

Once Again 551

Chapter 551

Seeing Suyeon smiling, Okseon calmed down her expression. She felt displeased since she saw the true face of the person who was once her idol, but she wasn't going to do something pathetic like expressing her displeasure

"Unni, you're too nice, taking care of others and not just me. That's why we like you a lot."

"Nah. I don't like kids that much. Have you ever seen me go out of my way to talk to them? Probably not."

"Th-that's true."

She was about to finish up the conversation with some formalities, but she got an absurd reply. Wouldn't people normally reply with a smile here? Okseon made a vague smile. She wanted to finish this conversation smoothly, but it seemed that wasn't going to happen.

"You don't seem to be close to the others, huh?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. I see you by yourself all the time during breaks."

"I guess it does look like that. I'm not good with words, so I'm still quite awkward with them. But it's fine since they're all good people."

"That's strange. Yeseul seems to hate you though."

"R-really?"

She didn't think that Suyeon would bring up such a sensitive topic so openly. Just then, she met eyes with Yeseul, who was walking towards the school gates. Yeseul smiled brightly and waved at her as though to tell her to come quickly. She probably acted like that because Suyeon was nearby.

"No way. We aren't that close, but we aren't on bad terms. Yeseul is looking after me a lot now too."

"Really? That's strange. I think you're being ostracized. No, to be precise, you don't have any plans on getting close to the others."

"Maybe it looks like that because I'm shy. I heard that I got embarrassed a lot when I was young. I guess that's something I should try to fix. If I try to talk to them more proactively, they'll treat me kindly soon enough."

"Is that how it works?" Suyeon wondered out loud as she swept her hair backwards.

Okseon felt a bad taste in her mouth. Suyeon was being oddly persistent today. She wasn't like this usually. When Okseon approached her and greeted her, Suyeon would usually return the greeting in kind and encourage her before going on her way. Okseon thought that Suyeon was a refreshing, cool woman, but that didn't seem to be the case from what she saw today. This senior disappointed her a lot.

“Well, if you say so, then you must be right. Anyway, try to do your best to get along. You’ll have to see each other for months, so it’d be strange to not talk to them even once. Don’t you think?”

“I’ll try my best.”

She was cautious with her words because Suyeon might talk to the others about it, though that was very unlikely. Since she realized that Suyeon was someone who liked to meddle in other people’s matters, she had to watch her words from now on.

“Try, huh. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Those words sounded quite suspicious. Okseon looked at the hands that came to pinch her cheeks before subconsciously taking a step back. Suyeon’s hands stopped in mid air.

“Is the coquetry over now?”

Okseon widened her eyes at the sudden words. Coquetry, she said? Suyeon faintly smiled before turning around.

“Nothing. Do your best for the rest of the shoot. I’ll be watching from the side, so you can ask me if you’re stuck on something. I’m an unni after all.”

Okseon somehow felt chilled by Suyeon’s last words. She said goodbye to Suyeon, who walked over to a car before walking towards the school gates.

“I wonder what you talked about with senior Suyeon. Even though you don’t say a word usually,” Yeseul said after approaching her quietly.

Okseon maintained her expressionless face. Yeseul was feeling jealous right now. She was green with envy because she saw her talking closely with a senior. What a childish reaction. She was like a child who would cry when her toys got taken away. Okseon honestly didn’t feel the need to confront her. At the same time, she was surprised at herself for being calm and rational even after receiving such a gaze. I really am different from these kids - she thought.

‘I thought Kim Suyeon could be my conversation partner, but she was an idiotic woman like the others.’

Though, she still decided to maintain a good relationship with her. Bad rumors would start floating around if a senior saw her in a bad light after all.

“Can you hear me?”

“I can.”

“Then why aren’t you answering me?” Yeseul spoke in a small voice.

She was even glaring at her. Yeseul was under a misconception. She was riding on the bandwagon of popularity driven by Giwoo, but she thought that she was gaining popularity with her own skills. She was really pathetic and foolish. Once the main driving force, Giwoo, left, she would be stuck in that bandwagon without being able to do anything. Yet she still acted arrogantly as though she was the princess of the shoot. If it was a battle of words, Okseon had the confidence to make her start crying in

an instant. However, going along with such a childish play would lower her status as an intellectual, so she decided to react appropriately.

“The shoot is going to begin soon.”

“I know.”

“So unless it’s something critical, please leave it for later. We aren’t close enough to talk to each other during shooting hours, right?”

“What was that?”

“Also, it was senior Suyeon who talked to me first, what can I do about that? Is talking to a senior such a big fault? Do I have to get your permission or something? If that’s the case, I’ll immediately go up to her now and say that Yeseul said such things.”

“Wh-when did I say that? I’m asking because I was just curious. You’re overreacting, geez.”

Yeseul walked over to Giwoo while grumbling. She tapped Giwoo’s shoulders as she glared at Okseon. She was like a little child going to her mom to tell her what others did wrong. Giwoo consoled Yeseul with a smile and just greeted Okseon with his eyes.

As expected - Okseon smiled in satisfaction at Giwoo’s reaction. Giwoo was the only one worth talking to here. It would be great if she was the female lead. Thanks to Yeseul, who had zero skill in acting being the female lead, she had to bring Giwoo down. This was a perfect occasion for the saying ‘one loach could muddy an entire creek’.

There seemed to be some problems with the lighting as the shoot was delayed a little. During this time, Okseon approached Maru, who was taking a phone call in a remote place. She watched him until he finished his call before calling out to him.

“You seem to be on close terms with Suyeon-unni, huh?”

“Rather than close, we’re in a cooperative? No wait, enemies that have to be kept at bay? It’s a complex relationship.”

“If you’re trying to sound funny, it wasn’t.”

“That’s why I’m not aspiring to be a comedian. Because I’m not funny.”

“You turned out to be a really boring type huh. I didn’t think that would be the case.”

“You know, it really makes me wonder whenever I talk to you. Just what kind of person is Han Maru in your head to be disappointing you all the time? Did you perhaps mistake me as a perfect person? I’d be rather embarrassed if you did.”

“Me? No way.”

“Right? Then don’t be disappointed in the future. Why get disappointed about someone you didn’t have any expectations for, to begin with? It makes me sorry for disappointing you.”

Okseon felt her toes tensing. She felt this yesterday, this boy's speech could really make people uncomfortable. She decided to endure since it wouldn't be mature of her if she got upset over some wordplay like this.

"Suyeon-uni says she's close to you though."

"So you're investigating the relationship between Suyeon-noona and me after the one between Giwoo and me? Man, I feel like I'm leading a fulfilling life because of you."

"You have a talent to put words in a funny way, huh."

"Now I have a talent to say funny words after not sounding funny? Okseon, should I be aspiring to become an average comedian then?"

Okseon frowned. This guy was really frivolous. He had no weight to his words just like how boys would play pranks on girls when they were toddlers. He was beyond idiotic and had no wits. This was why talking to dumb people was excruciating.

"Suyeon-uni is quite a good person, isn't she? Looking after you and all," she said with a smile.

She was being sarcastic, but as Maru didn't have a brain, he would probably interpret those words as-is.

"Of course, she is," Maru replied with a smile.

There. The boy in front of her did not know the concept of sarcasm. This was why he was not able to predict what kind of consequences there would be if Giwoo continued to improve. He was done for. It would be much easier if he just went to Giwoo and told him to stop as she said, but he couldn't even do that. He just kept saying unfunny words.

'Suyeon-uni is close to a guy like this? I guess JA Production isn't as great as the rumors say.'

It seemed that president Lee Junmin has gotten on in years if he decided to take Maru under the wing of his company. Although he was called the maestro of digging up new talent, he didn't have much activity recently, did he not? Even a master craftsman would return to being ordinary if they did not continue to polish their skill. She could already imagine what the future of JA Production was going to be like.

"So why were you waiting for me when I was on a call? If it's about Suyeon-noona, I'm willing to talk about her more."

"Forget it. I just asked to confirm."

"Did the matter with Giwoo go well?"

"Why? You worried now? I said go tell him if you're so worried about it. I'm giving you this advice for your sake."

"I said I don't plan to. I just asked out of curiosity. It doesn't seem that important though, huh?"

"Not important?"

This time, she couldn't hold back her vexation. They were away from other people, so there was no one to hear. It wouldn't be a problem even if she snapped out a little.

“You really are clueless, huh. Even after the lengths I went to explain to you in kind. Just how much more do I have to explain so that you can understand that you are in a bad situation?”

Her lips were trembling due to the frustration.

Maru spoke with a smile.

“Okseon. I really like people like you. You keep taking action to do something. It’s really good to see that you’re trying to do something rather than sighing about it while doing nothing. But you know? You really don’t take other people’s words seriously, do you? Or is it that you forgot in such a short time? You take pride in yourself for being smart. So act like it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I told you that the matter with Giwoo is for you to solve, right?”

“I told you several times that it’s for your sak....”

