you want to go to a drama set, do you want to try a part-time job for a supplementary role?"

"Can I?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but I can ask a guy that works there."

"Then, yes. I want to try."

"But are you okay with that? You have acting club activities."

"I can miss a day or two. It's not that strict."

"Then I'll try asking. It's not a surefire method, so don't expect too much."

"No, I'm going to expect a lot."

"I guess I shouldn't have said that. Wait a sec then."

"You're going to ask right now?"

"Since we're at it, why not?"

Maru called Woojoo. Thankfully, Woojoo was on break and didn't have any problems with having a call right now.

"A friend of mine wants to try the supplementary role part time job. If it's not too much, can I ask how to apply for one?"

-If it's like that, then sure, I can do that. I received some help from you as well.

Since he was willingly helping him out, Maru didn't see a reason to refuse. He asked whether there were any roles for a girl that was held within the capital and the surrounding regions.

-I can ask the leader and he'll probably reply immediately, so I'll get back to you soon. But a friend of yours, huh. Does she do acting as well?

"Yes. *She's* good."

-Then I'll tell the leader just that. I'll get back to you.

"Sorry for bothering you."

-I'm paying my debt, so you don't have to be.

He hung up and looked at her. Her eyes were filled with expectation. Maru felt that he would have to look into other methods of getting her the part time job if this wasn't possible. He didn't want to see her disappointed.

After finishing their meal, they went to the café next door. There was a buy-one-get-one-free event for Americano coffee for students only. They entered the crowd of students and ordered two cups of coffee. For some reason, she ordered an Americano as well.

"I thought you didn't like bitter stuff."

"But this one's free."

She took out some money from her wallet with a smile. Maru put back the credit card he was fiddling in his hand into his wallet.

"Maru, you should really save up on money. It looks like you're splurging whenever I meet you."

"Well, I guess I should. If I think about the marriage expenses, furniture, and even the honeymoon, I guess I indeed should save up. Is a monthly lease better than a jeonse? What do you think?"

"Isn't a jeonse better?"

"..."

She nonchalantly replied and sucked on the straw. Maru was planning to tease her, but since her reaction was so smooth, it made him flustered instead. She looked at him in the eyes before giggling.

"What? You look disappointed."

After saying that, she frowned. *She* opened the lid and poured a lot of syrup inside. *She* really couldn't eat bitter things.

"It's not tasty."

"I told you you should've gone with your usual menu."

They took the coffee and left the café. The evening winds were quite chilly, and the warmth emanating from where they were holding hands felt quite good. Maru held her hand and walked along the streets.

"I have something to buy."

She walked ahead of him. The place *she* arrived at was a local dollar store. They had a variety of products ranging from cosmetics to kitchenware. This place was filled with students as well. On the entrance were the words 'Fee of 100 times the price if anyone gets caught stealing'.

"What are you going to buy?"

She didn't say anything and walked up to the place where cosmetics were lined up. In this place where Maru didn't even know any of the brands, she picked a few facemasks that were displayed on one side. Maru didn't know what it was, but he could understand the words 'skin calming'.

She picked up five of them before walking towards the counter. While she paid for those things, Maru had a glimpse of her wallet. It was completely empty.

“Give me your bag.”

Maru watched as she stuffed the facemasks into his bag.

“You’re giving them to me?”

“Good skin is crucial for both actors and actresses.”

“I don’t need these things.”

“You should start managing your skin when you’re still young.”

Why was it that she reminded him of his grandma that stuffed his hand with a 5,000 won bill when he visited her with his family, saying that he should keep it a secret from his mom? After putting them inside the bag, she smiled with a sense of achievement. Was this something to rejoice about? At that moment, Woojoo gave him a call.

-The leader says we need one for Youth Generation, how about it? As for clothes, just casual clothes are fine. For now, she only needs to do crowd scenes, but she might get more if her acting skills are up to par. I think it’s quite okay since it’s the same drama. The date is next Sunday, and the meeting time is 6 in the morning.

“Please wait a moment.”

Maru looked at her. Although she would say that she was fully grown up, in Maru’s eyes, she was still a child. He would be much at ease if he could be with her rather than having her by herself.

“There’s a spot in Youth Generation, do you wanna try? It’s next Sunday and the meeting time is 6 in the morning.”

“I do, I do,” she spoke as she closed her face against his.

She was close. It also seemed like *she* smelled of baby powder. Maru pushed on *her* forehead with his index finger as he spoke,

“Yes, hyung. *She* says she’ll do it.”

-Really? Then I’ll tell the leader about it, so that friend of yours needs to message the number I’m about to send you now. *She* has to send whether she’s participating or not on the day itself, so don’t forget.

“Alright. Thanks.”

-You’re welcome. Also, see you on set. I think I’m going to be going there for the foreseeable while.

“Okay, see you then.”

He hung up and told her that the schedule was set. She rejoiced like a little child. Maru told her the number that Woojoo sent him. She quickly inputted the number into her phone before sending a text message right away.

“So, we’re shooting together then?”

Hearing those words, Maru flinched. He was not one of the main characters, so there was no way he was required to show up to every shoot.

“You might have to go by yourself.”

“Ah, okay.”

She looked slightly disappointed. Maru pondered for a brief moment. Next Sunday. Today was the 24th of July, and the preliminaries for the acting competition was the 8th of August. He would probably have to practice on Sunday. Maru thought about that for a moment before speaking.

“Let’s go together on Sunday.”

“But you said you might not have a shoot that day.”

“I’ll just be your manager for the day.”

“Can you do that?”

“Is there a reason I can’t do that?”

“How about practice?”

“I can take a day off too.”

“Really?”

She looked slightly down. It seemed that she was worried. Maru reached out and grabbed her cheek and twisted it slightly before letting go. *She* pouted before stroking her cheek against his hand.

“Let’s go. It’s getting late.”

Although the acting club and its members were important, they weren’t as important compared to her. Also, he wasn’t in a bad condition where taking a day off would have him worried. If he didn’t have such confidence, he wouldn’t even be thinking about getting the grand prize in the first place.

She didn’t say anything for a while, but after that, she said that she looked forward to it with her unique relaxing smile. Maru also nodded.

They waited at the bus stop briefly until the bus headed for her house came.

“Get on then.”

“Yeah, I’m off.”

She tagged her transportation card. The bus slowly started driving. *She* waved her hand through one of the back windows of the bus. Maru also waved at her.

“Rather than that, she likes jeonse better, huh.”

And it would be better if they lived in Seoul as well. A jeonse in Seoul... Maru heaved a deep sigh. Although the 300 million won in his bank account was a large sum of money. It was pitiful compared to the real estate prices of Seoul. Also, since he wanted to present his daughter with the best possible things, it seemed that he had to start saving up money very strictly.

“Am I going too far?”

Maru looked at the bus that had her in it. What would he do if there came a day when she came up to him and said that *she* liked someone else better? Maru pondered about that for a moment before grinning. He had thought about that problem numerous times in the past, but there was only one conclusion: he had to become a man *she* could never give up on. It was that simple.

