

## Once Again 421

### Chapter 421

It seemed over. Kwon Dayoon took the phone off her ears and leaned back in the chair. The leather seat cover she bought with her own money wasn't as comfortable as yesterday.

'Blue' started disbanding. 'This is our last time' - the words they said as a joke during the last performance ended up taking root. It was an inevitable matter, and it was also one she was prepared for.

"Dammit..."

She pressed on her eyelids.

She gained that opportunity after failing once, so she was very obstinate on maintaining Blue. Their trainee period was harsh. She believed that the sense of friendship she gained with the other members as they ate cold rice together would never change, but it ended up happening.

She had to say goodbye to living together with the others, to being the only unpopular member, and to the title of an idol nearing 30, but why was it that she felt so frustrated? There was a time she wished for this to happen faster, and they were finally disbanding, but rather than a smile, she only groaned.

Was it because of the affection between the members that she thought was lost? Dayoon shook her head. There was no room in her heart to be shaken by such luxurious emotions. There was only one reason she was frustrated and sad: she had become truly alone. Economic independence. The shield known as 'Blue' no longer existed. Now, it was up to her to accept the waves of time and the gazes of the world. That was what scared Dayoon.

"...Haa."

The other members had found their own paths already. They were young. They just hit twenty, and the youngest one, Chaerim, was just nineteen. In this market, age was something more than just a number, especially to girl idols. Every time their age went up by a number, the rope that strangled their necks became tighter. They would become useless unless consumed quickly, just like milk that was just before the expiration date.

There was no idol that was doing better than her that was older than her. Not even one.

"This is my last opportunity."

She grabbed the script in a rush. She was pushed to the edge of a cliff, but it wasn't like there was no salvation for her. That man had come back for her. That man, who she really was about to fall in love with, and this movie were the saving grace that was given to her at the edge of the cliff. If she missed it, she would fall down from the cliff. Meaning, she would hit rock bottom again. It was impossible for her to start over again in that moist, small space again. Back then, she was young, was able to take challenges, and above all, did not know the cruelties of the world.

"Didn't know I'd come back here again. Phew, didn't know I'd come back here again."

She said the same line over and over again in a nervous manner. When she first met director Joongjin under that man's lead, Joongjin said to her that there was no need for her to act; that there was no need for her to know what acting was.

When his snake-like eyes scanned her body, Dayoon realized that he was serious. She was one of the lead roles, and she didn't have to do any acting? She had her suspicions, but she could only say that she would do it.

Finally, today, she got a glimpse of the way Joongjin did things. Throw away everything other than the act that I tell you - Joongjin kept his word as he continued the shoot.

"The shoot is starting."

The manager spoke while tapping on the window. Dayoon got out of the car with the script. She felt dizzy for a moment due to the heat.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, oppa. I'm okay."

She let go of the manager's hand, who was trying to help her up, and walked towards where the reflector was. This was the scene where she went to the crime scene again with Yoo Joongang instead of Lee Hyuk, who went to prison. She could see many members of the staff rush down the mountain with shovels in their hands.

"Miss Dayoon, over here."

Joongjin smiled as he gestured. Next to him stood Lee Hyuk and Joongang. They were, like her, lead roles in this movie, but she was still unfamiliar with them. This was their first meeting after the read-through. Although there was a get-together, Lee Hyuk and Joongang did not show up due to personal circumstances, and Dayoon wasn't able to go either due to meeting that man. From what she heard, even director Joongjin didn't show up. She heard that the main members of the staff and some of the supporting roles ate high quality beef with the credit card they were given. In other words, these people, including herself, had no intentions of getting close with the others. She heard some people say that they should eat together after the shoot today, but wondered how many people would actually show up.

When Dayoon stood in front of Joongjin, the rehearsal began immediately. Joongjin instructed everyone on what the actors had to do just like what he did during the morning with the child actors. How many parts they had to divide their breathing into; where they had to look; what hand gestures to make while they speak, and things like that. The blanks in the script were being filled with the director's words. She was taking notes on a movie set even though she had never done so even in school.

She looked at the script, which had practically turned into a user manual, and did her practice. When she did everything the director told her to do in front of him, she would immediately get coached.

"Miss Miso, would you please."

The woman that joined mid-way through the morning, Yang Miso, approached her. She seemed acquainted with director Joongjin. The director explained that she was here for coaching.

"I didn't know it would be like this, but since things have progressed already, I'll try my best," Miso said as she shrugged her shoulders. Dayoon forced herself to smile. In a movie shoot, someone that was supposed to be the lead actor was getting coached on acting. Joongjin would explain the form of the acting, and Miso would get into the details. Dayoon added things into her script while listening to Miso's words.

"Relax your shoulders, yes, just like that. You need to show what's inside. In other words, you can only act once you embarrass yourself to the point that you can't embarrass yourself anymore."

Just as Dayoon nodded her head at Miso's words,

"Miss Miso. Just tell her the methods. There's no need to go into comprehension. Just the tricks, that's enough."

"Is that really enough?"

"It is. If it's lacking, we can always add more. We should get this done quickly and get some rest."

Miso sighed slightly before continuing to explain.

"I don't know what kind of contract there is between you two, but let's take the intensive course. Try saying your lines."

Dayoon said the lines at the beginning of the scene. She did not forget to make the expressions that director Joongjin told her to make.

"You have a good memory at least. Then, for now, think of it as trying to put strain into the part between your nose and your eyes while you say this line. That's it. Say your lines just like that. Also, let me ask. You didn't do any research into the character's emotions, right?"

"No. I don't know anything."

"...Phew. Okay, let's try it for now."

Miso explained how to do acting while giving easy-to-understand examples. Dayoon felt her confidence skyrocket. She felt as though she made out some of the path on this dark path of acting. When they went over the script just once, Joongjin told everyone to gather round.

"Let's do the rehearsal."

Dayoon properly recreated the parts she practiced. The two male actors also continued their act as Joongjin instructed them without saying a word.

"Good, do just that."

She gave her script to the manager and stood in front of the camera. Was this really sufficient? She felt very uneasy. If she was not able to take a leap with this movie, her life in the entertainment industry would suffer. She had to find a way forward before Blue's disbandment became official, and this movie was the greatest and most suitable opportunity for her.

I need to do better - her hasty attitude pushed her back. The camera started rolling and she started acting, nay, she started imitating. At first, she did just as director Joongjin told her to. They reached a cut

without any mistakes. Following that, they proceeded to get the second take. Dayoon then thought: would she really be able to gain popularity like this?

Wouldn't it be better to say her lines more dynamically? - such desires made her lips feel dry. She was also a professional. One that smiled and danced on a stage in front of thousands of people. She knew how to be liked by the people. Wouldn't her acting become a lot smoother if she used that skill here?

Hearing the director's cue sign, Dayoon started moving. She started off the same as last time, but she made a more cheerful smile in the scene where she walked while hanging her arms around the two male actor's shoulders. She was told to smile, so this should be fine, right?

At that moment, director Joongjin stopped the shoot.

"Miss Dayoon, let's have a talk for a sec."

Dayoon looked at Joongjin nervously. When she did something different from what she was told to do, he found out immediately. How eagle-eyed was that?

"Why did you do that?"

"Because this looks better."

"Hm, so you're saying that you know acting better than me, Miss Dayoon? That you know the character better than me?"

"Eh? No, that's not true."

"Then why did you act however you want? I should have told you that you are to follow my instructions. Miss Dayoon, do you want to shoot a movie, or do you want to do acting? Please just choose one. If you want to shoot a movie, then do what I say, and if you want to do acting, then leave."

"L-leave?"

"Yes. Didn't I say it the first time we met? That you don't need to do acting?"

"...I'm sorry. I will not do anything strange anymore."

"Good. What we're doing is business. You can do your art later."

Dayoon lowered her head towards Joongjin who lightly patted her shoulder. That's right, this was work, and she was supposed to do what she was told to do.

Dayoon returned to her place.

\* \* \*

"Right there, that's right."

Receiving action guidance from Choongho who joined them later, Maru and the minor actors rolled on the ground. They threw themselves on the ground while avoiding tree roots. When they fell on the mat that was outside the frame of the camera, the director shouted cut.

"Well then, let's go to the next scene."

Maru looked at Sooyoung and Joon-gi who were next to him.

“Let’s decide after doing the next rehearsal.”

Until now, they did not feel any rejection towards the acting that Joongjin told them to do. Since it was an action scene, there was no room for individual influence, and since it was a fast-paced scene, the director’s efficient way of instructions was actually quite beneficial.

However, the next scene required them to talk to each other on the slope of the mountain. This was an important part where anger that started from a misunderstanding would eventually lead to the death of a friend.

“Please gather round.”

The child actors gathered around Joongjin. Maru and Bangjoo stood on the opposite side of the main characters. After making them face each other, Joongjin started the rehearsal. Under director Choongho’s guidance, they created a brawl scene.

“That’s the general gist of the fight scene, and Mr. Taehoon, come here.”

After finishing explaining to the lead actors, Joongjin walked towards the monitor saying that they should try the shoot this time. This was a long take that lasted about 50 seconds. Jangsoo, who held up a steady cam while wearing a vest, put out his cigarette and approached them.

“This thing is super heavy. I can last about three takes, but any more than that is impossible for me since there’s my age and all, so please spare me.”

Hearing those words, the actors laughed in a small voice. Jangsoo captured Taehoon and Gwangsoo in the frame.

This was the start.

Along with Joongjin’s cue sign, the silence broke. Taehoon swore just like during the rehearsal. Maru did the same from the opposite side. Gwangsoo spat on the ground, and that became the signal for thirty people, divided into above and below, to run towards each other.

Bangjoo, Joon-gi, and Sooyoung also went at each other while uttering their lines.

The brawl scene that they had practiced for more than an hour unfolded. Maru pulled back the moment Jangsoo, who held the camera, went by him. Like Moses splitting apart the red sea, the actors all pulled back wherever he moved. The only ones left at the end were Taehoon, who was punching out in a cool fashion, as well as Gwangsoo, who was giving a roundhouse kick to a burly guy.

“Okay. Jangsoo-hyungnim. Let’s do that one more time.”

“Don’t shoot too much. Well, not that you’d do that.”

Joongjin said that they’ll start shooting again after some maintenance. They dusted off their bodies and pressed back down their hair. The stylists came and redid what looked sloppy.

Maru waved at Sooyoung. Sooyoung brought Joon-gi and Bangjoo.

“How was it? Did you guys find anything you want to change?”

“I did.”

“Me too.”

“I got a feeling after I did it. This is a bit bland. It’s too meek when this is supposed to be kids fighting.”

All three of them said that there was a part they didn’t like. They meant that the action was fine, but the part where they expressed their emotions before the fight was a bit meek. Maru nodded once. That definitely required some changes to make it look good.

“Let’s do it. Just changing the tone of voice would change a lot of things.”

“For me, I’m going to change some of my lines as well.”

“Don’t stray off too much.”

“Okay.”

They went back to their standby position. After checking the footage, Joongjin raised his hand. He had the habit of snapping his fingers when he gave his cue signal.

“Ready, action!”

The flow was the same as last time. Taehoon and Gwangsoo said their lines like saying the model answer from a textbook. Following that was Maru’s turn. Maru changed his tone and actions from the ones that Joongjin told him to do. He let his emotions decide so that it would suit the character better.

Following that, the three others also did their acts slightly differently from what Joongjin told them to do.

It now looked more emotional and a lot rougher.

After punching each other in the following battle scene and pulling back behind the camera, Maru and Sooyoung exchanged gazes of satisfaction.

The changed version was definitely better.

At that moment, Joongjin shouted cut the moment the big kid moved out of the frame after being kicked and pointed at Maru and the three others exactly.

“Shall we have a talk?”

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His eyes were scary. The set had over 30 people mixed in it, yet he was able to catch the slight differences in the actions of the four of them. Maru gave the others next to him some glances before standing in front of Joongjin.

“I guess I don’t need to explain why I called you here, right?”

Maru nodded his head.

“From what I saw, it didn’t look like you were moving individually. It seemed that someone came up with the idea of changing the tone. Am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Then I’ll get straight to the point since we’re busy. Why did you not act the way I told you to?”

Joongjin waved at Jangsoo to wait. Maru looked back for a sec. Over a hundred pupils were looking at him.

“Because this is better.”

“You’re saying that the act you four did is better than the one I instructed you to do, huh?”

“Yes.”

“So you, Mr. Maru, are saying that you know acting better than me, yes? And that you’re more knowledgeable about the character than me.”

Joongjin pointed at the script as he spoke. Maru spoke to Joongjin who had a faint smile on his face.

“I can’t tell you that we know acting better than you. It’s also rather difficult to say that we know the characters better than their creator. However, I believe that we are better at expressing. I’m not saying that the characters that you gave us are bad. I believe that we’ll still get a good picture even if we acted as you told us to do.”

“Then why do you say that you’re ‘better’ at expressing?”

“Because we have our individualities. The acting that you instructed us to do is too well-fitting. It’s just like putting up a statue. It’s good to look at, but it’s also rather bland.”

After saying that, Maru had to cringe one eye. That was because Sooyoung, who stood behind him, hit his back with a fist. Tone it down a little - he seemed to express. However, Maru believed that he had to be even firmer in his decision at this point.

Joongjin was listening to his opinion. If he deemed that there was no need to face him, then he would’ve told the four of them to go back already. Throughout the entire morning, he made it clear that he would do what was necessary and would not do what wasn’t. And here, he kept asking questions. It was as if he wanted Maru to keep going.

Above all.

Maru looked at Joongjin’s eyes. A blue speech bubble popped up behind him. This was the first time he saw such a deep blue color. He wondered what the meaning was behind that color, but right now, he had to focus on the contents of the speech bubble instead.