“Second, if you really don’t want to do it, I told you to prepare a form of compensation if you want me to take action. Did I not?”

“The whole premise is wrong! This is for your sake! Why do I need to do something like that?”

“They say the thirsty will dig the well, but you just look thirsty. If you are thirsty, you should be the one to dig the well. That’s what desperation is, and if you aren’t, then just let it go.”

“You really are dumb, aren’t you? You just can’t understand a single thing I say. You should just listen to me, go to Giwoo and tell him to stop copying you. I told you that your life will become much better if you do, didn’t I?”

“Oh, it was about my life? I didn’t know that. If it’s like that....”

At that moment, Maru retracted his smile and put on an expressionless face. Okseon was a little surprised at this new side of him. When hanging out with Dongho and Joomin, he was always smiling like a fool. Maru moved to the side before turning his back to everyone else. Now, Okseon was the only one who could see Maru’s expression.

“Okseon.”

“Wh-what?”

“I’ll say this again, but I really like that you’re trying to take action. Your thoughts are reasonable, and your actions have a reason behind each one. You probably thought that the attention you receive will rise once Giwoo falters and Yeseul’s acting skills fall in tandem. It’s reasonable. But why are your thoughts the only things that are reasonable? If you want to attain something, you need to give up just as much in order to attain it. Do you want to take it? Then you should go get it. Do you want to have someone else do it? Then you should compensate that person. This is the second time I’m telling you this. I quite like you and I respect your thinking, but if you keep treating me like your personal property and try to order me around regardless of the time, then I can only change my opinion of you.”

Maru took a step closer to her. Okseon stepped back just as much. She felt scared for some reason. Maru's slow moving hand grasped Okseon's arm softly.

"Just like how you want to stay quiet among us, I want to smile. I do not want my workplace to have a stiff environment. Dongho has adjusted himself to the current atmosphere, and the same can be said for Joomin-noona as well. I painstakingly made this atmosphere, so it would be quite troublesome for me if you keep acting like this. The two of us will just keep our businesses separate and to ourselves, okay?"

"Y-yeah."

"Good, that's good. But you know? I hope you don't talk about other people's lives so easily like that. I'm quite desperate, you know? And desperate people don't see anything other than their objective. If I think I can only survive by stepping on someone else, I really will do it. So be careful when you approach me. Stepping on a friend isn't really pleasant. You know that, right?"

Maru returned to his smile. It seemed as though the childish character from when he was with Dongho had come back to him. However, Maru's eyes just now were nothing like the frivolous boy's in front of her. They were incredibly ferocious. He was like a wild dog that growled at other animals that tried to invade its territory.

"Haha, I just tried being heavy, because you seemed to like this sort of stuff. You're quite mature, you know? You like this kind of thing better than talking with a smile, right? How was it? Was my acting okay?"

"...Yeah."

Maru tapped on her arm before turning around. Okseon couldn't say anything besides that 'yeah'. This was the first time a man felt scary to her. She couldn't even budge her lips.

"Talk to me from time to time, okay?"

Maru waved his hand before walking away. At that moment, she heard that the shoot was ready as the lights turned on. Okseon was about to follow Maru, but waited until Maru disappeared into the crowd.

She slowly breathed out before taking her first step. She felt a little dizzy.

Chapter 552

I think it would be better if we did this part this way - Dongho thought about such things as he watched producer Park Hoon give instructions around the set. If the shoot kept getting delayed and the actors started complaining, he would go up to the producer and say such. The producer would become touched and would compliment him, but he would say it was nothing much and credit the producer instead, all the while with a slight smile on his face.

'Man, so cool.'

He coughed awkwardly in order to dismiss the smile sneaking onto his face.

'The girls will see me in a new light when they see that. What if they confess? A popular man has a hard life.'

What should he do if Yeseul decided to confess? Accept smoothly? Or pretend to reject her mercilessly before hugging her from behind. He heard that 'bad boys' were the trend these days, so he would act disinterested, and then hand her some ice cream with a ring in it. With a nonchalant face, too. Then, Yeseul would eat that ice cream and say 'oh' after discovering that ring which would cause her to look at him with adoration and embarrassment.

'Perfect.'

It was a flawless plan. Just as he turned his head around with a satisfied smile on his face, he saw Joomin stamping her feet to chase away the cold. Her heart would definitely start racing if he handed her a blanket right now. There was also the possibility of her confessing, so he had to get ready for that. Joomin-noona was a really decent woman after all.

"But where the heck did that guy go?"

He crossed his arms and breathed out. He didn't bring a coat since he heard that it was supposed to be 'Spring weather', but it was really cold at night.

"Dongho, take this. It's cold, isn't it?"

Joomin offered him a blanket. Dongho watched her do so in a daze before hurriedly accepting the blanket. He felt rather embarrassed because of the thoughts he had just moments ago.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. Noona, do you know where Maru is?"

"Maru? There he is."

Dongho turned his head around to where Joomin was pointing. Maru and Okseon were standing in front of the school's west entrance. Their business seemed to be over as Maru had turned around and was walking towards them. Just then, the lights turned back on again. The shoot would resume soon.

"But Okseon is a little no-no."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, just talking to myself."

"You really are funny at times, Dongho. You talk to yourself a lot, too."

"It's none of your business whether I talk to myself or not."

"You mad?"

"Noona, I'm not a man who gets mad over something like this!"

However, his voice had become a little louder. Joomin smiled before reaching out her palm. He didn't know what she was trying to do so he stared at her hand before putting his hand on Joomin's.

"Pfft, what are you doing?"

"A-ah! The blanket! You mean the blanket, right?"

“Yeah. Give me the blanket, I’ll put it back.”

“You should’ve just told me to give you the blanket.”

“Don’t most people understand that gesture? Rather than that, why did you suddenly give me your hand? You were like the puppy at my house.”

“I’m not a dog, you know?”

“Did I say something? You really are funny.”

Funny? Wasn’t ‘funny’ a softer way of saying ‘I like you’? So he was a popular man after all, huh. Dongho laughed to himself before shaking his head. That delusion just now went too far. He had recently thought that fantasizing by himself like this was quite foolish. He was now in his 3rd year of high school, so he was a pseudo-adult already. He wanted to act more maturely. A serious Seong Dongho. Hm, cool.

‘I might actually be a little scared if she’s the one who tells me she likes me though,’ Dongho thought as he looked at Okseon walking towards them.

He had no idea what she was thinking all the time. Han Maru liked childish pranks, but he was a decent guy, while Joomin-noona was a kind person. Giwoo, Yeseul, and Jichan were just lucky people. It was Okseon he didn’t know anything about.

Well, he never talked to her after all.

“Did you talk to her about something?” He asked Maru, who just returned, while hanging his arm over his shoulders.

“Nothing much. I was just on a phone call and Okseon was next to me, so I just told her that the shoot was delayed.”

“What did she say to that?”

“She said she understood, duh.”

“That’s it?”

“What else would she say?”

“Well, that’s actually probably it considering Okseon’s personality. She never says a word with us. Well, just like what Joomin-noona said, she seems perfectly capable of speech from the way she talks with senior Suyeon.”

Okseon walked up to him before walking past him. At that moment, Dongho spotted something strange. Okseon glanced their way, albeit for a brief instant, before walking past. She seemed somewhat hesitant and cautious.

‘Don’t tell me she’s....’

Dongho felt his heart race a little. Okseon, who was like a cold wind this whole time, walked past him like a feeble girl. What could that possibly mean? Wasn’t this the stereotypical pattern of a girl in love?

‘If I look at her closely, she’s quite cute too.’

The slightly tanned skin made her look cute. Was the reason she didn't talk to them this whole time because of embarrassment? Now that he thought about it, she talked to Maru just now and even talked to Joomin a couple of times too. Just not him.

It felt like the pieces of the puzzle were all here. Dongho felt nervous. There were a lot of girls at his school who flattered him for being an actor, but none of them approached him with romantic interest. Was a warm breeze finally coming to his youth that felt like an ice age this whole time?

'Don't get excited. I might be misunderstanding.'

He liked fantasizing by himself, but he wasn't stupid to the point that he couldn't differentiate reality from fantasy. He had to make sure without getting excited. At that moment, Okseon looked their way again. Her eyes shaking; her lips sealed; her body shrunk back. Was Okseon always so cute?

"M-M-Maruu."

"What?"

"I think Okseon likes me."

"...Ah, okay. Congrats, I guess."

"You noticed it too, right? Look at her. She can't look at me properly. I found it strange this whole time. Okseon talks to you from time to time, but she never talked to me even once. I finally know the reason now. I was such a fool, why didn't I notice sooner?"

He felt like his feet were getting sweaty. She was looking at him nervously. Okseon was a really decent girl from up close. How nervous must she have been this whole time? She was someone who talked to the seniors with so much vitality. If she was hesitating that much, she must have been extremely nervous.

This wasn't a delusion. This was reality.

'There's really someone who likes me.'

