

Once Again 381

Chapter 381

“What do you think of that guy?”

“The one in brown?”

“Yeah, him.”

Breaktime. Changsung was having a conversation with Jinhyuk while drinking some coffee.

“I don’t know about anything else, but I really like the way he speaks. I hate dragging things out, you know? He knows how to act in front of others, and it looks like he listens to others. I think that he’ll be able to take care of himself on set so I think he’s okay.”

“I was just going to pick anyone I wanted, but it feels good to see someone like him,” Changsung spoke as he crumpled the empty paper cup.

“You finished it already?”

“You should finish yours as well. We need to do the rest.”

Jinhyuk blew on the coffee before drinking.

Changsung returned to the studio and had a look at the rest of the child actors. Although no one caught his eye, they all looked a bit decent. The child actors with a lot of lines had been cast already a long time ago. These days, there were professional child actors as well. From how there were a lot of parents who taught acting to their kids from the moment they started learning the language, raising an actor was somewhat like an investment in this country. It seemed as though the child’s will did not matter at all in the perspective of the parent. It was good for Changsung since he was able to get a lot of kids who were good at acting, but as someone who watched them from the side, he found them pitiful.

“Tell everyone that they did well and bring these people here.”

The six that passed returned to the studio. They ranged from a little girl to high school boys. They somewhat looked like a family when they stood next to each other in a line.

“First, congratulations on joining us on the shoot. The six of you will appear in the drama as a group of beggars. You have a few lines and you’ll be appearing in about 4 episodes so you’ll get paid well too. If you do well, we might use you later when we need child actors so don’t be so disappointed that it’s only four episodes.”

The young actors all nodded. They seemed to know the workings of this industry. It was really satisfying for Changsung since he didn’t have to console them.

“That person over there is going to give you a contract form each so write one. Do any of you have an actor grade?”

All six of them replied that they didn’t have one.

“You’re all below 19 years old, so your payment will be grade one. I’ll tell you the details later when writing the contract so don’t worry about that. Anyway, well done, and see you on set.”

Changsung looked at the one in brown standing on the left. He learned the boy’s name when the youngest member of the production team called out names. His name was Han Maru.

“Uhm, producer.”

Just as he was about to leave the studio, a middle school student standing in the middle raised his hand.

“What is it?”

“Is there a bus that goes to the set? Our family doesn’t have a car.”

“There’s a rental coach so don’t worry about it. We’ll give you a ride both ways. But hey, you’re worried about that as well? What a good boy.”

The middle school boy only smiled in relief then. Before, people started off as actors that were completely broke, but recently, people that became actors were from well-off households. This was especially the case for child actors, so people like him who were worried about transportation were rare.

“Good luck!”

After saying that, he left the studio. Jinhyuk followed him and asked him where he was going.

“I’m going to visit the author of course.”

“We’re going now?”

“Yes, we’re going now. Are we people with a lot of free time? The Wednesday-Thursday drama that’s airing now will be reaching the midpoint soon. We need to shoot the first and second episodes, edit it, and advertise it to get sponsors.”

“It’s not like ads and sponsors will raise our salaries.”

“Instead, we get scolded less. Even if the viewing rates are low, we’ll be better off as long as we get sponsors and ads. Getting your salary while everyone else glares at you doesn’t feel like getting a salary at all.”

“I guess that’s true. But why am I, someone who’s been here for less than a year, working on a historical drama? I heard that new recruits have to stay as assistant directors for more than three years.”

“You still didn’t know the reason?”

“Huh? You know the reason, senior?”

Jinhyuk blinked and asked.

“I asked them to give you to me.”

“What?”

“Your cocky attitude and your tendency to suck up made me think that you’ll be worth using. Let’s go, assistant director.”

“No way, senior!”

Changsung laughed heartily as he walked on the corridor.

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“Fifty thousand per episode. 20% on reruns. Since there aren’t any photos since this is a historical drama, I guess you’ll only receive 10 thousand during flashbacks. No, I guess there won’t be flashbacks at all.”

Considering that the minimum wage was less than 3,000 won per hour right now, it definitely wasn’t a bad amount. If it was a scene where he just had to show his face, say a couple of lines, and disappear, three hours was enough on the assumption that he didn’t have to wait. 50 thousand won for saying a couple of lines after loitering around for three hours. Of course, if things didn’t go well, he might have to wait two to four more hours without being able to do anything, so it wasn’t that good of a deal.

“Please take care of my child.”

Her name was Kim Bitna. Maru grabbed Bitna’s hand and nodded towards the lady that bowed towards him. Bitna also waved at him. She was a cute kid.

He didn’t talk much to the other people that passed. They all left the TV station after bidding each other goodbye. Maru exited to the lobby and returned his entrance card and entered the coffee shop.

He ordered a latte and waited for a while when someone ran inside from outside the TV station. Behind him were numerous people holding small cameras. The man that ran into the lobby panted for a while before cheering out loudly. When he had a closer look, he realized that the man was a comedian.

‘Is there a shoot for an entertainment show right now?’

Following that, broadcasting cameras and microphones as well as a flood of people rushed into the lobby. A woman holding a sketchbook at the front wrote some things down before showing it to the man who was still panting. The man improvised some lines on the spot.

Maru watched them for a while as he drank his coffee before leaving. He was walking towards the bus stop while watching the statues placed in front of the TV station when a white sedan passed by on the road. The emblem wasn’t a Korean brand.

He saw Bitna who politely greeted him through the window. Her mom, who sat next to her, was driving with sunglasses on.

“Whew.”

He sucked the last bit of coffee through the straw as he watched the sedan enter the streets. Although they were all minor actors, someone was looking for a bus that could take him to the set, while someone disappeared on a high-end sedan. They say the desperate succeed, but in Maru’s opinion, the sedan had a higher chance of succeeding than the bus. There was this famous saying: money isn’t the answer to everything. However, when it couldn’t be solved with money, people resort to God.

After throwing away the empty plastic cup into a trash can next to the bus stop, he waited for the bus. Since he was going to and from Suwon to Seoul all the time, he was starting to think about grabbing a residence in Seoul. Though, his parents wouldn't allow him.

Just as Maru squinted to check the number on the bus that was coming from afar, a small car stopped in front of the bus stop and opened the window.

"Han Maru."

Maru lowered his head and looked inside. Journalist Dongwook was waving at him.

"What are you doing?"

"I was here for an audition. Rather than that, sir."

"Yeah?"

"You'll get a parking ticket if you stop in front of a bus stop. It's 30,000 won."

Maru smiled and pointed at the front. Dongwook shrugged before driving forward a little.

"Are you on your way to the company?"

He approached the car and asked.

"No, rather than that, get on."

Dongwook gestured for him to get in the car. He opened the door to the passenger seat and got in. The stench of cigarettes momentarily made him stop breathing.

"Aren't you smoking too much?"

"I have a reason for that. Rather than that, have you had lunch?"

"Not yet."

"Then eat with me. I'll be lonely by myself."

The place Dongwook drove to was a rather old gukbap restaurant. As they entered the street with the gukbap restaurant, they saw old single-story buildings on the right, and tall buildings that were at least 20 stories tall lined up on the left.

"Looks like this place will be redeveloped soon."

Hearing those words, Dongwook pointed at the banner hung on the building. 'We object to the development' - it said.

He followed Dongwook to the gukbap restaurant. A fly greeted him. As soon as he sat down, a pork gukbap was served to him. It seemed that he didn't need to order here.

"It's not like you can't eat that or something, right?"

"I can't have enough of it. Thank you for the meal."

He first scooped the white broth. The restaurants that had good food could be discerned from just the broth.

“It’s good.”

“Right? I’m a regular here.”

He put some chili paste in the soup and then the radish kimchi sauce before putting the bowl of rice in. The two continued their meal without a single word. Only after they saw the bottom of the gukbap bowl, did they say ‘thanks for the meal’.

Maru ate the scorched rice-flavored candy that the lady threw at him before leaving. Although this place was very unfriendly towards the customers, he definitely wanted to come here again.

“Wanna smoke?”

“I decided that I want to live a long life.”

“Alright. Don’t smoke then.”

After puffing, Dongwook sighed out a deep breath.

“Did something happen?”

“I’m investigating a few things, but it’s really going strangely.”

“Looks like it’s something serious.”

“It’s not that serious yet, but... Geez, a junior of mine has a strong journalist mindset so I think it’s going to turn serious.”

“If it’s something that’s giving you a headache. It’s better to get your hands off it early. You won’t be able to leave if you’re too late.”

“Kid, you’re right, but I think it’s too late for me already.”

Dongwook grinned. After getting in the car, Maru told Dongwook that he would get off at the nearest train station.

“Sorry about that. I want to give you a ride to Suwon, but I’m too busy for that.”

“You don’t have to. Please be careful.”

“Thanks.”

Dongwook waved his hand and closed the window. He had thinned out a lot compared to the last time Maru saw him. Perhaps he received a lot of stress.

“Watch out for your health. You’ll regret it later,” Maru spoke in a small voice as he watched the car drive off into the distance.

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“Mr. Bae, are you in?”

Changsung pressed the bell before waiting quietly a while. For some reason, the writer that picked up his phone before he arrived wasn't picking up right now.

"Perhaps he collapsed?"

"Hey, don't talk about such unfortunate things. Perhaps he just left for a while due to an appointment."

"Why isn't he picking up then?"

"How would I know? Try pressing the bell again."

Just as Jinhyuk pressed the bell and called out to writer Bae, the elevator started moving from the 1st floor. Changsung stared at the elevator indicator. Eventually, the elevator stopped on the 7th floor, the floor they were on.

"Mr. Bae."

"Oh, producer Han."

"Where have you been all this time? You weren't picking up my calls either."

"Oh, sorry about that. I was just meeting this fellow."

It was only then that Changsung found a man standing next to writer Bae Chulho. That man had a thin stature and sharp eyes. He thought that the new person would have a picky personality, but the man instead smiled and greeted him.

"So you were a producer. My name is Ahn Pilhyun. I'm also a writer, though, I'm not as well-off as him."

"Ah, yes. Hello there. My name is Han Changsung. I'm a producer at RBS."

"And I'm Kim Jinhyuk."

While they exchanged greetings, writer Bae Chulho opened the door.

"Come inside for now. It won't be polite of me to keep guests waiting outside. You should come in as well."

"I was going to even if you didn't tell me."

Pilhyun waved the bags he was holding. The smell of fried chicken wafted out from it. Changsung gulped subconsciously.

"Well, then. Please excuse me," Changsung said as he took off his shoes.

Although he had visited this place before, he felt that writer Bae really liked plants. There were all sorts of orchids in the veranda, and in front of them were colorful cactuses. There were flowers next to the TV as well. It must be very tiring to look after them all.

"Have you had lunch?" Writer Bae asked.

"No, not yet."

Changsung thought that he might be being rude, but he couldn't say that he did after smelling the fried chicken. Jinhyuk was all smiles.

"Tsk, what a pity. We only bought enough for the two of us," writer Ahn Pilhyun, who was next to writer Bae, said as he ripped open the paper bags.

He really looked like he had no intentions of sharing.

"Hey, stop teasing people you haven't seen before."

"Why? It looks like he likes it."

"Geez, sorry about that, producer. This fella is really ill-mannered."

Writer Bae brought the fried chicken and some beer on a tray.

"Let's talk after we eat. I have something to talk to you about as well."

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There were three taboo topics to talk about while drinking: politics, religion, and favorite baseball teams. The moment any one of them became the topic of the conversation, food would start flying everywhere, and drinks would start rising into the sky.

"This is why the ruling party is shit. Just look at what happened today! Just look at those bastards! Is the National Assembly a wrestling ring? Why do I have to see a shoulder throw in the National Assembly?"

"Is the opposing party any better? The Lee Joongho you liked so much did a flying kick."

"Hey, we're talking about defeating enemies. A flying kick? I'm disappointed they didn't go further."

"For someone who was just talking about wrestling rings, you sure are infinitely forgiving when it comes to your party."

Writer Bae Chulho and writer Ahn Pilhyun looked like they were about to grab each other's collars.

Changsung, who was stuck in the middle, shook his head as he drank the rice wine. Those two were going at this for two hours now. Around an hour ago, they were fighting about which baseball players were good or bad. It seemed that they supported different baseball teams. They started pointing at each other with displeased faces, so Changsung was worried that a fight would break out.

However, they started laughing and drinking together in a friendly fashion as though they didn't fight at all, but they soon started fighting again after 10 minutes, this time, about religion. They talked about such sensitive topics without rest for the past couple of hours. Even Changsung, who had been cautious at first, became used to it. They would probably start laughing again soon.

"These two are very... dynamic, in a way," Jinhyuk spoke in a small voice.

Since two men that were nearing fifty were fighting like they were teens, 'dynamic' seemed to be fitting.

"But was writer Bae always like that?"

"No. He was a calm person. He looks like a professor no matter how you look at him, right?"

“That’s true. Then that must be because he’s at ease with writer Ahn next to him, right?”

“They’re probably friends. It’s the first time I saw writer Bae laugh like that as well. I’ve known him for two years, but I feel like I finally got to know the real him.”

Writer Ahn waved the bottle of rice wine, gesturing for Changsung to drink. Changsung immediately brought his cup.

“We were too loud, weren’t we? We did that because drinking quietly is no good. I learned that drinking quietly is only for sending away unwelcome guests.”

When his cup was filled, writer Ahn poured some for Jinhyuk as well. Changsung drank it in one gulp. This was his ninth year as a producer. The only things he managed to gain were chronic fatigue, as well as a bloated liver due to all the alcohol. He never lost in drinking when drinking with celebrities that were known to drink well.