A bus arrived. It was the bus to his house. Maru took out his MP3 player from his bag before getting on the bus. He put his earphones on and started enjoying some music.

Just then,

“...Wait.”

Maru stared outside the window. He could see a boy and a girl walking together on the streets. Both of them were people he knew. The problem was that he knew them too well.

Maru stroked his chin before taking out his phone. Then he made a call. Of the walking duo, the girl stopped and answered her phone. That was proof enough.

-What?

Bada replied in a picky voice. My dear sister, I’m watching you right now.

“Where are you?”

-Why do you ask?

“I just wanted you to buy some snacks when you come home.”

-Gosh, please stop asking me for that stuff.

“Credit card.”

-...What shall I bring you, my dear brother?

“Something with chocolate on it. It would be better if it tasted like love.”

-What the heck are you saying.

“Hey, hand the phone over to Dowook who’s standing there like a complete idiot. Also, if you came all the way here because you didn’t want to be caught, I’d like to tell you that that’s not necessary.”

At that moment, Bada hung up. Maru saw her frantically scanning her surroundings. The bus that stopped because of a red light, started driving again and Maru could no longer see the two. He then messaged Dowook.

-Hang out healthily, okay? Healthily.

He got a reply immediately.

-I was kidnapped.

Oh, really now?

Bada had a rather reckless side of her just like her mother. If she took after her father a little more, she would've become a more cautious and earnest girl....

Maru smiled and closed his phone. Since this matter concerned the two of them, it was up to those two to decide what they did. It was up to them to go out after all. As for marriage, though... that required a detailed examination with a microscope.

At that moment, he got another message.

-You're so dead. DEAD!

It was from Bada.

She was one scary sister alright. She paid back his graces with revenge. Maru thought that the first thing he had to do after going home was to lock his door.

. Basically, another method of getting a residence that is somewhat unique to Korea.

Chapter 317

A music streaming service. A service that you have to pay to listen to music from the computer. He wondered if it would work in a world where MP3 files were illegally being distributed online through peer-to-peer programs, but it seemed that his superiors actually thought that it was a decent business idea. While working on that, the parent company presented the illegal peer-to-peer website with a suspension and quickly released a music distribution platform. Although the reactions were lukewarm since it was still in its beta stages, it didn't seem like a far-fetched idea from looking at the precedents in Japan and America.

Hong Janghae nodded after watching the presentation from the team leaders. It had been around a month since he switched from being a senior managing director of a company under YM Logistics to the CEO of an entertainment company named 'Soul'. In other people's eyes, it might look like a demotion for him, but Janghae didn't think of it that way. First up, the parent company invested a huge amount. Although the agency was built from profits from other subsidiaries, the ones that invested were two of the largest subsidiaries of the YM Corporation: YM Logistics and YM Living.

On top of that, the connections he created while working at YM Logistics were maintained, and he was able to utilize those connections for his new company. It wasn't that his path to promotion was blocked off. It was instead the opposite, it was a proof of trust. During a group meal, the chairman of the YM Corporation named him directly and wished him luck. This meant that this business had grabbed the attention of the chairman. To Janghae, who couldn't be satisfied with being a senior managing director, this was an opportunity. He also received his share when he was appointed the CEO of the agency. 24% of the stocks. There was also a plan to go public in the KOSDAQ market.

Management was just secondary. The main purpose of Soul was to grab ahold of the music distribution industry. They had to be the leading industry platform and eventually take over the market to the point that it would be impossible to distribute any music records without going through the platform provided by them. It was an idea that only YM Corporation could think of, and put into practice since they had a large proportion of the telecommunication market. Although other colossal companies were eyeing the music distribution market, YM was ahead of them by one, no, at least ten steps.

They were even talking to the Korea Music Copyright Association (KOMCA) about this. Now that the ship that was the music album market was sinking, they had to move on to the internet. The other music distribution companies were well aware of this. Soul worked in secret with those distribution companies to negotiate on copyrights. As most of the singers, lyricists and composers had left the management of their copyrights to KOMCA, things would go extremely smoothly once they completed developing the platform and released it into the market.

“You should all go have lunch. I’ll have lunch on my own.”

After sending off the team leaders, he closed his eyes for a minute. Since the scale had decreased in size, the management system had decreased as well. Janghae thought that it was actually quite okay like this. He was working with a select few elites, so it reminded him of the time when he did his team project before. After resting for a while, Janghae picked up the celebrity list on the meeting table. Although music distribution was their primary business, he couldn’t just let the agency business handle itself. After all, there was no better publicity than celebrities joining their ranks.

Janghae got a coffee from a vending machine before looking through the papers. Whether it was items or people, the way to handle them was similar. In fact, handling people was easier in some cases.

Emotions did nothing to items, but they did affect people. The item wouldn’t change no matter how much love you give it. It wasn’t like a stone would turn into gold with enough love. However, in the case of people, they did sometimes turn into gold. Even when it came to useless and incompetent people, sweet words of flattery might cause miracles.

What an efficient way of doing business was that? It was possible to turn worthless things into something that had value by using the psychology of expectation, which was free. Of course, such a thing still wouldn’t be useful when it came to work that required a high level of understanding, but the majority of work in this world was simple labor. People that were enchanted by sweet words could be useful in places like that.

One of the team leaders was like that. There was one team leader that did all the menial work for the other, smart team leaders. Janghae gave that team leader some hope. All he had to do was to tell him that he could look forward to next year’s performance assessment. He didn’t lie about anything. It was based on facts. It was just a matter of possibility. He could be promoted, and he might not be promoted. It was just that. A hope within reach was the best whip and carrot at the same time.

“President. Please take this.”

One of the team leaders knocked on his office door and gave him a bottle of vegetable juice.

“Thank you.”

“Not at all. Please have a nice meal.”

Janghae nodded with a smile. It was him. The pitiful guy that worked hard staking his life for a hope that was vague and abstract while not having any skills himself. Actually, he wasn’t even pitiful. People that didn’t even know what kind of position they were in were not qualified to be considered pitiful. While other team leaders worked their bodies off in order to heighten their work capabilities, that team leader gave him gifts like this in order to make connections.

It wasn't that Janghae considered bribes as bad. A suitable amount of bribes was like oil. An oiled cogwheel definitely turns better than a not-oiled cogwheel. However, applying grease when one wasn't a cogwheel in the right place couldn't be anymore frustrating to him. That cogwheel would just spin on the spot in vain. If he was planning to use his bribes to survive the corporate life, he would have to be willing to give up his organs for it, but everything about that man was ambiguous. Ambiguous people always stayed on the spot. In this society, maintaining the status quo was the same as regressing. Staying still while others forged ahead? It would be better if he started writing a letter of resignation instead.

"Also, I hate carrots."

Janghae shook his head after reading the label on the juice. He threw the whole thing into the trash can by his foot. A heavy thud could be heard. That team leader's life would also fall to the bottom with that kind of sound sooner or later.