Thinking about it, Okseon was much better than Yeseul, who implicitly boasted from time to time. How feminine was that? She felt very mature. Joomin-noona was really good as a person, but dating was better between two people of the same age, no?

"...Probably not."

Dongho toppled the tower of thoughts with a small laugh.

"What's not?" Maru asked from the side.

"It's about Okseon. It doesn't make sense for her to fall in love out of nowhere."

"You're quite realistic when it comes to that."

"I've always been a realistic person. I'm just a slight romanticist."

"Like hell you are."

“You don’t believe me?”

“Why don’t you go talk to her, just in case?”

“Should I?”

“Weren’t you supposed to be a realistic person?”

“You never know.”

Dongho calmed down his breathing before approaching Okseon. Why was it that his heart was racing even though he knew that it shouldn’t be the case? If it turned out that she liked him....

‘At that time, it’s ring in ice cream.’

Dongho calmed down his face before standing in front of Okseon.

* * *

“Well done. We have to keep this up just until next week, so please hold on,” producer Park Hoon said.

Next week was filled with weekday shoots as well. Monday and Tuesday. Thankfully, Wednesday and Thursday were empty. This would allow Maru to focus on the acting club and the film shoot during those two days.

“Maru.”

Joomin approached him and tapped him on the shoulder before pointing at Dongho. Dongho was getting ready to go home with a depressed face.

“What happened to him?”

“It’s the pain of loss.”

Seeing Joomin’s confused expression, he said that it was just a joke.

“The shoot ended early today.”

“That’s true. We don’t have any remaining shoots either. Looks like everyone gets to go home together for once.”

Joomin stretched her arms out.

“I’ll only return to a normal schedule once the additional parts for episode 13 are shot.”

“Sounds like you’re busy.”

“I’m a college student after all. I have a mountain load of assignments.”

“The theater and film department should learn stuff like acting theory, right?”

“I don’t know. I’m not in it.”

“Didn’t you say that you helped out with the graduation piece of the seniors from theater and film during the first meeting?”

“Since I was working in this area, I got to know a lot of them. That’s how I helped them out. I actually major in advanced materials engineering.”

“You’re doing this work on top of your studies?”

“I guess it turned out like that. I might apply for leave soon though. No, I might even quit altogether. It’s curious. I never knew I’d become an actress. I somehow became the female lead of an indie movie through some connections and ended up joining an agency. The head manager in charge of me told me that I’d become successful, and honestly, I didn’t believe it, but it ended up coming true. It fits me and I’m having fun as well.”

“Good for you. But don’t you find it a little wasteful that you aren’t going to finish your studies?”

“I do. In my 1st year, I had nothing to do so I just went to college earnestly, but right now, I’m doing this drama on top of a few other things. I think that it would be a bit greedy of me to try to do both things at once. I do want to graduate, but I don’t want to be half-assed with both of them.”

“If it’s graduation, you can always do that later.”

“Right?”

Just then, Dongho, who was walking ahead, shouted at the two to come quickly.

“Ah, right. We’re going to eat out to celebrate the fact that we finished early today. You are coming, right?”

“Sorry, I have a prior engagement.”

“Really? Then I guess it’ll be just Dongho and me, huh.”

“I’ll definitely attend next time. Or, why don’t you ask them to come?”

Maru asked that as he looked at the three main characters walking to their respective cars. Giwoo was going to his agency’s van, while the other two were being picked up by their parents.

“Those people are busy. I asked them last time, but was refused.”

“Why don’t you take Okseon then?”

“Okseon? Would she?”

“Who knows?”

“Alright, I’ll try talking to her. It’d be bland to eat with just Dongho.”

After smiling, Joomin suddenly widened her eyes before greeting politely. Senior - that word made Maru turn around as well.

“Hi.”

Suyeon was standing there, waving her hand. Joomin told her goodbye before leaving.

“Did I interrupt you?”

“With what?”

“You trying to woo her.”

“Should I call Geunsoo-hyung and tell him to cancel this meeting?”

“No, no! You’re acting all stuck-up again. Sorry, sorry.”

“But didn’t you two make an appointment without me?”

Suyeon sighed.

“For me, it’d be much better if we just met by ourselves. But that guy isn’t someone who would do that. That’s why I used you as an excuse.”

“You’re using me again?”

“Let’s help each other out, yeah?”

“Why don’t you give up at this point? I don’t think Geunsoo-hyung has an ounce of interest in you.”

Suyeon shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter even if he doesn’t have any interest in me. It’s me who likes him.”

“Financially?”

“It’s pure love.”

“I thought you were fed up with men.”

“Don’t you know the saying that you should heal wounds gained from people with other people? And you know, it’s fun. I’ve known him for years, but I still haven’t closed the gap at all. He’s like a flower growing on the top of a cliff. It’ll be very fun to snap it.”

“I think I should cancel this appointment after all.”

“I’m just joking.”

She then said ‘also, it doesn’t hurt me to one-sidedly like him’. Maru stared at her.

“What?”

“I was wondering what would have happened if the man who was your first love was actually a decent man. You actually sound quite pure when it comes to that.”

“Well, like you said, if that man was a kind man, I might have become a faithful wife by now.”

“Yeah, I think so too.”

“...What the. It’s slightly unpleasant when you say it like that.”

“You got me. I was trying to make you feel displeased.”

“You really are the despicable type huh.”

“Not as much as you.”

“Well, I guess there isn’t someone like me either. I should be proud of it.”

He walked towards the parking lot behind the school with Suyeon. There was a van that was going towards the school gates at that time, and it stopped in front of Suyeon. The door opened and Giwoo came out.

“Senior. Thank you for your work today.”

“Oh my, my dear Giwoo. You’re good with your greetings. I really like you.”

“Haha, this is nothing.”

“Thank you for your work today too. I hear that it’s thanks to you that our viewing rates are going up.”

“Of course not. It’s all thanks to your beauty.”

“So you’re good with words too.”

“Are you going somewhere with Maru?”

“I have an appointment. Why? Want to join us?”

“Really?”

“No, I’m just joking. I don’t take anyone to places where I’m at ease.”

After pinching Giwoo’s cheeks once, Suyeon walked ahead. Maru waved at Giwoo.

“See you next time.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“Maru.”

“Yeah?”

“Can I see you separately some time? I want to become close to you.”

“It would be an honor. I’m willing to go anywhere if it’s the lead actor calling me out. Call me any time, I’ll leave my schedule empty.”

“You mean it, right?”

“Probably?”

Maru yawned before following Suyeon. He walked over to the car with the headlights on and got in the passenger seat.

“He’s like a snake.”

“Oh no, not as much as a certain someone.”

“I’m more of a doe.”

"You're trying to be funny, right?"

"Was it funny?"

"Just a little."

"I guess I succeeded then. Also, are you on good terms with Giwoo?"

"I'm not that close with a snake."

"What was that earlier then?"

"I'm not denying it. I just found it a little strange that a thousand-year-old viper was calling someone a snake."

"Am I that old? I don't have any wrinkles, you know?"

"How long are we going to keep going with this conversation?"

"Until we meet Geunsoo-oppa?"

"Then let's get going. I'm tired already."

"Hey, hang out with me. I'm bored because I haven't been meeting any men these days."

Suyeon started driving with a small smile.

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Giwoo had a pleasant smile on his face as he got on the van. However, manager Kim did not get deceived by that smile. He even nervously checked whether he made any mistakes when he saw that smile through the rearview mirror.

"Shall we go?" he asked carefully.

Giwoo was looking outside the window. Eventually, a car passed by in front of them. Manager Kim knew that that car belonged to actress Kim Suyeon. The car became distant and Giwoo's gaze fell from the car to his phone. Manager Kim stayed quiet. This was a sign for him to wait.

He took out a mint candy. The plastic wrapping didn't come off easily. Tschk, a violent ripping sound could be heard. He felt all of his senses tingle and immediately looked at the rearview mirror. Giwoo was looking at him with a bored expression.

"Manager-hyung."

"Y-yeah."

"Can you be quiet for a moment? I have to send a text."

"Sorry, should I get off and come back later?"

"You don't have to, but I'd be thankful if you did."

Manager Kim nodded before quickly getting out of the van. He felt much better now that he escaped that stifling atmosphere. If he didn't have the ambition to succeed in this field of work, he would have

long since given up on being Giwoo's manager. Whenever his eyes met Giwoo's, which felt frosty despite the smile on his face, he was reminded of manager Cha, who was fired without a single word.

'I wonder who he's texting all the time though.'

Giwoo did not care who was around when he made or received calls, but he was strangely wary of his surroundings whenever he texted. He once approached Giwoo from behind when he was writing a text, and Giwoo looked at him as though he would kill. Ever since then, he looked away as much as possible whenever Giwoo was texting.

"Hyung, get back on."

"Alright."

He got back in the van. Giwoo thanked him for his work today. He knew that those were just empty words, but manager Kim smiled as brightly as he could as he nodded.

"Let's go then."