“This fella’s good at drinking. Oi, Bae. You met a good man.”

“The producer is decent.”

Decent just because he could drink huh. Changsung laughed in a small voice before putting the cup down.

“Since we drank enough, we should get to work.”

Writer Bae and writer Ahn stood up and started cleaning up. Changsung and Jinhyuk also helped out. The living room was cleaned up not long later.

“Oh, it’s somewhat funny to say this at this point, but this friend of mine decided to help me out. You’ll see him frequently in the future,” writer Bae spoke.

Changsung looked at writer Ahn and made a formal greeting again.

“I’m just helping out personally, so you don’t need to worry about payment. I’m just paying him back for the things I owe him,” writer Ahn spoke.

“Yes, okay. Then I’ll start talking about the script now. We don’t have that much time until we start shooting.”

“Yes, of course. We should talk about that.”

Changsung gave a glance to Jinhyuk. Jinhyuk took out the script for the first and second episodes that writer Bae sent them, as well as the outline of the plot that they discussed with writer Bae.

“Since this became a fifty-episode drama, I think there’s a need to look at the plot again. Of course, it’s good as it is, but I want to listen to your valued opinion.”

“My valued opinion, huh.”

“First, I’ll tell you about the first episode since it’s right upon us.”

“Okay, go ahead.”

This was his second time working together with writer Bae. Writer Bae wrote the script for the fantasy-esque historical drama two years ago. Their meetings together had continued until now.

Changsung respected writer Bae. At first, he thought that the writer was a stuck-up person from how he refused to drop the honorifics even in meetings outside of work, but the moment he realized that it was for mutual respect, he treated the writer as the teacher of his life. He always listened carefully to every word when talking about work-related things, and did not ignore anything just because someone younger than him said it. This was why Changsung was able to get straight to the topic without any formalities.

“In the first scene, the main character goes to the Ming Dynasty and receives an award for his loyalty, right?”

“Yes.”

“I think we should change it.”

“How?”

“I want to make it so that the main character wants to resign, but his resignation is refused by the King. The character we’re trying to express is ultimately a rational and cold-headed politician, but since it’s a drama that we’re doing, the audience needs to be able to put themselves in the main character’s shoes. In that perspective, it should be an honor for him to receive praises from the Emperor of Ming, but it might cause a sense of repulsion from the audience since it’s the first episode. It looks okay on text, but it will feel different once it becomes a video. Of course, we’re willing to follow your will. This work is entirely yours after all.”

“Hm. The first sentence is the most important regardless of which work it is. Including indentation, the first words will decide the world of the writing. I thought that bowing his head to the Emperor of Ming would portray the figure of a politician that’s hypocritical yet successful. I wanted the audience to decide whether the character is splendid or underhanded.”

Writer Bae stroked his chin and stopped speaking. That was a habit of his when he fell in thought. Changsung cautiously waited with his breath abated. The producer and the writer. The relationship between the two was very peculiar. They had the same objective of creating a work, but there were many times where they differed in the direction.

A long time ago, when he was put in charge of production as the assistant director in the B team, he saw a famous writer quarrel with his senior in the meeting room. He understood from that why they just exchanged scripts with emails.

Producers had their own ideals, and writers had their own ideals. If the producer was able to take responsibility for the script as well, there wouldn’t be any noise, but that was realistically impossible. It would be possible if the entire script until the final episode was written before shooting, but the drama production system in Korea was not that easy. Even if they spent several years writing the script, it was unknown if the script would get the final stamp. On top of that, they had to reflect on the real-time feedback as well as reflect on the social issues of the time.

If a murder method in a detective drama was used in real-life before the episode aired, then whatever video they had had to be deleted. If they aired it just like that, it wouldn't just end with visiting the KCC (Korea Communications Commission).

On top of that, since it was something made by people, they would have to change the script if one of the actors encountered an accident or something, so it was nearly impossible for the producer to do that alone. This was why scriptwriters were needed.

There was a moment of silence. Changsung thought that he should say it - 'I will do as you say for the first episode'.

The first scene could be considered the face of the drama. Also, the audience was very harsh. Unless there was an actor or actress they liked, many people would change channels after just looking at the general atmosphere. If it was a drama set in modern times, he would need to worry less, since it wouldn't look out of place. However, in the case of historical dramas, especially in the case of RBS historical dramas, the target audience was the younger generation so it had to be softer. The reason he went with beautiful-looking sorcery and a beautiful lady in the intro of the drama he did two years ago was due to those reasons.

In such a situation, which would look better? The main character bowing down to the Chinese Emperor, or the monarch of one country asking the main character to stay by his side?

Now that hanja education was no longer compulsory, and history education was decreasing, there was no way the audience knew about the background of the characters in detail. Since this was a business that used billions of won in funds, as well as hundreds, if not thousands, of people working on it, he had to take those elements into account. Too much money was at stake to just go with intuition.

He wanted to create a first scene that was friendly towards all.

That was what Changsung wanted.

Despite that, Changsung decided not to change the intro if writer Bae didn't want to. Although he was creating the drama, the foundation of the drama was the writing that writer Bae wrote. Changsung wanted to create this work together with the writer.

"I think the producer is right on that."

The one that broke the silence was not writer Bae. Changsung looked at Ahn Pilhyun. Writer Bae's gaze was also directed at writer Ahn.

"Hey, you have the answer already. If you're thinking this long about it, you must be shaken, so there's no need to ponder about it so deeply."

"Geez."

"The producer's sounds better. It's cool, isn't it? If people do not know what the main character is like, this is much better than bowing his head to a Chinese guy. It's good to express your philosophy, but dramas aren't made alone. Isn't that right, producer Han?"

Writer Ahn winked. Receiving unexpected support, Changsung's expression visibly brightened and nodded. Actually, there was one more reason he wanted to change the scene to the main character

meeting the King alone. It was reducing production costs. Making the introductory scene look fancy would require a huge sum of money. He couldn't even begin to calculate the money needed to make the set for meeting the emperor in the capital city of the Ming Dynasty.

However, if it was just a personal meeting with the King, they could just use the set in RBS. Since they had a limited budget, they should save where they could.

"Good. Let's go with what producer Han says. However, I do not plan to remove the capital scene."

"Of course. I'll definitely use it when expressing the main character's later life."

"That's good then."

Changsung sighed in relief. However, it wasn't over yet. This was just the beginning. Writer Bae wasn't that picky when it came to direction, but he was stubborn on some parts, especially related to the background. He had to talk about cliffs, lakes, and waterfalls in the script and about what the atmosphere is supposed to be like and start looking for suitable places.

Just as he was about to go to the next topic, the bell rang. It was from the door.

"Looks like they're here."

The one that stood up was writer Ahn. He slowly walked towards the entrance. After an unlocking sound, the door opened.

"We're here, senior."

"H-hello."

The ones that came were two men. One looked to be in his late twenties with sharp eyes hidden behind black glasses, and the other seemed to be a high school boy that had a chubby body and a rather shy-looking pair of eyes.

"This is the first time I have had so many guests. Come inside for now."

Writer Bae waved at them. The two youths made their greetings as they entered.

"I needed some help doing research. These two are thankful people who decided to help me out. You should greet them as well. These two are producers from RBS."

Changsung nodded to the two people who awkwardly greeted him.

"It looks like you were in the middle of a conversation, so we'll go inside the room for now."

"Okay."

When the man in glasses waved, the chubby boy followed him.

"Then should we continue our talk?" Writer Bae spoke as he pointed at the script.

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"It's made of sponge, so it won't hurt even if you get hit."

Instructor Yoo swung the rod against his own arm. The rod made a loud noise, but the instructor didn't bat an eyelid.

"Maru, want to get hit?"

"It looks painful though," Maru smiled as he stood up.

Instructor Yoo swung the rod towards his shoulder. It didn't hurt immediately, but he felt like it would become painful if he continued to get hit.

"People flinch back if this flies at their faces even if they know that it's not dangerous."

After saying that, instructor Yoo suddenly swung the rod. Since he was on watch, Maru dodged it without much difficulty. Instructor Yoo bitterly smiled.

"Hey, you're supposed to get hit here."

"It felt like it would hurt if I continued to get hit."

"Geez, your reflexes are top-notch. Okay, this guy is the weird one. People usually cower subconsciously."

The rod was suddenly thrown at Bangjoo, who was watching. Bangjoo flinched and raised his hand upwards.

"Like that."

The students laughed in a small voice.

"You need to get used to this now. If you want to not put yourselves in danger during the real deal, you should not dodge it haphazardly, but clearly look at what's coming at you and dodge it according to the plan. Only then would the action look cooler."

Instructor Yoo clicked his fingers and told them to stand up.

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"That's right. Do it like you are not hitting but pushing strongly."

Instructor Yoo then shouted 'focus'. Maru exchanged glances with Bangjoo, who was in front of him before getting into position again. It had been two weeks since they started practicing. Although quick movements were still awkward and dangerous at times, they were able to bring the moves they practiced together to a considerable level.

He pushed away Bangjoo's right arm to his left before sending a knee kick his way. Switching to defense, Bangjoo pushed his knee and bashed his head. Maru flicked his head back as though he got hit and swayed his arm around.

"Oh, seonbae-nim. Wasn't that quite good just now?"

"Yeah, we were in perfect sync."

"So practice does make perfect. It was really hard at first too."

“How many times have we bashed each other on the head?”

“Probably more than ten times at least,” Bangjoo giggled.

“Let’s do that once more.”

“Yes!”

“This time, we’ll start from part A and go all the way to part C.”

Their hands and feet reached out and were taken back according to a previous agreement. Although their movements were very dynamic, Maru’s head was calmly thinking about the next move. Due to repeated practice, his body was subconsciously preparing for the next move by itself, but just relying on that would cause accidents. Keep tense - action director Kim Choongho always said those words.

He shut his mouth and just thought about his next move. If he was supposed to add emotions into the acting, their movements had to be even more flawless. If the actors that were fighting together did not have trust in each other, they would become worried about accidents, and it would be impossible for the acting to look natural. He punched out towards Bangjoo’s chin in a straight line. A few days ago, they made a mistake on this part and the punch hit Bangjoo’s face. He was slightly worried when he remembered that, but he trusted Bangjoo and punched out without restraint. A ‘restrained’ action scene was worse than nothing.

“Whoa!”

Bangjoo crossed his arms and blocked his face. Maru kept extending his fist out with the feeling that he was going to push the center of Bangjoo’s guard. Bangjoo’s body was pushed back and he fell down.

Right as Maru was about to think that he perhaps went a little too far, Bangjoo did a backflip and stood up again. Maru raised his thumb at Bangjoo who was grinning.

“Geez, you guys are doing unnecessary things. Both of you, come here.”

Instructor Yoo looked at the two and gestured at the two to come.

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“Let’s organize these by date.”

“Yes.”

Daemyung received the Joseon Wangjo Sillok (Annals of the Joseon Dynasty). It was quite a thick book this time. The name of the author was different once again. Daemyung had a look at the books piled up neatly on the side. They were all Joseon Wangjo Sillok. The publisher and the author were different for all of them. Above all of them, were revised versions as well. In front of that pile were books that talked about art galleries, clothes stores, etiquettes, and large events of that era.

“It’s hard, isn’t it?” Gwak Joon sat down next to him as he spoke.

Daemyung shook his head.

“No, it’s actually quite fun.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

He opened a notebook and pressed down on the spine and started writing on the right side of the notebook. The things he was about to do were simple. Once writer Bae Chulho gave them a topic, he would have to investigate that topic by looking through books and the internet and then write the information down in the notebook. There was no need to summarize or make it easier to read and since he could write it down as it was, it wasn't that hard.

If he gave the organized notes to Gwak Joon, he would add and remove the necessary parts and then give them to writer Bae. After a while, writer Bae would give them another topic and the same process would repeat.

“It's not easy to write a drama script.”

He spoke as he pressed down on the pen so that he could write neatly. He thought that writing was done sitting down. He considered writing as something that he could complete by sitting down and focusing on writing each and every letter, but the actual writing of a drama script wasn't something that could be accomplished by just sitting down.

“It's not easy, especially in the case of historical dramas. If it was just ordinary fiction, you could just write it within the realm of common sense, but in the case of historical dramas, research is very important. Even if it has fantasy elements mixed into it, it would cause the ire of the audience if it's completely different from what it was really like in that era.”

Daemyung nodded his head. They were adapting real events into a drama. They weren't creating a completely new world, so it would be difficult to ignore history entirely.

‘He probably bought all these books for that.’

It had been around a week since he started helping out here. The work he had a hard time with at first gradually became better and he could do it quite quickly now. When he first heard about this work, he wondered if a student like him who knew nothing about professional writing should participate, but he was fortunate enough to just do the research without doing anything important. He had no desire to participate in the script meeting or do something with the writers. That was because he would feel pressure if he did. He didn't like the saying ‘a caterpillar should be satisfied with eating leaves’, but he could sympathize with that saying right now.

He stretched his arms out and went to the next book. Just one volume of the historical relic had several books written about it. The authors of those books had different interpretations of the relic, so Daemyung wrote them all down in the notebook.

“But the people we saw before, they were producers right?”

“Yeah. They're the producers in charge of this drama.”

“Wow, this is the first time I saw a real producer from a TV station. But they're different from what I imagined.”

“What you imagined?”

"I thought that directors would look chubby, sturdily built, and have a beard, looking like someone who does art for a living. Though, I might be rude for thinking like that."

"There are many such people among movie directors, but the people working for TV media are generally thin. I heard that they can't gain weight because of all the activities they do. I heard that some people get reflux esophagitis because of all the stress they receive."

"...Direction must be a hard job."