Janghae had a look at the actors that belonged to the three major agencies: NL Company, Jewel Entertainment and Yellow Star. They all had actors that were considered top stars by the masses. Idols that shook the hearts of students also belonged to those three. Janghae rested his chin against his hand. Before he was designated this position, he already studied the history of the entertainment business in South Korea. In the case of actors, their lineage was quite clear. Actors from theater troupes and their acquaintances were still kings in the industry. There weren't many signs of change just yet.

Meanwhile, music was a different story. They were in a period of change. The ballad-centric industry was shifting towards idol music that was focused on dance music. No, it had already changed. He honestly laughed when brats that reeked of their mother's milk were singing on TV, but he changed his mind after switching his job. The more he knew, the more he saw. Idol music was currently the center of pop music. In the case of teens, there were many fans that were willing to give up on going to school in order to watch an idol that they loved. Just because they were younger in age didn't mean that they had less purchasing power. Most of the album sales were due to teens and people in their twenties, with teens being overwhelmingly higher. Although album sales had plummeted thanks to the introduction of MP3 players, women in their teens and twenties still bought most of the albums.

"Idols, huh."

The first choice when it came to scouting people for an advert for YM Living was a beautiful actress, a young one if possible. The very foundation of advertising lay in giving the watcher a misconception that it was possible for them to become like the actor or actress in the ad with the product shown in the ad.

However, recently, that flow was shifting towards idols. Like the literal 'idols', idol bands had a lot of influence. Just like how a hat worn by an actor would sell like hotcakes, there was already a precedent with idols where a scarf that an idol was wearing was sold out. It was already proven that using a variety of idols was much more effective in creating ads rather than scouting a super expensive actress.

A business pursued profit. It wouldn't be a business if they left a profitable business idea alone. YM Living also switched its telecommunication adverts from actresses to idols. There were visible results very soon. Sales had increased this year compared to last year. They conducted a survey with new registrants, and the percentage of people that registered after seeing the advert on TV was significant.

Of course, the top stars still monopolized the peak of advertisements like cosmetics, apartments and refrigerators, but it was unknown what would happen in a few years' time. There was a possibility that idols would enter that scene. Though, they would first have to undergo a process to make them look high class.

Moreover, there was the Korean wave. Although actors started off the trend, the idols followed suit. Although all they did right now was to appear in late-night shows as guests, the current industry outlook was that it would soon be their era. Of course, it was unknown how long that flow would last. However, no one denied the fact that there would be profits in the short term. As for the flow, no one would know when such things would end.

Janghae slowly flipped over the pages. In regards to actors, they were contacting some people under the rug. Although Yellow Star, which started off as an agency for actors, possessed several 'A-tier' actors, the ones that were considered 'S-tier' were currently scattered throughout multiple companies. Park Taeho, who got the best actor award in the Daejong Festival last year and had clearly become one of the top-tier icons of popularity, also belonged to a place named Jewel Entertainment and not the three major agencies. Gong Yeonsoo, actress of the main heroine of a drama that hit 50% viewership on TBS last year also belonged to a run-of-the-mill agency with not many actors in it. Other S-tier actors were in similar positions.

Actually, it didn't matter what agency an actor belonged to as long as they had ticketing power. Thanks to that, the majority of them stuck with the agency they started off with since they had been through thick and thin together. Although the big agencies were putting in their effort to house S-tier actors in their ranks, the reason they failed each time was because they couldn't cut off connections that were tied through 'emotion'.

Stars. Lofty beings in the skies. Everyone's idol. It was a place that one could only climb up to with skill, personality and even luck. Many people defined stars as such.

However, Janghae thought differently.

'It's all a matter of exposure in the end.'

As long as he gathered actors with potential and exposed them to the media frequently, they would become stars with a high probability. They said people always wanted new things, but in reality, that wasn't the case. People preferred what they were used to. When developing new products, ideas that were too new were always rejected. The reason was simple. The risks were too high. Businesses preferred profit models with stable profits. A business' preference was equivalent to the mass' preference.

The current idol market was like that as well. Although the internet talked about how it was copy and paste everywhere and that the music market is dead, the industry was seeing never-seen-before highs. Although the internet proclaimed the death of pop music in South Korea, idols were in first, second, and third places in music programs. Business targeted people that actually had purchasing power rather than those that typed away on the keyboard. It was natural for their focus to be on that as well. This was why idols had great achievements. It was extremely logical.

Groups that proclaimed they would breathe new life into music culture in the form of band music, ballads and hip hop had all died out without any achievements. They disappeared.

The public wanted something new? Those were just the immature words of the pioneers. If they really wanted new and fresh things, the structure of the industry would have changed already. Just like how the old music market was taken over by idols.

“So the priority is to get actors that are actually popular, huh.”

The internet made everything so much simpler in this era. It was easy to find out who and what the younger generation was passionate about. Janghae gave orders to standardize the faces of actresses that were popular amongst women in their teens to thirties. After that process was done, he would have the team leaders start casting people. In this agency, the structure was such that each team would compete against each other. If the value of the actor they scouted rose, they would receive appropriate compensation.

“A star is not born, but created.”

Janghae stretched out his neck and stood up from his seat. After matters about contracting actors were somewhat done, the next would be idols. As they were the latecomers in this industry, they had to put much more effort into it. However, Janghae had the confidence. In the end, everything came down to fighting with money. As long as the parent company did not stop its support, this competition was something that he could not lose. He opened the door to the meeting room and left. He decided to have a sandwich for lunch. He had to start using his brain again after eating a light meal.

Janghae smiled at the team leader that came back while tapping on his belly saying that he was full. To Janghae, that team leader was out of his mind. The only ending that awaited a fat pig was to be butchered.

Chapter 318

Aram stretched out her arms and laid back. They had just finished their third run. By now, she was used to seeing the sunset at school. Though, it did feel quite good since it felt like she was having a proper school life.

“Aram.”

Jiyeon was startled and pulled down her shirt. It seemed that it rolled up as she lied down. This girl was really feminine. Aram thought that she should learn from her. In her lying position, Aram bowed her waist and flicked her body up. When she stood up with a rebound, someone clapped.

“You’re good.”

It was Maru-seonbae.

“You should try as well. I think you should be able to do it.”

“I don’t like wasting my energy,” Maru said as he lied down.

It was break time, and everyone seemed tired. It wasn’t that surprising since they had been practicing ever since school finished. Although they weren’t using their bodies physically intensively, the

consumption of stamina was considerable since they had to be conscious about all of their moves. Aram felt a similar level of fatigue as when she was training at the dojo.

“Suyeon-unni isn’t coming these days.”

“Well, she has her drama shoots. We should be thankful that she comes here from time to time. After all, she’s doing this for free,” Maru spoke.

Aram nodded in agreement.

“There’s not long until the competition.”

“That’s true.”

“There must some pressure to go on stage, right?”

“A lot, probably.”

“Haa, it’s fine during practice, but it’s strangely more tiring when I stand in front of people. Even though I perform in front of people for the advancing in dan.”