-Go on.

Joongjin’s lips were curved slightly. It meant that he welcomed this situation like a child full of curiosity. Maru closed his eyes shut before opening them again. The speech bubble was gone. Although the functionality was imperfect as it couldn’t look deep into a person’s heart, it was plenty enough to see through his intentions for now.

“Bland, huh. Have you researched into the characters that you are acting?”

Hearing Joongjin’s question, the four of them nodded their heads without hesitation. Although they were ‘Friends A through D’ in the script, they still had their names in the story. There were times when Taehoon and Gwangsoo would call out to them, and in the brawl scene, they would swear at each other as well. An actor would research into even a ‘passerby A’ if they got that character. And right now, they were given a character with lines and even a name. How many actors would not do the research?

Ever since they arrived here, the four of them gave feedback on each other’s acting. They tried changing the tone of the words, and sometimes even changed the words as they repeated the short scene. They supplemented each other’s acting while thinking about different combinations even back in the action school, in the coach, and even during the spare time after lunch.

“I think that a strand of grass knows a strand of grass’s thoughts the best!” Bangjoo said.

His voice was very loud as though he had been holding back this entire time. Maru could feel Sooyoung and Joon-gi flinching. Maru also coughed awkwardly inside. It was good that he was bold, but he went a little bit too far.

“So that means that I was a bit lacking in expressing your characters, huh? I’m good at looking at the forest, but not at looking at the tree, is this what you’re trying to say?”

“That’s not entirely the case.”

The reason they stood in front of the director was not to go against him. It was to express their opinions and get back a good result. If the director was firm, they would have no choice but to leave the negotiation table and go back.

“I think that’s what Mr. Bangjoo meant. Am I wrong?”

Maru looked at Bangjoo. He was worried about how Bangjoo would answer.

“Yes, that’s what I mean.”

“I see.”

Maru lowered his head and sighed. ‘He’s the type of guy who would become reckless once he gets excited’ - Joohyun’s voice flashed through his head. Well, he did like the fact that he was bold enough to answer that way. After all, he wanted to say that as well.

It was impossible for Maru, who instinctively sucked up to his superiors, to act that way, but that bold high school student did it so easily. Being influenced by his courage, Joon-gi and Sooyoung also said that their acting was slightly better.

“Camera director.”

Hearing Joongjin’s call, Jangsoo came.

“Let’s have a look at the footage.”

“With these kids?”

“Yes.”

The video they shot just now played back on the external monitor. Looking at the screen, Bangjoo exclaimed.

“This feels rather new to look at it this way. Oh, there’s me.”

The acting was slightly different, but it didn’t look bad on screen either.

“Let’s have a look at the one we took before that.”

Following that, the footage where they acted as they were instructed to by Joongjin started playing back. It definitely wasn’t a bad act. This had its own charm. However, if they were asked which was filled with more vitality when comparing the two, Maru had the confidence to say that it was the second take. The others seemed to think the same as they all had expressions of confidence.

“What do you think? Can you say that the one you four did is better than the one I requested even when comparing side by side?”

“Yes. In fact, I have even more confidence now that I see it in person.”

“I think the same.”

“Me too.”

Hearing answers from the three people, Joongjin looked at Maru. Maru replied that it was better. After stroking his chin, Joongjin spoke,

“Do you remember that I told you to be prepared to leave if you don’t follow my words?”

Maru carefully nodded. He had to be careful here. He might suddenly change his attitude into a strict one from an accepting one. If he was the type of man who could only speak gallantly, there was no way he would look at the four of them in a good way since they were challenging his authority.

“But the fact that you acted differently in a group like this without listening to me is that... you have the confidence, and to me, I feel very happy about that.”

“Eh?”

“Let’s shoot one more time the way you four did it and talk again.”

Joongjin smiled and clapped twice. That was the signal for everyone to go back to their positions. Maru looked at his friends behind him. Everyone had vague expressions. It looked like it went well, but not entirely.

“I’m not sure what’s happening, but I don’t think we’re being chased out.”

“Let’s try it out once. We’ll see then. Also Bangjoo, I was startled because I thought you were getting angry. Geez, man.”

Sooyoung headlocked Bangjoo in his arms and shook him vigorously. Bangjoo apologized and groaned at the same time.

“Let’s do it like we did last time. The director would probably tell us something once we do.”

The three of them nodded after hearing Maru’s words.

Since this was the first time that there was a delay in the shoot, all of the actors and the staff looked at the four of them with confusion. Maru ignored their gazes and prepared his own acting. If he got the permission to do whatever he wanted to in this scene, he should be able to get more freedom to express his emotions in the next scene, where he died.

‘Now that I think about it, this is the first third take of the day, huh.’

During the classroom scene in the morning, they got an okay after the first take, and it took two shots with the adult actors. It was done practically in an instant, and Joongjin did not take any more shots. Yet right now, Joongjin went into the third shot after hearing their words.

“Please prepare yourselves. Ready, action.”

Maru acted with more focus than ever. It wouldn’t be funny if he made a mistake when he expressed his opinion. He grabbed Joon-gi’s collar and let go before falling down after getting a hit. After checking Jangsoo walking past him with the camera, he grabbed Joon-gi’s hand and stood up.

“I hope that went well.”

“We’ll have to wait to find out.”

Jangsoo went around filming everyone until the last shot, and Joongjin shouted cut after that.

“The four of you.”

Since they were prepared for this, they walked up to him the moment Joongjin called them. They watched the footage that Jangsoo took just like last time.

“Good. I get what you are trying to say.”

Phew, Maru inwardly sighed in relief. It seemed that their opinions were accepted.

“But why don’t we change it like this? Oh, this is just a proposal, so just listen to me. First is you, Mr. Maru.”

Maru checked the footage as he listened to Joongjin’s words.

“Try to raise your anger even more here.”

“Right here?”

“Yes. It’s good to shout while pushing your body forward, but your expression is lacking a little in detail. We’re going to do a close-up shot on your face, so put your effort into it. For example, like this.”

Joongjin made an expression himself. It looked quite funny, but Maru could understand his intentions. After that, they slightly edited the lines as well. It was a minute change, just a change in postpositions. The moment Maru heard the contents of the change, he could only nod. It was a very clean direction without room for retort.

“Does that make you satisfied?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Good, then next. Mr. Bangjoo.”

Like before, the two started changing the scene a little. Now, there was a cut that didn't exist before in the script. What was supposed to be a single long-take scene was split into two. While changing the lines, Joongjin even asked the art director to change up the landscape. The scriptwriter next to him busily wrote things down with a pen. The staff holding shovels carved the mountain so that there was room for Bangjoo to run around.

Text and image were being altered at the same time. Hearing Joongjin's explanation, Bangjoo dazedly nodded his head and walked back. Sooyoung and Joon-gi were the same in that regard.

The skit that the four of them prepared while supplementing each other's part was altered once again, in a better, more detailed fashion.

“We should insert a cover shot halfway through, and that... hm, I think it will look pretty decent.”

Joongjin smiled and started writing things down on the script.

Seeing that, Maru was flabbergasted. They took just one shoot. After seeing that one shoot, he changed literally everything about that scene on the spot. However, it didn't feel spontaneous nor chaotic. It looked as though everything was intended to be this way from the start. Maru was amazed, yet felt a little disheartened. If the four of them were given more time to think about it and exchange opinions, they would probably have arrived at the same conclusion that Joongjin gave right now. However, Joongjin skipped that entire process and pulled out the best picture from his mind alone. Wasn't that too smart for a brain? He wanted that brain for himself.

“But why did you listen to our words?” Bangjoo asked.

Joongjin, who was writing things down on the script, raised his head and replied.

“Because you told me to do it.”

“What?”

“I'm a very lacking person. I'm far from perfect. Embarrassingly, I hear the word genius a lot, but I'm not actually that smart. That's why I try my best to experience and accept various things.”

“But you said you'll chase us out if we don't listen to your words...”

“That's because I need to select the right people. I'm not generous enough to commit my time to useless stories. I only listen to words that have value. Mr. Bangjoo, who would you want to listen to? One that says that his thing is the best? Or one that hesitates and says that his thing is worthless?”

“Of course, the one who's confident.”

“I'm the same. Actors that have pride in their acting are bound to speak no matter what kind of warning I give. That's because actors are creatures that can't accept acting that's below their level. As for me, I'm always ready to listen to words from actors. It doesn't matter whether their opinions are better or

worse than my directions. Having a conversation with actors is always a form of study for me. It's valuable. In that sense, your sister was also a very splendid actress. She was an amazing actress."

After closing the script, Joongjin notified everyone that they'd start shooting in 10 minutes.

Maru looked at Joongjin who looked where the ground was turned over. He was a scary man. He was endlessly open and endlessly accepted other opinions. By now, that man's dictionary of direction should have recorded the 'standard model of high school student acting' in it. He couldn't be happier that his last shoot was tomorrow. He couldn't begin to imagine what kind of acting he would have to do in order to continue satisfying him.

While resting, Maru took out his phone that he had put on silent. There was a text message from Joohyun, who told him that she was going back to sleep. He opened that text.

[Push forward with your opinion until the director is satisfied; until the word 'good' escapes his mouth.]

It was a rather late reply. Maru shook his head and put his phone back in.

## **Chapter 423**

She turned off the tap and raised her head.

"I'm completely burnt."

She wiped the moisture off with a paper towel and applied some sunscreen again. It wasn't that she had given up on becoming an actress so she had to take care of her skin at all times. Just as she turned around after wiping off the excess sunscreen on her hands, Kwon Dayoon entered the bathroom.

How thin. She thought that the girl might snap with a touch. When she saw her on TV before, she gave off the impression that she was just skinny, but now that they met in real life, she looked worryingly thin. It wouldn't be strange even if she fell over right now due to anemia.

Dayoon lowered her head and stood next to her. Since morning, the two hadn't talked about anything in private. Ever since she heard those words from director Joongjin, she always parroted 'I understand'.

"It's hard, isn't it?"

Miso spoke out to her first. It wasn't her style to pretend that she didn't see it.

"Eh? Ah, yes."

Her face looked like she didn't know what Miso was talking about. Miso smiled bitterly. As an instructor, Dayoon was the type of person that would annoy her the most. Someone that called herself an actress was shooting a movie without even knowing the basics. If she wasn't paid for this, she would have shouted at her to do things properly.

However, as an individual who was also a member of society, she pitied Dayoon. This woman looked like she had a lot of circumstances. She always looked uneasy as though she was being chased by something, and sometimes, she even looked desperate as though she didn't know what to do. Though, how many celebrities actually led easy lives was up to debate, but was she desperate enough to be dictated around by the director?

“Uhm.”

Dayoon, who was just fidgeting with her fingers under the flowing water, spoke.

“Please speak.”

“Is it fine for me to keep doing what I’m doing?”

Dayoon heavily raised her head as though there was a weight attached below her chin. Miso replied as she looked back into her empty eyes.

“That’s what I want to ask. What do you want to do? Are you going to keep listening to the director’s and my words? Or are you going to try something?”

“I don’t know....”

“If you don’t know, then just do it. Don’t think about it. That will be easier for you.”

Dayoon made a loathing smile. She kept washing her hands even though they were clean.

“Can I continue to live on as an actress?”

“I wouldn’t know. But like this, you won’t last long. After all, acting isn’t such an easy job. Though, no job is easy.”

Miso threw away the wet paper towel before leaving. The sun was setting. If the heat of the day was something sharp that pricked the skin, the heat of the evening was the stuffy one that made one tired.

While fanning herself with her hand, Miso walked towards the car that handed out lunch boxes. During the day, Kwon Dayoon’s fans supported them with the lunch boxes and for dinner, they were given lunch boxes by fans of Yoo Joongang. There was a ‘good luck’ sticker on the cover of the plastic container. Popular models sure had it good.

She was going to eat alone since she didn’t know anyone here, but just then she saw Maru who was also receiving a lunch box. The two met eyes, but Maru just nodded before turning around.

“Hey!”

When she called out to him, he turned back around and sighed. She flicked her fingers. Maru approached her slowly. But he dared to sigh?

“Are you eating alone?”

“Yes, I’m eating alone, you satisfied?”

“You should eat with the director.”

“Gosh, don’t even mention him. He kept talking as he ate during lunch, and I wasn’t able to eat anything because of that. I couldn’t entirely ignore him since he was acting like an excited child. Look over there.”

Miso pointed at Joongjin, who kept following camera director Kim Jangsoo around, while she held the lunch box in her hands. The two seemed to be on close terms as Jangsoo shouted at director Joongjin to

shut his trap. However, it wouldn't be director Joongjin if he listened to those words, so his mouth would probably not stop.

"He is a little talkative."

Maru waved his hand at three people who were walking away from him. They seemed to be his friends. When she looked closer, she saw Bangjoo as well.

"The four of you, you seemed to talk with the director a lot during the day. What did you talk about?"

The four minor actors changed the entire atmosphere for the afternoon shoot. Director Joongjin, who always one-shotted almost everything, had started to take more cuts after the brawl scene. That was the first time she saw a 'three' on the take number on the slate.

"We told him that we want to change the acting."

"Oh, that's why he started shooting more. That's strange. He might look soft, but he has a stubborn side so I didn't think he would accept opinions from other people."

"He's rather peculiar. He's also quite different from how he looks."

Miso looked at Joongjin who was laughing amongst staff members.

"I admit that he's a peculiar person."

"But what brings you here, instructor?"

"To do some acting coaching."

"Coaching?"

"Yeah. This is the first time I experienced something like this."

Miso looked at Dayoon who walked past her. The lifeless face she showed in the bathroom was gone. There was only a strong-willed lady that cheered others up around her and endured the hard filming with a smile. Seeing her greet each and every staff member she came across in a polite manner, Miso got the impression that Dayoon was indeed a pro. Saying that something hard is not hard had to be the biggest burden pros had to bear in front of the public.