He was now slightly worried if he could be a director.

"You're having a hard time."

The door opened and writer Bae entered. He was holding a tray, and on top of that were some delicious-looking watermelon slices. Daemyung stood up and received the tray from him.

"Let's eat before continuing. Only if we get something to eat will our brains work."

Daemyung picked up a large piece of watermelon and took a bite. The cool and sweet sensation made him refreshed.

"Are you more used to it now? I mean, organizing research materials," writer Bae asked.

Daemyung put down the watermelon and was about to sit upright, but writer Bae said that he could stay at ease and pushed his shoulders down.

"Yes. I'm more or less used to it now. But I was surprised that you need to know so much. I didn't do all this when I wrote my script. I'm a little worried that my way of doing it might have been wrong."

"Hmm, it's not like that. There is no 'correct' or 'wrong' way of writing. When you're young, you can just write the things you want. Doing all this investigation and research is when 'this' is on the line," writer Bae made a circle with his thumb and index fingers with a calm smile.

Daemyung chuckled in a low voice.

"You said your dream was to become a director, right?"

"Yes."

"Do your best. Kids like you, who wholeheartedly focus on your dreams since young are bound to succeed. Do you know why?"

"No."

"In truth, many people just leave dreams as dreams. I was like that as well. I worked at a company until my mid-thirties with the excuse that I'm busy. I should get to writing if I get some free time, I should get to writing after this matter is finished - like that. But I was wrong. It was all just an excuse. I should do this at this specific time - the 'specific time' they mention never comes to people who think like that. Only people who get to it immediately, so, people like you, become successful."

Good luck - he added as he patted Daemyung's shoulders. Daemyung felt courage welling up deep inside him. It was a great fortune that he was able to come to this place during the summer holidays following Gwak Joon.

"Ah, right. I almost forgot."

Writer Bae, who was smiling in satisfaction, suddenly stood up before leaving. He wondered what it was about, and peeked outside. Writer Bae went into a small room, which was his writing room, and came back out with something in his hand. It was a black bag.

"Take this. It's payment."

"What?"

He tried opening the bag that was closed with velcro and peeked inside. What he saw inside was a laptop. It even looked brand new as the plastic peeling wasn't taken off yet. The manual was there as well.

"You're giving this to me?"

"Yes. The publishing company gave it to me for me to use, but I already have one. I did try using it, but it didn't fit right with me. Rather than having it pile up dust in a corner, it's better to be used by someone else. Try taking it out."

Daemyung blinked several times and took out the laptop. It was a Japanese-made one. He did look into buying laptops since typing was much easier than writing with a pencil, but he couldn't even dream about it since they were so expensive.

After brushing the sleek surface, Daemyung quickly came to himself and put the laptop inside the bag again. Then, he gave the bag back to writer Bae.

"I'm doing this to learn, so I don't need to receive something like this. It's really okay, I don't need payment."

He was only helping out for a short time during the summer holidays. No, he wasn't only helping out, he was receiving guidance as well. Actually, just all this research could be considered studying as well, so there was no way he could accept something like an expensive laptop while doing this.

At that moment, writer Bae, who always put on a warm smile made a scary expression for the first time.

"You're trying to make me into a shameless man."

"Eh, what? No, I didn't have that kind of intention at...."

"Take it."

Gwak Joon picked up the laptop on the floor and put it on Daemyung's legs. Daemyung was unable to do anything and just kept looking at writer Bae.

"People should receive proper compensation for their work. That is something natural. If you refuse compensation despite working, that's just devaluing yourself. Work is different from charity activities. If you work, then you must receive compensation for it. Especially in this industry."

Writer Bae looked scary as he said those words. Daemyung felt as though he was being punished.

“Of course, I’m not saying that you’re bad for thinking about it. You’re both humble and kind. I really like you.”

Writer Bae then stayed silent for a while before leaving the room with the tray. Daemyung sighed out in relief. Writer Bae looked really scary right then.

“Startled, are you?”

Gwak Joon spoke in a calm manner.

“Yes. Was I in the wrong?”

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just that seniors are adamant when it comes to things like that. Once, a junior writer wrote a full-length novel. It really took a long time for that person to edit. To the point that he became ill for it. That junior was thinking that it was still good since it was published, but the royalties kept getting delayed. That junior writer and the CEO of the publishing company were quite close friends, so the president kept telling the writer to wait when he brought up the royalties topic.”

“What happened after that?”

Gwak Joon fell silent for a while. He looked at the ceiling with his eyes cloudy before speaking.

“He committed suicide. That was four years ago. It seemed that his family wasn’t in a good financial situation.”

“...No way.”

“Most of the time, death comes due to the most trivial reason. However, it’s a gloomy problem for the person in question. After that, senior became really angry when people didn’t receive what they should. He also looked at people that gave away their talents for free to the ones with money. That publisher actually did a lot of that. I’ll give you an opportunity to get your work published, so try writing. Of course, I can’t give you money, but think of it as an opportunity - just like that. Other times, he held a competition and gave out a small amount of prize money and held the work hostage until it was the right time.”

Gwak Joon was saying all those things calmly, but Daemyung thought that he was even more upset than writer Bae about it. He could imagine the burning rage in his eyes.

“If you’re also going to sell your talents for a living, whether it’s directing or writing, don’t ever do anything that brings you damage. Not only will you bring yourself harm, but it will also end up destroying you. Bear that in mind.”

“Yes....”

The laptop on his lap felt very heavy.

Chapter 384

“Let’s stop here for today. Thanks for all your hard work.”

Daemyung bid goodbye to writers Ahn and Bae, as well as Gwak Joon as he hugged the laptop bag tightly. The three of them told him that they still had things to do before they wrapped up. On the elevator down, Daemyung kept staring at the laptop bag. The pressure of having received an expensive product, the joy of getting something he wanted, and lastly, the weight of the words he heard as he received the laptop swirled inside his head and heart.

Along with a ringing sound, the elevator opened. When he went past the short corridor and down the stairs, he saw a little bird standing in front of the parking lot. The bird cocked its head a few times as though it was eating before flying into the sky. Looking at the bird that eventually became a dot and disappeared, a line popped up inside Daemyung's head - I will create good writings with this laptop.

He put the laptop bag inside his backpack carefully and closed the bag. His chest heated up for some reason. He wanted to sit down immediately and start writing. Nothing came to mind though, he just wanted to write.

"Yes, Maru."

-Where are you now? I'm just departing from Seoul.

"I'm still in Seoul."

-That's good, then let's have dinner together. You haven't eaten yet, right?

"I haven't. Wait, is Bangjoo next to you? I think I heard his voice."

After some noise, Bangjoo's voice could be heard over the phone. It was as loud and cheerful as ever.

-Seonbae-nim!

"So it was Bangjoo. Let's go have dinner together."

-Of course! Seonbae, we'll be waiting so come quickly.

"Okay, okay. I'll go as soon as I can."

-Yes! I'll hand it back to Maru-seonbae now.

Maru picked up the phone.

-Do you remember the place we went to last time? The place we had jeyuk-bokkeum.

"I do. It was delicious."

-Let's go there then. Do you still remember the way?

"I vaguely remember. I'll call you if I can't find my way there. I do know where to get off."

After hanging up, Daemyung spat out a deep breath before walking. He had just heard some heavy, no, scary words so it was true that he was feeling a little stuffy, but at the same time, he had the desire to focus on this path much more.

This would have been unimaginable for his past self. If it was the Park Daemyung of elementary or middle school, he would have a hard time meeting up with others outside of school. School was his only joy, and holidays were his paradise. If he continued living like that in high school as well....

'I should be in my room right now, doing nothing.'

He was branded as the awkward guy and was being bullied because of his looks and figure. That gradually intensified until he was eventually ignored and was ripped off money. When he just entered high school, he believed that he could no longer change. He believed himself to be beyond saving. He believed that anyone who talked to him had ulterior motives. He was at the epitome of self-disgust and self-disbelief.

He dug himself a hole and hid in it without looking back, cutting off all of his connections. He insulted himself for being alone, yet he was relieved that he was alone as well. When that kind of life was about to continue for three more years, Maru talked to him. It was his salvation. That was the moment he bid farewell to his elementary and middle school days.

'This story.'

Daemyung suddenly stopped walking. Then, he hurriedly took out a notebook from his bag and opened it. He was about to write against the wall of the building, before deciding to sit down on the spot and write. He saw the passersby watching him, and he was embarrassed to the point that his face was going to burst, but he didn't want to miss this inspiration for a story right now. He felt that it would turn blurry and disappear if he turned around, so he quickly started writing. He found himself pathetic for his lack of vocabulary as he wrote things down, but right now, he focused on getting the story written.

"What is he doing?"

"I don't know."

Girls around his age stared at him as they walked by. After Daemyung wrote the last letter, he quickly stood up from the spot. He met eyes with people who were staring at him, and Daemyung covered his face with his notebook and ran away with all of his might. He went past the bus stop right in front of him and went to the next one over to take the bus. He sat down in the middle of the street and started writing. That was really unimaginable.

'But even so.'

Daemyung tightly grabbed onto the notebook inside the shaking bus. The play script he was working on right now felt rather lacking the more he wrote. The story he started off after talking with Mintae-hyung, had been polished thanks to Gwak Joon-hyung's advice. However, he felt that it was becoming more lacking the closer it reached the finishing line.

He finally realized what he was lacking just now.

'My story.'

It might be pathetic and uninteresting, but it was his own story that he knew best and could sympathize with. It wasn't a story he could introduce to others, but he felt that turning this story into a script would be more interesting than any other writing.

“I think I’ll listen to them as well.”

He promised Maru and Mintae-hyung that the three of them would one day put on a play. Han Maru would be the main character, it would be directed by Park Daemyung, and the stage would be set by Yoon Mintae. If he could complete this story and make it into a play, he would be happier than ever.

He got off the bus with an excited heart. He came to this place before with Maru. He just had to walk down the street until he came across the alleyway and if he just turned there...

“Huh?”

Daemyung took his eyes off the notebook and looked up. There was a boy who had dyed his hair yellow and wore baggy clothes. The moment he had a closer look at his face wondering if he knew that guy, Daemyung remembered the boy’s name.

“What is it? Why’d you suddenly stop?”

“What’s happening?”

At that moment, others gathered around him. Two girls and two boys. He didn’t know the girls, but he knew the three boys too well.

“It’s Park Daemyung. Wow, it’s piggy, isn’t it?”

“Dang, you lost some weight. Though, you’re still fat.”

“Wow, it’s nice seeing you here.”

Daemyung stepped backwards. They were boys from his class in his third year of middle school.

Just as the nightmares of that year became vivid again, he felt the texture of the notebook he was holding, as well as the weight of the laptop on his shoulders.

“Hey, it’s been a while.”

The boy approached him and hooked his arm around Daemyung’s shoulders. The nervousness engraved in his cells went back in time and became active again. These boys always approached him like this, bullied him, then eventually ripped money off him. Daemyung felt that his heart was racing all by itself. It wouldn’t be strange even if it stopped at any moment.

“Who is it? A friend of yours?”

“Yeah. A friend of mine from middle school.”

The girls approached and stared at him. Daemyung looked at the boys before walking forward. The arm around his shoulder naturally fell down.

“I-I’ll get going.”

In this blood-wrecking tension, Daemyung barely spoke out. If it was before, he wouldn’t have been able to utter a word. Though, his legs were still shaking.

“Hey, where are you going? We haven’t met in so long. Aren’t you glad to see me?”

The boys stopped him again. He saw the girls making a suspicious smile. They looked like they found a nice toy. They were the eyes that Daemyung had seen many times before.

“Daemyung.”

“Uh, yeah?”

“We haven’t seen each other in so long, so why don’t you treat us to something? Aren’t we friends?”

A fishy smile poked his eyes. Daemyung clenched his eyes shut. Money, he had. He still had leftover pocket money after all. Should he just give them what they wanted like middle school? Well, that was definitely the easy way out. If he just lowered his pride a little and gave them some money with a smile, the boys would probably end things with a pat on the shoulder. Just as he was about to take out the ten thousand won bill in his pocket,

-Don’t ever do anything that brings you damage.

He remembered Gwak Joon’s words. It felt as though his words were holding him.

“Uhm, I’m sorry about this, but I can’t.”

“What? You don’t have any money?”

“N-no... I do have money, but.”

“But?”

“Sorry. I can’t.”

He pushed away the guy that hung his arm around his shoulder. The boy then started laughing.

“What are you doing?”

“Uh, what?”

“Park Daemyung, I asked what you were doing.”

He looked devious. Daemyung looked at him in the face for the first time. So his facial features looked like that. He suddenly chuckled when he thought that he finally saw the face of the boy that bullied him viciously for a whole year.

When he did, the boy’s face crumpled. The others around him did the same.

“You’re fucking crazy.”

The boy grabbed Daemyung by the collar before dragging him to the alleyway. For some reason, Daemyung was still smiling.

* * *

“...It hurts.”

His cheek hurt since he got hit.

When he was slapped after being dragged into the alleyway, he became scared for a moment, but he soon calmed down. His legs were no longer shaking either. When he looked at them, he even thought that such 'characters' talked like that.

At that moment, a low 'what are you doing over there!' could be heard. The people around him became startled and ran away, and Daemyung was able to escape the alleyway without much trouble.

He put his hand on his cheek and turned left after walking two blocks. When he climbed the gentle slope, he saw the store on the right.

"You're here?"

Maru was standing in front.

"Why are you outside?"

"I just came. But hey, did your teeth rot or something?"

"I-it's nothing. Rather than that, let's go inside. I'm hungry."

"Okay. Let's eat first."

Maru hung his arm around his shoulders as he said that. Daemyung blinked and looked at Maru.