“It’s because you’re not used to it.”

“Do you get nervous as well, seonbae?”

“No.”

“Wow!”

Aram raised her thumbs up. She looked for another conversation partner since Maru had closed his eyes. Then, she saw Daemyung-seonbae who was leaning against a wall, writing something down on his note. Aram glanced at Daemyung once before looking at Jiyeon.

‘I wonder when these two will make progress.’

If she could, she would just put them in a classroom with no one else and lock the doors up, but it was obvious that Jiyeon would fall into panic if she did so, so she hadn’t put it into practice. However, she was thinking of putting it into practice if they maintained their status quo. It was frustrating to watch from the sides.

“Tell him that you want to watch a movie together on the weekend.”

“Wh-why so suddenly?”

“Because I’m bored.”

“Stop teasing me,” Jiyeon said with a pout.

This girl was no good, so she had to change her target. Just as Aram started crawling towards Daemyung, someone grabbed her by the ankle.

“If you’re going to tease him, do it later. He’s busy.”

It was Maru.

“You weren’t sleeping?”

“Let’s take a rest, okay? I get that you’re full of energy, but you should rest when you can.”

Aram twitched her nose before returning to her original place. She felt bored. Yoojin wasn’t here today either. She said that she couldn’t be here because they had to prepare for their festival.

“Bosung Girls High’s festival sounded like it would be a lot of fun. I wish I could go there.”

“It happens on a weekday so we can’t.”

“Really? Oh wait, we have a school festival of our own, don’t we? Seonbae, when’s our festival?”

“Before summer holidays probably.”

“I know that much.”

At that moment, Daemyung told her that it was held before the preliminaries for the acting competition. Now that she thought about it, she did see some of her classmates making a roulette for the festival. They apparently belonged to the board game club.

“Don’t we need to do something as well?”

“Can’t we just skip?” Maru, who was lying down, spoke.

Aram stood up and shook her head vigorously.

“Students should fulfill their roles as students. This is a festival we’re talking about, you know? A festival!”

“Oh! A festival!”

Bangjoo, who was doing pushups on the side, also joined the fray. Aram looked at Maru. Maru avoided her eyes. Then, she looked at Daemyung. Daemyung also smiled awkwardly and looked away. These seniors were no good.

“Let’s do something as well.”

“Youth shines the brightest when it stays still.”

“Maru-seonbae. This is a festival that only happens once!”

“For us, it’s once, but for you three, it’s twice. There’s another one in your third year.”

“But there’s only one festival as first years! Third years’ festival is a different festival.”

“Haa.”

Maru lied sideways and covered his ears. Aram changed targets this time. Now that it came down to this, she could only persuade Daemyung.

“Daemyung-seonbae! Jiyeon wants to do something for the festival!”

At that moment, Aram saw that Daemyung's eyes were shaking. She faintly smiled. Jiyeon became flustered and told her to stop, but she just ignored her. It was a festival that only happened once. She wanted to participate and enjoy it.

"Sh-should we do something? Practice is going smoothly, and we should have some fun too. I think it's a good opportunity."

Daemyung looked towards Dowook. Dowook just told him 'do whatever you want'. There was only one person left. Aram walked on her knees towards Maru. She also dragged Jiyeon with her. She glanced at Maru, who was covering his ears with his hands.

"...What are you going to do?"

"We're gonna decide that now."

"Ah, my head. Daemyung, I give up. Do whatever you want. I'll do whatever you tell me to."

"Yes!"

Aram raised her fist in victory.

* * *

Bangjoo became fired up at the word festival. He thought that it would be fun to prepare for the festival with his friends. Since he was in the acting club, he wondered if they were going to do a play.

Just then,

"Ahn Bangjoo."

Maru-seonbae, who had rolled all the way towards him, sat up and spoke to him.

"Let's have a smo... I mean, some drinks outside. Daemyung, I'll go buy something to eat with Bangjoo."

"Okay. Oh, what about money?"

"It's fine."

Bangjoo followed Maru out of the classroom. They walked down the central staircase to the 1st floor. The corridor was empty. He was familiar with this scene now.

"Do you like festivals as well?"

"I do. It's a festival after all."

"I see."

"You don't like it, seonbae?"

"Well, I neither like it nor dislike it."

He bought a canned drink from the vending machine in front of the school cafeteria. It was a chocolate drink. He drank a sip before running across the corridor to leave the school building when Maru asked,

"Have you talked with your sister?"

Bangjoo stopped running and looked back at Maru. He could somewhat understand what he was talking about.

“Yes, I have.”

“I was worried because I might have interfered between you two unnecessarily. After all, I did interfere with another’s household matters unintentionally.”

“Not at all. I don’t think of it like that. Isn’t the fact that you are paying attention to us and worrying for us a sign that you’re treating us as important people? It was good because I could have a proper talk with my sister. We got to know that we haven’t exactly told each other a lot about ourselves.”

“Really? That puts me at ease then.”

Bangjoo faintly smiled and watched as Maru walked ahead of him. He truly felt thankful. To both his sister and to himself, the events that occurred that day was a memory that both of them did not want to look back at. When his sister talked about the events that happened on that day, Bangjoo, though he didn’t even know why, sighed in relief. For the first time, his sister told him what happened that day. Bangjoo got to listen to what kind of vulgarities she had to endure as a woman. It was frustrating and heart wrenching to listen to, but her sister just talked about it calmly. Whether it was before or now, she was a strong woman.

His sister was worried that the events that happened that day might have traumatized him and consequently turned him into someone that unintentionally raised his voice. She was also worried that he might be forcing himself to smile. Bangjoo didn’t think that was the case, but when he looked back in retrospect, he thought that that might indeed have happened. Although he looked like he was showing his frank emotions, he might have been covering everything up below that smile of his. When they did the one-man act at the café before, Miso had told him that his emotions were dull.

Regarding that, Bangjoo decided to think about it as well. Although he wasn’t dissatisfied with his current personality, he did want to fix it if his true self was suppressed by the bad memories that happened that day. He didn’t like leaving things alone that he knew were wrong.

“Do you have anything you want to eat?” Maru, who was walking ahead, asked after turning around.

Bangjoo replied with a smile.

“Dumplings.”

* * *

“But she really did get into a fight about something trivial.”

Hearing Aram’s words, Jiyeon tilted her head and looked at her. Fight? What was this about?

“Oh, you weren’t there because you were running an errand. Two of the girls got into a fight during lunchtime. People started watching them since they were bored, but what a spectacle that was. They were fighting over something like ‘this oppa and that oppa aren’t on good terms’ or something.”

“What do you mean?”

Daemyung, who had been quietly listening all this time, asked.

“Seonbae, do you know a group called The Five?”

“Is that a singer band?”

“Well, an idol group to be specific. I overheard some of the girls in class talking about them, but apparently they went separate ways because something happened in their group. They started fighting over who’s right and who’s wrong. One of them is actually the quiet kid in class, but seriously, it was no joke. Though, they did shut up after seeing that they grabbed everyone else’s attention.”