"It must be hard."

"What?"

"Nah, just talking to myself. Rather than that, I looked at the script. It seems that the four of you won't have any more shoots after tomorrow, right?"

"Yes. We'll be done after just two days."

"Good for you. Maybe I shouldn't have taken up his offer. This is no fun. Should I ask if I can do a cameo?"

"I don't think the director will allow that."

"I know. I just tried saying it."

Miso ate the shrimp tempura inside the lunchbox. It was supposed to be crispy, but it was soggy as heck.

“Is it doable?”

“Is what doable?”

“Acting. No, I mean being an actor.”

“Yes, it’s somewhat doable. It’s not hard physical labor, and I’m used to waiting now.”

“That’s good. There are plenty of people who can’t adapt.”

“I will have to endure. No matter what happens.”

“You sound pretty determined.”

Miso turned to look at Maru. He looked pretty tragic, scraping off every last rice grain into his mouth. It was as though he was like a physical laborer going off to construction sites every morning. Maru was putting strength into chewing. Miso shrugged when Maru looked like he knew full well the meaning behind every meal. She even felt like there was another face under his facial skin.

“What happened to your movie audition?” Maru asked as he put down the spoon.

“I failed. Pretty cleanly too.”

Miso was eating slices of kiwi when she said that and suddenly flicked Maru on the forehead.

“I had almost forgotten about it too. Why did you have to bring it up?”

“I just asked out of courtesy. Rather than that, when are you going to marry Mr. Taesik? I mean, you two aren’t exactly young right now.”

Miso glared at Maru. Maru flinched and started moving backwards.

“Just get ready to come and eat some food.”

“Looks like you’ve greeted each other’s parents already.”

“Yes, we have.”

“Congratulations. I was wondering when I’d get to eat noodles, but it looks like I might be able to eat some within the year.”

“It’s next year though. Since I’m getting married, I might as well get to be the bride of May.”

“Ah, the bride of May. It must be expensive though since that’s the season for it.”

“You know all sorts of things huh.”

Maru brushed the rest of the food into his mouth before standing up.

“I’ll get going then. I still have stuff to consult with the others.”

“Fine, you can go.”

Miso also closed the lid and stretched her arms out.

The sun had set already.

\* \* \*

“Good.”

Changsung clapped to thank everyone. The countryside shoot schedule of three days was finally over. The coup scene with more than a hundred people was also finished without a hitch. Although there was a long time until that scene aired, they shot it early because of the weather.

“Thank you for all your work.”

“My dear little main characters. Well done.”

Changsung massaged the shoulders of Lee Uljin and Kang Giwoo who came to say thanks. Although there was a lot of controversy during the beginning of the shoot, their acting was clean now as though they had adapted to the situation. It was especially the case with Giwoo. His childish side was gone. Even other middle-aged actors praised him for his weighty acting.

“Let’s work hard for just a few more days. There’s not long left.”

Changsung encouraged the kids before looking for Jinhyuk.

“How is it? Did those guys say that they were okay with the schedule?”

Jinhyuk nodded.

“Just barely. They might join us late on the set, but I don’t think there will be any delays in the shooting. But what do we do about tomorrow? The forecast said it would rain and that’d be a big problem for us since we’re shooting outside.”

“If it rains, then it rains. Just get prepared so that the old folks don’t catch a cold.”

“I’m going to get a heater and some heat packs. Oh yeah, Giwoo’s acting has gotten a lot better.”

Jinhyuk pointed at Giwoo, who was leaving the set while greeting the staff, as he spoke.

“He’s definitely become a lot better.”

“But senior. Don’t you think it’s similar?”

“What is?”

“You know, that kid. What was his name again? The second beggar.”

“The second beggar? Ah, it’s Maru. Han Maru.”

“Yeah, him. There was a bit of a commotion during our first shoot in Moongyeong. Uljin pushed Maru and almost caused an accident.”

“I remember that. I still don’t understand why he did that.”

Changsung shook his head when he thought back to that incident.

“But what about it?”

“You know, Maru showed a guide once. Han Myung-hoe’s acting. Do you remember that?”

Ah, that’s right.

Changsung nodded his head. He understood what Jinhyuk was saying. The Han Myung-hoe that Maru showed back then as well as the Han Myung-hoe that Giwoo was acting definitely had their similarities. The tone of voice, and the expression. When he compared his memory to the footage he took just now, it definitely was similar. No, rather than similar, they looked identical.

“Giwoo’s pretty good at grasping the characteristics of others.”

Jinhyuk spoke as though he was proud.

“That’s also a form of talent, I guess.”

However, Changsung was a little weirded out when he thought about how the two people’s acting was strangely identical. Although they say art starts from imitation....

“Senior. Let’s drink some coffee.”

“Ah, okay.”

Changsung shook off his thoughts when Jinhyuk pointed backwards. He was clearly overthinking. He should be cheering for someone who was doing their best, not try to put down his work.

“You the one buying?”

“Senior, I’ve already run out of money this month.”

“Yeah. I guess I was expecting too much. Let’s go. I’ll buy you the 300 won vending machine coffee.”

“I’ll take the 400 won one, thanks.”

“Fine, 400 won.”

Changsung smiled and gave Jinhyuk a bill.

#### **Chapter 424**

“Mr. Maru. Are you ready?”

Maru nodded when the direction team asked. The blood capsule that he put in his mouth had almost been completely dissolved. The powder and his spit should have mixed enough by now to look like blood.

“Standby!”

Director Joongjin shouted heartily. The whispers all died down. Following that, sound. He could hear the word ‘speed’ from afar.

“Camera!”

Roll - the camera director's first assistant shouted as Maru gathered even more saliva in his mouth. This was the second take. After the first take, he was given instruction from the director. During the first run, he 'leaked' the blood, so he asked for Maru to spit it out during the second run.

'Maybe I should've just done what he said.'

Ever since the incident yesterday, director Joongjin always asked for his opinions. Just thinking about what the other actors would think of the director going to four minor actors for opinions made his stomach ache. Maru looked at Lee Hyuk, who was standing behind the monitor. He wasn't hiding his intentions from his eyes that looked at him annoyingly. It seemed that Sooyoung's words were true. This man didn't look like he had a good personality.

The slate man's voice could be heard before the clapper sound entered his ears. The only thing left now was the director's shout.

"Ready, action!"

Maru let his head fall on the place he decided on and spat out everything in his mouth. The red saliva covered the dark skies. Wasn't this a B-grade movie? He decided to believe in the power of editing as he rolled around. Since it was a slope, his body started rolling by itself once he pushed himself forward.

Dry leaves scratched his head and little stones, which appeared no matter how hard the staff tried to brush them, away scratched his arms. He was supposed to be dead, so he couldn't exactly flinch either. He rolled around five meters before landing on a mattress. The staff that was waiting for him immediately came to him and checked up on him.

"Uhm, was my rolling okay?"

"Don't even mention it. You were practically a bowling ball. Rather than that, you okay?"

"Yes. It just prickles a little. My clothes aren't ripped, right?"

"They aren't. Oh wait, there's a scratch on your cheek. Tsk, that looks painful."

A female staff member from the direction team gave him a tissue. Maru thanked her before pressing down on his cheeks with the tissue. He was bleeding fake blood from his mouth, and real blood from his cheeks. It was a bloody party.

He dusted off the dry leaves and returned to where he was supposed to be.

"Seonbae-nim. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay."

He smiled at Bangjoo who asked worriedly before looking at the director. He wondered how it would be this time. If he did not give the okay, he would have to roll down the same path once more.

"Maru, you should curl up your shoulders when you roll. You'll get injured if you roll like that."

The action director, Choongho, gave him some advice. For safety, it was best to curl up the arms and put them against the chest, but it would be really awkward if someone that lost consciousness rolled down the hill like that, so the arms were just freely flung around.

“I’ll be careful if I have to roll again.”

“That’s right. What’s important is to not get injured. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

Maru asked Sooyoung and Joon-gi how he did.

“You died dynamically. But is your head okay? It looked really realistic.”

Maru tried touching the back of his head. He smashed his head against a protrusion made of soil, but his hand had some blood from his head as though he had scraped his head against some stones.

“Rinse your mouth with this. You look like a total zombie right now.”

“Thanks.”

He put some water that Joon-gi gave him in his mouth before gargling.

“But seonbae-nim. What does it taste like?” Bangjoo asked, seemingly curious about what artificial blood tasted like.

“It doesn’t taste like anything.”

“They should make it sweet.”

That was not a bad idea. Maru thought that it would be better if it tasted like strawberries. Maru drenched his hand with some water and wiped his face.

“Okay! Thank you for your work everyone. Today’s shoot ends here.”

Everyone cheered while clapping.

“Thanks for your work.”

“Thank you too.”

With that, the four minor actors’ roles were finished here as well. The funeral scene in the morning and the death scene in the afternoon. Thanks to director Joongjin editing the original script several times, he got a lot of appearances. Occasionally, they would get one-shots just by themselves so smiles never ceased to appear on their faces throughout the shoot.

“I hope the movie goes well. I’ll bring my mom to watch it,” Sooyoung said as he organized the drill uniform.

Everyone started getting ready to pull out. The lights turned off, and the generator car also quietened down.

“Let’s return the scene to its original state before going down.”

Director Choi from the art team raised a shovel above her head as she spoke. They started putting the ground that they turned over for the brawl scene back to its original state.

“Well then, let’s do this together. We’ll need everyone to attend the afterparty after all,” director Joongjin raised a shovel as he spoke.

Other than the lights team and the camera team who had to move around heavy equipment, the rest of the staff joined in. Even the people that came here to act in the action scene gladly helped out.

“Afterparty. What a magical word.”

“We should help out as well.”

Since he mentioned a party, it seemed that the parts they needed to shoot here were finished. The beginning sequences for the movie were completely finished in just two days. It was quite a tight schedule, but it didn’t feel like they were being chased by time. It was probably thanks to director Joongjin’s method of shooting.

“This feels like an exercise before a meal.”

Maru also joined with a shovel in hand.

\* \* \*

“I’m gonna sleep.”

“I’m already sleeping.”

That was the exchange between Sooyoung and Joon-gi who sat behind him. Maru pulled the curtains to cover the window. On the coach back to Seoul, everyone had fallen asleep due to fatigue. Even Bangjoo, who seemed excited to go back, was leaning against the backrest of the front seat, dozing off. It seemed that he had finally expended all of his internal batteries.

“You should get some rest.”

Maru also yawned before closing his eyes. He would probably be back in Seoul by the time he woke up. He let his body rest against the chair that was vibrating slightly, waiting for sleep to overwhelm him when his phone in his pocket notified him that there was a message. It was 9 p.m. on a Sunday. There was only one person who would send him a message at this hour.

-You finished?

Maru pressed some buttons on *her* number, which he saved as ‘Bunbun’, to reply to her.

-I’m on the way back. How about you?

-I’m done as well.

-Must be tired then.

-Yeah, I’m tired.

-I’ll call you then. It’s less tiring to speak than to text after all.

He wasn't used to pressing buttons on a phone, so Maru decided to call *her*. He pressed the call button and waited for *her* to pick up when the signal cut off mid way. He wondered if he mis-pressed so he was about to call again when he got a text message.

-No. I'm tired today. I'm going to go to sleep now.

Maru looked at his phone screen for a long time. People had their own patterns. In *her* case, it was to make a phone call after exchanging text messages. Good night - *she* always called him to speak just those two words.

Even on days when he grumbled over text about being exhausted, *she* gave him a call without fail to say those words. Maru folded his phone before thinking. Perhaps *she* was really tired. Perhaps *she* might have crawled into her bed thinking that she couldn't be bothered to do anything. Like how it required a long time to recharge a completely depleted battery, even *she* sometimes expended herself of any energy.

Was this that time?

Maru opened his phone. It wasn't just women that had intuitions. Men had their own intuitions as well. Maru wanted to know what was so iffy about this dry text message.

He was wondering whether to call *her* or not before leaving a message. He wanted to help *her* out if she encountered something difficult and perhaps talk bad together if she was pissed about something. He wanted *her* to rely on him regardless of what it was.

-Did something happen?

He typed that and almost sent the message, but Maru quickly pressed the cancel button. He started a new message and started typing again.

-If you aren't sleeping, hang out with me a little.

He sent the message before opening the curtain. When he was looking at the cars that were rushing by, the phone in his hands started vibrating.

-Sorry.

That was *her* reply.

\* \* \*

*She* put her phone down before biting her lower lip. Originally, *she* wanted to call him. No, before *she* even sent a text, she wanted to call him and listen to his voice. No, it wasn't that either. *She* didn't want to listen, but rather she wanted to say everything.

When *she* curled up her body, the script entered her eyes. 'That family is strange'. When *she* first received the script, and when she first read the title out loud, how happy was she then?

It was *her* debut as an actress that she had dreamed of for a long time. *She* was a nextdoor friend of the main character. The character was rather vague so *she* didn't have many lines, but she would be satisfied just by getting into a single frame with other actors.

“Geez, why am I like this?”

*She* laughed in vain when she saw a tear droplet fall down. This was no good. *She* kept rubbing her eyes with the back of her hands. *She* rubbed to the point that she was worried that they would go red, but for some reason, she couldn't stop.

The moments *she* experienced during the day came back to her. A startling rebuke as well as a gaze that looked down on *her*; the voices that whispered in the background. *She* curled up her body even more. The woman that slapped down the script on her head, Lee Miyoon. *She* could still hear her laughing voice.

“Looks like I made a bad impression.”