"Let's eat."

"Uh, okay."

Maru smiled and opened the door. Inside was the owner, who was clearly expressing that he was bothered.

"Why the hell are you here again? I thought you lived in Suwon. Why do you come all the way here to eat?"

"Because your food tastes good. Rather than that, we'd like three servings of jeyuk-bokkeum."

The owner clicked his tongue before walking to the kitchen. He was an interesting man. He grumbled but he did everything anyway. The sound of meat being fried could be heard from the kitchen. While the food was getting prepared, Daemyung cautiously showed the things he wrote in the middle of the street to Maru.

"I tried writing it, and I'm wondering if it's okay to change the story to this."

Maru received his notebook before reading it with his chin resting on his hand. The writing was short, so it shouldn't take that long for him to read it.

"Hey, Daemyung."

"Yeah?"

"Were you in a hurry or something? Your writing is through the roof."

"I-I guess I was. But how is it? Is it a little boring?"

“No, it’s good. This, is this your story?”

“Yeah.”

He was embarrassed to admit, but his answer was firm.

“Then there’s no problem. You’re the one writing the script anyway.”

Maru gave him back the notebook. Daemyung felt relieved. He felt better to hear that from the friend he trusted the most.

“It’s all thanks to you,” he said that subconsciously.

“What do you mean?”

“The thing is... if it wasn’t for you, I would not have joined the acting club, and would still be the weird guy in class. That’s why I’m thankful and... you know.”

“Geez, hey. Those that don’t have the will to change will not change no matter what you do to them. The reason you’re in the acting club and are writing is because you wanted to change yourself, not because of me.”

Maru shivered as though he was cringed out. Daemyung laughed.

“What about Bangjoo though?”

“He left for a brief moment for something urgent.”

“Something urgent?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Just then, the rice and the jeyuk-bokkeum were served.

“Let’s eat for now.”

“I thought he left for a brief moment. Let’s eat together once he comes back.”

“It’s fine, you can eat. Bangjoo, that guy is sturdy, so he doesn’t need to eat something like this.”

Maru urged him to eat and even stuffed a spoon in his hand, so Daemyung ate a spoonful. It was definitely good. The reason this place was filled with people at night was probably because of the taste. Just as he was about to talk to Maru about food, Daemyung saw Maru hold his bowl with one hand and eat in a hurry.

“Man, that was good.”

“Y-you finished already?”

“Yeah, Daemyung, you can continue eating. The owner will keep you company.”

“Where are you going?” He asked Maru, but Maru just left after telling him to stay.

“I don’t plan to talk to you guys,” the store owner spoke as he kept watching the TV.

Just as he didn't know what to do due to the awkward atmosphere. The store owner suddenly stood up before sitting down where Maru sat.

"Eat."

"Eh, what?"

"I said eat."

"Yes!"

He started stuffing himself due to the scary eyes. Just as he ate a few spoonfuls, the store owner spoke again.

"Is it good?"

"Y-yes. It's good."

"Really?"

The store owner abruptly stood up and went to the kitchen. Then, the sound of meat being fried could be heard again. Daemyung scratched his head and looked at the kitchen and the entrance alternately. He didn't know what was going on.

Chapter 385

-Yes. You just need to keep going straight when you see the convenience store.

He ran as he listened to Bangjoo's explanation. When he walked down the street, he saw Bangjoo who was waving his hand above his head.

"They went into the noraebang here."

"Noraebang?"

"Yeah, but seonbae-nim. I think I saw Daemyung-seonbae, am I wrong?"

"Daemyung? He's at the restaurant right now. Looks like we crossed paths."

"Really? Looks like I was wrong then. Oh, this is the drink you asked for."

Bangjoo gave him a plastic bottle.

"Thanks. I felt thirsty all of a sudden."

"I was wondering what it was since you told me to run and buy it all of a sudden. But why did you tell me to follow those guys? Did something happen?"

"They're friends of mine."

"Your friends?"

"Yeah. It's too long to explain right now. Here's the money for the drink and the food. Once you enter the restaurant, Daemyung should be there. You should start eating. Also, if Daemyung asks what happened, just tell him that I'm out to meet some friends. Don't explain anything in detail."

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

Bangjoo received the money and took a step before turning around again.

“But seonbae-nim.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m asking just in case, but are you going to fight or something?”

“Fight? Me?”

“I just had a hunch. You wouldn’t normally tell others to tail your friends. Also, I feel like you are a little upset.”

“I just have some things to talk about with them. Anyway, tell Daemyung that I’m just meeting some friends to not make him worry. I’ll be back in a bit, so take your time eating, okay?”

“...Uhm, seonbae-nim. I don’t have experience fighting, but I do have the confidence not to get hit.”

“I said I’m not fighting. It’s nothing serious, so go and eat. I told you I’ll be back real soon, didn’t I?”

Maru pushed Bangjoo’s back. Bangjoo looked at him worriedly before nodding and walking. The annoyance seemed to have gotten the better of him, causing him to not manage his expression properly. It seemed that Bangjoo had noticed that.

Before he arrived at the store, Maru saw Daemyung who was across the road. He was with a few other people so he wondered if they were Daemyung’s friends, but he realized that they weren’t friends when he remembered Daemyung’s middle school stories that he had told him before. He prevented Bangjoo from looking across the road and checked on Daemyung’s status. Daemyung was flinching back as he was surrounded by those guys. He wondered if he should walk over, but he decided not to, believing that Daemyung would be able to handle it by himself and crossed the pedestrian overpass.

He was talking to Bangjoo while he watched Daemyung, and just then, he saw the other guys pressure Daemyung and push him into an alley.

It was obvious from where he was standing that Daemyung was clearly being forced. Daemyung, that naive guy didn’t act back and just stood still like a turtle, even when he eventually got pushed. Maru pointed at the convenience store on the other side of the alley and told Bangjoo to buy a drink. After sending the confused Bangjoo into the convenience store, he ran towards the alley where Daemyung was dragged to.

He just entered the alley thinking that he should pay back double what they did to Daemyung, and then he saw Daemyung being slapped. A swear word rose up to his throat. Just as he was thinking about crashing into the boy at the back, he saw Daemyung looking back at the boys with a confident expression. He didn’t look like he was scared. He looked calm, and some kind of fighting spirit could be seen.

The moment Maru saw that expression, he stopped and hid behind the corner and growled. The students that were playing delinquent became startled and all rushed out the other side.

Maru went around the building and watched them before telling Bangjoo, who had returned with a drink in hand, to tail them. Bangjoo was confused but he still listened to Maru's words.

"Damn those bastards."

Delinquents were usually calm when they were alone. At most, they would swear. But, for some curious reason, once they grew in number, their daringness and courage shot up rapidly. It was quite absurd.

Such traits would continue even when they entered society. The reason bullying in companies was even worse than bullying in schools was because those same people became a little smarter and did things even more sneakily. When Maru first became a whistle-blower, he realized that there were actually quite a lot of delinquents who hid their fangs. The moment they found any person that went below their baseline that they came up with all by themselves, they would sneakily approach that person and prey on them. Once that person became weaker and resigned from the company, or perhaps even chose the path of no return, the one that preyed on the flesh known as gossip all this time would put on the sheep masks again and start worrying once again. Watching them made Maru think that maggots were better than them. Maggots at least stuck to corpses for survival.

Maru went into the noraebang. After telling the lady at the counter that he was here to find some friends, he looked inside the booths. As it was just past 6, most of the rooms were empty, and finding them was too easy.

He saw the boys through the glass door smoking and singing with some girls. There were places like this in every neighborhood. Also known as the 'weak spot'. The owners of such places would not care what happened inside. They just wouldn't sell drinks.

Maru went to the bathroom and opened his bag. Inside was a roll of tape he used to wrap around his hands to hit the sandbag after martial arts practice. Director Choongho had given him a roll, telling him to wrap it around his hands before wearing gloves. It would take some time to tape himself properly, but there was no need to do that right now. He just wrapped his hands so that he wouldn't injure his knuckles.

As he taped himself lightly, he looked at the mirror. A young boy was glaring from the other side. Maru looked at that figure for quite a while before chuckling.

"How young."

He knew well that what he was doing was reckless. Nothing would change even if he went in and beat them up. There was no way they would reflect on themselves, not to mention repent. They would just leave because they were annoyed that they were beaten up. However, Maru felt that he would feel satisfied as long as they felt the pain.

After pressing on the tape, he took the bag and left the bathroom. He walked past the lady that was just dazedly watching TV and stood in front of the door to the booth where those people were inside.

"Han Maru. You became really childish."

He clenched his teeth slightly as he opened the door. The guy that was looking at his phone while singing with his arms around the girls looked at him. Just as he squinted while trying to think about who Maru was, Maru threw his bag at the guy. At the same time, he grabbed the guy that held a microphone

on his right by the neck and slapped him on the cheek. The guy that was slapped looked at him in disbelief. The singing stopped. The guy that was dancing with the girls at the front looked at him as well.

Amidst the strange silence where only the accompaniment was flowing out, Maru slapped the cheek of the one he was grabbing again. He decreased the surface area of his palm as much as possible and slapped him on the lower cheek. If he opened his hand too much and hit him wrong and ended up giving a shock to the ears, it would be quite a pain. The loud slap would be heard over the accompaniment from the noraebang machine.

The guy that was hit twice covered his face and closed his eyes. It looked as though he had no intentions of fighting back. He looked at the other two just in case. The girls looked like they were about to scream, and the two boys just looked at him scared.

‘Do I look that vicious?’

He even planned his escape after causing a ruckus, but now that they were looking at him obediently, he felt rather confused instead.

“S-sorry.”

The one he was grabbing spoke in an awkward voice. When he had a closer look, he saw tears forming in the corner of his eyes. Maru pressed on that boy’s neck with his arm and scanned him from top to bottom.

‘...They all look like they’ll snap with a hit from Daemyung.’

Daemyung had endured Miso’s harsh training. At first, he couldn’t run a single lap around the school field, but now he was able to run five laps while chatting. He knew how to use his body well to the point that he could teach the first years.

‘He should’ve tried shaking them off.’

He felt angry when he thought that Daemyung got hit by such feeble-looking people. Maru thought that he should bring Daemyung to the boxing gym. The master should probably give that na?ve boy some fighting spirit.

Maru sighed after watching the guy that looked at him with tears.

* * *

“Where have you been?”

On their way home, Daemyung asked in a quiet voice after smiling at Bangjoo, who was overly cheerful again.

“I met up with some friends.”

“Friends?”

“Yeah. Rather than that, the owner seems to have taken a liking to you. That was the first time I saw him give out free food.”

“R-really?”

“He looks a little tough but he’s not a scary person.”

“That’s true.”

They got on the bus to Suwon. Bangjoo, who sat down, fell asleep immediately as though he was tired. He was snoring as he leaned on the window, and the noise was a little loud.

“Looks like the lessons are hard,” Daemyung spoke worriedly.

“It’s because he’s hyperactive. He doesn’t take a break.”

“Well, I guess Bangjoo does have really good reflexes and is in good shape. He did Judo, right?”

“Yeah. Perhaps thanks to that, he’s really quick to learn. The instructor praises him a lot as well.”

“I wish I had a body like him as well,” Daemyung said as he looked down at his stomach.

“Hey, grab my hand.”

Maru turned around and reached out with his right hand. Daemyung was confused but grabbed his hand anyway. The hand was rather thick, but it wasn’t just flesh. Perhaps it was because his body was rather round, but he really had a big build. He just looked weak because of his personality. If he could make a scary expression, the bully in class would probably be him.

“Try pulling, with all your power.”

“With all my power?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not that strong.”

“Try anyway.”

Daemyung nodded faintly before pulling Maru’s hand. Maru abruptly opened his eyes and did his best not to get pulled, but his body was too easily pulled by Daemyung.

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

Maru hit Daemyung’s neck with a knifehand strike. Daemyung, who had a clueless smile, coughed slightly and looked at him with confusion.

“Ah for god’s sake.”

“What?”

“You have such a body and yet...”

Why did you get bullied? - Maru almost uttered those words out loud. This guy probably never thought that he could hit others. He probably developed a mindset that he should avoid everything like a herbivore and just follow the flow if he was caught. The world was too harsh for people like him.

“Next Monday at 11. Do you have plans?”

“N-no.”

“Then meet me at 11.”

“Why?”

“I’ll introduce you to someone good.”

“Someone good? Who?”

“Someone like that,” he spoke as he put on a thick smile.

* * *

“Please take care of him.”

“Alright.”

He saw Daemyung make a dazed expression through the gaps of the door. Hearing the sandbag popping sounds, Maru waved at him. He received text messages from Daemyung, but he didn’t read them. Instead, he just texted back ‘good luck’.

After dropping Daemyung off at a boxing gym, Maru immediately headed to Seoul. He had Miso’s lesson today. He got off at Gangnam station and walked to Film Academy. When he opened the door to the fourth lecture room, he saw Sungjae doing some warmups.

“I’m here.”

He greeted him before doing some warmups next to him. He could only follow Miso’s training if he warmed up properly. Just as he was stretching his waist on the ground, the door opened once again. Gyunglim entered, wearing skin-tight jeans.

“Aah, it starts once again.”

“Don’t complain and get stretching already. The instructor will probably get started as soon as she comes.”

Gyunglim headed to the bathroom with a crying face. When she returned, she was wearing baggy training clothes.

“Good day!”

Gwangseok had arrived as well. Although he started off with a cheerful greeting, he looked like he chewed on something bitter the moment he started doing some stretches. On Mondays, there was a physical training session, though, it was still called ‘acting lessons’. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, the lessons were only two hours long, but on Mondays, the lessons were 3 hours long. The extra hour was for physical training.