"Yes."

He ignored Giwoo's phone that was reflected on the rearview mirror as much as possible before starting the car.

* * *

"How's the acting club going?"

"Going pretty well. Let me open the window a little."

"You feeling hot?"

"I'm just a little stifled."

Maru opened the window about halfway. A wind strong enough to hurt his eyes rushed in through the window. Listening to the loud noise of the wind, he felt as though his head had cleared a little.

"I'm cold though."

The window closed. Suyeon was the one who did it. He got some fresh air, so he wasn't dissatisfied.

"Miso-unni is quite strict, isn't she?"

"She is. She's going to be even stricter starting next week. The actors have been decided after all."

"Are you in it as well?"

"No, I decided not to since I don't think I'll have the time."

"Daemyung must be disappointed then."

"It's not like that."

"I guess I should come over some time to have a look."

“Come when Miso-noonim isn’t here so that you don’t get into a fight.”

“We’re pretty close now.”

“No way. A dog will never get close to a monkey.”

“Who’s the dog and who’s the monkey?”

“Which one do you like?”

“Me? Monkey.”

“Then you can be the dog.”

“That’s good, I actually like dogs better. I thought you’d tell me that I was the dog when I say I like monkeys.”

Maru stared at Suyeon in a daze before laughing.

“Where’s Geunsoo-hyung?”

“He’s nearby. You know the plan, right?”

“The plan?”

“When we get there, you leave after you eat a little. I’ll spend the rest of the time enjoying sweet moments with Geunsoo-oppa.”

“I happened to have a lot of time today. Tomorrow is Saturday as well.”

“You’re going to school though.”

“I just have to go to school after staying up all night. Don’t look down on the stamina of a teen.”

“Let’s form an alliance.”

“As a man like Geunsoo-hyung, I want to protect Geunsoo-hyung instead.”

“Why did I even try?”

Suyeon turned the wheel. As it was Friday night, there were a lot of people on the streets. The restaurants and various stores were busy with the golden time sales. The energy of drinking in the air felt like it could make any sane man drunk.

“It’s over there.”

Amidst the hazy lights, there was a building that gave off a calming purple light. The word Izakaya entered his eyes.

“There’s a lot of standing bars these days, huh.”

“It seems to be a trend. They keep popping up. But this place is pretty decent. On the first floor, you can play around with a bit of energy, while the 2nd floor is for talking quietly.”

Suyeon walked through the automatic door that opened by itself. Maru looked at Suyeon on the spot.

“What are you doing? Come in.”

“This place will have to stop doing business if patrols show up. In the first place, I probably won’t even be allowed in here.”

“Only the restaurants that high schoolers target have that sort of problem. Excuse me, it’s fine if I take this guy in, right?” Suyeon asked an employee.

The female employee nodded with a smile.

“Sheesh, you’re worried about strange things. Let’s go.”

Maru walked into the restaurant, thinking that it should be fine since they asked. He walked past the 1st floor, which was a wide open space, and went up to the 2nd floor. Seeing Suyeon’s confident steps, it seemed that she was a regular here. After walking past a few rooms, Suyeon greeted in kind before turning around.

“Oh, Geunsoo-oppa. You aren’t alone,” Suyeon said.

Maru followed her into the room. Just as Suyeon said, there was another person in front of Geunsoo. Maru greeted him since he knew the person.

“Sungjae-hyung is here too, huh.”

“Hi, Maru. It’s been a long time.”

Ahn Sungjae, who was sitting opposite Geunsoo, greeted him.

“It’s good to see two handsome men together. Didn’t you guys order anything? There’s nothing here.”

Suyeon naturally smoothly sat next to Geunsoo, which left Maru to sit next to Sungjae.

“I called you to see you after all this time. Are you doing well?”

“I’m doing fine.”

Maru lightly shook Geunsoo’s hand. This was the first time they had met up since New Years at the elder’s house.

“But it was rather unexpected to see you two together.”

Maru looked at Geunsoo and Sungjae alternately. Although both of them did appear in Twilight Struggles together, as far as he knew, the two never met each other.

“Oh, Maru shouldn’t know about it yet, huh.”

“Know what?”

“That I’m doing a movie with Sungjae,” Geunsoo said with a smile.

Maru looked at Sungjae. He never met up with Sungjae after Miso’s classes at Film, but he did text him from time to time. They exchanged texts a while ago, and he didn’t mention anything back then.

"It hasn't been that long since it was confirmed. I can't exactly go around telling people about it when it's not even set in stone," Sungjae said as he stroked his chin.

"Are you two really going to be starring in the same movie?"

"Yeah. I got to shoot with Geunsoo-hyung."

Congratulations - Maru said with a smile. The two of them were in the same movie, huh. Geunsoo's acting skills went without saying. His skills, consolidated in the independent movie, were well-known throughout Chungmuro. In his distant memories, he remembered the middle-aged Geunsoo in a talk show, but he couldn't remember the contents. From how he appeared in talk shows though, it should signify that he had gained some popularity.

'I think there was something with Ganghwan too.'

Geunsoo and Ganghwan. He thought that these two, as a pair, had something about them, but it felt stifling because he couldn't remember it properly. Were they known for their deep friendship in the industry? He thought that there was a much larger impact than just that, though.

"What are you thinking about?"

Suyeon asked from in front of him. Maru shook his head and said that it was nothing.

'It's becoming fainter and fainter, huh.'

Until just a while ago, he thought that he remembered what the future held in store for Ganghwan and Geunsoo, but right now, his memories were fuzzy like a tangled up lump of thread. The one thing he was sure about was that the two were friends even 30 years later. He somewhat remembered that young people were going to the national theaters to see plays, but he didn't know what they were about.

Just as it was about to feel like ants were crawling around his head, causing him pain, the door opened and an employee came in. It seemed that Geunsoo had called for one. When he heard Geunsoo's voice and the employee's reply, the stifling feeling in his head disappeared. At that moment, Maru realized that the remnant of memories that caused his headache had disappeared completely.

He still had a vague feeling about it because memories weren't independent, but Maru could feel that it was going to disappear completely when he woke up tomorrow.

Maru decided not to mind it so much. There was no need to try and cling onto that memory. This was something about the future that didn't happen yet. He had his share of explanations when he got this life, so there was no need to feel uneasy about it.

'If I can write it down, it would be good, but I can't do that.'

It was only natural. He had to be thankful that he got to live a second time. If he was too greedy, he might receive divine retribution. Didn't he check already? He had just thought about investing in real estate when the price of the land that he thought about buying fell to rock bottom. God was very fair.

'My family. It's fine as long as I remember just that.'

He had the confidence to not forget about his love towards her, even if all of his memories disappeared. Just then, he had this thought.

‘But... why did I get this life again?’

He thought that he had someone’s help, but did even that disappear now? He still remembered the woman in a white suit clearly. That was probably thanks to the fact that she was a spiritual being.

‘Now that I think about it, that woman is as pretty as her.’

He smiled faintly as he thought about the woman in a white suit. It seemed that he was quite love-struck. He was thinking that a woman who could be described as a heavenly beauty was around the same as his wife.

“Maru, what are you going to eat?”

“Anything that can fill me up.”

Geunsoo smiled and ordered the rest. The employee checked the orders before quietly leaving.

“Anyway, what’s it about?” Maru asked Sungjae.

Sungjae pointed at his own face and said ‘new detective who’s passionate.’

“And Geunsoo-hyung is a corrupt detective.”

“What?”

Maru looked at Geunsoo. A corrupt detective, huh. Geunsoo looked pretty gentle on the surface. He was far from the ‘lunatic’ nickname he got when he was in school. If he wore some neat-looking glasses and asked other people what job he looked like he had, most people would probably reply with lawyer or doctor.

That was precisely why the title of a corrupt detective quite suited him.

“I’m pretty good when it comes to being corrupt,” Geunsoo said as he crossed his legs.

“Then I’m the tragic woman in love with the corrupt detective?” Suyeon softly placed a hand on Geunsoo’s shoulder.

Geunsoo replied with a ‘I’m not so sure’ and a smile. Geunsoo would have refused her touch before, so it seemed that the two had gotten closer.

“When does it start?”

“The crank-in is set to be in August.”

“There’s quite a lot of time until then, huh.”

“I should gain some muscle until then. I’ll have to quit drinking and start learning action acting again.”

Hearing Geunsoo’s words, Sungjae breathed out heavily as well. Rather than a sigh, it looked like he was getting resolved.

“That’s why today’s the last day for drinking.”

“Looks like you should drink a lot then,” Maru said with a smile.

As they were talking about recent matters, the door opened and the food came.

“Let’s talk further after we drink a little. I’ll tell you a few of Sungjae’s episodes. That will be very interesting.”

“Hyung, stop it.”

“I’m going to bring this up for the rest of my life while drinking. Ahn Sungjae, the actor burning with passion!”