When Yoojin first mentioned to *her* about Lee Miyoon, she decided that she would act carefully in front of that person, but things went wrong on the first day. After the first greeting that *she* thought she was forgiven for, that woman sneakily bullied her. It was as though she wanted *her* to keep enduring; to keep struggling and not leave the place.

*She* kept reminding herself inwardly that it was okay, but her fears became larger the farther the shoot progressed. What kind of words would *she* hear today? What kinds of things would she nitpick about today?

Let's run away - those words subconsciously came to *her* mind.

*She* sat up. *She* then stood up and stood in front of the mirror.

“Who told you to make such a pathetic face?”

*She* pulled her cheeks to the sides.

*She* was scared of Lee Miyoon. It was to the point that *she* couldn't look at her straight in the eye. However, the scarier she felt, the more rebellious *she* felt as well. I will never give up, I will make her say that I'm good from her mouth - *she* thought.

“But... can I really do it?”

*She* protruded her lips out.

“Aaargh, I don't know! I don't get it!”

*She* flung herself on the bed and started violently waving her hands around. *She* wanted to grab someone and swear at that woman. *She* wanted to talk about what a bad woman she was and how difficult *she* had it.

However, *she* didn't want that person to be Maru. That person never said anything when he was hurt, but always brought medicine when someone else was hurt. If *she* told him her worries, he would probably listen to her stories in a warm, kind manner, but looking at it another way, that was just her pushing her worries onto Maru.

Maru had been busy enough already these days. He had to be tired. Despite that though, he never complained. He always smiled and always played jokes on *her*. *She* didn't want to rant in front of such a person.

*She* didn't want to become a burden to him.

"My girl, is something happening?" Her mom came in and asked.

*She* hurriedly turned her head away and stuffed herself into the blanket. *She* couldn't let her mom find out that she was crying.

"I-I was just practicing acting."

"Geez, aren't you putting in too much effort? Mom was surprised, you know?"

"Uh, okay. I'll be quiet."

"My girl."

"Yeah?"

"Want to drink some coffee with mom? I have some spare time since I just finished my manuscript."

I'm fine - *she* was just about to reply but her mom was already in front of her. *She* could see the laptop with the screen still on through the gaps of the door.

"You should study acting more if you want to fool your mom. Come out. Your mom's itching to talk as well."

Her mom patted *her* on the butt before leaving with a smile. *She* sniffed once before going to the living room.

## **Chapter 425**

"Is it strange?"

"Well, it looks okay and not okay."

"Don't be vague and reply properly. Is it okay or is it strange?"

"With my standards, it's not that good. But it's fine since you're cute, noona."

"God, don't talk about something unnecessary."

Yoo Jiseok grabbed the script that was closing in on his eyes.

"Blade catching! I watched a Hong Geunho movie last night and he catches a blade like this."

"Why don't you join a circus already?"

Chaerim, who approached him, quickly snatched the script away from him.

"Your acting is pretty decent."

"But you just said it's not that good."

“That’s a matter of personal preference.”

Chaerim’s nose twitched before she went to a corner of the practice room before coming back with a laptop. That laptop was there to be used to listen to music. After connecting the internet cable, Chaerim searched for something on the internet before showing him the screen. It was an internet café hosted on a web portal.

“Look at this.”

Jiseok made an awkward smile as he looked at the screen. There was a big banner that said ‘Anti-Blue’ in big red letters.

“A fan café, huh. I don’t have anything like this.”

“It’s an anti-fan café.”

“Well, anti-fans are still fans.”

“Shut up, and go to my category and read some of the articles.”

“Wow, there’s a category dedicated to you, noona?”

He moved the cursor and clicked the ‘bitch Lee Chaerim’ category. He moved his eyes to read a few of the post titles and coughed awkwardly before closing the lid. The feed was filled with unspeakable insults everywhere. The most eye-catching words, though, were ‘crap acting’. They were used in tandem with the f-word, b-word, and stuff like that to insult Chaerim. Their expressive powers were so strong that they might as well win the Lee Sang Literature Awards. Oh, wait, that might be a little offensive to that person.

“You’re quite popular,” he spoke with a smile.

The script was flung at him. Jiseok looked down at the script that hit his face and fell to the ground.

“You’re going too far, throwing something like that at a person who has a bad heart.”

“Ah.... I’m sorry,” Chaerim was startled and immediately apologized.

“Oh! That worked. Looks like I should use it a lot in the future.”

Jiseok picked up the script and handed it back to Chaerim.

“Do you really want me to hit you?”

“You already did. But noona, it’s not like this is the first time it happened. People that want to insult you will insult you even if you do good deeds so just forget about them and smile.”

“I know that. If their insults were groundless, then I would just ignore them. Like you said, this is not the first time it happened after all. But there are things I can’t simply ignore.”

“You mean the one about crap acting?”

“Did you really have to say that out loud?”

“I really can’t be indirect with stuff like this.”

Jiseok opened the laptop lid again and searched Youth Generation on the web portal. Chaerim participated in the afterparty for the drama yesterday. Now, all she had to do was to watch the last episode on TV. She should have an ease of mind, but she didn't seem to.

'Well, the reason is obvious.'

The view rates for Youth Generation could be seen right underneath the search bar.

7%. Although the drama started off with a double-digit viewing rate, it kept going down as time went on, and now that the last episode was a few days away from airing, it finally went down to one digit. Even though the drama was an ambitious one with popular idols and youth stars, the results were below expectations.

The previous season of Youth Generation hit a huge jackpot and reached a 20% viewing rate even with actors that were practically nameless. The 7% of season 3 paled in comparison.

With bad results, the viewers started trying to find the reason, and their arrows were naturally pointed at the actors. After all, the highschool romance plot hadn't changed, so they came to the conclusion that it was the lack of skill on the actors' part. As a result, the official website for Youth Generation was filled with all sorts of insults and swear words, while the fan cafés of the actors were also filled with posts that expressed their sneers and disappointments towards them.

The one that had the highest ratio of insults was Lee Chaerim from Blue.

"It wasn't that bad, you know?"

"So it wasn't that good either?"

"Uhm, for some reason, I think we're going back in a loop, but in any case, you weren't really my style."

"Like I said, what's the problem?"

Chaerim collapsed on the floor. Jiseok giggled as he saw that.

"You changed a lot recently, noona."

"Changed? Me?"

"Yes."

"What changed about me?"

"Don't you remember how you treated me the first time we met? You simply outright ignored me. I talked to you and you acted like you didn't hear it. You sat down like this with an expression that looked like you were bearing the burden of the entire world on your shoulders."

Jiseok made a 'The Thinker' pose.

"What are you saying?"

Chaerim pouted before turning her head away.

"I'm saying it's good to see it. You grumbling, smiling, and even getting angry - people need to express their emotions. Otherwise, they'll get ill. But seriously, your expression softened up a lot. Are you perhaps dating? Perhaps the man is from the popular group Change?"

After saying that, Jiseok immediately got up and prepared to run away. Chaerim was holding a plastic water bottle with both of her hands. If he got hit with that, he'd have a broken bone at least.

He was slowly taking steps backwards when his phone that he left on the floor started vibrating. Chaerim snorted and grabbed the phone.

"Uh, noona. Privacy, please!"

"Privacy, yeah right."

Jiseok shrugged. Actually, there were no calls or messages that would be bad if someone saw them. He sat down again and looked at the clock in the practice room.

"Speak."

Chaerim picked up the call. Jiseok blinked his eyes. Who was it on the other end that she was so natural about it?

He approached her while walking on his knees.

"It is Jiseok's phone. Why am I the one picking it up? Because I wanted to."

"Noona, who is it?"

"Han Maru."

"Ah."

Jiseok scratched his head. Did they get close during the shoot before? When Chaerim said that she wanted to call Maru before, Jiseok thought that Chaerim had a romantic interest in Maru, but from the way she picked up the call right now, he seemed to be mistaken. Well, not that liking someone who already had someone would do her any good.

"You want me to switch to Jiseok?"

Chaerim narrowed her eyes and glared at him. Jiseok kneeled and politely extended both of his hands.

"A-ing~ noona, pwease give it to me."

"Ew, that's so disgusting. Don't you ever try to act cute again in front of someone. They might slap you in the face."

Chaerim slapped the phone on his palms.

"Your violent and direct attitude really is your charming point."

"Don't speak nonsense and just pick up the phone already. He sounded quite serious."

"Eh? Serious?"

Han Maru and serious? At that moment, Jiseok predicted what Maru was going to say.

“Phew, hello?”

-Jiseok?

“Yeah.”

-I have something to ask.

“What is it?”

-Did nothing happen at the shoot?

It was just as he had expected. Jiseok tapped on the floor with his fingers, wondering what to say to him. He thought deeply, but not for a long time.

“Well, a lot of things happened. A shoot is pretty hard after all. We were called around everywhere, had to wait, and... oh yeah, your girlfriend had a pretty hard time as well. *She* seemed pretty nervous and made quite a lot of mistakes. Though, there weren't any big problems since *she's* a pretty brave girl.”

-That's it?

“What else could there be? If you want to know more about me, I can talk to you about it for an hour, but if you want to know about your girlfriend, then you should just call *her* yourself. Stop bullying a single man.”

He made a dry laugh. Chaerim, who was sitting next to him, looked at him with a strange expression. Jiseok turned his body around to look at the mirror in the practice room. Right now, he didn't want to meet eyes with her.

-So nothing happened?

“Hey. I get that you're worried about your girlfriend and all, but do you take *her* for a kid? Well, I guess 2nd year of high school is still a kid. But at least *she's* not a little brat that bursts out crying when she falls over. Just how much do you love *her*? Why don't you just bring *her* with you in your pocket at all times, Mr. Han Maru?”

-Alright, if nothing happened, then that's that.

“Then do you want to know about me?”

-No, I'm going to sleep.

“Are you at home right now? What happened to going to Gunsan?”

-I'm inside the coach going to Seoul.

“Really? You should be tired then. Get some sleep.”

Just as he was about to hang up with a laugh, he heard a voice over the phone.

-Please take care of *her*.

“...Don’t worry about it. This Yoo Jiseok will support your girlfriend with all of his heart.”

He hung up before heaving a sigh. From the look of things, it seemed that Maru had an inkling of what was going on.

‘It’s not like *she’s* the type of person who’d tell everything to Maru either.’

When he first met *her*, he thought that she was just a feeble girl just from her looks, but after watching her from the side for a while, he noticed that she was clearly the tenacious type. *She* was an ordinary girl when talking with others around her normally, but she never backed down when facing off against that old woman. *She* was like a tree branch that did not break easily.

‘But *she’s* still a tree branch. It’ll be very troublesome if *she* does snap.’

Lee Miyoon. That old woman was a scary one. Her eloquent speech was one thing and combined various rumors that floated around about her, she was a woman who could give others not just mental problems, but actual physical problems. There was a reason why producers were submissive to her.

She was a woman who most people would bend down to. She was a person to avoid fighting even if that required apologizing and begging. Yet that girl never became submissive in front of that woman. *She* admitted *her* wrongdoings and apologized for them, but *she* boldly told Lee Miyoon that something was not right when she asked for more than that.

Jiseok shook his head in resignation when he watched *her*. Just where was all that courage coming from in such a small body?

The problem was that *she* found the situation very exhausting. *She* was like a general when duking it out with Lee Miyoon, but after that, she would relax her fists and start shaking all by herself. Just like a rabbit that was abandoned alone in the winter.

He tried telling her to bow *her* head and compliment that woman even if she didn’t mean it since that woman liked flattery, but it was of no use.

‘In that sense, *she’s* just like her boyfriend.’

*She* was young. *She* had nothing to lose even if she bent down. In fact, it would make *her* life much easier. Yet *she* didn’t do that. *She* continued to fight the difficult battle.

He couldn’t exactly cheer for *her* either. He knew how hard of a time *she* was having, so there was no way he could cheer for her. It also didn’t look like *she* would tell Maru about her hardships either.

“It’s me who’s stuck in the middle who’s having a hard time.”

“What’s that?”

“Ah, that startled me.”

Jiseok looked at Chaerim who suddenly appeared in front of his face.

“I know you were looking at me. But what’s this about?”

“Nothing much.”

"It's nothing much yet you're putting on a face like that?"

Jiseok turned his head around to look at the mirror that replaced one wall. He was putting on an ugly smile.

"Maru's girlfriend, huh, you mean Bunbun?"

"Bunbun? That's *her* nickname? I guess it does suit *her*."

"Don't change the topic. If it's about *her*, you should tell me as well. *She's* a friend of mine."

"You two know each other?"

The two were a rather unexpected duo so Jiseok asked back in surprise. Chaerim nodded very seriously. It didn't look like she wanted to know just for fun. She seemed truly worried.

"It doesn't matter even if you don't want to say it. I can just call *her*."

"Hm, if you say so."

Jiseok decided to tell her what happened during the shoot. Chaerim told him that *she* was her friend with her own mouth. This was the first time he heard such a thing from her. This went to show that she treated that girl just that importantly.

Jiseok nodded once as he looked at Chaerim, who looked concerned as though this concerned her.

"So it's not a boyfriend, but a good friend that you got."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the reason your expression became pretty. Alright, I'll tell you. However, you have to keep it a secret from Maru, and help me out since you heard it."

"Alright."

Chaerim looked resolute. Jiseok thought that this was really unexpected as he started to speak.

## **Chapter 426**

'Something's happening.'

He was sure after calling Jiseok. Something had happened to her. Maru, who nervously tapped his feet, eventually sighed and leaned back. He didn't want to force her to tell him what happened when she didn't want to. Like Jiseok said, she was not a little kid. Although she made others worry by acting like a three-year-old sometimes, she wasn't someone that couldn't take care of herself. If she really had a hard time, she would probably come to him herself. His role would probably be to listen to her and encourage her when the time comes.