“Good morning.”

Miso entered with a cup of coffee in one hand.

“Wow, looks like you’re all energetic, doing exercise. Then let’s kick it up a notch today, shall we?”

Maru heard someone say ‘demon’ from the side, and he deeply sympathized.

Chapter 386

“A historical drama, huh,” Miso spoke as she sipped some coffee.

Maru saw a shadow loom over her face.

“What is it?”

“I once played the daughter-in-law for a noble family in a historical drama set in the pre-Yeongjo era. Goddamned pre-Yeongjo era.”

Miso pointed at her head. Maru smiled and nodded. She was probably referring to the gache worn in that era.

“Looks like the gache was heavy.”

“Try living with a 5kg weight on your head for an entire day. Your neck, shoulders, waist - not a single part of your body will stay intact. The only saving grace for me back then was that my character didn’t have much significance in the story so I could lean against the wall and rest if I wasn’t shooting. The women that played noble characters couldn’t even do that and had to sit up for the entire shoot. After that, I always check whether the drama is set in the pre-Yeongjo era or post-Yeongjo era when I have to audition for a historical drama.”

Miso stretched her shoulders out, saying that she still felt stiff when she thought about it.

“Looks like women have it hard. I’m a beggar, so I have no need to wear fancy clothing. I guess I’m safe on that part.”

“That’s good. You’re shooting in the summer as well. There’s nothing more difficult than playing beggar in winter. You’re in for a good time if you play a beggar role for a summer scene in the winter.”

Miso patted his shoulder before standing up.

“Well then, everyone had a good rest, right? Let’s resume class.”

Maru sighed shortly before looking behind him. The three people that were panting while looking at the ceiling were slowly getting themselves on their feet. Sungjae, who was trained several times harder than the others due to his superior stamina, looked dark in the face; Gwangseok, who never exercised much in the first place, was clenching his head as though he had a headache; and Gyunglim looked like her soul had escaped her body.

“But Mr. Han Maru.”

Maru raised his head and looked at Miso. She had a suspicious smile on her face.

“Looks like you’re too okay. It’s as though you didn’t train as hard as the others.”

The moment he heard that, he thought that there was no way out for him. Whatever he said, his training was about to get harsher. He regretted not noticing this sooner when Miso approached him.

“Starting next week, you and Mr. Sungjae will...”

Just as Miso spoke up to that point, the door opened.

“Instructor Miso.”

“Yes, instructor Choi.”

“I got an urgent call for actors. Can I take people from your class?”

“I don’t really care, but I’m not so sure about them.”

A man called instructor Choi entered.

“Uhm, can I take two hours of your time? I got an urgent call looking for actors for a shoot. It won’t take that long, and you’ll of course get paid as well.”

It seemed that trouble occurred with some background actors.

“I’m fine with that,” Maru spoke first.

Gyunglim and Gwangseok also said that they would go.

“Ah, it must not bode well for you, right?” Instructor Choi asked Sungjae.

There was no reason for a top-tier idol to play as a background actor, so he thought that Sungjae would refuse. However, Sungjae’s head was nodding instead.

“If I can be blurred out, I can do that.”

“Yes, it’s just that much. You just need to sit down in a café. Uhm, I’m running out of time, so can we get going quickly? I keep getting calls,” Instructor Choi spoke as he pointed at his phone.

The four people stood up. Instructor Choi immediately called someone. They followed instructor Choi out of the class. In front of the academy building was a van.

“Get on quickly!”

Instructor Choi grabbed the steering wheel and spoke. As soon as they closed the door, the car drove off. The urgency could be felt from the sheer speed of the van.

After crossing the complex roads of Seoul for a while, the van started to slow down. Maru found a shooting set while he was looking outside. He saw lights, reflectors and cameras around a café terrace. Around ten meters away from the terrace, someone that looked to be a staff member was explaining something to the passersby. It seems that he was asking for their understanding.

As soon as they got out of the van, instructor Choi exchanged greetings with one of the staff. They weren’t speaking in polite speech and it seemed that they were close. The staff thanked him before waving at the four.

“We need to start the shoot immediately. We’re behind on schedule right now. Follow me for now.”

They entered the café. Right now, no one had recognized Sungjae yet. This would probably be better off for shooting.

“Sit over here and here. The two of you need to face each other. In a bit, you’ll hear a shout from the terrace, and you just need to turn around and look at them. Simple, right? You guys are from Film, so this must be easy for you, isn’t it?”

Then I’ll leave it to you - the staff member left a coffee cup and a muffin along with those words and left. Following that, another staff member came and gave them thick coats. Apparently, the drama was set in winter. Wearing a coat made them feel hot even though they were in an air-conditioned café.

It seemed that the staff were signalled that everything was ready as the two men standing in the terrace quickly moved to the car parked on the side of the road. A brief moment later, two women with great figures appeared and sat on the table in the terrace. They were both wearing thick clothes and a scarf to boot. Wearing winter clothing under this weather? Just looking at them made Maru sweat. The actress sitting on the left turned her head slightly. Maru smiled after seeing her face. She was someone he knew. It was Ahn Joohyun.

“Miss Joohyun, Miss Taeyeon. Sorry for making you wait.”

“Not at all.”

“It’s nothing.”

The man who seemed to be the producer started explaining the situation to Joohyun and the actress named Taeyeon. Joohyun nodded and grabbed the cup in front of her. Was this the scene where she sprayed drink on the other girl?

“Oh my god, it’s Ahn Joohyun,” Gyunglim spoke with an excited expression.

It seemed that Joohyun was popular among the girls.

“But Sungjae-hyung. Are you okay with being in the shot?”

“This much should be fine. It’s not like I’m appearing in the drama officially.”

Maru didn’t know if it was okay because he was hiding his face under a cap, or because he could handle surprise cameo appearances like this. Perhaps freedom rose along with popularity?

Maru didn’t act like he knew Joohyun since it seemed rather unbecoming of the situation.

The producer headed towards the monitor during the rehearsal. The two actresses got composed and looked at each other. Maru fixed his gaze on Gyunglim, who was sitting opposite of him.

“Let’s talk about something.”

“Just sing the national anthem instead.”

Just as Maru finished singing the first verse with his lips and was about to start the second, he heard the ‘cut’ sound. The camera moved behind Joohyun.

“That was good just now, keep that up.”

They shot the same scene again, just at a different angle. Like that, they shot a total of four times before finishing one scene. The producer approached and talked to the two actresses, before this time, walking

with a male actor on the road to explain to him the path he was going to move during the shoot. In that short time, the makeup artists fixed the hair and the makeup of the two actresses.

Dozens of people acting towards one goal without any accidents was a drama in itself.

“We’re going over to the next scene. Please wait.”

The camera turned towards the road this time. This was the scene where the male actor hurriedly walked towards the café and stood in front of the two actresses. They shot first the scene where he walked with quick steps, but after several iterations, he started running because it didn’t look right with walking. They repeated that around three times, and every time he ran, the makeup artists came and wiped the actor’s sweat.

After that, the shoot progressed without a hitch. They shot everything in one go without causing a single NG scene. It seemed that that was the last scene for the day as the background actors were all smiling.

The producer, who was looking at the monitor, raised his head. That signalled the end. A man, who was watching in satisfaction with his arms crossed from one corner of the café, brought some pen and paper. It seemed that he was the owner of this café. After taking pictures with Joohyun, Taeyeon and the male actor and taking their autographs, the owner smiled and walked to one of the walls of the café. It seemed that he was planning to hang them up.

“Director, what do we do about the extra shoots?”

“Yeah. We called around, but I think we’ll have to delay it for tomorrow. We can get adults easily, but if we want people that are good-looking, we’d have to look into academies. Damn, there just had to be an accident today.”

After conversing, the producer called one of the staff members. The one he called was the guy that guided Maru and the others when they just arrived. After conversing with the producer, the producer came towards them.

“Oh, Mr. Ahn Sungjae. Hello. I didn’t recognize you because you were wearing a cap.”

Sungjae took off his cap and greeted the producer. At that moment, the people inside the café recognized who Sungjae was and started whispering. Some girls in the streets looked at the cameras with curiosity before finding Sungjae and screeching.

Actors and idols. Although both had their popularity, it seemed that when it came to fan fervor, idols saw far more of it. When the commotion became bigger, Sungjae smiled and slowly walked towards the door. Instructor Choi had started his car as well, getting ready to leave. The producer asked for a handshake and asked him to feature in his next work.

In that short time, Sungjae shook hands with the producer, and shot photos with the fans, and lastly signed an autograph for the owner before getting in the car. From what Maru saw, Sungjae was fleeing for dear life. Some girls approached the car and kept screeching ‘I love you, oppa’. The rather empty street was filled with girls in no time. It seemed that the girls texted their friends of Sungjae’s appearance.

“I guess we’d have to go back on foot.”

It seemed that it was nearly impossible to get in the van right now. None of them had the courage to go through that crowd. Instructor Choi seemed to have thought the same as he peeked outside the window and said that he'd be going first. The girls kept screeching as they followed the van. It looked as though they were going to follow forever if the van moved slowly. Everyone around was flabbergasted by the sheer energy the girls gave off. Perhaps this was why idols were all the rage.

Just as Maru returned his coat and was about to leave, Maru saw Joohyun, who stood a bit far away from the set. They just happened to meet eyes, and Maru bowed to her. Since he paid his respects, he just had to return now. He would return to the lecture room to get his bag and go home.

At that moment, he heard some loud footsteps behind him. When he turned around, he saw Joohyun, who looked very happy for some reason. However, that expression made Maru feel rather iffy since that 'happiness' looked like it stemmed from a debt collector that just found the debtor.

"Maru, do you have some time?"

"Eh? What time?"

"No, you have to."

Joohyun inadvertently started dragging him by the hand. For some reason, he was reminded of Bangjoo's words, who said that he started sports in order to not get beaten up by his sister. He considered that to be a joke on Bangjoo's part, but when he felt the grip around his wrist, he thought that it might have been real. He was brought in front of the producer, leaving behind Gwangseok and Gyunglim, who looked at him with surprise.

"Producer, what about this guy?"

"Who is he?"

"He has decent acting skills, I can guarantee that. He's the guy director Choi Joonggeun has set his eyes on. Sir Yoon Moonjoong brought him along with him on a few occasions as well."

Maru looked at Joohyun. He had never met Joohyun once when he shot his part of Twilight Struggles. Joohyun did her shoot on the set in Seoul, and Maru had only a single scene in the countryside.

'But she's quite knowledgeable about me.'

Perhaps she heard from others during her shoot? It shouldn't have been Suyeon. After all, the two weren't on good terms. If so, then it was likely that it was Geunsoo that told her about him. After all, he had quite a lot of connections.

"Really?"

The producer scanned Maru from top to bottom.

"He has a decent face. But this requires you to do some stunts. Hey, young fellow. I have a short scene that requires some action, right? It's a scene where you have to stab Miss Joohyun here with a knife. Do you have experience shooting action scenes?"

"No, but I am practicing for one."

“Hm.”

The producer took out his phone from his pocket and handed it over to Maru.

“Consider this as the knife and try stabbing.”

He approached Joohyun who had her back towards him. He grabbed the phone as he would a knife and acted like he stabbed her.

“Hm, I think this might turn out okay. Let’s move to the terrace for a bit.”

After putting the table away, the producer told him to do the same thing again. He also told him that this time, Joohyun would counterattack. Just as he was about to stab the phone into Joohyun’s waist, Joohyun turned around and grabbed his wrist. Maru loosened his wrist and left his body to be led by Joohyun’s push. His torso was going down. Just like how he learned, he twisted his body and fell on the ground with a loud thud, so that it would look good on camera.

Joohyun, who was pushing down on him from above, made a startled expression before smiling.

“What do you think?”

“What the, did you two practice that action already? Why is it so smooth?”

“That should be fine, right?”

“Of course. I was going to split the scene into multiple angles, but if it’s like this, we would probably be okay with a single take. But hey, doesn’t your shoulder hurt? I heard a loud noise.”

Maru stood up while saying that he was okay. Although it did ache a little, it wasn’t anything he couldn’t hold back.

“Rather than re-shooting, let’s just take this guy.”

“That’s easier for us as well. It won’t impact your schedule either, Miss Joohyun.”

Somehow, the conversation was progressing without him. Maru dusted off his clothes before looking at the two.

“Well, is there something I can help you with?”

Hearing his question, both Joohyun and the producer nodded their heads simultaneously.

Chapter 387

He was pushed into the car almost as though he was being abducted. The black van was clean inside. The very back seats were folded in to make some storage space, and some clothes were hanging from the top. In the net behind the driver’s seat were numerous rolls of paper that seemed like scripts. This felt very different when compared to Miso’s own car, which looked like a warzone.

“Can you go in a little further?”

He was dazed and forgot that Joohyun was behind him. He sat right behind the driver’s seat and watched as Joohyun sat next to him.

“Unni! Take a photo with me!”

“I’m a huge fan of yours, unni!”

Fans had flocked to the car and were screeching.

“Girls.”

“Yes!”

“You’re on the road. You’ll end up in the hospital if a car hits you so get off quickly.”

“Haha, unni, you’re cool!”

“You call me cool no matter what I do. Take the photos right now and get out of the way.”

Joohyun turned her head slightly and posed. The girls all started screeching when she posed like a magazine model. Joohyun changed her pose around three times, and whenever she did, many artificial shutter noises could be heard.

“All done? Please step back. Also, stop chasing celebrities. You, you, and you over there. I think you three are high school students. You should really start studying. Chasing me will only cloud your future even more. Study well, and go to a good university. Then, I’ll give you a big hug.”