“Ah, I think I saw that on TV as well. I heard that the lawsuit was over or something. Though, I don’t know the specifics.”

Jiyoon was also aware of the group ‘The Five’. They were a popular idol band made up of 5 people, and they broke up recently. It was big news in the entertainment media, so she also knew the general gist of the situation.

“As far as I know, they broke up because they had some trouble with the agency,” Jiyoon spoke.

“With the agency?”

Daemyung looked at her. Perhaps he had gotten interested. Jiyoon remembered the magazine article that she once read.

“I briefly read it from a magazine, but apparently they are breaking up because of unfair contracts or something.”

“They got into a fight with the agency? Those girls were fighting over which oppa was in the wrong or something like that. That’s strange,” Aram spoke as she narrowed her eyebrows.

“Well, I think that’s because some of them decided to stick with the agency and some of them decided to leave. I think it was ‘Soul’ that some of the members were going to. I think that’s what you’re talking about. The team did split up.”

“I see now.”

Aram nodded her head.

“You’re quite... knowledgeable. Do you like idols?” Daemyung asked in a careful voice.

Jiyoon quickly shook her head.

“No! I don’t! I just came across the article by chance. I mean it.”

“Hey, if you don’t like idols, you don’t like idols. Why go so far to make excuses? It’s as if you’re conscious about someone. Pfft.”

Aram covered her mouth and laughed. Jiyoon became teary-faced when she saw that Aram had a playful smile. Although she was a good friend, she felt flustered whenever she acted like that. Last time, she had even pushed her back saying that she should confess. Although she had told her to stop, Aram

looked like she was still looking for opportunities to strike. She was thankful that Aram was supporting her, but she still didn't have the courage to confess just yet.

Jiyeon glanced at Daemyung. She wondered if he was disappointed in her. Fortunately, Daemyung just smiled like his usual self and replied 'I see'. Seeing that, Jiyeon forgot about the people around her and stared at Daemyung for a while.

"Ehem!"

Aram coughed. Jiyeon was startled and turned around to see Aram. Dowook, who was sitting next to Daemyung, squinted and looked at her. The always cold-looking mouth curved upward slightly. It was an ominous smile. The reason it felt all the more ominous was because Aram and Dowook looked at each other and nodded their heads at the same time.

"Aram."

"Yes, seonbae."

"Should we get a drink as well?"

"Sounds good!"

Then, the two abruptly stood up. Jiyeon quickly shook her head while grabbing onto Aram's pants. She was clearly telling them not to go, but Aram just flicked her hand off and turned around.

"A romantic time between the two of you."

Those words hit Jiyeon's ears. Even Dowook, who didn't like playing along with pranks usually gave a thumbs up as he left. Daemyung was just reading the notes he was always looking at during break time, so he didn't catch them leaving.

"Huh? What about the others?"

Daemyung raised his head and asked.

"B-b-both of them left."

"Wh-what?"

"..."

"..."

Jiyeon didn't know where to look. Was she supposed to look at Daemyung? Or the ceiling? Or the floor? Then, her eyes met Daemyung's. Daemyung's ears had turned bright red. That made Jiyeon's heart flutter.

"U-uhm, seonbae."

"Y-yeah?"

Jiyeon was reminded of Aram's advice. Watching a movie together. She gulped and clenched her fist tightly. She thought that she should be able to say it since they were alone together.

“Would you like to-!”

At that moment, the back door suddenly opened. The one that showed up was Maru. He was holding a plastic bag in each hand. Jiyoong was well aware that she shouldn't resent him, and that Maru did nothing wrong, but she still ended up looking at him with resentment. Bangjoo, who was following in, also flinched and stopped on the spot.

Jiyoong felt as though time had stopped. She moved her eyes and looked at Daemyung. This clueless seonbae of hers was just looking at the food in Maru's hands with a happy face. Seeing that, Jiyoong was a little angry. Right now, she felt like she could tell him 'idiot' straight to his face.

“Why are you just standing there? Oh, and what's that?”

Daemyung asked. His voice was slightly excited.

“This? Uh, dumplings.”

“Dumplings? Kimchi dumplings or meat dumplings?”

“Both. Uh, but, hm....”

“What is it?”

“I feel like I've sinned. Wait a sec.”

Maru slowly closed the door. Jiyoong's jaws were agape. She was sighing.

Chapter 319

Receiving the glare of others didn't feel that good. Especially if that other person was a junior. Normally, Maru would look straight back and ask what was the problem, but he could only avoid her gaze for now. The entire cause was him.

'I became a mindless old fool who decided to interrupt the business between two youths.'

Maru glanced at Jiyoong as he took a bite out of a piece of dumpling. She was pouting and was biting little pieces off the pickled radish. They met eyes just now and she had something akin to resentment in her eyes. Maru felt like he was sitting on a chair made of needles. When he opened the door, Jiyoong was about to say something to Daemyung with a flushed face. He just had to interrupt at that moment, so saying anything would be just an excuse.

“The dumpling is good. Where did you get them?”

Maru glared at Daemyung who obviously just talked about dumplings. Seeing him stuff his cheeks with dumplings and drown himself in happiness, he felt even more sorry towards Jiyoong. It seemed that this guy didn't even know what kind of situation he was in just now.

Someone sighed. Maru was sure that it was Jiyoong without even looking.

“Daemyung, are they good?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. You should eat some more then.”

He wanted to say something, but he couldn't because he saw Jiyeon's prickly glare. Maru made a bitter expression and spoke to Aram who was enjoying dumplings as well.

“You should have guarded outside.”

“We didn't know you'd be back so early. We just went to get some drinks. No wait, if you saw that something was happening when you opened the door, you should have closed it immediately.”

“Our eyes already met, so it would be even stranger if I just closed the door without saying anything.”

“Anyway, it's all your fault.”

Aram pouted as well. She looked like the sandcastle she painstakingly built had just been washed away by a wave. Of course, the wave was Maru. Maru scratched his eyebrows.

“Since it's like this, let's redeem it through the festival.”

“The festival?”

Aram made a suspicious smile.

“Daemyung-seonbae. Have you decided on what to do for the festival?”

“No, not yet. I was planning to talk about it with you right now. If you have anything you want to do, please go ahead and speak.”

“We're the acting club, so of course we have to do a play. Why don't we give it a twist and do a play with a lot of ad-libbing?”

“A lot of ad-libbing?”

“Yes. Doesn't that sound fun?”

“Well. If there's no storyline, doing a drama at all will be hard. If we're going to do a play, we should decide on the main storyline at least.”

“Nah, it's a festival we're talking about. It's not a proper play but something we can all have a laugh over. How about it? Doesn't it sound fun?”

Aram poked with her elbow. She was signalling Maru to help her out. Having no choice, Maru decided to speak.

“We should just decide on an ending and see how things go. How about it?”