The coach slowed down until it eventually stopped. They had arrived at Yeouido station. He woke Bangjoo up. After waking up, Bangjoo yawned. Joon-gi and Sooyoung, who sat behind him, groaned as they woke up.

"My waist hurts."

“It’s not surprising considering that you’ve been asleep for four hours. Let’s get off. We’re here.”

He dragged Bangjoo, who was still half asleep and staggering, off the coach. Just as the background actors and minor actors were saying their goodbyes, there was a simple roll call.

“Thank you everyone and you may go home now.”

“Thank you for your work.”

It was midnight. The last train shouldn’t have gone past yet, but the city buses should have stopped for the night.

“Bangjoo, when we arrive at Suwon, take the taxi home. I’ll give you the fares. You two live in Seoul, don’t you?”

Joon-gi and Sooyoung nodded. They told Maru that taking the taxi would only cost the minimum fare.

“Get going then. You worked hard.”

“Be careful on your way home too. See you next time.”

They poured over a month of action scene practice into just two days of shoots. There were three band-aids on Maru’s arm, and the four of them probably used up two bottles of spray pain relief. Whether they showed as much as they learned couldn’t be seen until the movie was released.

“Hey, want to eat something before you go?”

Joon-gi took out a 10 thousand won bill and pointed at the 24-hour kimbap restaurant. When he looked at Bangjoo, he was nodding vigorously. There were still forty minutes until the last train, so it should be fine to get some food.

“I won’t reject your offer since you’re treating us.”

Maru stood in front of the pedestrian crosswalk in order to cross the road. Just then, a van stopped right before the crossing. It wasn’t waiting for the signal. At that time, the lights turned green.

“Let’s get going.”

Just as they started walking forward, the van’s headlights turned on its full beam. A blinding amount of light appeared right in front of their eyes.

“What kind of thoughtless person turns on the high beam right in front of people?” Sooyoung grumbled.

Maru frowned and looked at the van. Just then, one of the windows opened before an arm reached out. The fingers flicked. It clearly looked like it was gesturing for them to come.

“What the?”

“Isn’t that Lee Hyuk’s van?”

Listening to Joon-gi and Sooyoung’s conversation, Maru pointed at the van with his chin. He wanted them to come, so they did. He moved towards the van with the others. Just like what Joon-gi said, Lee Hyuk was inside.

“Going home?”

The main actor that they never got to even talk to during the shoot was now reaching out to them, huh. Maru replied for now.

“Yes.”

“That’s good to see. I also had a lot of friends when I was as small as you. Practicing together, too. Good times. But are you going to go eat there?”

Lee Hyuk pointed at the kimbap restaurant across the street.

“Yes. We’re going to eat a light meal before we go home.”

“Really? Then I guess I can’t sit back and watch as a senior.”

Lee Hyuk rummaged through the bag on the next seat and took out five notes of ten thousand won bills. Was he too cautious for nothing? He heard that Lee Hyuk’s personality was crappy so he was worried that he was picking a fight, but from his actions, it seemed that he was generous towards his juniors.

“Here, you should eat a lot since you’re still growing up.”

The hand that held the five notes poked out through the window. Lee Hyuk waved the notes like he would a fan.

“Let’s eat pork cutlets,” Bangjoo spoke with an excited voice.

Sooyoung, meanwhile, politely thanked him. Maru also lowered his head in gratitude before reaching out to receive the money. Just then, the money started falling to the ground. After looking at the notes that landed on the ground, he looked back at Lee Hyuk.

“But you know, these days, juniors don’t act like they’re supposed to.”

It seemed that he didn’t do that on accident. Everyone seemed to have gotten a gist of the situation as they looked at Lee Hyuk with displeased gazes. Maru stood in front of Bangjoo for now. He didn’t know what he would do after all.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

Maru spoke as the representative of the other three who fell silent.

“Brats. Are you entitled to talk to the director like that? Huh? You boys don’t seem to know your place. You simply lose sight of your seniors because the director treats you well, huh?”

So he does have a crappy personality. Maru sighed inwardly.

He had to do just as the director told him to, but little kids much younger than him ‘dared to’ have feedback sessions with the director - or so he seemed to be thinking? It shouldn’t be. That was too one-dimensional and funny. There should be a limit to how childish a person could be.

“Do you not see why your seniors are staying silent? What do you know when you just started acting? Do you think you are someone special because the director treats you well?”

Maru barely held himself back from laughing. He was such an easy man to read. The way he expressed his dissatisfaction was no different from a kindergartener. No wonder there were bad rumors about him. Being a villain wasn't possible with a bad head. The most fundamental requirement to become a villain was to be smart. Maru didn't know whether he showed up in order to rebuke them or to scare them. Perhaps this man thought nothing and had the van pull over without any reason at all.

Complaining in front of kids because of a momentary spike in emotion, huh. Maru wanted to cheer for him out of pity.

Maru glanced behind him. The three were standing in a diagonal line, looking at Lee Hyuk. Maru locked his hands behind his back and waved his palms sideways. He was gesturing to them to not get agitated.

"I'm sorry. We'll mind that more from now on."

"Look around you. If you keep doing that, you will not be able to last long around here, you know? I'm saying all this for your own benefit. When I was like you, minor actors weren't able to say anything in front of seniors. The world really has become better."

"We'll watch out from now on."

"There's no one that tells you stuff like this. You know that, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Pick up the money already."

Maru bent down. He got fifty thousand won for free for just talking with him a little. If this was a part time job, he wanted to do it for a lifetime. It seemed that they could get desserts as well with this money. Just as he tried to pick the notes up. Three shadows covered the money. Many hands reached out and snatched the notes from him before the three of them threw it back into the van.

Maru was startled and looked at the three in surprise.

"We don't need it."

"We have money as well."

"I'd like to decline."

Maru sighed before looking at the skies. These guys were quite aggressive. Leaving aside Bangjoo and Sooyoung, even the usually calm Joon-gi joined them as well. Did he gain a tough personality after shooting the brawl scene?

Lee Hyuk looked at the notes on his lap before laughing.

"All four of you must be fucking nuts."

Lee Hyuk was about to get out of the van. Maru saw the three of them flinching.

"Senior, you must be busy, so why don't you stay inside? I'll explain to my friends," Maru spoke as he held the door from opening. Lee Hyuk glared at him from the other side.

"Hey."

“Yes.”

Just as he replied, a hand reached out to his face. Maru reflexively pulled back, but he soon stopped and pushed his head forward instead. Lee Hyuk’s hand touched the side of his head. Thud. He was prepared for the hit, so while the sound was loud, it didn't hurt that much.

He lightly reacted to the force and fell over sideways. He got a glimpse of Lee Hyuk looking at him with surprise as he fell down.

“Seonbae-nim!”

Bangjoo was startled and ran up to him. Maru used this opportunity to put a blood capsule in his mouth and pop it open. He had some spares left over from the shoot in his pocket. He had originally got them in order to pull a prank on his girlfriend.

“Wh-what the.”

Lee Hyuk peeked outside the window. Maru licked the capsule with his tongue and tried to get as much saliva in his mouth. When he tried spitting out just a little, he saw that it had changed red. Although the capsule hadn’t dissolved yet, it was enough. He put a little bit of it on his hand as he stood up.

He looked at Lee Hyuk in a daze. The important point here was to look like he was frightened. While the three of them panicked and were unable to say anything, Maru touched the side of his head with the hand with the fake blood on it. He showed Lee Hyuk the ‘blood’ he got from ‘the side of his head’ and this time trembled his lips. He couldn’t get angry.

Using offensive words wasn’t the way to bestow the opponent maximum nervousness. It was the fear-stricken eyes that did not know why he got into this situation.

After looking around for a while, Lee Hyuk took out some cheques from his wallet.

“Hey, you damn brat. You should be careful! Take this and go to the hospital right now. I gave you the money okay? And I told you to go to the hospital. If something happens it’s not my fault. You know that, right?”

Maru slowly reached out and grabbed the money. As a service, he did it with shaky hands. Lee Hyuk told his manager to start driving. Maru could see the manager look at him worriedly and apologetically through the side mirror. From the looks of it, it seemed that he could get testimony from him if a problem did occur. Maru looked at the manager with a deep gaze. The manager made a face of pity before driving off.

Maru saw off the van with a sad gaze. Only after seeing the van disappear from his sight did he stretch his shoulders out a little.

“That damn bastard!”

Joon-gi swore at him.

“Let’s report him to the police, seonbae-nim. No, I should call my sister. She should be able to help out.”

Bangjoo was agitated.

“Hey, hey. We should call my dad, we can get all the cops here.”

Sooyoung guaranteed.

Maru turned around to his three friends and smiled. The three blinked several times in confusion. He could hear Sooyoung saying ‘did you hit your head too hard’ in a small voice.

“Don’t overreact and take this. This is some pocket money from your big brother here.”

Maru gave the three of them a 100 thousand won cheque, which he received from Lee Hyuk, each.

“A-are you okay?”

“Seonbae-nim. You do realize that you’re bleeding right now, right?”

“It hurts a lot, doesn’t it?”

Maru opened his mouth wide to the others. The three of them freaked out when they saw the red saliva in his mouth, but Sooyoung eventually found something strange as he approached him.

“Don’t tell me this is....”

“Didn’t you take one as well?”

“The capsule?”

“Yeah.”

“...Damn lunatic. When did you have the chance to do that?”

“Just after I fell down.”

“Ha, haha, haha. You’re a madman!”

Sooyoung laughed and raised his hand. Maru high fived him pleasantly. Joon-gi and Bangjoo seemed to have realized what was going on as they also came up to him while laughing.

“If someone hits you, just get hit. You get free money.”

“I didn’t even imagine.”

Everyone giggled.

“Hey, we might miss the last train, so let’s hold off eating together for later. We’re going, bye.”

Maru patted Joon-gi and Sooyoung on their backs before starting to walk. He was wiping the blood around his mouth with the back of his hand when Bangjoo approached him with sparkly eyes.

“Seonbae-nim.”

“What is it?”

“You look like a total scammer.”

He hit Bangjoo who grinned at him.

\* \* \*

Lee Hyuk threw his wallet at the manager who glanced at him through the rearview mirror.

“What are you looking at, fucker!”

“N-nothing.”

“Son of a bitch. Am I nothing to you, huh? Is that what it is now?”

“O-of course not.”

As he fumed, Lee Hyuk was reminded of the brat that bled just now. He made an awkward smile as he leaned forward.

“My little brother. I was a bit too agitated back there.”

“E-eh?”

“You know I hold you dear, right? It’s already been a year since we started working together. Did you know that the president tried to fire you and I shielded you?”

“N-no.”

“Dang, bro. The reason you can still drive right now is thanks to this big brother here. So treat me well.”

“...Yes.”

“And also, you know that it’s not my fault for what happened back there, right? He just slipped all on his own. You know that, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“Yes. If someone says something later, you tell them exactly that. Okay? We’re brothers, aren’t we?”

Lee Hyuk smiled and patted the manager on the shoulder loudly before leaning back in the chair.

Those boys were so cocky. He couldn’t understand what the director was thinking to listen to kids like them. People called him a genius, but perhaps he was just a lunatic?

“Who’s calling at this time?”

Lee Hyuk picked up his personal phone. A call at such a late hour? The moment he checked the name on the screen though, he immediately sat up. He took a deep breath in before picking up the call politely.

“Hello?”

## **Chapter 427**

The car was empty. After a man in his fifties, who was lying on the elderly seats at the end, got off, only Maru and Bangjoo were left in the car.

“It’s like we have the whole train to ourselves.”

“You’re right.”

Bangjoo looked around before lying down on the floor and took a photo of himself. Maru chuckled when he saw that.

“When else would I get to do something like this? The train is so quiet.”

“Give it to me. I’ll take a good photo of you.”

Maru took a photo of Bangjoo, who got into a proper pose, from the other end of the car. At his age, events like this would become memorable moments. Bangjoo smiled in satisfaction after looking at the photo.

“Are you going to upload it to your cy?”

“I don’t do that.”

“That’s unexpected. I thought kids these days all did it.”

“I don’t really want to tell others what I’m doing. It’s fine as long as the ones that need to know, know about it.”

Maru nodded once. For a brief moment, Bangjoo had a mature smile on his face. Perhaps it was natural to think about the world differently from those of his age since his sister was a top star.

“But seonbae-nim.”

“Yeah?”

“Didn’t you feel angry back there? If it was up to me, I don’t think I could’ve done that. I mean, you were hit. Quite strongly at that.”

“You get upset about all sorts of things.”

“Eh? You’re not upset about it?”

“If it’s a matter of being angry or not, then yes, I do feel angry. I’m not a pervert, so there’s no way I’d feel pleased when I get hit. But there’s also nothing to gain by becoming angry.”

“Nothing to gain?”

“Bangjoo.”

“Yes.”

“No matter how crappy someone’s personality is, you should really hold back if that someone’s higher than you. Going against him like what you did back there is not that good.”

“I... don’t think I can do that.”

“Well, I guess it’s definitely hard for you if you have the same traits as your sister. Your sister is a ‘right’ person after all.”

“My sister?”

“That’s not all. She’s also amazing. Normally, people can’t do that. If I was in that situation, at least, I wouldn’t be able to do it. People’s gazes, right? Those things definitely don’t have any physical power. No matter how many death glares I give you, you won’t die after all. But for some weird reason, when those powerless gazes combine, they suddenly possess the power to bury a person out of existence without breaking a sweat. Your sister, she fought against the media, didn’t she? Moreover, she also fought against the people that insulted her. She still might be at odds with people who ask bad things of her, you know? Not anyone can just do that.”

“...I’m not sure about her being right, but I agree that she’s amazing.”