“Unni! I love you!”

After sending a kiss to the girls that made hearts with their arms above their heads, Joohyun closed the door. The girls were like obedient puppies as they moved to the pavement, all the while screeching.

“You’re good at handling people.”

“I have to deal with that pretty much all the time. Though, it’s getting easier for me nowadays since there aren’t any people that suddenly rush at me asking for a handshake. In the past, some people would even just hug me out of nowhere.”

When Joohyun sat back, the manager started the car.

“Where are we going?”

“To an underpass.”

“An underpass?”

The truck with lights loaded in the back started following them. They turned around at Gangnam station and entered the Southern Circular Highway.

“Are we heading towards Woomyun mountain?”

“You’re quite knowledgeable. Yeah, we are.”

The van went under the elevated highway and entered a flat terrain in the mountains. The van started rattling due to the uneven road as sand and dust flew everywhere to the side. As this place was still under development, construction vehicles could still be seen throughout.

“We’re here.”

The manager stretched out his neck and spoke.

“Sungho, you should get some sleep here. It must have been tiring for you driving all the way here from Busan.”

“If you say so, noo-nim.”

“I know you’re gonna sleep anyway.”

“Since you’re so considerate, do you think you can cause some NG scenes and let me sleep for three hours?”

“I don’t think so.”

Joohyun patted the manager on the shoulders before getting out of the van. Maru got out as well. The rough texture of the earth could be felt through the soles of his trainers.

It was 3 in the afternoon. Although the sun was right above their heads as it was mid summer, this place was rather dark for some reason. Ugly chopped trees, an excavator, as well as construction materials were suppressing the greenery and giving off a dull grey light.

“The generator car should be turned on here.”

From how the generator car stopped here, it seemed that the set was still a bit ways off.

“I don’t think this shoot suddenly got scheduled. What happened?” Maru spoke as he looked at the staff members that busily moved around.

Manpower was money. There was no way all these people gathered here without a concrete plan. Yet, the actor that had a shoot here was casted not properly but from some other place. Something didn’t feel right.

“Originally, one of the agencies we know said they’ll send a person, but there was a sudden accident.”

“An accident?”

“It seems like there was a traffic accident during travel. It wasn’t that he was severely hurt, but any shoot for the day seemed impossible so the producer was worried. That’s when I found you. Thanks to that, you saved me as well. If we didn’t get the shoot done today, we would’ve had to set another date for the shoot.”

“Miss Ahn Joohyun, over here.”

One of the staff members shouted.

“Let’s go.”

Maru walked next to Joohyun. People carrying props for the shoot were moving towards the mountain. There was an underpass through the side of the mountain where some of the trees had been roughly chopped.

“Producer, is this the place?”

“Yes, it is. It feels rather decent right? Apparently, this place was originally going to be tunneled all the way to the other side, but it’s halted right now due to some business problem. Thanks to that, we can use this gloomy-feeling place.”

The unfinished tunnel, as well as the containers that laid around. The gloomy atmosphere given off by the rusty metal made Maru feel like there might be corpses if he dug around. This looked like the perfect place for some shady, dangerous business.

“Oh, young fellow.”

He saw the producer wave at him. Maru walked towards him.

“First of all, thank you for coming, and I’ll give you the money here once we’re done, so don’t worry about that.”

“Okay.”

“Then shall we start the rehearsal immediately? They say time is gold.”

The producer walked inside the tunnel. It seemed that there were no problems safety-wise. The tunnel, which still had iron beams everywhere, gave off a very chilly atmosphere. No, it wasn’t just the atmosphere. It was actually quite chilly.

“It’s the same as what you did before. When Miss Joohyun shows her back, you... uh, what was your name again?”

“Han Maru, sir.”

“Yes, Maru, you’ll stab her just like before. We originally had an actor that practiced this scene already, but he got into an accident. So that’s why I’m asking you.”

After that, the producer started explaining the action scene that they were going to shoot with delicate gestures and speech that was mixed with some dialect. Maru could feel the resolve that the producer had to finish this shoot within the day.

“You got that?”

“Yes.”

“Good, then let’s try.”

Joohyun stood with her back open. On the other side stood the male actor from the café. The two started conversing with serious expressions. The producer, who was checking the script from the side, gave him the signal to enter. The moment the producer raised his finger, Maru grabbed an imaginary knife and rushed towards Joohyun’s back.

The man standing on the other side made a fishy smile. It seemed that he played a role that betrayed Joohyun’s character. Just as he was about to stab with the imaginary knife, Joohyun quickly spun around and snatched his wrist. It was just as they practiced at the café. Like at the café, Maru fell lightly without

being pushed too far. The stones on the ground dug into his shoulders. It hurt quite a bit even though he fell moderately.

Joohyun twisted his arm after subduing him and pressed on his neck with one knee. Maru coughed slightly. Her knee was supposed to press on the part between his neck and shoulders, but it ended up pressing down on his Adam's apple instead.

"Sorry, I'm pressing the wrong part, right?"

"It's fine, rather than that, continue with the rest."

Joohyun nodded and pretended to take out a pistol. The man standing on the other side raised both of his hands and kneeled. At the same time, the police roles entered from the entrance of the tunnel.

"Okay, that's perfect."

The producer pulled Maru up.

"You're good. But it hurts, doesn't it?"

"Yes it does. Do you have anything I can pad myself with? I am going to fall over properly during the shoot, but I might get injured if it's like this."

"We do. We'll give you your clothes immediately."

The clothing team gave him a leather jacket and some protective padding. Maru put on the protective pad before putting on the jacket. Thankfully, the size fit him.

The equipment side of things seemed to have finished preparing again as the lights were on. The low-angle light as well as the light for each of the characters emitted different lights from each other.

"Let's go on standby right away!"

The producer cheerfully spoke while clapping. It seemed that he was happy that the shoot was going well.

"Excuse me."

A woman wearing overalls approached Maru before telling him to close his eyes. In her hands was a makeup box. He closed his eyes while standing up. His eyes felt ticklish for a while before he heard that he could open his eyes.

"Please wait."

The woman moved elsewhere after applying something on his lips and cheeks. Maru headed to the mirror standing next to the vehicle for the clothing team. He looked blue in the face right now. Even his lips looked like he hadn't eaten for days. Even though the woman had only touched him up for a brief moment, his impression had completely changed.

"Looks good on you," Joohyun approached him and spoke.

She was wearing clothes that were fit for outdoor activities and she was wearing a strap for a pistol.

“Are you a detective or something?”

“Yeah, for the violent crimes section.”

“And I’m a murderer?”

“You’re a scary dude that was raised on an island. I don’t know the details myself. The writer never tells us stuff like that. But hey, have you seen my drama?”

“I haven’t.”

“At least hesitate a little, will you? You’re making me feel awkward. Oh, and thanks for taking care of Bangjoo. He boasted that Maru-seonbae treated him very well.”

Joohyun walked into the tunnel with a smile. The other actors all started to enter one by one as well after their makeup. Maru also moved according to the producer’s call.

“Let’s end this quickly and go to a restaurant together afterwards.”

The actors all fired themselves up. The lights turned on and the cameras started rolling. The producer checked the monitor installed at the entrance of the tunnel and talked into the walkie-talkie. Maru also moved according to instructions. He sat and waited behind the iron door at the end of the tunnel. The shoot soon began and the camera started taking video of the two. They shot the scene four times, one with the camera shooting from above Joohyun’s shoulders, one from the front, one from the side, and one because Joohyun wanted a re-shoot.

The camera that shot Joohyun and the actor came towards Maru. It seemed that they were going to shoot where he was to show the audience that there was an assassin hiding here. Maru hid the knife he received from the staff and just peeked out to check on the two. He didn’t know what kind of character he was playing and didn’t know what kind of expression to make, so he just stayed expressionless.

“Cut! Next.”

The producer seemed happy though. Once again, the two actors faced each other and talked about businesses and betrayals and what not. Then, the staff standing behind Maru tapped on his shoulder. It was his signal to go in.

He leaned forward to set his center of gravity forward and started running at full speed. The camera followed him from behind. It was a shaky hand-cam. Maru stabbed out with the knife from behind Joohyun.

“Cut!”

The staff that followed him with the hand-cam showed the producer the footage.

“Let’s do that again.”

Maru nodded and hid himself again.

“Cue!”

He once again ran with the cameraman with the hand-cam. Then, the word cut could be heard again.

“Okay.”

It seemed that the footage was better this time. A camera with a big lens approached him. Maru waited behind Joohyun ready to stab. The things he was about to do now required some delicate work. The producer said that he wouldn't divide it up into cuts and would take a single shoot, so he couldn't make a mistake here.

“Cue!”

He moved his hands at the director's signal. Although today was the first time he did action with Joohyun, they worked pretty well together. Joohyun's unrestrained movements were a little dangerous, but it was much better than awkward actions. It would definitely look good on camera.

He let go of his knife from the moment his wrist was snapped. There was no metal clanging sound like the movies. They would probably edit this in afterwards. He kicked his left foot off the ground on purpose to make his body stay afloat for a little more. He didn't want to do this a second time. He then fell on the floor with his shoulder, where he padded himself the most.

A loud thud could be heard throughout the tunnel. Maru saw that the camera director had become startled. It must have been because of the sound.

“Lee Ganghyuk!”

Joohyun loudly called out before pulling out her pistol. When he looked from below, he saw that Joohyun was glaring at the man like a vicious wolf. There weren't any traces of the sister that was worried about her brother until just now.

‘But she's pressing too...’

Maru clenched his teeth and endured. He felt that Joohyun's emotions were getting violent through his body. The hand that grabbed his wrist and the knee pressuring his neck became stronger. Maru breathed as lightly as possible so that his sound wouldn't be caught. Right now, the pain from his neck was stronger than the pain from the fall that he received from his shoulder.

“Good!”

The producer's words saved him. Maru tapped Joohyun's back with his left hand. Joohyun, who had a cold gaze, became startled and quickly stood up.

“Are you okay?”

“Ah, yes. It does hurt, but it won't kill me.”

Maru stroked his neck and spoke.

“Had you pressed a little harder, I would've gotten to taste what the river Styx would have tasted like.”

“Then perhaps I should have?”

Joohyun smiled and reached her hand out.

Chapter 388

The lights didn't turn off, but Maru's part was done. He finished off his scene by crawling on the ground, and being arrested by the police.

"Thanks for the work," Joohyun spoke as she offered him a bottle of water.

He opened it and drank a sip. When he did, the pain he had almost forgotten became vivid again. He took off the leather jacket and the padding. He pressed on his arm with his fingers, and thankful, it didn't seem like he was heavily injured. It seemed that his muscles were just startled, so he thought that he would be okay after around a day or so.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"No, it doesn't hurt that much. But you still have scenes left to do, right?"

"I do. I'll call a taxi, so you can go first."

Joohyun put her hand inside her pocket before pulling it out again.

"Oh, looks like I left my wallet with my manager. Let's go."

Maru stopped Joohyun from going to the van.

"Can I stay at the shoot? I want to see what it's like."

"It shouldn't matter, I think? I'll ask the producer. He'll probably say yes though."

Joohyun approached the producer. Meanwhile, Maru returned the padding and the jacket to the staff in charge of clothing. The staff that received the clothes sighed slightly. It was probably because the leather was damaged due to scraping against the ground.

"Sorry about that. I tried my best not to damage it, but it happened anyway."

"Oh, no. We can just mend it later. Thanks for the work."

It seemed that the staff never had the intention to get angry at him and just smiled back. Maru bowed and turned around. Just then, he heard a shout saying something about the management of clothes. When he turned around again, he saw that the staff that just received the leather jacket was receiving an earful from a woman in her forties. He met eyes with that staff for a brief moment, and that staff twitched his clasped hands, gesturing for him to go. Maru bowed again because he felt sorry. The woman's voice kept rising endlessly after that.

"Position is everything."

He looked around the set while drinking some barley tea. He saw the leader shouting at the background actors. He even pointed his fingers at people that looked older than him and kept shouting words like 'hey', and 'you'. He instructed the background actors that had flocked to him like chicks around a mother hen and told them that they had 30 minutes to finish lunch before meeting up again. Maru looked around. They were within the ranges of Woomyun mountain. On his right were heavy vehicles, and to his left was the silence of the big mountain. There was no way there were any restaurants in this deserted area. The closest place he could think of was the Seoul Arts Hall to their north, but they would have to cross the mountain to go there. Moreover, the rental coach was clearly not going to move.

The staff received lunchboxes and started eating, but the background actors all just looked at the staff anxiously. The leader was just eating a lunchbox comfortably.

Just as he was suppressing his bitter smile with some barley tea, he was given a lunchbox. The producer was standing in front of him.

“You should eat.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

“You said you wanted to watch the shoot, right? You can. If you’ve never watched a monitor before, you can come and watch as well. I can do that much since it’s thanks to you that we can take a breather. If we went overtime with this many people, we would’ve been over budget. So, you were....”

The producer made an awkward smile and looked at Maru’s face. Maru knew the meaning behind his smile, so he spoke first.

“Han Maru, sir.”

“Yes! Han Maru. Sorry I can’t remember your name. Anyway, you can watch at ease. Oh, and this is your payment. This is just for you without anything for the academy, so don’t tell them that you were paid. You know that you’d originally get paid three months after, right? I’m being considerate.”

The producer winked at him before going away. One of the things people realized while working at a day labor market was that the middlemen that did the calls became rich the fastest. The academy stood in between the student and the field. Not only did they take lesson fees, they were taking broker fees as well, so their pure profits had to be through the roof. Perhaps instructor Choi, who introduced them to the job, might have monopolized the commission in the middle. The only one that took losses were always the worker ants.