Hearing that, Sungjae leaned back against the door as though he had given up. It seemed that a lot of interesting events happened between the two. Maru received just a bit of alcohol in his glass before picking up his chopsticks. He wanted to eat first.

Chapter 554

“When I first met Sir Yoon, I actually didn’t feel anything. Naturally, I knew that he was a famous actor, but I’ve never seen his work after all. A kindly smiling senior was my first impression of him.”

Sungjae drank the rest of his glass before continuing to speak,

“Then I met him again at the shoot. Now that I think about it, I met Maru for the first time back then as well. He asked me for an autograph which was quite peculiar. He was really calm about it after all.”

“It’d be strange for a high school boy to fanboy over a male idol group,” Maru remarked.

Suyeon added ‘that’s true.’

“Anyway, the first day I met him at the shoot, he told me a lot of really important things. Actually, back then, I had somewhat of a victim mentality.”

“Victim mentality?” Geunsoo asked.

“One of the senior actors coughed when he saw me. Do you know what I thought back then? I thought that was his way of expressing his displeasure. I thought that that was his way of saying that an idol shouldn’t be here. Actually though, it turned out that he just had a cold.”

“You were being way too shy for a grown-up.”

“I was lacking confidence back then. I had a guilty conscience too. I felt sorry that I received an actor’s work after being successful as an idol, and when I looked at the actors with that kind of mindset, I thought they were all ostracizing me. It’s embarrassing to talk about it like this, but it was really bad back then. I even had the thought that that was what I got for being a traitor.”

“Maru, Sungjae’s quite innocent, you know?”

“I actually felt that quite a while ago.”

Maru smiled as he ate some food.

“Well, ever since I got a good scolding from Sir Yoon, I came to myself though.”

“What a kid.”

Suyeon pointed at Sungjae and giggled.”

“If he’s a kid, then so are you. You guys are the same age after all.”

“Hey, even though we’re both 27, there’s a huge gap between our mental ages, you know? I’m a mature lady, and you’re a kid.”

Sungjae was about to retort but did not in the end. It seemed that he had learned that he couldn’t win against Suyeon in a battle of words. Maru picked up the drink bottle and held it in front of Sungjae.

“You should drink when you feel bad.”

“Right?”

After pouring a drink for Sungjae, he poured one for the other two as well. Since this drink cost 60 thousand won per bottle, it tasted really good. He could drink something like this only when other people were buying.

“Idols or whatever. It’s laughable to put up an entry barrier to keep our plates safe. Who the hell cares about what people used to do? All that matters is acting skills,” Geunsoo said.

Suyeon, who was next to him, slightly frowned before he continued.

“I oppose the notion of acting being treated like some sanctuary. Of course, those that have half-assed acting can get insulted for all I care. However, I find it pathetic that people insult each other based on what the other party’s background is. No, it’s beyond pathetic. I’m angered by it. Actors need to be evaluated on acting skills alone. Good acting will definitely receive the light after all.”

“That only applies to people like you, Geunsoo-oppa, who have the acting skills to back it up.”

Suyeon rested her chin on her hands. Both of them looked slightly drunk.

“I think we’re past the age where we can become successful through acting alone. Of course, someone as good as you might be able to do it, oppa. These days though, the system relies on agencies most of the time. What good is being good at acting? There are fewer stages to show it off.”

“If it’s stages, it has increased compared to before. There’s cable TV as well. Since the number of people watching movies is increasing every year, the pie has increased.”

“But the difference between having someone behind you and not having someone is too big. You know how many actors disappear every year without being able to knock on the door of commercial media after having debuted in indie movies.”

Phew - Suyeon sighed before falling towards Geunsoo. Geunsoo used his left hand to receive Suyeon’s head before carefully pushing sideways. Suyeon tried her best to lean against Geunsoo’s shoulder, but Geunsoo’s left hand mercilessly and perfectly defended it.

“Are those two always like that?” Sungjae asked quietly.

Maru nodded.

“Even that’s considered close. A year ago, they were still using polite speech to address each other. No, I guess Geunsoo-hyung was the only one who did that.”

“That’s somewhat incredible, both of them.”

“The two of them aren’t exactly normal. Rather than that though, a movie, huh. Are you going to quit being an idol completely?”

“We’re doing well in our respective fields, so I don’t think we’ll have any activities for a while. President Park promised as well.”

“You belong to NL Company, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I met president Park Narim once. I got some tickets to your concert from her as well. Thanks to that, I scored some points with my sister.”

“The president did that? She usually doesn’t do something like that though.”

“Our president was with me back then.”

“President Lee Junmin? That makes sense. He’s one of the people she has a hard time dealing with. Perhaps she wanted him to see her in a good light. So, how was your first impression of her?”

“She felt like a politician. She was good with words as well.”

“That’s how she is.”

Maru ate a piece of sushi with fish eggs on it. The texture was pretty interesting.

“Who’s the director?”

“It’s director Lee Jincheol, and he’s known Geunsoo-hyung for a long time. I met him for the first time not too long ago, so I don’t know what he’s like. Well, I did get that he was a quiet person.”

“An acquaintance of Geunsoo-hyung, so that means he’s the director of the indie movie?”

“Yeah. It’s his first try at a commercial movie.”

“Can I ask which places invested in it?”

“I thought you’d be interested. It’s SC. SC Cinema.”

“The same place that invested in the production of Twilight Struggles, huh. It belongs to the SC Group, right?”

“Yeah. Thanks to them, we get to procure hundreds of cinemas to air the movie in as long as we finish producing the film. When I see situations like this, I can sort of sympathize with Suyeon. The investor even has its own cinema branch. How many film actors can survive after going against their wishes? No matter how good the final piece is, it’s not good for anything if there isn’t a place to air it.”

“The dream of all film actors is to shoot a movie that can surpass all of those conditions. A film that everyone wants to see will have to go up in cinemas.”

“You’re right. This is a bit different, but in the case of music, there are some people who rise with skills alone. Even in Hongdae, there are many indie bands with large fanbases.”

At that moment, Suyeon, who had been struggling to get herself on Geunsoo’s shoulders, said something.

“But every one of them wants to become major. Why do you think that is? It’s obviously for the exposure. Indie bands, they’re good. I have a lot of teams I like as well. But they disappear quite easily. There’s no music without food in your stomach after all. With that being the case, Geunsoo-oppa!”

Suyeon, getting encouraged by her drunkenness, latched onto Geunsoo. Geunsoo wrestled with Suyeon before standing up.

“Looks like I’ll have to get some fresh air.”

“Wait for me.”

Suyeon followed Geunsoo, who sighed as he walked out of the room.

Maru looked at them as he chewed on some pineapple. At this point, Geunsoo was practically enjoying it.

“How did you get to know Geunsoo-hyung? A get-together?”

“The first time we met was back when we had a get-together for Twilight Struggles. Back then, we didn’t even talk much. We just greeted each other out of formality. We never meet during shoots, either. Then, I went to the get-together after the film was released because I wanted to see Sir Yoon, and we introduced ourselves properly at that time. Though, we got properly close when Miso-noona held a drinking occasion with the two of us.”

“I thought it’d be like that. You must have had a hard time drinking with the two then, huh? Miso-noonim usually drinks until her limit once she starts, doesn’t she?”

“So you know about it.”

“I had to massage her back several times. A woman who’s over thirty was... geez. She doesn’t know how scary the world is.”

“It’s strange when you put it like that. What’s even more strange though, is that it suits you.”

“I do look a little old. With the right hair style, I think I’ll be able to pass off as thirty,” Maru said as he combed his bangs backwards with his hand.

Sungjae laughed.

“Anyway, that was really unexpected of Miso-noona. She couldn’t be scarier during her lecture, but she’s kinda cute when she drinks. She was crying and sniffing, and I really had the urge to shoot a video of her.”

“Hyung, did you take videos?”

“No, I didn’t. I don’t want to die early after all. Geunsoo-hyung said that she’d kill me.”

“Well done. You’ll really get killed, and you won’t even know why.”

“She’s getting married in May, right?”

“Yeah. There’s not long left. Man, I already feel sad for the teacher who’s going to live with her for a lifetime.”

“I was also surprised when I heard about it for the first time. A school teacher, huh. Doesn’t that only appear in movies?”

“Teacher Taesik is a winner in life.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Both of them laughed. Miso-noonim in a wedding dress, huh. He couldn’t imagine it that easily. It would fit her more if she ripped that dress and abduct Taesik during the wedding instead.

“Rather than that, I’m kinda envious. You get to be a lead actor.”

“It still doesn’t feel real to me either. Well, it also doesn’t feel like I didn’t get the role with my skills.”

“If you don’t like it, you can always give it to me.”

“I’m going to cling onto it like my life depends on it. I spent all this time as an idol in order to grab opportunities like this after all. For now, I’ll start with getting the title of a ‘skilled idol actor’.”

“Sheesh, I wonder what my president is doing.”

“Should I tell that to president Lee Junmin?”

“Hyung-nim, here, receive a glass from me and forget about it.”