“People like you and your sister will end up fighting. You don’t care about the opponent’s weight class. You will enter the ring based on absolute values such as whether something is right or wrong. Those people don’t worry about getting hit. They’re solely focused on solving the injustice in front of their eyes. They are great people worth admiring, and they’re people that should be cheered for. But if I was asked if I want to be like that, I would shake my head.”

Maru looked at Bangjoo with a smile. Bangjoo scratched his head with an awkward smile. He seemed to have understood a little of what he said.

“You know. You’re like... an adult.”

“An adult? I’m just a man with a lot of fears. In fact, it’s you who’s more like an adult since you’ve been living alone since middle school. Wasn’t it hard?”

“It wasn’t that hard when I thought of it as just doing some more bothersome things. Oh, it was a little hard when I had to lie down in bed due to sickness during the winter.”

“There’s nothing harder than being by yourself when you’re sick. But it should be better now that your sister comes home frequently, right?”

“She’s coming home too frequently. I don’t think she has any plans on getting married. She never brought home a boyfr....”

Bangjoo stopped talking and made a bitter smile. Maru didn’t say anything and just looked out the window on the other side. The train was just exiting a tunnel.

“Do you think it’s better to just hold it in when something like that happens?”

“If you can, it’ll be better. In the perspective of good or bad rather than right or wrong, I mean. However, there are times when you must get angry.”

“And when is that?”

“That’s when someone’s trying to take something away from you. That’s when you get angry. You have to flip the table and cause a huge ruckus. Even if you usually submit to one person, you need to get angry when that person wants to take something away from you. In that context, the scariest people in the world are those that always seem to suck up to others.”

“Why?”

“Because no one can be sure of the size of that person’s anger if he or she does erupt. Scammers don’t look like scammers, right? Scary people don’t look scary. They are polite and usually very generous. They look like they’re making losses from what they do. But the more a person acts like that, the better you should act towards them. You never know what such a person is thinking. Of course, there are also people like Daemyung who are gentle down to their bones.”

“Daemyung-seonbae-nim is really kind.”

“He’s worryingly so.”

“Hm, then I guess you’re a dangerous person in a sense.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You held back last time.”

“I just told you, didn't I? I’m just a man with a lot of fears.”

“Is that how it is?”

“That’s how it is, Mr. Ahn Bangjoo.”

Maru straightened his back as he tapped Bangjoo on the cheek with the back of his hand.

\* \* \*

“You should go back first.”

“What about you, hyung-nim?”

“Damn kid, just go when I tell you to. You’re terribly disobedient.”

Lee Hyuk slapped the manager on the back of his head before getting off. Only after seeing the van disappear into the distance did he calm down and start walking. He walked past the hotel lobby and grabbed an elevator. He got off the elevator while muttering the room number and checked the number on each door as he walked.

“Is this the place?”

After gulping several times in order to ease his throat, he took out his phone and called someone. After checking that the signal repeated itself three times, he quickly hung up. He had to be as careful as possible.

Soon, the door opened. The one that opened the door was a cute girl with a bob cut. She seemed to be just past 20. Lee Hyuk put on an awkward smile at the girl who flinched after seeing his face.

“U-uhm.”

“There are people inside, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is this your first time here?”

"I can tell that you're a trainee, but let's not pretend we know each other. You should know that this is a masquerade without the masks. I'll also pretend that I never saw you when I come across you outside, so don't worry about that."

The girl nodded. She was wearing a black silk one piece dress, which revealed her cleavage every time she moved. It didn't look like she was wearing any underwear either.

Normally, he would have pleased his eyes to the utmost, but right now, he didn't have the leisure to do that. The calm music that flowed out made him tenser. This was a party room that required millions if not tens of millions of won to rent per day. He didn't have the leisure to appreciate any of the pop art on either side of the corridor as he walked in. While he was walking, he heard a woman's moan from his left, but he ignored it. He didn't have the courage to open the door and look inside.

The first thing he saw when he went in was the large glass window which allowed him to see the entirety of Seoul, and the second thing he saw was the people who were appreciating some drinks lightly. The man that was giggling with the ladies on a white sofa looked at him. Lee Hyuk tried his best to ignore that gaze and walked around in order to find the person that called him here.

"Oh, my. If it isn't Lee Hyuk."

One of the girls he met eyes with approached him with a smile. Lee Hyuk did not know who this girl was. However, just from the fact that she acted so boldly here, he knew that he had to be polite with her. If it was before he screwed up his business, that is, four years ago, he would've held his head up in pride, but right now, he had to be an obedient dog.

He lowered his head at the girl who touched him like a toy before walking further inside like he was running away. Just as he was looking around like a foreigner in a new place,

"Over here."

A voice could be heard inside a room with a bed in it. Lee Hyuk put on a smile and walked towards that place. The woman sitting on the bed puffed on a cigarette before putting the cigarette on an ashtray.

"One of the CEOs of my business partners enjoys appreciating the smell of cigarettes like this, and well, it is quite decent. It's horrible when you do it with domestic cigarettes, but the imported ones have a good smell. Oh, please sit. I guess I was talking too much by myself when there's a guest around."

Lee Hyuk obediently sat on a chair when he heard the woman's words. His mouth felt very dry. The woman was in her late twenties. She was younger than him, but around 'here', age was merely a number that did not have any significance.

"Come here, have a drink."

"Ah, yes."

"Oppa. You're a lot older than me so don't use polite speech towards me. Let's drop the honorifics, alright? I think it's been four years since we met."

"This is more comfortable for me."

"Haha, there you go again, oppa."

Lee Hyuk pretended not to have heard her say 'you're pretty good' right after that. He put down the glass after drinking it.

"How was the shoot?"

"Good, thanks to you."

"How is it thanks to me? It's all because of your efforts. Come and sit over here."

The woman spoke as she shifted her chest length long hair to one side with her hand. Lee Hyuk sat obediently in front of her.

"Oppa, you really become more my style every day. This is really a problem. I've never been engrossed with a man for such a long time before."

Lee Hyuk clenched his teeth when he felt the hand that stroked his neck.

"Looks like you're still working out?"

"Ah, yes."

"Oh my. Look at that sturdy chest. Men are really attractive when they're past thirty. Oppa, I really like you because I don't get fed up with you. You're so good at managing yourself."

"Because I'm an actor after all."

"Aha~n. Actor, you were an actor, that's right. I almost mistook you for a dog I raised. Haha, then I'm a woman who gets horny for a dog, huh? How lewd."

Lee Hyuk flinched when a hand reached inside his pants, but he relaxed after seeing the woman's gaze becoming sharp.

"I am really tired these days. I mean, work keeps screwing up. So, I want to relieve some stress this time. Oh, before that, though. There's something I need to do. Let's give the kind oppa a present for now."

The girl handed him a box. When he opened the box, there was a watch inside.

"It's a limited edition, apparently. It costs around 80 mil. Put it on."

He smiled even though he felt insulted as well. He put the watch on and showed it to the girl. The girl smiled back at him.

"It suits you. You should wear it from now on."

"Yes, ma'am."

"It's almost time too."

At that moment, a boy opened the door and entered.

"Hey, what are you going to do if this noona was doing something strange?"

"At that time, I'll just quietly close the door and leave."

"Geez, how bold of you."

Lee Hyuk nodded towards that boy.

“We meet again, Lee Hyuk-seonbae-nim.”

“Ah, yes.”

Lee Hyuk licked his lips as he spoke.

“Mr. Kang Giwoo.”

## **Chapter 428**

(Note: The following scene might be VERY disturbing. You have been warned.)

“Did I tell you this last time? I was really touched after seeing your first movie. Your first movie is what made me want to become an actor.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

Lee Hyuk took a bite from the crêpe when Giwoo told him to eat. Although the crêpe contained lots of cream and fruit, he couldn't taste anything. He only mechanically moved his jaws to break it down and swallow it.

“Is the food to your tastes?”

“Yes. It's good.”

“A patissier I really like created it for me. It's really hard to get ahold of this since he usually stays in France, but he came to Korea a while ago.”

Giwoo ate the crêpe with a happy face. Lee Hyuk drank the water in his cup in one gulp before heaving a deep breath out. He had emptied four glasses of water already.

“Looks like you're thirsty.”

“No, I just really like water.”

“I see. Oh, I heard you went to a shoot. How was it?”

“It was the same as usual. Shoot, rest, shoot, rest.”

“I heard that the director was quite eccentric.”

“Ah, the director. He is a little eccentric.”

“What was he like?”

“He instructs us on what acting to do.”

“Isn't that the same for the other directors?”

“His participation is on a whole different level. He doesn't let any actors do what they want. We just had to do precisely what the director told us to do.”

“That's rather peculiar. Then there are no improvisations or ad-libbing?”

“No, not a single one.”

“I see. What an interesting director. I’d like to see him once.”

Oh, please excuse me - he added before picking up his phone. He didn’t use any polite speech as though he was talking to a friend. Lee Hyuk checked the time with the watch he received. It was nearly 1 a.m. He didn’t know how long he would be staying here. Although it was frustrating, there was nothing he could do. He could only wait obediently until he was told that it was okay to go.

“That’s not it. You must leave some room behind. Our ancestors were never wrong. A cornered rat will bite. So don’t push too hard and leave some breathing room. Only then will there be no accidents. Yeah, yeah. Right. You can enjoy yourself more, but keep this in mind: you cannot let that person challenge you. You must leave just enough room for that person to run away. If that person turns around and tries to bite you, then you should completely suppress that person. No, actually, you can’t get to that stage. It means that you’re lacking. You can’t be played with by someone you’re trying to toy with. Isn’t that right?”

Giwoo spoke as though he was explaining a math formula to a neighboring student. Lee Hyuk felt his nerves tightening and he started eating the crêpe in a rush. Giwoo’s voice was buried beneath his chewing noise. He didn’t want to know what that kid was talking about nor who he was talking to. No, he should never know either. Just as he was looking for the sweet flavor with his numb tongue, Giwoo put down his phone and spoke.

“Sorry about the call just now.”

“Not at all.”

“Rather than that, it seems like you really like that crêpe. Should I order some more?”

“I-I’m fine. I’m full now that I ate one in a rush.”

Giwoo smiled and nodded. Lee Hyuk felt as though the yucky cream smell was climbing back out of his throat. He really wanted to eat something spicy right now.

“Eunjoo-noona is quite mischievous, isn’t she?”

“No, not at all. She’s a good person.”

“Haha, you don’t have to be so nervous. Her mischief is quite famous among us. That watch, it looks like you got it from her, right?”

“Ah, yes. Just now.”

Lee Hyuk slowly lowered his arm so that the watch face couldn’t be seen. The conversation had halted for a while. Giwoo chewed on the crêpe he said he liked with a relaxing smile. Seeing Giwoo’s chin slowly move, Lee Hyuk felt his tongue go dry. The sound of a clock ticking could be heard from somewhere. There was no clock in the room. He didn’t know where the sound was coming from, but Lee Hyuk felt stifled by the sound.

“You helped me out a lot, senior.”

“Help? Oh, no, not at all.”

“Yes, you did. From the moment you met me along with Eunjoo-noona three years ago, you helped me out quite a lot. Thanks to that, I was able to have a successful debut, and I managed to digest the historical drama that I’m shooting now without a problem. Oh, you know that one, right? The one with Han Myung-hoe as the main character.”

“Yes, I do. I really do.”

“Ah... but it seems like my acting was a bit old. The producer said that it was good at first, but the more we progressed, the less he seemed satisfied.”

Lee Hyuk subconsciously put strength into the hands he placed on his knees. He had met this kid three years ago. Back then, he had screwed up his business so badly that he had lost his house to the debt and was thinking about committing suicide. Just then, he was introduced to Kim Eunjoo by one person. She was someone that was given the title of senior managing director for her 30th birthday. She lived in a completely different world. She earned enough money to pay taxes for her luxuries, which amounted to what an ordinary breadwinner would earn in a year. Her concept of ‘consumer’ was completely different from the others.

Lee Hyuk, while he was still at rock bottom, was able to make a comeback thanks to her. He started getting advertising contracts again which were cut off before. Numerous contracts flooded him during the past three years. Although he didn’t belong to any agency, he had no problems doing his activities. Eunjoo also solved his tax problems by assigning him a very capable tax accountant. His stamp was never dry of ink. He had gained a new life in exchange for doing cute tricks in front of her.

However, now that three years had passed, Lee Hyuk had found a new rope that bound his body. Contract. Her methods were smart and were just as scary.

In that process, Lee Hyuk was introduced to Kang Giwoo, who Eunjoo called a ‘close little brother’. He was a rather kind-looking boy. He smiled at every word and was kind. Just as he thought that there could be a kid like this in this world, he got to see the true nature of the boy.

Lee Hyuk shook his head lightly and snapped out of it.

“Old, you said?”

“Yes. My acting was definitely good, but it seems that it doesn’t fit the latest trends.”

“Th-then what do I do?”

“Nothing specific. I learned a lot from you until now after all. I just set up this occasion in order to thank you. Oh, and also, take this.”

Giwoo gave him a box wrapped with a silver strap. When he opened it, he saw a necktie pin.

“Apparently, it’s made of platinum. It should suit you.”

“Th-thanks....”

Lee Hyuk closed the box again and looked at Giwoo.

“Does that mean I don’t need to coach you anymore?”

“Yes, we’re done. I don’t have anything I can learn from you anymore after all. Thanks for everything until now.”

“U-uhm.”

He hurriedly called out to Giwoo, who was standing up from his seat.

“Then what happens to me from now....”

“Don’t worry about it. I think Eunjoo-noona still likes you, senior.”

“Ah, okay.”

“But who knows, she might change her mind if I say a couple of words to her. She’s very whimsical after all. She’s a scary one capable of ditching someone she had been with for 4 years without batting an eyelid.”