He opened the lunchbox and sat down on some construction board. He put some kimchi in his mouth and was chewing when he met eyes with one of the background actors that was wandering around. The kimchi he was chewing suddenly tasted like sand.

Maru never considered himself to be ‘good’. He rarely donated money to beggars in the streets, and he didn’t have any memory of sacrificing himself for others.

However, he wasn’t so insensitive to the point that he could ignore the eyes of the people who were given the cold shoulder in the field, when he used to be one himself. He closed the lid and stood up from the spot. There were around 11 background actors. Most of them were sturdily built since they had to play policemen, but there were a few that looked thin and looked like they weren’t here to play the police roles.

He did not plan to tell the producer to take care of their meals. If those people had the will to take care of that, they would’ve done so already. Telling people who had no will would be telling them that they were wrong. Maru didn’t want to receive a glare from the producer.

He would do whatever was within his reach. Maru gave his lunchbox to the middle-aged man who was smoking.

“Here.”

The man stared at him for a while before whisking away the lunchbox. The man glanced at Maru before starting to eat on top of an iron beam.

Maru shrugged and turned around. Not all good deeds were rewarded. However, the moment one decided to do good deeds, they should not expect a reward. The moment they expect even a smile, they would resent the person that did not thank them back.

“Huh, it’s Maru, right?”

Someone called out to him. Maru turned around to look at the person that called out to him. The man waving his hand at him was Park Woojoo, who he met during the shoot of Youth Generation. The man filled with a sense of justice still remained in Maru’s mind.

“Hello, hyung. Are you here as a background actor?”

“Yeah. So the one that was being arrested was you. No wonder you felt familiar. Were you always part of this drama?”

“No, I’m just a replacement for the day.”

“I see.”

“You haven’t eaten yet, right?”

“They told me to eat, but I don’t have a place to go. I’ll try telling the leader.”

Maru looked at the background actors with unsatisfied expressions standing behind Woojoo. It seemed that Woojoo was going to represent them in getting justice. It seemed that his personality hadn’t changed at all.

“You probably won’t be able to do anything about it.”

“Perhaps.”

Woojoo smiled bitterly.

“Thanks for the lunchbox. That person might look cold, but he’s not a bad person. He just has some circumstances.”

“Who here doesn’t have some? I don’t mind so don’t worry about it.”

At that moment a van entered the premises. It was Joohyun’s van. The manager, who was supposed to be sleeping, came out as he yawned. He opened the back of the van and took out a cardboard box.

“Please take these. It might not be enough, but it should be enough to stave off hunger.”

Inside the box were hamburgers and drinks. The background actors all took a drink and picked up a hamburger. Even the man that took Maru’s lunchbox took a set for himself.

“Maru, was it? You should take one as well.”

“Thank you.”

The burger had a thick patty. The manager also crouched down with the hamburger in his mouth.

“Did Joohyun-noo-nim buy it?”

“Yeah. I got a call. She told me to go buy something for them since they looked like they weren’t going to have lunch. Thanks to that, though, my nap time is gone. Geez, even after she told me to sleep, I have to work.”

Although he was saying that, the manager was looking at the people eating hamburgers with satisfaction. It wouldn’t have been surprising even if he said that the actress Ahn Joohyun is the one treating them, but he didn’t and just told them to have a good meal.

While eating, Maru looked at the tunnel. He saw Joohyun, who was focusing on her script. When he stared at her for a while, Joohyun waved back at him.

“You know Ahn Joohyun?” Woojoo asked him.

The manager had returned with the box.

“Yes.”

“Really? Wow, so you’re an actor after all.”

“You are one too, though.”

Hearing that, Woojoo stayed silent for a while as though he was embarrassed before continuing with a cough.

“Actually, I was cast in a drama this time. There was an audition at the academy I went to, and the president told me to try so I applied for it. I didn’t expect much, but I ended up passing.”

“Congratulations. I guess the only thing left for you now is to become a superstar.”

“Yeah right.”

Although Woojoo was shaking his head, he had a smile on his face. Maru truly wished for him to become successful through this opportunity.

“But what drama is it?”

“It’s a historical drama. The next one on RBS.”

“Really? I’m part of that too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m a beggar.”

“Really? We might see each other then, huh.”

“I hope we do. Please take care of me.”

“Hey, I’m in no position to take care of anyone.”

The two faintly smiled while looking at each other. Just as the background actors almost finished eating, the staff came and told them to get ready. It seemed that they were going to do the next part.

“I’m off then. See you during the shoot if we can.”

“Yes, hyung. I’ll give you a call at that time.”

“Okay.”

Woojoo put on a jumper and ran to the tunnel. Maru picked up the hamburger wrappers that the background actors littered everywhere and put them in a separate bag. From afar, he saw the leader pointing his fingers at the background actors. The staff didn’t say anything as they walked by.

“The moment you become the only good guy, you’ll get sworn at instead.”

Joohyun’s manager had come.

“Let’s go. Noo-nim wants me to give you a ride. Is the train station okay?”

Maru replied yes before standing up. Although he wanted to watch the actors a little more, it wouldn’t be bad to leave right now.

“I wonder when they’ll start treating them like people. I know well since I have experience doing that, but there are too many shit leaders and staff. Of course, there are good people as well, but there are more that think that the people they’re working with are people they’ll never see again and treat them however they want. Even though they have superiors that do the same to them, they do the same to the extras.”

“That’s how people get by everyday. Though, I think there are some decent people,” saying that, Maru looked at the staff he returned his leather jacket to.

“That person’s decent,” the manager agreed.

The ‘good’ people were always noticeable.

Maru got in the van and had a look at the set. Below the sparkly lights were stars and around them were numerous people that did not shine. They would only be able to put their names in the ending credits. For some, this was a set that shined, while for others, it was a gloomy workplace. Maru sighed as he looked.

Thank you all for today’s work - those words lingered in his mouth.

* * *

“His eyes look good.”

“It’s really good.”

“It’s somewhat of a pity to let him go after just that.”

Joohyun heard the conversation between the producer and the assistant director as she fanned herself. She approached the two who were focusing on the monitor. The monitor that would usually give a live feed of what the camera was shooting was currently playing back the scene they shot before. It was the scene where Maru was being subdued. After the camera swiped past her face, it captured Maru’s wrist, and even his face. Maru was looking at her with twisted lips from the ground. She felt this during the

read-through for Twilight Struggles, but he was really good when it came to expressing raw rage. In this scene as well, he managed to create a good picture with a single keyword despite the fact that he didn't know what the character was like at all.

"What happens to him after this?" Joohyun asked.

"Well, I'll have to consult the writer about it, but he actually has a decent impact. It's too much of a waste to throw him away after using him once."

"Then why don't we add an interrogation scene or something?" She hinted at him.

"That sounds good. We haven't discovered the backer of the organization yet. We should give this footage to the writer and listen to her opinion as well. Hey, text the writer for me and ask if she has some time."

The assistant director quickly took out his phone. Seeing that, Joohyun smiled and took a step back. She had received help from Maru. As a person, she had to pay back what she received. It might be an opportunity that might slip past him, but she tried her best anyway. She hoped that this would help Maru.

"Ah, Miss Joohyun."

"Yes?"

"We're going to eat dinner together after this. You're coming with us, right?"

"You might get an earful from me, are you fine with that?"

"Don't worry about that. I won't ask you to drink."

"Then I'm in."

The producer raised his thumb and smiled.

Chapter 389

"There's a saying. An actor does not cry. However, they make others cry. An act where the actor does not feel sad but the watching audience feels sad. What do you think, Mr. Sungjae? Do you think such an act is possible?"

Sungjae replied that it was impossible to Miso's question.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because it's a matter of sympathy."

"Sympathy, you say."

"To compare it to a concert, there are definitely differences in a concert when I do it with all my heart in joy and one where I just do it since I don't have a choice. Especially when it comes to the reactions of the audience."

"When you were truly happy, did the audience react to you more?"

"I believe so. When we started having fun on stage, the audience started jumping around as well. Even if we don't tell them beforehand when they should jump, everyone jumps in unison at the climax as though it was all planned beforehand. I believe that's the power of sympathy, and that acting has a similar aspect. I don't believe that many people would feel sad when the actor does not feel sad."

"Very well. Then that's one vote for impossible."

Maru saw Miso raise her left index. Then, she asked the same question to Gwangseok, who sat next to Sungjae.

"I don't think it's possible either. Instructor, you mentioned method acting from time to time. To become a character means sharing their emotions, right? The character's sadness is my sadness. Dang, I think that's such a cool line. Don't you think?"

Gwangseok smiled in satisfaction. Miso shook her head.

"So, are you saying that you can't do it?"

"Yes. Maybe it is possible, but they wouldn't be able to win against people that actually cry. The depth of their emotions should be different."

"Alright. Then that's two votes for not possible."

Gyunglim spoke next as though to show that she was used to these kinds of lessons. Just until last week, she looked like she didn't want to speak in front of four others, but she looked quite relaxed now. It seemed that she felt much closer to the others.

"I think the same. Just like how the ones that think they're good will hide their tails in front of the ones that are actually good, the ones that are pretending to cry might look lacking compared to people that are actually crying. In the first place, it's imitation. Imitating crying is crying acting."

"So in order to make the audience cry, the actor themselves has to cry?"

"Yes. I think it'll be much easier."

"Then I guess that's three votes."

Maru purposely avoided Miso's gaze that moved onto him. She didn't like being one-sided. That was why she always wanted an opinion from the other side when things were leaning too much one way. This was why he didn't want to sit at the end.

"I also think that...."

Before he could even begin, Miso shook her head. She was quick and clear about her actions. Maru could feel the invisible pressure that told him to say otherwise. He turned around to seek help, but the three that already replied clearly told him with their expressions that they weren't interested in sharing his burden.

He couldn't exactly blame them for it because he himself had the same expression as them last week. That time, the one cornered was Gyunglim, and she had to stutter her way out while being stared at by Miso.

There were no cases where Miso's question didn't end with an answer. It would only end if the answerer said something, even if it was not satisfactory. After thinking for a while, he started speaking,

"People put themselves in the character's shoes even if they know that it is fiction, and treat that fiction as though it was real. There's no need to search far for this case since even books are mostly just stories that one author has written with his or her imagination, but the readers participate as members of that world despite knowing that the world is false. It's the same with dramas. The people that are moving and talking on screen are all fakes that a writer creates, but we find ourselves becoming enraged, crying and smiling together when the characters encounter various events. In some way, there is already a screen. The ones watching already know that the world unfolding in front of them is false. In such a situation, I don't think there's any meaning in differentiating actual sad crying and pretending to c...."

When he said it out loud, he felt that he was going a little too far, so he decided to fix his words, but Miso replied as though she was waiting to.

"So what you're saying, Mr. Maru, is that the frame of acting is already false, so there is no meaning to the emotions that an actor has, and the only important thing is the viewer, right?"

"It's not entirely meaningless. I just think that its importance is a little lower since the viewers already accept what they're seeing as fiction."

"Then the mechanisms of acting must be similar to a machine then, correct? As long as the actor can show precise movements and agreed-upon emotional gestures, then the absence of emotions can be an exception?"

"In an extreme case, if two people with the same face, with the same voice, and with the same speech tone created the same expression, it is highly likely that the viewer would not spot a difference between the two. If there were no visual and aural differences between two actors where one puts in their emotions while the other does not, wouldn't the viewers accept it as the same acting and the same emotions?"

Miso clicked her fingers. Maru sighed in relief. That signalled the change in the direction of Miso's arrow. This time, Miso's arrow was aimed at Sungjae. Maru could see Sungjae's cheeks twitching.

"What do you think about that?"

"I think he's righ...."

"No, speak under the assumption that he's wrong."

Sungjae groaned and fell silent. He would feel very upset since he received the hot potato. Also, Gwangseok, who sat next to him waited with an ugly expression. Sometimes, the one next to the one being punished was more anxious after all.

"I think what Maru said makes sense. However, what's important is that people are not machines. In this world, you cannot have two people act the exact same."

Miso nodded. However, it seemed that Sungjae's answer wasn't enough to go to the next question.

"Then, where does the difference between an act with emotions and an act without emotion come from in the perspective of the audience, who already knows that what they're watching is false? No, does it

even exist? Perhaps it's just as Maru said, and it's just a matter of technique and emotions are just superficial?"

Maru thought about that question as well. What were emotions? What did 'emotions' mean to an actor?

Silence continued for around 10 minutes. Maru glanced sideways. All three of them were in deep thought. They looked like they were at a loss.

There was no sharp answer for this. Although various thoughts were flashing in his head, there was nothing that looked 'right'. Every one of them looked right, and at the same time, they all looked wrong. In this vagueness, Maru ended up raising the white flag. When he sighed, the three others all sighed as well. It seemed that they weren't able to come up with a good answer.

"Looks like you've all given it some deep thought, so let's stop here for today."

Miso clapped and signalled the end of the lesson.

"Since class is over, I'll stop the polite speech. You'll continue to come across this dilemma if you continue your careers as actors. Acting, if you dig deep enough, is also emotional labor. You're bound to get exhausted. Just expressing emotions is hard enough, but there are actors that even fit their body shapes to that of the character's. They're all working hard in order to show a good act."

Miso picked up her script which was on the ground.

"If you continue doing that, you'll end up finding yourself minimizing your emotional consumption as much as possible one day. After all, after working for a long time, you'll gain some tricks here and there. Acting is the same. That is when the path splits. One type will continue to believe that their own sadness is the same as the viewer's sadness and will continue to imbue their emotions. The other type will generalize their actions and increase efficiency. I can't say which is right or which is wrong. That's because there is no answer. It's a matter of personality, and perhaps just innate constitution."