He poured a glass before pushing it over to Sungjae. It was pleasant to drink since the alcohol content wasn’t that high. Maru looked at the door. It had been around five minutes, but the two of them did not return.

“Were we interrupting?” Sungjae asked.

“No, we’re the guardian angels.”

“Guardian angels?”

Maru just smiled back at Sungjae who looked at him in curiosity.

“Oh yeah, I’m watching the drama.”

“Really?”

“I’m watching it in the van while travelling. The character seems to be similar to you, right?”

“I was lucky.”

“You should really wear your glasses. I think people will recognize you more that way.”

“Are you serious?”

“When I first made my debut, I went around in my stage outfit. It’s quite fun, you know? Now, I can’t even reveal my face in public, but back then, it was really enjoyable to see people looking at me half with doubt from afar.”

“I was forced to change my name to ‘Lee Chan’ at school for a few days, and from that, I don’t think I enjoy someone recognizing me like that.”

“Is it annoying?”

“Rather than annoying, it’s embarrassing. I didn’t show anything much, nor did I do anything much, but they still kept calling me by the character’s name, so it felt rather strange.”

“Maru, you’re quite strict with yourself, aren’t you?”

“Personally, I don’t think that’s true, but what do you think?”

“I do feel like you’re lashing out at yourself from time to time. You’re doing plenty well now, but you seem quite urgent too. Though, maybe that was just during the acting classes.”

“Urgent, you say... I guess you’re correct about that. I’m actually quite eager to become successful right now too.”

“I think that’s good. For me, such obsession was what motivated me. It’s similar when I look around. There are kids who are fixated on success among the aspiring idols around me. And most of the time, it’s kids like them who succeed. After all, they’ll do anything to get it.”

“Did you do anything you can as well?”

“I spent my time passionately as an idol, and that’s how I got this opportunity to become a lead actor.”

“...I know that it might be rude and foolish of me to ask this, but should I try being an idol as well? I’ll rise to the top ranks first and then get the roles.”

“Hm.”

Sungjae looked at him with a piercing gaze. Maru looked back at him in a serious manner.

“From the perspective of a company, you won’t make the cut because of your face.”

“I knew it.”

“Right now, the softer-looking ones are the ones that work against people. Some places seem to be preparing idols that focus on masculinity, but it’s unknown whether the market is ready to accept that or not.”

“Do you also look at the trainees applying to NL Company from time to time?”

“It’s one of my important schedules.”

“Suddenly, you look like a big-shot now. Please take care of me later.”

“Likewise. Oh right. I heard that it’s going to be released next Wednesday.”

“What’s going to be released?”

“Director Park Joongjin’s movie. Didn’t you participate in that?”

“I did. But I didn’t know that it was going to be released.”

“I thought Miso-noona would have told you about it.”

“Looks like she’s quite busy with the wedding. Is it getting released next Wednesday?”

“Yeah. That makes it your 2nd film, right?”

“Yes. Though, I didn’t have many lines and just rolled around in the dirt in the mountains.”

“Go watch it and see if the action scene came out well.”

Maru rested his chin on his hand and sighed.

“I wonder when I will be able to stand in the same line as a director during movie previews.”

“Once you become a lead actor, of course.”

“I guess there’s a far and rocky road ahead of me.”

“It won’t take that long. Here, have a drink and cheer up.”

Maru faintly smiled at Sungjae who picked up the drink bottle.

Chapter 555

“What a dirty life. Aah, I wish a meteorite fell right on top of my head.”

Suyeon, who had been chuckling until just now, finally fell over. Just before she hit her head on the table, Geunsoo reached out and caught her head.

“I did think that she was overdrinking a little, and it really came to this, huh.”

“I think it’s about time we get up,” Maru said as he looked at Suyeon who had licked her lips.

Although she was strong with alcohol, it was natural that she got drunk since she drank without rest. Maru didn’t know if this was a part of her plan or not, but in any case, she was completely drunk.

“I want to cry.”

“Suyeon-noona. Get yourself together.”

“I don’t want to. Life’s too hard.”

“This woman turns pessimistic once she’s drunk huh. Woman, you should watch your mouth. Aren’t you trying to look pretty? Geunsoo-hyung is right next to you.”

“Ah right, Geunsoo-oppa’s here. I know, I know. I’m the bad bitch. I’m the bad girl.”

Suyeon leapt into Geunsoo’s embrace with a grin on her face. Maru paid his condolences to Geunsoo.

“I’m in charge of her?”

“Consider it as punishment for a popular man. Suyeon-noona, get on Geunsoo-hyung’s back.”

Geunsoo sighed before piggybacking Suyeon. At that moment, Maru saw Suyeon’s lips curve into a big smile. He didn’t say anything since she looked really happy.

“Sungjae-hyung. Let’s leave.”

Sungjae put on his baseball cap so that other people couldn’t see his face before putting on his hoodie as well. It would be incredibly hard to recognize him without getting up close.

“Maru. There’s a wallet in my pocket. Use the credit card in the wallet to pay.”

“Yes, sir.”

After paying the bill, Maru came out of the restaurant with the receipt. He saw the three sitting down under the parasol by the convenience store. They each held a hangover drink.

“You should call a chauffeur service and go home.”

“No. Sungjae and I are going to sleep there,” Geunsoo said as he pointed at an alley with motels in it.

“What do we do with Suyeon-noona?”

“Get her a taxi home.”

“No!”

Suyeon, who had her face buried in her arms on the table, suddenly woke up and shouted. She grabbed onto Geunsoo’s arm and said something in a weird voice. To sum it up, she said she couldn’t go home because her car was right in front of the restaurant. Maru didn’t know what the car being here had to do with not being able to go home, but the stubborn Suyeon looked like she was about to lie down on the street if they called for a chauffeur service.

“Fine, fine. I’ll grab a room for you as well, so go sleep there.”

“Yes! I’m sleeping here!”

She became docile after that. It took around two minutes for her to start snoring.

“There’s Miso-noona too, and there’s this girl. Do the women at JA all act like this when they’re drunk?”

“Don’t ask. I’m beginning to get suspicious myself.”

Sungjae laughed before pressing on Suyeon’s forehead. Suyeon seemed to be in deep sleep as she didn’t even budge.

“Geunsoo-hyung. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll grab two rooms, one for this embarrassment of a woman and one for me and Sungjae. Maru, do me a favor.”

Maru grabbed Suyeon’s left arm and Geunsoo grabbed her right.

“Sungjae-hyung, let me borrow your cap for a moment.”

He put the cap he got from Sungjae on Suyeon. Her long, disheveled hair covered most of her face, but they couldn't go wrong with too much caution.

“Sungjae, you should wait here. We don't want people catching you with us.”

Sungjae nodded at Geunsoo's words. Sungjae was the most well-known out of the four of them here. There would be disastrous consequences if a photo of him going into a motel leaked out. First up, Bada would bawl her eyes out. That was disastrous enough. Since it was such a horrible matter, they had to be prepared.

He and Geunsoo threw Suyeon into a motel room before leaving. It wasn't just an expression. They literally threw her on the bed.

“I'm sweating.”

“Me too.”

“She's such a hassle to deal with.”

“So you'll put her next to you?”

“No.”

“You're quite firm with that stance.”

“I'm trying to think of an excuse to get far away from her, but I can't because of the alcohol. Leaving JA is one method.”

“Suyeon-noonna might follow you out.”

“That sounds more scary than the horror movie I watched a few days ago.”

Maru had to stop as he was walking back to the convenience store from the motel. Geunsoo sighed.

“I think he got caught.”

“He got caught indeed.”

The convenience store was flocked with people. The women standing on the perimeters were raising their phones up high to take photos. Maru climbed the stairs next to the building and looked down at the convenience store. Sungjae was in the middle of everyone as though he was a gladiator in the middle of an arena. He professionally signed autographs and took photos. It was probably very hard for him to do that because he was drunk, but he looked immaculate.

“Should I try calling him?”

“Can he even pick up?”

“I'll try anyway.”

He grabbed onto the rails as he tried calling. He saw Sungjae take out his phone in the middle of the crowd.

“Can you take the call right now?”

-Ah, yes. Please speak. Uhm, can you be quiet for a second? This is an important call.

The whole alley turned quiet in an instant with a word from him. Maru saw Sungjae leave the crowd before speaking,

“Can you escape?”

-No. Even if I can, I won't be able to go to the motel. It seems like I'll have to take the taxi back for today.

“Okay. Popularity has its demerits, huh.”

-I can't help it. Oh, tell Geunsoo-hyung I said sorry. I'll be going back first. I think I won't be able to go home at all if I stay any longer.

“Alright. Have a safe trip home.”

He saw Sungjae wave from afar. He probably waved towards Maru's general direction.

“Sungjae-hyung says he'll take the taxi home. Also, he wanted to apologize to you.”

“That's a pity. I wanted to talk with him in a quiet room. He was too famous to be hidden with a single hoodie, huh.”