Lee Hyuk raised his head to look at Giwoo. Giwoo was putting on a nonchalant smile.

His knees started shaking. His body leaned forward subconsciously. His knees touched the floor. Lee Hyuk lowered his head and spoke.

“C-can’t you put in a good word for me?”

A pair of white brand-name shoes entered his eyes. He felt as though he was about to groan from all the humiliation and embarrassment he felt, but he didn’t have the courage to strike back. Nothing other than begging desperately was probably allowed to him right now.

“Senior, why are you doing this? You’re making me look bad.”

The white shoes moved backwards, and Giwoo, who kneeled just like him, looked into his eyes. Lee Hyuk looked at Giwoo. Giwoo nodded twice before extending a hand. Lee Hyuk grabbed his hand and the two slowly stood up together.

“Senior.”

“Yes.”

“My mother likes movies where you appear.”

“Ah, yes, okay.”

“So please do well in the future too, okay?”

“Of course, of course.”

Was this what it felt like to receive salvation? He felt truly thankful. Humiliation? Embarrassment? Such trivial emotions were buried by the wave of emotions. Right now, the boy in front of him was God.

Giwoo closed the door and left. Lee Hyuk staggered his way to the bed and sat down. He didn’t know how long he sat there for. Just then, he was reminded of the necktie pin that Giwoo gave him. He smiled in vain, opened the box, and tried grabbing the necktie pin in his hands. The moment he felt the cold

sensation, Lee Hyuk clenched his teeth so hard that his teeth were going to break. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to strangle the hell out of that little prick and throw him out the window.

He stood up from his seat and raised his hands above his head. Then, he threw the necktie pin on the floor with all of his power. Along with a clinking sound, the pin bounced off the floor, then off the wall before disappearing somewhere.

Lee Hyuk sat back down while panting. After calming down his breathing, he raised his head and looked at the mirror embedded in the ceiling. He could see his pathetic face. He didn't know what led him here. He brushed his hair, which was stuck against his forehead due to the cold sweat, upwards and stood up.

"...I should find it."

He made a loathing laugh before crouching on the ground. Why did he throw it if it was going to be like this in the end? He picked up the necktie pin that faintly reflected off the light underneath the bed. He dusted it off. It looked very high-class and also looked like it would fit a navy-colored tie. When he was in this place, he would often hop between self-loathing and pleasure. He would probably go crazy if he stayed here for a long time.

Just as he was about to open the door with a sigh, the door opened without him opening it. The person that opened the door was the cute girl that opened the door for him when he arrived at this place. She had the smell of alcohol as though she had drunk quite a bit.

"Why are you here?"

Just as he asked in a questioning tone, he felt a gaze looking at him with his arms crossed. He moved his eyes. He saw Giwoo, who had an indecent grin.

The girl took a step closer to him before jumping into his arms. The girl spoke in a small voice.

"Would you like to play with me?"

Her voice was shaking endlessly. Her shaking was transferred to Lee Hyuk since their bodies were pressed together. Lee Hyuk looked at the girl in his arms before he looked at Giwoo again. Giwoo had a smile like a service worker and nodded once.

That face. Lee Hyuk knew what that face was.

Eunjoo was someone who clearly expressed her malicious intent. She expressed her emotions well just like a normal person. She would give him a reward if he followed her words well, and would rebuke him if he didn't. While Lee Hyuk found her difficult and scary, he could still look at her in the eyes. She was someone understandable after all. A fear that he could understand was something he could handle.

However, he had no idea what to do with that kid. Villain? Malicious? He wasn't related to any of that. That boy was pure. No malicious intent could be felt from him. Yes. He made other people tragic with words that didn't contain any malice. That was what made Lee Hyuk feel scared. A fear he couldn't even comprehend was something he couldn't resist.

Lee Hyuk hugged the girl in his arms and took her straight to bed. He kissed her chest since she had given up on resisting before stripping her. He rubbed all over her body like a horny dog. Just then, he

saw Giwoo, who had approached him without making a sound. Lee Hyuk stared at Giwoo, who patted his back before leaving, for a long time. The door slowly closed and it became quiet.

Lee Hyuk looked at the girl beneath him. The girl, clearly stricken with fear, started smiling awkwardly.

"...Yeah. I should take a breather as well," Lee Hyuk said as he forcefully pulled apart the girl's legs.

\* \* \*

"You look tired."

"Maybe I didn't get enough sleep in the coach. My shoulders felt stiff ever since I went home last night. Urgh, my back."

"Someone might think you're an old geezer."

"Since we're talking about it, why don't you give me a massage?"

Dojin said 'fine' before pressing on Maru's shoulders with his elbow. Maru didn't expect much, but the massage was actually pretty decent.

"Where did you learn to do that?"

"I learned in order to help Iseul's mother out. She's dealing with food ingredients all day after all."

"This is why raising boys is no good. They only look after their girlfriend's parents. Ouch, that hurts."

"I'm doing the same for my mom so don't talk bullshit. But hey, your shoulders are really stiff. They're totally like a rock."

Maru had Dojin massage his shoulders throughout the entirety of the break time.

"You have a good friend, don't you?"

Dojin said as he lifted his hands off Maru's shoulders. Maru made a satisfied smile.

"Yes, I really do."

"If you're like this, Bangjoo must be dazed right now."

"He has more stamina than me, so he's probably fine."

Just as he rotated his shoulders around once, the teacher entered through the front door.

"Hey, give me your textbook. The two of you can share."

He immediately stole the textbook from a kid sitting in the front row.

"Boys, wake up. It will be lunchtime after this so don't doze off and listen carefully. I'll add a minute to the lesson every time I see someone doze off."

The teacher slapped on the lecture desk as he spoke.

**Chapter 429**

“Maru-seonbae, aren’t you ditching too much these days?”

Maru, who was eating some tofu, looked at Aram, who was sitting on the other side.

“But I went last week.”

“To be precise, that was last Monday. We should really do some practice together.”

“I want to do that too.”

It was lunch time. Maru met the juniors of the acting club on his way to the cafeteria. They decided to eat lunch together, and the whole acting club sat at the same table.

“Maru is very busy,” Daemyung stood up for him.

“I know that, but he’s still our senior. He should really come and help us practice. Daemyung-seonbae is having a hard time by himself. You told us to show up when we were promoting ourselves. How can you be the one to not show up?”

“I can’t apologize enough.”

Maru gave half of his pork cutlet to Aram as an apology. Fortunately, she seemed to like his gift and stopped glaring at him.

“I don’t really have any complaints because Daemyung-seonbae always does his best, but Dowook-seonbae is always sleeping. You should show an example for us juniors.”

Dowook, who was just quietly eating his lunch, looked at Aram with a glare, but Aram wasn’t someone who would be taken aback because of something like that. In the end, Dowook just shook his head in resignation.

“Here, take this and stay away from me.”

“I’ll accept it since you’re giving it to me, but you guys are really going too far. It looks like you’re pushing all the responsibility to Daemyung-seonbae. Jiyeon, you say something too. Express your annoyance at being unable to go on dates on the weekend.”

Ah, so that was what she was leading up to. Maru looked at Aram, who looked like she was clearly enjoying the situation, and Jiyeon, who was telling Aram not to say it, alternately. After seeing the two quarrel, he spoke.

“I’ll go there on Thursday. I don’t have to go to the action school anymore.”

“Ah, you were shooting a movie right? With Bangjoo as well,” Jiyeon, who was sitting next to Daemyung, quietly asked.

“We came back, well, today just after midnight.”

“Ah, so that’s why Bangjoo wasn’t conscious throughout class. We were going to get lunch together, but we came by ourselves since he was sleeping. We tried waking him up, but he didn’t budge at all.”

“That, you did well. He had it very hard, so he needs some sleep.”

Bangjoo moved around in excitement until the very moment he left the scene. He should probably need the whole day to recover.

“Seonbae. Have you seen Lee Hyuk? Bangjoo told us that one of the main actors was Lee Hyuk.”

Aram asked with a face full of curiosity.

“He did come.”

“How is he? Does he have a bad personality just like the rumors?”

“Why do you think rumors stay as rumors? It’s because they never get verified. He’s just ordinary.”

“Really? I guess the internet really isn’t to be trusted, huh.”

“I heard Kwon Dayoon was there as well, is that true?”

Daemyung asked as he put his spoon down. His food tray was completely clean even though it was full at the beginning. His appetite was really great.

“Yeah, she did come. What about it?”

Just as he was about to say something, Daemyung flinched and looked next to him. Maru followed his gaze. Jiyeon was swirling her spoon in the doenjang-guk.

“No, it’s not what you think.”

Daemyung quickly explained. This boy had it hard as well. Maru was really curious about how the romance between these two would progress in the future. Jiyeon would still be the dominant side, right?

“If you finished eating, let’s get up.”

Dowook stood up with his food tray.

They left as they ate the stick yogurt that was handed out as dessert.

“What was the fifth period again?”

“Math.”

“Shit.”

Math after lunch. Maru felt sleep overwhelm him just by thinking about it.

Having returned to his class, Maru put his textbook on the desk and went straight to sleep. He had to get some sleep now if he didn’t want to doze off during 5th period. The always noisy classroom was quiet for some reason. It was thanks to the drowsiness coming from a full stomach as well as the rather cool wind.

Just as he yawned and was about to get some sleep though, his phone, which he put inside his desk drawer, started vibrating. The urge to ignore it was really big right now.

“Hey, Han Maru. Pick up your call. It’s noisy.”

Dojin, who was sleeping next to him, kicked his chair as he spoke. Maru brushed his face with his hand and took out his phone. The golden time to sleep was lost now.

“Hello?”

He picked up the call while still half-asleep.

-Why is there no energy in your voice? Have you not had lunch?

“I did have lunch, and it’s making me even more sleepy.”

-You’re young, you shouldn’t sound so weak already.

“People in their growth period need more sleep. But hey, what’s up?”

The one that called was Yang Ganghwan. According to Maru’s knowledge, he should be in his break period right now after the play in which he played the main character, was finished.

-You’re coming to Seoul today, aren’t you?

“Yes, I have lessons.”

-What time do you leave Film?

“I think it ends around half past eight.”

-Alright, thanks.

“What?”

Pop - the call was cut off. Maru moved the phone away from his ears and looked down at it. What was that about? He scratched his eyebrows for a while, but he couldn’t be bothered to think about it. He was in desperate need of some sleep right now. When he had a look at the clock, he saw that there were 30 minutes until the start of the 5th period. 30 minutes was plenty of time for some sweet sleep.

Just as he lay against the desk in order to sleep again, someone tapped on his shoulder.

“Maru, you asleep?”

Maru raised his head when a girl’s voice carefully called out to him.

“Oh, Yoonjung-seonbae-nim.”

Lee Yoonjung, who had rolled her long hair into a bun, was standing at the back door. Even Dojin and Daemyung woke up due to her voice and were sitting up.

“Oh, president,” Daemyung said as he looked at Yoonjung.

“You’re the president now. Daemyung, you look like you gained some weight over the summer.”

“I-I lost weight.”

“Really?”

Yoonjung shrugged with a smile.

“What brings you here?”

Maru asked with a yawn. The 3rd year seniors were busy preparing for college exams. Although they frequented the clubroom during March, it was very hard to see their faces after June.

“I have a favor to ask from the acting club.”

When Yoonjung stepped aside, they saw another girl standing behind her. That girl, who was wearing round glasses, had a smile on her face.

“Hi!”

She said her greetings very cheerfully. Maru nodded since she looked like a friend of Yoonjung.

“Talk with us for a little. Just ten minutes is fine.”

Yoonjung winked as she spoke. Maru looked at the girl with glasses standing right next to Yoonjung.

“I’m in the broadcasting club, and we’re going to resume the radio soon.”

“The radio?”

Maru subconsciously looked at the ceiling. The speaker, attached right in the middle of the ducts, which was next to the hard-working electric fans, entered his eyes.

“The school radio. I wonder if you remember us talking about many things with the students.”

“Oh, that.”

Last year, there was a period of around a month with a school radio program. The basic format was to play a song and read someone’s personal stories. There was probably negative, if any, feedback as it soon disappeared. The presence of that very program was very faint in his memories.

“Was there something like that?”

“I don’t remember.”

Daemyung and Dojin didn’t seem to know about it.

“But why do you need the acting club?”

“This time, we’re going to do an audio drama.”

“An audio drama?”

Yoonjung, who was sitting next to her, pushed the girl with the glasses, who clearly seemed overly excited, and added some detail.

“There’s a limit to reading stories from the listeners. I mean how dramatic can a Korean high school student be? They’re mostly the same. That’s why we came up with the idea to just create an audio drama. Oh, it wasn’t us, but.”

“I asked Yoonjung since she used to be in the acting club, and she told me that I should talk to you guys. How about it?”

So this was what it was about. Maru decided to find a suitable reason to reject them. There was no merit for them. Moreover, acting with just a voice was a different realm altogether from normal acting. Moreover, he did not want to add a school event to his now-decent schedule. They didn't seem desperate either, so there shouldn't be a problem even if they declined.

Just as he was about to express his rejection, he saw Daemyung standing next to him.

They had a request for the acting club, and the club president was Daemyung. Maru hinted at Daemyung to reject them.

"An audio drama?" Daemyung asked back.

"Yeah. Our broadcasting club, no, there's actually a coalition of high school broadcasting clubs and that came up. We decided to try it out in a few schools in Seoul and the Gyeonggi region. The YBS radio is apparently going to host a youth audio drama in their 9 p.m. slot for around 30 minutes, so this is a pre-production event of sorts. Dramas for the tired exam students - you know, things like that."

"Ah, I see."

"Are you the club president?"

"Eh? Ah, yes, I am."

The girl wearing glasses came into the classroom. Maru stared holes into the girl that kept approaching Daemyung, but she didn't seem to mind.