What's bound to happen will happen. Thanks, everyone - she finished off before telling everyone to leave.

"Haa, it's over."

Gyunglim spoke as she stroked down her chest. Gwangseok also sighed.

"Running is better than this. Squeezing my brain like that doesn't sit well with me," Gwangseok grumbled.

"I'm off first. Sungjae-hyung, see you tomorrow."

"See you."

Gwangseok took his bag and left the class first.

"I'll get going as well. See you tomorrow, both of you."

Gyunglim also left while staggering.

“Shall we go as well?”

“We should.”

Maru turned off the lights and left. In the class opposite to theirs, it seemed that there were some vocal lessons going on as he could hear a baritone voice.

“Want a drink?”

“If you’re treating me, sure.”

They went to the convenience store in the next building and grabbed some drinks. Maru waited for Sungjae at the counter with a drink, and he saw Sungjae come with a triangular rice ball and some ramyun.

“You’re drinking that?”

“I’ll eat it like I’m drinking it. Aren’t you hungry?”

Maru grinned and grabbed a ramyun and a rice ball for himself. He poured some hot water into the ramyun and sat on a chair outside the convenience store.

“You’re a successful idol and you’re eating that?”

“I’m resting these days, so my income isn’t that good.”

“The recent concert was the last one, right? I mean, your activity as an idol.”

“There won’t be any more until the end of the year.”

“Wow, your president is amazing, having a super popular idol rest for half a year to practice acting.”

“Instead, she scheduled concerts in Japan and China from the beginning of next year, so I don’t feel that good about it.”

“That sounds good, Japan and China.”

“I’m going there to work.”

After emptying the ramyun in a single breath, Sungjae made a soft smile. He looked happy.

“What do you think of the fans? Do you still like them?”

“I do. They’re people that like me, so there’s no way that I’d hate them. My entire income is thanks to them. Though, sometimes, I feel scared as well. Everything I’m going to achieve in the future will receive the ‘it’s because you’re the idol Sungjae’ treatment. No matter what I do, that tag will not leave me.”

“You want to become independent?”

Sungjae took a bite of his rice ball and shook his head.

“No, I’m just grumbling. I’m so popular and everything I’m doing is doing well. Why would I give up on this?”

“Aren’t idols supposed to be pure like fairies?”

“The trend is honest idols these days. Rather than that, what do you think about that before? Are you the emotion faction or the mechanical faction?”

“Me?”

Maru rolled around the words in his mouth. Which side was he on, huh?

“Hyung.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you ever have that feeling when you act? That there’s an acting you in front of you, and there’s another you calmly observing from behind.”

“I don’t know. I’m the type that forgets about everything when I focus. Is that what you see?”

“Yeah, well. These days, I think it’s becoming even clearer. There is a self of me that’s closely observing the other me that’s getting angry.”

“Haha, then do the two selves give feedback then?”

“Sometimes.”

Sungjae laughed. He clearly thought of it as a joke. Maru also loosened his expression and smiled. This wasn’t worth any serious talk.

“If what you’re saying is true, then you are both on the emotional side and the mechanical side?”

“Right.”

Sungjae giggled and stood up.

“Let’s go. I’ll drive you to Suwon.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t take long by train.”

“Just do as I say. I’m just going on a drive.”

“A drive, with a man like me?”

When Maru cringed and looked at him, Sungjae just shrugged.

“Hyung.”

“What is it?”

“Do you have experience dating a celebrity?”

“What if I say yes?”

“Then that’s just that. I’m just asking out of etiquette. I heard that asking these questions is proof that you’re a popular star.”

“You have a glib tongue. Why don’t you try going on a discussion competition or something? I think you’ll do good.”

"I thought about that too."

Maru picked up the empty ramyun container and stood up.

"Ah, right. Hyung."

"Yeah?"

"Can we take a photo together on the way?"

"Why?"

"I need some cards for negotiation. These days, my sister keeps annoying me."

"Ah, that sister. Well, you can take photos if you like. I can do that much."

"Thanks. God bless you."

Maru smiled as he thought about how Bada would jump up and down asking him where he got the photo from.

"Hey, seeing you grinning like that makes you look like a scammer."

Sungjae spoke as he walked. Maru just shrugged and followed him.

Chapter 390

After pushing up the glasses that slid down, he turned over the page. There was no greater joy than reading a book on a soft sofa under the fan that spun with a low hum. These days, reading could be done on the PC or the phone, but he never got used to reading a book on a screen. It would hurt his eyes if he kept reading like that.

Above all, he couldn't feel the sensation of turning each page over. The vertical presses of a key didn't feel right when moving to the next page. Only when feeling the sensation of paper rubbing against each other as he turned the page did he feel like he was properly reading. To borrow the younger generation's words, he was 'behind the times'.

"Hey, I gave you food just a moment ago."

Yoon Moonjoong watched Dalgu as he wagged his tail by his feet and eventually closed his book with a smile. He hadn't been taking him out on walks recently.

He put on a leash and opened the door. It was August 21st. The sun was scattering rays of heat as though to boast that it was nearing the end of summer. As soon as he took a step outside, he missed his spot in front of the fan, but he couldn't win against Dalgu, who was urging him to go with his tongue sticking out.

"Let's go slowly."

Dalgu was becoming stronger by the day. Moonjoong wondered if he found some ginseng or something in the mountains without him knowing. When he climbed the slow slope, he saw his neighbor who had come out to buy some groceries. She was a fine lady that moved in not too long ago with her husband and handed out some rice cakes.

“Hello.”

“Ah, hello.”

“Looks like you’re going on a walk.”

“This fella was probably feeling itchy. He was urging me too much to go.”

Dalgu would be happy to meet strangers, even if it was a thief that got into the house, so he wagged his tail.

“Uhm, sir.”

“Yes, please speak.”

“If it’s not too much of a bother, can I take a photo with you? My mom’s a huge fan of yours, and she says she wants to come to my house when I told her that the actor Yoon Moonjoong lived next to me. And she lives in Daegu as well.”

“Haha, do take a photo and send it to her. Don’t make her come all the way here.”

She took a photo of him with Dalgu in it. The newlywed lady politely greeted him before leaving. The reason Moonjoong never left the house he moved in with his wife for more than ten years was because of the warmth of this place. Even people that just moved in would become a single family with the rest of the village.

He took Dalgu and strolled around the village. As Dalgu was even more popular than him around here, anyone they passed by gave him food. Perhaps this was what Dalgu was aiming for.

“Since we’re here, let’s go see your mother.”

They started climbing the paved mountain path. When they first moved in here, the path was made by the people, but after some time, the road was properly paved with cement and a mountain trail was formed. The sturdy and stable footing was good as well, but he sometimes missed the smell of soil that he walked on with his wife.

After climbing a bit, he left the official trail. He greeted the climbers that were going to the mineral spring and then took a path that led slightly downwards. There was a bulging grave amidst the flat grassy terrain. It was his wife’s. Dalgu, who always wagged his tail, would obediently roll his tail up in front of that grave. Looking at him, who would sit obediently in front of the grave, Moonjoong realized why people considered dogs better than humans.

After sitting down on the dry ground, Moonjoong stroked Dalgu’s head. Next to the grave of his wife, who gave Dalgu his name, was a smaller grave, and that was Dalgu’s mother’s grave.

“Hey, is it cool in there?”

Moonjoong sat in front of the grave and looked down at the neighborhood for a long time before standing up. He took Dalgu and climbed down the mountain. Dalgu obediently followed him. It seemed that he also wanted a rest.

Arriving at his house, Moonjoong looked at the clock. It was 11 a.m. Almost time for his schedule. He went to the bathroom to wash his hands before changing clothes. Since that person was very accurate when it came to time, the bell would soon ring.

“Sir, it’s Park Changjin. I’m here to pick you up.”

It was just as he had expected. He told Dalgu to wait quietly and opened the door. Park Changjin, the manager Junmin assigned to him, was waiting for him.

“Are you ready?”

“I am. Mr. Park, have you had breakfast?”

“Yes. I had a fulfilling one. Have you had breakfast, sir?”

“I also had a fulfilling one.”

Led by Mr. Park, he sat in the back seat.

“Then I’ll start driving.”

Just as Moonjoong nodded, the window opened slightly.

“I’ll turn off the air conditioner.”

It seemed that he remembered that Moonjoong disliked the wind from the air conditioner. The car departed softly. Moonjoong took out his glasses from the glasses case.

“The script is in front of you.”

“Oh, I left empty-handed, thanks.”

He took out the script from the pocket behind the passenger seat. The title was on the cover.

‘Apgu.’

Moonjoong turned the page and started reading the script. Today was the day of the first read-through. He would return to his acting career again. He was cast in a historical drama, though he didn’t have an important role. A writer he was acquainted with, had requested for his appearance and he accepted after seeing the scenario and the role he had. His screen time on camera didn’t matter. The question was whether he wanted to do it or not, and Moonjoong really liked his role that appeared for a brief moment at the beginning of the piece.

“We’ve arrived.”

He only flipped a few pages, but he had already arrived at the TV station. He got out of the car and went to the 4th floor of RBS. He saw journalists waiting outside. There were quite a lot of people as well.

“Hello, sir.”

“Hello.”

He lightly nodded towards the journalists that greeted him. He also saw some familiar faces. Mr. Park opened the door to the room that said 'Idea meeting room II'. He saw the other actors waiting inside a long room.

"Am I late?"

"Not at all, sir. There's still time left."

He shook hands with producer Han Changsung, who approached him and greeted him with a bright smile. The young challenging mindset of the producer who was nearing 40 in age, could be felt from his hand. Next to him, another good-looking producer greeted him. He introduced himself as Kim Jinhyuk.

"He's the assistant director. He's in charge of directing the B team so you should be able to see him quite often."

"Hello, I'm Yoon Moonjoong."

After shaking hands with Jinhyuk, he went inside. A man in his fifties, who sat at the head seat, smiled and approached him. Writer Bae Chulho. He was the writer for the drama. He knew the writer personally, and he was also the one who asked him to appear in this drama.

"You're here, Hyung-nim."

"So you're here as well."

"I should be. This is the first read-through after all. I'll only be able to change the script if I know what it feels like if it's actually said. Well then, please come this way."

Moonjoong sat next to the producer. The young actors also introduced themselves to him. They all had clear eyes and were good-looking. He felt rather proud when he thought that these kinds of juniors would lead the industry in the future.

After talking for around ten minutes, all the empty seats were filled. When the people carrying cameras entered the room as well, the door closed.

"Hello. My name is Han Changsung, and I will be directing this drama. Although there were many ups and down, we're finally at the starting point. I don't think the elders will like it if I talk too much so I'll just get to the point."

Moonjoong smiled and listened to Changsung's words.

"I only have one thing to ask you of. I hope you stay healthy until the end of the shoot. Well then, let's begin the read-through. As for the procedure, we'll take a break after reading each scene. Writer, please say a word or two."

Changsung passed the baton to Chulho.

"My name is Bae Chulho. I will not tell you to follow the script to the tee. I hope we can respect each other and create a good piece of work."

The actors all applauded.

“Then lastly, a word from our elder.”

Changsung pointed at Moonjoong politely with both of his hands. Moonjoong waved his hand saying that it was unnecessary, but the other actors in the room started applauding. In the end, Moonjoong had to stand up from his seat.

“I haven’t shot dramas in a long time. I don’t have as much stamina as I did before, but I will do my best so that I will not leave behind any regrets. I hope everyone here can do their best until the very last cut and create a piece of art. Though I only appear for a brief moment at the beginning, so I can’t be with you till the end.”

“But you definitely need to come to the party after the last shoot,” someone spoke.

The other actors who were older than the rest here also spoke out. Moonjoong said that he’ll go before sitting down.

“Let’s keep up this atmosphere and start right away. The drama, Apgu. Let’s do our best,” Changsung said as he opened the script.

* * *

“3rd of September?”

-Yeah. That’s the date of your shoot, so come to the 5th exit of Yoido station. It’s at 7 so don’t be late either. If you’re late, you’ll have to get there on your own, so you definitely must get there on time.

“Are you driving me there if I’m late?”

-Hey, you’ll kill me.

“I’m just joking. You must be busy, so hang up. I’ll save the time on my phone so I won’t be late.”

-Alright.

After finishing his call with his manager Byungchan, Maru saved ‘September 3rd, 7 a.m.’ on his phone. The movie that was supposed to be shot at the end of August was delayed to early September. It was probably because of the schedules of various actors.

“Looks like I’ll become busy.”

The drama was going to start soon as well. Although the company was managing his schedule, he had to take care of transportation by himself. If the shoot was in Seoul, he could get Byungchan to give him a ride provided that he had the time, but in the case of shoots in the countryside, he would have to take the coach rides provided by the TV station.

‘They’ll only give me the full treatment once I become full-fledged.’

Although he officially signed a contract with JA, full-time management would only start after he graduated high school. Although he would receive a personal car and a manager if he managed to score himself a good piece, Junmin was not kind enough to assign so many resources to a highschool student, who wasn’t even profitable.

There was barely any interference from Junmin's part which was just as much as the part he had to take care of by himself, so it wasn't that bad. Once he started his actor activities, he would have to digest all the events that the company required him to do, so he wouldn't be as leisurely as he is now at that time.

Maru pushed his phone to the side and opened the script that Byungchan gave him yesterday. The script was bound properly with a smooth cover to boot. Although he had come across many drama scripts, this was the first time he entered one through an audition so this felt rather new to him. After staring holes into the characters 'Apgu' on the cover, he flipped the page. The act he was supposed to do should be there.