“Really? Are you okay with that? Just because we're the acting club doesn't mean we have to do an act at all. If you have anything you want to do, then you should talk about it.”

It seemed that Aram had already signalled everyone as everyone said that an act would be good. Jiyeon also nodded.

“If everyone's okay with it, then let's go with a play. We don't have that much preparation time, so we shouldn't do anything too difficult.”

“We should do a romance!”

“A ro...mance?”

“Yes. It’s a festival, so there’s no need for tragedies. How about Romeo and Juliet?”

“That’s a tragedy though....”

“It’s fine because it’s an ad-lib. Please, please?”

Maru said ‘that sounds decent’. He could see what Aram was thinking. This was a scheme that was known to everyone but Jiyoong and Daemyung. Aram continued her story with an excited face. It was already turning into a ‘how to tease them perfectly’ rather than ‘how to tie them properly’, but it was the results that were important after all. As long as it went as she said, the two would definitely become closer.

“Let’s decide on roles now. Also, you should make a general plot. And then we should do the act! Sounds good, doesn’t it?”

“Al-alright. Everyone seems okay with it.”

“Then Jiyoong is Romeo and Daemyung-seonbae is Juliet.”

“What?”

“Isn’t it the opposite? No wait, why am I Romeo in the first place?”

Only Daemyung and Jiyoong objected to that. Of course, the rest stayed silent since it was what they had agreed upon. It seemed that USS Aram had departed the port and couldn’t be returned. Aram was at the helm, so he decided to let it be for now.

“You did things like crossdressing competitions in middle school, didn’t you? Our school did. Did you not?”

“I guess that happened.”

“See? Just an ordinary boring play is no fun. Since it’s a festival, let’s twist things up.”

“But me as Juliet is a little....”

Daemyung smiled awkwardly as he spoke. At the same time, he was sending a desperate plea for help to Maru. His eyes were saying something along the lines of ‘help me’ or ‘save me’. Maru slowly turned away his head.

This is all for your own good.

Daemyung flinched and looked at Dowook next, but there was no way Dowook would help. Jiyoong was just looking into nowhere with a face that looked like she had given up. At that moment, Aram whispered into her ears, and Jiyoong’s expression slowly brightened up. Although the confusion was still there, it seemed that she had accepted it somewhat.

“I’m... fine with it.”

One of the main characters ended up accepting the role. Maru looked at Daemyung. The flow was unstoppable and Daemyung ended up accepting.

“Yes!”

Though, the one that was the happiest was Aram.

* * *

“Have a safe trip back home!”

“See you tomorrow.”

They scattered in front of the school gates. After watching some of the members walk towards the bus stop, Maru got on his bike. He had to do some grocery shopping before going home. Today, pork neck was on sale. Making some kimchi-jjigae out of it would last two days at least.

“What is it?” He braked as he answered a call. It was from Bada.

-Oppa.

That ‘oppa’ was spoken in a nasal voice. It was clear that she had a request.

“Snacks?”

-Yeah. Potato ones.

“I’ll buy them, so clean up the house for me.”

-Alright.

Just as he was about to start biking again after the call, his phone started ringing again. He thought that it might be Bada and put his ears against the phone. However, the voice belonged to a man.

-Can you take a call right now?

“Ah, yes. Byungchan-hyung.”

It was his manager Byungchan.

-Are you at home right now?

“No. I’m going back from school right now. We had practice.”

-I see. Which school did you go to again?

“Woosung Engineering High.”

-Then can you wait there for a moment? I’ll go pick you up.

“What’s this about?”

-Writing a standard contract. I hear that it’s not usually written, but the drama production company said that you should write a contract perhaps because of the president of our company. You just need to read the contract and sign it. It’s nothing complex, so it won’t take that long.

“How about you sign it in my...”

-That’s not good! Contracts are very important. It involves money, so you’ll be in big trouble if you have someone else do it. You should read them through carefully or else you’ll receive damages when you grow up. I’m giving you advice as someone who’s been in society longer than you.

“Okay then. I’ll be waiting in front of the school.”

-Okay.

Maru smiled as he hung up. He just probed him out to see how much he should share with this man. Although this might seem petty of him, Maru liked the fact that Byungchan tried to maintain basic principles. He was a reliable man as a partner that overlooked his business. As for his personality, Maru had seen enough in the Gukbap restaurant before, so he thought that he could ease his guard somewhat around him.

He turned around on his bicycle and returned to the school. Beneath the darkening skies, the school was a lot quieter than during the day. It would be noisy once again once tomorrow arrived. After he waited around 10 minutes while saying goodbyes to some of the teachers that left at this hour, a sedan with its headlights on stopped on the side of the road. It was Byungchan’s car.

“I’m late, aren’t I?”

“No. I didn’t wait for that long.”

Byungchan was wearing a hoodie and jeans and looked as tired as always. Maru got in the passenger seat.

“I had to drive around all day because of someone’s photoshoot, so I’m kinda tired.”

“You should’ve come tomorrow if it wasn’t anything urgent.”

“Nah. It’ll be easier for me to sleep at night if I get things done today. Here, read this for now.”

Maru took out the contract form within the envelope. It was only a single page, and it mentioned the involved parties, his payment per episode, his payment date, as well as a couple of lines of things he had to keep in mind. Since he was like a minor role that was more like an extra, the contract was simple as well. He could understand what Byungchan meant when he said it’s not usually written. He signed the two copies of the contract with his name in block letters at the bottom.

“Have you read over it carefully?”

“Yes.”

“Then give it to me. I’ll send it over to them tomorrow. This one’s for you.”

Maru received the contract and put it inside his bag.

“Anyway, congratulations. I guess it’s your first contract.”

“That’s true.”

“You can’t ignore small contracts like this, because in the drama industry, actors are given a grade. If you join through open recruitment, then you’ll receive a grade immediately, but if you don’t, then these contracts are the basis of your grading. Right now, you have no tier, so you’ll only receive 50 thousand won per episode, but once you get a grade 6, your payment will multiply. If your grade rises and you get more experience, more and more people will look for you to hire as minor roles.”

Byungchan, who excitedly talked about it for a while, made a bitter smile. He, an aspiring actor himself, was explaining to him about actor-related work while working as his manager, so he must be feeling very complicated inside. Maru didn’t say anything until Byungchan had enough time to calm himself down.

“Oh yeah, have you had dinner?”

“Have you?”

“Not yet.”

“Then let’s eat something then.”

“Shall we?”

“You should take out the company card at times like these, right?”

Byungchan made a satisfied smile. Maru messaged Bada that he might be a little late. Protecting a hard-working youth’s wallet was much more important than delivering some snacks for his sister. Byungchan hummed as he started the car.

* * *

“Snacks!”

“Here.”

He threw a pack of chips at his sister who rushed to the door as soon as he entered the house. Fortunately, she wasn’t annoyed or anything. She hugged the pack of chips like a bear would hug a honey pot and started eating it in front of the TV. After saying ‘you’ll gain weight’ in a small voice, Maru went inside his room. As he couldn’t just watch Byungchan eat without eating anything himself, he also ate a bowl of Soondae-Gukbap. He lied down on his bed feeling full and dazed out for a while before standing up again. His sister’s voice had gotten disturbingly loud.