“Taking his cap off wasn't the best idea, it seems. But it's quite curious to see so many people gather in such a short time. He feels like a true celebrity.”

“You envious?”

“No. I can't get envious after seeing him getting almost squished to death. Wouldn't people recognize you as well?”

“Probably not.”

“Twilight Struggles became so controversial though.”

“Hey, you make me sad by saying that even though you know what happened.”

Maru smiled and nodded. Geunsoo, the third son in the movie, had his head smashed by the elder's hammer. As that scene was filled with blood and insults, it was switched to the next scene quickly, so it was hard to recognize any actors in the scene. When the camera showed Geunsoo from up close, his face was already covered in blood, so he was far from his normal immaculate self.

“Won't you get a lot of female fans like Sungjae-hyung if this movie goes well?”

“That sounds good. It's about time I buy my own house too, so I have to earn a lot of money.”

“Do you have some money saved up?”

“Actually, quite a lot.”

Geunsoo made a suspicious smile.

“You should get going too. I'll get a taxi for you so take that.”

Geunsoo took out a few ten thousand won bills and gave them to him. Maru accepted the money without refusing. They walked through the alley, which was now devoid of people after they all left, and went to the main street. They waved at the taxi across the street, but it just drove past as though it had a passenger already.

“Do you regret continuing acting?” Geunsoo asked from the side.

“Fortunately, or perhaps, unfortunately, I’ve never regretted it for now. Now that I think about it, it was you who planted the fear of acting in me.”

“Did I?”

“Are you going to pretend that you forgot? You called me all the way to the rooftop to lecture me.”

“So, did you not like that?”

“No, it was good. There aren’t many people who listen to other people so seriously and then advise them. Did I tell you? You’re on my list of the people I respect, you’re at the top ranks too.”

“I’m sorry. You are not in my list of cherished juniors though.”

“Well, I’ll strike your name off then.”

“I just put your name on it, so don’t strike me off. We’re family, you know?”

Geunsoo looked at his watch.

“Please go home and rest. I just have to take the taxi home.”

“Nah. Since I’m out here, I’ll sober up a little. It’s about time she woke up and started causing a fuss.”

As soon as he said those words, Geunsoo’s phone started ringing.

“You got a call?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“It keeps ringing.”

“You must be hearing things.”

A moment later, Geunsoo’s phone became quiet. Maru took out his own phone just in case. As he had expected, he immediately got a call. The caller was of course, Suyeon.

“You’re hallucinating. Don’t take that call.”

“How are you going to face the consequences?”

“I’ve changed my mind. Sungjae isn’t here, so I’ll just take the taxi home.”

“You’re running away? After throwing a woman in a motel room by herself?”

“As an accomplice, you should be on my side. Also, being with her just by myself is a little scary.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

Maru pressed the decline button and then asked.

“Is Geunseok doing well recently?”

“He’s much more docile now. He’s always been good at studying, and these days, he talks to me quite often. He’s much better than the sensitive brat from before.”

“That’s good. A friend of mine is worried sick about him, so it made me a little worried as well.”

“The kid named Jiseok, right?”

“You know him?”

“He comes around from time to time. We talked about the sitcom Jiseok was in until just a while ago. It’s good that such a bad kid has a good friend.”

“Yes, so fortunate.”

“Geunseok talks about you from time to time, too.”

“What does he say?”

“That you’re hateful.”

Maru smiled. Hearing that he was hateful put him at ease instead. If Geunseok said something like ‘sorry’, he would’ve doubted that.

“Tell me if something happens to you. I’m definitely willing to help you out,” Geunsoo said with a pat on his back. Maru nodded.

“Oh yeah, are you busy these days?”

“Me? Just moderately busy.”

“If you have the time, let’s go visit director Lee together. We need a delinquent role, and you seem fit for the job.”

“In the movie you’re shooting?”

“Yes. Actually, it was him who talked about it first. He had dibs on you when he saw Twilight Struggles.”

“Me?”

Geunsoo put on a thick smile and spoke,

“He wants to know who that cocky delinquent was. He said that the delinquent was cocky to the point that he wanted to meet the guy.”

* * *

“Why aren’t you picking up, dammit!”

Suyeon shouted at her phone, but there was no reply. She swayed as she walked towards the door and grabbed the knob, but at that moment, she felt like she couldn’t be bothered with anything. She just lied back down on bed before heavily breathing.

“I know, I know, okay? A bitch like me and love? That’s laughable.”

It was all a game. She would live like this until she became a grandma. One dog and one cat. She would eventually pass away like that. Aah, a beautiful life.

Suyeon clutched her aching head and closed her eyes. She faintly saw the door slowly open amidst her fading consciousness. No, was it even opening?

‘I don’t know. My head aches.’

Suyeon closed her eyes just like that.

* * *

Her mouth felt bitter. She reached out while still lying down, but the bottle of water that was always within reach, could not be reached. Only after waving her hand in empty air for a while did she realize that she was in a motel. She buried her face in the thick duvet and sighed. Why did she always get drunk first when she drank with Geunsoo? It was like that at the villa before, and this time as well. She couldn’t understand.

“But still, he really left me here, huh.”

Of course, she didn’t actually feel disappointed. She had expected it after all. She smiled senselessly and sat up. She yawned and started getting ready to leave when she saw a paper bag on the dresser. Suyeon tilted her head and looked at the contents.

-What made you feel so bad that it made you cry throughout the night? I couldn’t get any sleep because I was worried.

It was Geunsoo’s writing. Suyeon took out the contents of the bag. It was a bowl of porridge, and it was still warm.

“You really... make me unable to give up on you.”

She rubbed her nose. Her nose strangely tingled.

“Dammit, really. Really....”

It seemed that she couldn’t eat right away.

Suyeon reached out to the tissue box on the dresser.

Her nose still tingled.

Chapter 556

He had gained momentum. It now felt natural for him to go to the shooting set after school instead of going home. The change in his everyday life had now become so smooth that going home after normal classes felt weird to him.

And today, he finally threw his body into awkwardness. Maru was waiting for Bangjoo in front of the ticketing office. They originally planned to come together after school, but Bangjoo had said that he had something to do so he had Maru go ahead. It was Wednesday afternoon. Usually, he would be at the

acting club, the shooting set, or at school to shoot the short film with the film production club, but today, he left all that behind and came to the cinema.

Maru picked up a pamphlet before sitting down in the lounge. Lee Hyuk, Yoo Joongang, and Kwon Dayoon were drawn on it in black and white, standing side by side under the title 'Those Guys'. They were grabbing each other's hands, but the enraged expressions seemed to explain the relationship between the three. On the top left hand corner, it said 'Return of director Park Joongjin from Spring Calendar'. The director of this film was more well-renowned than the actors. The pamphlet advertised the director quite blatantly.

Maru looked at the people lined up outside the ticketing office. It was a pretty busy hour and there were a lot of couples. Most of them seemed to be wondering what they were going to watch. Among the titles airing right now, there was no 'big' movie. No foreign Blockbusters, nor any domestic ones with famous actors.

It was a night before the storm. The release lineup for May, which was next month, was crazy. Whether the publishers were confident, or they just screwed up the release timing, he did not know, but the titles that many people looked forward to would start airing in about 2 weeks time. 'Those Guys' hit this blank spot. Whether or not it would do well, Maru did not know.

'He's late.'

There was no need to hurry since 'Those Guys' was airing on screens 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 at different times, but Maru started getting worried since Bangjoo did not show up even after 30 minutes. He should have told him if his business took a long time, so Maru wondered what was going on.

At that moment, he got a phone call from Bangjoo. When he picked up the call, Bangjoo was saying that he had just arrived at the cinema while heavily breathing. Just then, Maru heard a not-so-unfamiliar voice amidst the heavy panting.

"Who did you br...."

Just as he said up to that point, he saw two boys opening the door for the emergency staircase. One was Bangjoo, who was on the phone, and the other, who stood next to him, was Chihwan.

"Seonbae-nim!"

"I'm here!"

Bangjoo's greeting was as loud as always, while Chihwan's greeting was a little less loud but still enough to attract attention. Maru groaned and ended the call.

"Why are you here?" Maru asked Chihwan.

"I wanted to watch it as well. Bangjoo seonbae-nim is the senior I like the most after you, Maru seonbae-nim."

"I was just about to go, but Chihwan said he wanted to watch. I helped him finish the props so that he could come. Of course, we got permission from Daemyung-seonbae."

Miso wasn't here today, so Daemyung was in charge of everyone. As Daemyung was pretty lenient, he would have a hard time holding Chihwan back if he asked earnestly.

"No wonder you were late. Are you sure you finished your job?"

"Daemyung seonbae-nim double-checked mine. I seem to be quite talented at sewing," Chihwan said proudly.

Bangjoo looked at Chihwan as though he was proud of him.

"Were you two always close?"

Since he rarely spent any time in the acting club, he did not know the relationship between the juniors. The two were similar in regards to the point that both of them were overflowing with energy, but just because they had similar personalities didn't necessarily mean that they were close.