"Uhm, Daemyung?"

Things weren't looking good. That naive boy was weak against people who were very pushy. On top of that, she was a girl and a senior to boot. Maru definitely had to help him out here. He had to say that they had their hands full and that they were busy enough already.

At that moment, a hand reached out from behind him and covered his mouth. Maru turned around, startled. Yoonjung was smiling at him.

"If we can be of help, we'll do it."

"Really?"

The girl wearing glasses grabbed Daemyung's hands. Daemyung was startled and tried to pull his hands away, but the girl's strength seemed to be great as Daemyung was unable to shake her off.

"Then you promised, okay?"

"U-u-uhm, if it takes too much time, w-we might not be able to help..."

"Don't worry about that. There's no pressure. You don't need to feel the tiniest pressure. This is just done for fun. It's for enjoyment!"

The girl shook Daemyung's hands up and down. Maru shook Yoonjung off.

"Seonbae-nim?"

"It's not a bad proposal for the acting club. Like what Yeondu said, we won't be taking a lot of your time, and I only recommended you guys to her after hearing the whole story from her."

Hearing that, Maru nodded. Yoonjung was someone that cherished the acting club the most. There was no reason for her to have the acting club do something that might bring harm.

"That's right. If this goes well, you might be on the public radio. It's a drama after all, you know? You get practice as well. There are no drawbacks."

The girl with glasses patted Maru's shoulders with her small hands. Even though her hands were small, they were quite spicy. He felt like he now knew why Daemyung was unable to move.

"Then I'll be back after school. Oh, I'm Park Yeondu. See you later."

Yeondu left after hopping onto Yoonjung's back. It felt as though a storm had swept past. Maru shook his head.

"Daemyung."

"Y-yeah?"

"Don't you ever make a stamp."

"Why?"

"You might bring your entire family to ruin by guaranteeing someone else's loan."

"....."

"Now then."

Maru had a look at the clock while sighing. Unfortunately, the hour hand was almost touching the figure

"There goes my sleep, I guess."

### **Chapter 430**

He yawned and got ready to get some sleep, even if it was for a little, but raised his head when Daemyung, who sat next to him, woke up.

"What is it?"

"Wait a minute."

Daemyung rushed out the back door. He asked Dojin what was up with him, but he did not seem to know the reason either.

He hadn't returned even when the class started. The teacher, who carried in with him a billiard cue to show his 'love' to people that didn't listen to class, stood behind the lecture desk and spoke.

"What's up with that empty seat over there?"

"He just went to the toilet."

"Geez, he should have gone beforehand."

Just as the teacher clicked his tongue, Daemyung came back to the class.

“Big one, or small one?”

“B-big one.”

“Big one huh. Visit the toilet before class next time, okay?”

“Yes.”

He had become quite quick witted. Maru smiled as he pushed Daemyung with his elbow. Daemyung sighed as he sat down.

“Where did you go? Did you really go to the toilet?”

“No, I visited that seonbae from before.”

“That seonbae? You mean the one from the broadcasting club?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I asked if I could give a proper reply after talking about it with the members. I gave her an answer because I was flustered, but when I thought about it, I don’t know if the first years are fine with it or not. You’re busy as well. It’d be rather bad if I accepted her and told her later that we can’t do it.”

“Boys, let’s start class. Do I really have to wait for you to quieten down?”

The math teacher spoke. Daemyung flinched as he turned his face forward. Maru faintly smiled as he saw Daemyung hurriedly open the textbook.

‘He’s changed.’

While he fidgeted with the mechanical pencil, the class began.

\* \* \*

“I’m okay with that.”

“Me too.”

“I think we should do it!”

As soon as Daemyung’s words finished, the three first years spoke out.

“She said we might get to be on the radio if it goes well. Let’s try.”

Aram seemed enamored by the word ‘radio.’

“How about you, Maru?”

“I can do it if it’s just every once in a while. If it takes a long time, I’ll have to think about it. For now, I can’t do Mondays to Wednesdays because I have to go to Seoul right after school, but I’m fine on Thursdays to Saturdays, I don’t have anything planned as of now.”

Maru looked at the clock before standing up with his bag.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go."

"Oh, okay then. I'll talk to the seniors about the details and will tell you about it next time. Let's decide on it then."

"Thanks. Have fun doing practice, everyone."

He left behind the members of the acting club who waved at him. He went to the front door and changed his shoes before heading to the bus stop.

'I should look for a small studio to live in when I graduate.'

After he watched the passing buildings on the bus for a while, he soon arrived at Suwon station. He pushed in between the people coming out to get on the train.

'But why did senior Ganghwan call me in the first place?'

From how he asked the time and place, it was highly likely that he was coming to meet him. It wasn't surprising though, since that was just how he usually was.

He got off at Gangnam station and walked towards Film.

A lot of people around his age were walking into the academy. It was highly likely to encounter a celebrity when standing near the front door for a while. There were at least middle-aged veteran actors among the faculty here. It wasn't called a super company of the acting education industry for nothing.

"You're here."

"Yes, hyung."

When he entered the 4th lecture room, Sungjae welcomed him. He was holding a sandwich.

"Is that your dinner?"

With the beginning of the new semester, the lessons were pushed later into the evening as well.

"Yeah. Do you want some?"

"I'll gladly accept it if you give it to me."

The sandwich contained mashed eggs and potatoes. Just as he took a bite, the door to the lecture room opened once again. This time, it was Gyunglim, who was wearing a hat.

"Do you want some as well, Gyunglim?"

"Yes."

They were all eating a sandwich, sitting down in a row, before looking at each other and chuckling.

"Did you prepare your skits?" Sungjae asked.

"No. From what I know of instructor Miso's personality, she'll never give us the same context as the ones she gave as examples, so I just didn't prepare at all."

“That’s the same as what I had in mind. How about you, Gyunglim?”

“Just a few that she told us....”

“Really? Then should we try doing one? I’m getting a little bored now since I’ve been sitting here for so long.”

Gyunglim nodded and stood up. She even seemed to have made a script for her short skit as she was holding a piece of A4 paper.

“Tell me if I look awkward.”

“Okay.”

After replying to Gyunglim, Sungjae fixed his position and got ready to respond.

This was the usual now. Remembering the topic that Miso threw at them at the end of the class and researching it before the next class. At first, they were quite awkward, but now, they were able to start acting without many problems.

“You took my five thousand won bill.”

“Me? When?”

“You acting ignorant?”

After rolling her feet on the ground in frustration, Gyunglim stopped.

“How was that?”

“Your pronunciation was too mashed when you breathed heavily, so it was hard to hear. Also, people usually lose their speaking habits when they raise their voice, so it doesn’t sound natural.”

“Is it like that after all?”

Gyunglim put her finger inside her hat and scratched her head.

“Why don’t you two try? I need some practice.”

Gyunglim sat down and Maru stood up this time.

“Do you have anything in mind?”

“How about a historical drama? Watching ‘The King’ these days made me want to practice that.”

“That’s good. I’ll just take things slow. Gyunglim-noona, give us some feedback.”

Gyunglim nodded. Sungjae snapped his fingers and spun around several times on the spot before raising his head. It seemed that he had got things ready.

“I’ll try imitating one of the cuts I watched yesterday.”

Sungjae frowned and knelt on the ground with one knee. He said his line very tragically. His line was the last shouts of a losing general.

He was good. Seeing him upfront, Maru was surprised by the wave of emotions he received. His forcefulness was one thing, but the transfer of his emotions was very good as well. A shouting scene sometimes blurred the meaning of the lines with reckless shouting, but Sungjae distributed his efforts between the two evenly.

“You tried historical dramas before?”

“I was even a supporting role once.”

“I knew it.”

That made more sense. Maru looked at Gyunglim.

“I think it’s okay overall. But Sungjae-oppa, I feel like you were putting too much effort into frowning. I think it’ll be better if you loosen up a little.”

“Really?”

Sungjae’s eyebrows twitched as he tried changing the expression. When he did it a couple of times, he managed to create a face that still expressed vivid despair without exaggerating too much. After repeating that face a couple of times in front of the mirror, Sungjae made a smile of satisfaction.

“Everyone’s early.”

Just then, Gwangseok entered the lecture room. He swung his bag and threw it into the corner. When the bag hit the wall with a thud, the door opened once again. This time, it was Miso, holding a cup of coffee.

“Looks like no one’s late today. Well then, we’ll start in 5 minutes. Do some stretches on your neck, face, arms, legs, and even your hair for today.”

Miso crossed her legs as she sat down.

\* \* \*

“Can’t you bring out some more? You’re supposed to be enjoying yourself. More, more, more, more!”

Miso was teaching first hand that it really wasn’t easy to laugh one’s lungs out. Maru looked at Gyunglim while massaging the area around his lips. She was laughing and clapping to the point that her lips were going to rip. She was even using her feet as well.

Hahahaha - that was the laugh that could be heard for the past hour or so. Sungjae and Gwangseok were also massaging their lips.

“Exaggerate more, make it look more artificial. More, more, more. Think of it as you might end up spitting something out from your mouth while laughing!”

Gyunglim, who laughed like a, well, a crazy bitch, was only freed from Miso’s grasp after three more minutes. This really went to show that it was possible to tire yourself out through laughing.

“Expressions are made by your facial muscles. No matter how dramatic of an emotion you have, it’s no use if your facial muscles are underdeveloped. There’s a reason why veteran actors exercise their facial

muscles before acting. Even those veteran actors keep practicing in order to utilize the 80-something muscles in the face as though they would their limbs. But people just starting out acting forget that the basics are important and end up doing crappy emotion acting. You have to realize just how hard it is to just breathe while laughing. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Well, then. We're going to add this to our daily practice routines. Since we laughed together, let's try crying tomorrow."

Miso's speech was very warm, but as the listener, Maru felt drained of energy. Laughing was hard enough already, and now they had to cry? His eyes and neck felt strained already just by imagining that he was going to cry exaggeratedly.

"Let's clean things up and-."

Just as Miso was about to wrap up the lesson, someone knocked on the door.

"Come in."

"Wow, Instructor Yang Miso, you look blinding."

Ganghwan entered while telling a joke. There were paper bags in each of his hands.

"Huh? What brings you here?"

"I'm here to cheer you on. And also to see him."

Maru greeted Ganghwan who pointed at him with his chin.

"Huh? Yang Ganghwan!"

Gyunglim, who was massaging her face while sitting down on the ground, became startled and shouted. She seemed to have noticed that she was being rude after she shouted and apologized immediately.

"Sorry, I just didn't expect to see you here."

"Haha, I guess I wouldn't usually be here."

Ganghwan laughed before standing next to Miso.

"You haven't had dinner yet, have you? I bought some to eat with the people here."

Ganghwan took out some plastic containers from the paper bags.

"I wonder if everyone here's okay with sushi?"

Ganghwan grinned.

"Yes!"

Gwangseok cheered in joy before laying out the containers on the floor.

They sat down in a circle and started eating.

“Can I ask you for an autograph?”

“Me too.”

Gwangseok and Gyunglim seemed to know Ganghwan. People interested in plays would have heard of his name at least once, so it wasn't that surprising.

“Of course. But there's a much more famous person than me here.”

Ganghwan sneakily pushed a pen and paper towards Sungjae. Sungjae smiled in embarrassment before giving him an autograph.

“With this autograph, I guess you'll get a hundred, no, a thousand of my autographs.”

Ganghwan smiled as he stashed away the autograph he just got.

“But why are you really here?” Miso asked.

“On business.”

“Business?”

“It's got nothing to do with you, Miss Yang Miso, so stay out of it and enjoy your sushi.”

Ganghwan picked up a piece of sushi with his chopsticks before putting it towards Miso's mouth.

He'd probably get smacked for that - just as he thought, Miso smacked Ganghwan on the back of his head. Gwangseok and Gyunglim seemed to find their banter rather curious as they looked at the two in surprise.

“Uhm, are you two perhaps lovers?” Gwangseok asked without holding back.

“Me, with this woman? Geez, did you have to swear at me like that on our first meeting? Man, that was hard to take.”

Ganghwan replied sarcastically while Miso just outright ignored him as though there was no meaning in replying.

“This woman has a man she's going to marry soon. Ah, these people don't know about it, do they? Looks like I'll have to tell the tales of Miso's dramatic love stor... fine, fine. I'll stay quiet, so put down those chopsticks, alright? Jesus, that was scary, putting chopsticks against someone's eyes like that. Other people will just do it as a joke, but it's scary since you look like you'd really stab.”

“Why don't we just get on with our meal already? Just why did I help this guy's play out, I wonder.”

Miso shook her head in resignation. When they finished about half of the sushi that Ganghwan brought, someone knocked on the door again. Maru put down his chopsticks and looked at the door. There were a lot of guests today for some reason.

“Looks like he's here. Come in!” Ganghwan spoke. Was it someone he called?

“Hello.”

The one that came in with a bright greeting was Sooil. Everyone exclaimed in surprise as though they recognized him.

“Yoo Sooil, right?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Wow, is today a special day?”

Gwangseok whistled. Sooil greeted Sungjae first. It seemed that they had experience shooting together before.

“Is there some for me? I haven’t had dinner yet.”

“There’s a lot, come sit.”

Ganghwan pushed one of the containers towards Sooil.

“But what’s that in your hand?”

“Oh, this? Just some desserts. Thankfully, I was right on the number of people. Here.”

The paper bags that Sooil brought had plastic containers in them as well. Opening the plastic container, there was neatly lined-up food.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a crêpe. It has fruits and cream inside, and it’s pretty good.”

“Oh, really?”

Ganghwan reached out first, and Maru also picked one up.

“Thanks.”

He took a bite out of the crêpe as Sooil told everyone to enjoy it.