He opened the door and looked at the living room. In front of the TV, his sister was calling someone. He perked his ears because he wondered if she was calling Dowook.

“No way.”

His sister looked quite agitated. Maru had a look at what was on the TV. It was talking about some news in the entertainment industry. After the host’s comment was over, the screen switched. There were a lot of journalists on screen as it seemed to be some press meeting.

He read the text on the top right. ‘The Five’s slave contract rumors - what’s the truth?’ was written on it. Idols? Now that he thought about it, Aram did mention something about The Five or whatnot. It seemed

to be one of the topics that the four of them talked about after he and Bangjoo left to buy some dumplings.

“Who’s the bad one? Do the oppas have a problem?”

Are all the idols in the world oppa to you?

Maru quietly sat on the sofa behind Bada. At the table at the front were three men, and behind them was a banner that said ‘Soul Ent’. The journalists flashed their cameras at the three people that looked solemn. The speaker told the audience that the scene was from a press meeting that was held during the day.

“What’s happening?”

“Huh?”

Bada turned around. She seemed surprised that her brother was interested in this at all.

“Do you know those uhppas, oppa?”

She pronounced ‘those oppas’ with a weird pronunciation that was neither ‘o’ nor ‘uh’. Was this her way of acting cute?

“No. I’m just curious.”

Bada looked like it was Maru’s fault for not knowing who they were. Though he could ask Bada the same thing about knowing who the leader of the ruling political party was and he’d probably give her the same look.

“They’re called The Five. They’re the only idols that can compare with TTO oppas. Aah, they were cool.”

“But what, did a problem occur?”

His sister hung up after telling the other party that they should talk later. She seemed somewhat serious. Was she the president of their fan club or something?

“There is a problem. A big problem.”

“A bigger problem than your grades?”

“Do you want to die?”

“Sorry. So what’s it about?” Maru asked his sister for some explanation.

Chapter 320

“A slave contract,” Bada spoke as she raised her eyebrows. She seemed very upset.

“What is it about exactly?” Maru raised the TV volume as he asked.

The reason he was interested in political stories was because it was closely tied to everyday life. What kinds of new laws were passed, what kinds of bills were proposed, as well as what happened - as a citizen of the country he could not help but be interested. The same could be said about the entertainment industry as well. If it was before, he would have just looked at it and thought nothing of

it. After all, it was a world he wasn't involved with. However, right now, he was more closely related to the entertainment industry than politics. If a provocative word such as 'slave' was used for a story, then it would be better if he knew about it.

"Oppa. How much do you think a popular idol earns?"

"A lot, probably."

"I thought so too, but it turns out, that's not true."

At that moment, a handsome-faced singer in front of the mic started speaking.

-First, we apologize to all the fans for worrying you.

The three of them stood up and took a deep bow as an apology. A round of flashes burst out again. The man seated in the middle spoke in a heavy voice.

-We, The Five, have endured until now thanks to the love of our fans. Many things have happened, but we have endured while thinking about the fans that looked after us and cheered for us. However, we couldn't do that anymore. First, we will clear up the situation at hand. The reason we, The Five, split up, is not because of disharmony between the members. It is because of the unfair contract we signed with the agency.

The screen switched to the news studio again. Next to the host was a man in a suit, who seemed to be a legal advisor.

-Yes, that was from the press meeting that occurred this morning. Sir, what is the precise cause of this incident?

-According to the revealed contract, there are a few clauses that are problematic. The first is the clause that states that the singer has to tell the company his position at all times and must be able to be reached by phone. The second is the clause that states that the singer must participate in events the company wants without compensation. There are more, but these two clauses seem to be what triggered this incident.

-Ah, so there's a clause that states that they have to participate in events for free.

-Yes, while it does state that the event has to be company-related events and events that are aimed at advertising the singer, the interpretation is vague. After all, you can say that every event is related to the company.

-So that means that while they may hold activities as public singers, they will not get paid for their activities.

-In an extreme case, yes.

After listening to the two speaking, Bada looked at him as though she was saying 'isn't it serious?' Maru nodded his head. He did hear from the news that an idol boom was about to begin. It seemed congested even now, but more and more people from the younger generation were joining anyway. It must have become a red ocean in an instant, consequently leading to free human resources, naturally leading to

the fact that people lowered their own value to sign a contract. Going beyond that, there might be instances where they would even have to sign an unfair contract.

“The reason we go to their concerts and cheer for them is for them to do well, not for the company behind them to fill their stomach. But now, I found out that only a tiny sliver of the money went to the oppas in the first place. A friend of mine is a fan of The Five, and she told me that she’ll go to a riot in front of the company building. It looks very serious.”

Bada went to his room before calling out to him that he should come.

“Look at this.”

On the monitor was The Five’s official fan café. On the main page was a very ominous-looking line considering the circumstances. ‘We Have To Protect Them’. Below that line was a map and it seemed to be the location of The Five’s agency. Gathering at 7 p.m. There were already over 100 comments that said that they would participate.

“Are you going as well?”

“No. I would have if it was TTO that was like this.”

She was quite cold-minded when it came to things like this. They returned to the living room. There was one more person on the news. The new man seemed to be a journalist. The three of them discussed in depth about this incident.

-So there’s a possibility that unfair contracts between agencies and entertainers might come to the surface.

-I can’t say that for sure.

It was a sensitive topic, so the news host did not ask anymore. Maru sympathized deeply when the journalist said that he couldn’t be sure. It was unexpectedly difficult to scrape out the dead flesh. That was because the dead flesh was always in contact with living flesh. Just deciding on how much to scrape out would take ages. Above all, the pressure on the singers that would leave their agencies was too heavy. While they were still under a contract, they at least got some form of compensation. They might think that little was better than nothing, and while they kept thinking that way, no one would be brave enough to go against their agencies.

“Is Soul Entertainment the agency behind The Five?”

“No, that place seems to be the new company that those three oppas signed a contract with. They get much better treatment there, apparently. There’s no slave contract either.”

“Really? Then the two others are remaining behind in their old company?”

“Probably.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know that much. That’s causing an issue in itself. The Five is supposed to be made up of five people, but now they split up into three-two.”

“They said that it wasn’t due to the disharmony between members, but maybe they actually had a big fight?”

“Those oppas have a really good relationship though.”

“Have you seen them?”

“...No.”

“Then you don’t know for sure.”

“Forget it! You don’t even know them.”

Maru shut his mouth because his sister looked at him coldly. She was scary. He felt like a remote would be hurled at his face if he said any more. Maru narrowed his eyes and looked at the TV. The problem came down to exclusivity contracts in the end. Entertainers could only work through the medium that was their agencies. To put it a bit bluntly, they were the companies’ puppets.

“Are you okay though?”

Bada quietly asked. Her eyes were glued to the TV though. Maru wondered if she was worried about him.

“I’m fine. There weren’t any clauses like that in the contract I signed.”

“If you say so. That’s fortunate.”

“You mean your credit card is?”

“Hey! And here I was worried about you!”

“I’m saying it because it doesn’t suit you. It gives me goosebumps.”

Maru threw a cushion at his sister before standing up. Although he said those words, he was thankful for her. After all, he had thought of her as an immature kid until now.

“Wait, have you done your homework?”

“Ah, that’s right!”

Bada turned off the TV and ran into her room. It seemed that no matter how much she liked those idol oppas, they seemed to be insignificant compared to her homework. Having entered his room, Maru searched ‘The Five’ on the internet. As expected of an idol in their peak of popularity, they took the first through third most searched terms right now. Websites, cafés, and blogs were all talking about stories about The Five.

Browsing through websites, Maru stopped on one. It was an anonymous community, and the writer was supporting the agency. The writer went into detail about the costs associated with creating a 5-man idol band.

-The agency has to take care of the costs of idol consulting fees that may reach hundreds of millions of won. If the idol does not succeed, that becomes the company’s debt. While it is true that the agency ‘Alt’ has signed a malicious contract, honestly speaking, it makes me enraged looking at The Five’s

actions when they betrayed the efforts and affection that the company gave them to raise them until now. Advertising costs, education costs, living costs, as well as everything else was probably handled by the company, but they didn't say anything while they received all those benefits, but now they want equal treatment because they grew up a little? If they really wanted equal treatment, they should have shared the costs starting from their trainee days. But those kinds of trainees don't exist.

It was a complex matter indeed. There was a need to think about the effects that this incident might bring to his contracts.

Maru took out the contracts he put inside his drawer. He read them over from the beginning once again. Fortunately, all of the clauses included the statement that the involved parties may negotiate again on the contract, so there wasn't anything that seemed to be a problem.

It could be seen just how much Lee Junmin cared about his own people from this contract. In fact, there were some statements that seemed disadvantageous to the company. The contract period was two years, and it could be dissolved at any moment during that time. Compared to the ten-year slave contract that was mentioned on the news, this was a golden contract.

'Providing the best treatment to his own people, huh.'

As expected of a man who chucked 300 million won to a mere high school student. To Junmin, money was just a convenient means of achieving what he wanted, nothing more, nothing less. Although he was doing business in order to earn money, it felt like he was giving it all back to the people under him rather than piling it up.

The movie, *Twilight Struggles*, was also something that was hard to expect any profit out of, yet JA Production, the investor and producer of the movie hired superstar-level actors. Some of the articles he read after his shoot said that the movie will never break even. Although the level of investment into the movie was commercial movie-level, the contents were definitely not suited for commercial use after all.

'Now that I think about it, I really should make a visit.'

He was reminded of the kind smile of the elder. Since it had been quite some time since the shoot ended, it should be fine to make a visit. He put the contracts back into his drawer and lied down on his bed. He closed his eyes and waited until he became sleepy. Just then, his phone that was on the desk vibrated once. He had received a message.

He really couldn't be bothered, but he still yawned and sat up. He would be really dissatisfied if it was some advert. He checked the message. It was from Jiseok.

-Maru. Chaerim-noona wants to know your number! Should I tell her?

Chaerim? He wondered who that was for a moment before he remembered that it was the girl idol he saw during the drama shoot. But why so suddenly? Maru called Jiseok. Jiseok picked up immediately.

-So you're a boy after all.

"Stop with your nonsense. What's this about phone numbers."

-Noona wants to say thanks.

“At this hour?”

-I just met her. She’s next to me right now. She’s thankful for what you did back then.

“Oh that. Tell her to forget about it. I never did anything that would warrant thanks from her. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if she said bad things about me.”

-Eh? Are you not going to tell her your number? She’s an idol you know? From the popular idol group BLUE.

“And what good is that to me? Since you said you’re next to her, tell her that she doesn’t need to feel thankful. Ah, just tell her to not resent me too much during shoots. She’s one of the main characters after all.”

-What, that’s it?

“What else do you want?”

-Really, that’s it?

“We exchanged greetings, that’s enough. I’m hanging up then.”

-Hey! I said Chaerim-noona is right next to me!

“Good for you, there’s an idol noona next to you.”

He still had a loud voice as always. Maru yawned and switched his phone to silent.

* * *

“He hung up,” Jiseok said with a bright smile.

If it was anyone else, he would have told her the number without even asking, but from what he knew of Maru’s personality, it was obvious that he would not be okay with that so he asked first. However, he didn’t know that he would hang up without even listening to Chaerim’s voice even once. Although he did feel a little sorry for Chaerim-noona who stood next to him, he found this situation interesting. Being involved with Maru was always fun.

“He hung up?”

“Yes. And he told me to tell you that you don’t need to feel thankful and that you shouldn’t resent him too much during shoots.”

“That’s it?”

“You’re not upset, are you?”

“Why would I be?”

“Or disappointed?”

“Not really. I just tried to call him because it leaves a bad aftertaste. If he doesn’t need it, then that’s that.”

Chaerim yawned slightly and leaned backwards.

Jiseok licked his lips seeing that her reaction was very dry. He wanted to see something much more dramatic, but reality said no. Jiseok got out of the car. They were doing a night shoot right now, but it was halted due to a sudden interruption from some drunk people. The safety guard was trying to push the two away, but the two drunkards did not leave and just kept shouting. The production staff seemed to have gotten pissed as they even called for the police.

“Fuaam.”

He yawned before stretching his arms out. The drama shoot wasn't as fun as he had expected. He was a comedic character that hung around the main characters, so the acting itself was quite fun, but the waiting time was too long. Jiseok had a hard time enduring this time where he had nothing to do but stare into the sky. It would be great if there was someone he could play with, but Chaerim was sleeping inside the car like someone who was tired of everything.

“Sir, please get up.”

He saw some policemen that appeared in patrol cars trying to console the drunkards. They had a hard job. He inwardly cheered for them. After the drunkards went away, the shoot began again. This was a scene where the poor heroine was taken shopping. Chaerim, who was sleeping inside the car, had a scene right after this one where she came across the other main characters inside the store. That scene would be quite something to look at because there was a kiss scene. It was unknown if they could enter the store to shoot, but if they could, they would achieve their objective for today.

Jiseok looked at the jimmy jib camera filled with expectation when the door opened and Chaerim got out.

“Noona, there's still time until your shoot.”

“I had a sore waist.”

“Aha.”

Chaerim crossed her arms and looked at the street where the shoot was currently happening. She seemed bored.

“But hey.”

Chaerim, who looked like she wouldn't speak, opened her mouth.

“Yes?”

“Is he going to be the class president in the future?”

“You mean Maru?”

“I don't know his name, but yeah, that kid. Is he going to be the class president?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“I see.”

Chaerim nodded slightly before getting in the car again. Jiseok narrowed his eyes and looked at Chaerim who started sleeping again.