"At first, I thought he was someone with no bone in him, having only his height, but he turned out to have quite a refreshing side to him."

"I thought that Bangjoo-seonbae was weak too at first because he was short, but I liked him after I found out that he's full of energy."

Both of them remarked similarly. It seemed that they were close enough to joke around with each other.

"Seonbae-nim. Let me watch it with you. I want to see you two acting."

Chihwan jumped around like an excited puppy on a snowy day. Bangjoo also got swept up by Chihwan's mood and jumped around.

Maru had a headache. He felt like he brought some toddlers to a theme park. What if I lose them, what if they cause trouble, what if there's an accident - he hadn't done anything, yet he felt tired already. Maru sighed in a small voice before walking towards the ticketing office.

"Bangjoo-seonbae, what kind of movie is this?"

"An acting movie. I had to roll around in the dirt in the mountains."

"Wow, did you use wires and things like that too?"

"For this one, I had to use my body instead of relying on contraptions. I was like Jackie Chan. There was total chaos when fighting in the mountains. It was summer too, so we were sweating throughout the whole shoot."

"Sweat and fists. A movie for a man, huh."

"An awesome one for sure."

"Will I get to see you in it?"

"Probably."

"Wow, you're a film actor."

“Stop that, you’re making me embarrassed.”

The people lined up outside the ticketing office looked back and giggled. Maru did not look back. He pretended that he didn’t even know them. His head was filled with the thought that he should choose a different screen from theirs to watch. Unfortunately, the thoughtless duo called out to him with ‘Maru-seonbae’ and caught up to him.

“Seonbae-nim. I will buy the popcorn.”

“Then I’ll buy the coke!”

“Good. Let’s go, Chihwan.”

“Yes, seonbae.”

Maru stroked down his face with his hand. The lady at the counter, who was asking him which seats he wanted, chuckled. She calmed her expression and asked him to assign the seats, but there was still a smile around her eyes.

“I don’t know them.”

An awkward excuse subconsciously escaped his mouth. Maru nodded towards the lady who gave him the tickets while saying ‘yes’ with a smile, before turning around.

“A man should have onion-flavored popcorn!”

“Good! Onion!”

He heard voices from the convenience store far away.

How should he put this... It felt like Bangjoo was let loose. Maru realized how scary friends who clicked together could become. Chihwan was way more cheerful than normal as well. No, he was beyond cheerful. He looked mentally ill.

“The two of you, you really shouldn’t walk around together.”

“Why?”

“Why is that?”

Do you really have to ask? - these words came up to his throat, but Maru suppressed them. It would be fine as long as he wasn’t involved. It would be much more relaxing for him if he thought that he was just taking a couple of ponies for a walk.

“Don’t shout inside the theater.”

“Seonbae-nim. That’s obvious.”

“Seonbae. That’s called etiquette. We aren’t kids.”

Maru quietly calmed himself down as he watched the two enter the theater while laughing.

“It’s my bad for asking to watch it together.”

He shook his head and walked into the theater. After looking around the theater for a bit, he sat down on his assigned seat. Bangjoo gave him a cup of coke and put a bag of popcorn on his knees saying that it was his. After about 10 minutes of ads, the lights dimmed.

Maru looked at Bagjoo's facial expression. Even though he was so excited, he was now looking at the screen very nervously. That sense of nervousness seemed to be contagious as Chihwan, who sat next to Bangjoo, also looked at the screen without saying anything.

The shoot for this movie was done without a script and everything was done on the fly with instructions from the director. Maru did not know how the movie went, nor how it ended. He looked forward to - and on one hand, was uneasy about - how complete the film would be, when literally everything was planned out.

One hit wonder. This term was often used in the music industry to refer to composers or lyricists who left behind just one, incredibly good, song. The movie industry wasn't that different. The reason the word 'genius' wasn't used was because the directors who created incredibly good pieces disappeared after leaving behind just one work. Director Park Joongjin was also dubbed a genius with 'Spring Calendar', but ever since that, he created experimental works, turning away from the masses and capital.

This was an era where money controlled everything. Even the purity of the title of genius would turn cloudy if there wasn't enough money to back it up. Director Park Joongjin had returned to the commercial movie industry. For *Twilight Struggles*, Maru could say with confidence that it was the combined work of the director, staff, and the actors, but 'Those Guys' was different. Bluntly put, the success or failure rested on the director's shoulders alone. It was a one-man show from him after all.

If the movie succeeded, it was thanks to the director, and if it failed, the director would take the blame. This directing style was just that extreme.

Maru was curious. He wondered if the director dubbed a genius, albeit not willingly, would continue his reputation as a genius. Also, what kind of direction he would show in the final outcome.

The shoot was quite short, but during that time, Joongjin had never shown any hesitation. He looked like he was just bringing the perfectly clear picture from his head to reality. He shouted 'action' and 'cut' without any hesitation.

Eventually, light returned to the darkened screen.

Maru crossed his arms and focused on the film.

The start was the sound of a wave.

* * *

"I'll be off to the toilet!"

Chihwan went to the bathroom as soon as he left the theater. Maru looked back inside the theater, which was giving off faint light inside.

"It's really well-made. Really, really well-made."

Maru understood just a little how direction can overwhelm acting. The story of the film was stereotypical. Some might even say that it was on the level of a B-movie. This film did not contain character reflections, philosophical content, or satire. It just started and ran towards the end.

Friendship, betrayal, and revenge. This was something that was talked about for thousands of years, and they were still being used as main plots nowadays as well. The recent trend was to give a twist to boring clichés to make them look new, but director Park Joongjin seemed to be laughing at that notion as he directly showed everything. There was no foreshadowing, nor any kind of props that represented a character's current state of mind. In fact, he even added narration to prevent any misunderstandings. To be precise, he did not give the audience any time to think.

Being drunk on watching.

Maru wanted to judge the movie as such. An absurdly close friendship between two men, an understandable betrayal, then revenge. Plus the love story of a woman who was stuck in between the two of them. Joongjin seemed to be telling the audience to not think about anything as he just mercilessly dragged the plot from beginning to end before putting it in the goal.

"It feels a little...vain."

Bangjoo suddenly said. Maru knew what he meant by that. They ran around the harbor like their life depended on it, and they rolled around in the dirt in the mountain for half a day. The scenes they had to get injured to shoot, were mostly edited.

Even that edited part was muted the whole scene, so the voices of the actors could not be heard. About 10 seconds. That was how much their effort amounted to in the final work.

"But it was still good. It was really cool. The scenes just flashed past without any sound. I even forgot that I was in that scene and just kept watching."

"It's about 10 seconds, but I'm good with that. The people watching this movie will definitely remember those 10 seconds."

"But it still feels off. I understood when I watched the movie. That director should be able to shoot this kind of movie regardless of who was there. I lose my energy when I think about how the director does not need actors."

Bangjoo dazed out as he looked at the theater. The lights were coming back on in the darkened room.

In a state of deep immersion, muting the whole movie for about 10 seconds should have been a big gamble. The silence increased momentary concentration, but it would break the mood if it was too long. In that sense, Joongjin distributed the time perfectly. He used the muting to make the audience tense up even more and just progressed on with the story without any room for rest. The calm music just before the silent part should have been intentional as well. The silence, which he thought was just a rest, actually made him tense up even more after all.

Then there was his way of handling people. He turned the idol singer Kwon Dayoon into an adorable lady. It was to the point that Maru couldn't think of any other actress that fit the role. However, it wasn't that Dayoon's acting was good. He knew because he saw her at the shoot. She was bad at acting.

Only when Miso coached her for dozens of minutes before every shoot could she barely get a cut done. She was just that bad at it.

Yet the lady on the screen looked adorable. The plot and the direction of the movie made her perfect. To be honest, it felt like a scam. According to what he saw from her during the shoot, Dayoon was definitely not an adorable lady.

“You two, why do you look so dark?” Chihwan returned from the bathroom and had asked.

Maru shrugged and started walking.

Joongjin denied that he was a genius and disliked being called such, but this movie seemed like it would give him the genius title once again.

It was quite ironic.

Chapter 557

His cheeks felt cold. Junmin stroked down his cheeks with his palms. Something slippery could be felt. Amidst his hazy vision, he saw Mint sticking out its short tongue as much as possible.

“I feel like you’re gaining wrinkles by the day.”

He grabbed the bulldog’s - Mint’s - cheeks and stretched them apart. He was suddenly reminded of the fact that this innocent dog’s breed was born because of humans’ selfish desires.

“Today, I’ll give you your favorite as a special service.”

After stretching his jaw once, he got up from the bed. He pulled open the blinds to chase away the darkness. A slight green colored light seeped through the blades of the blind. It was a color that couldn’t be seen in Seoul. He brought Mint, Pansy, and Rose to the front yard. This place was a villa in Gyeongju where no engine noises could be heard. It was a quiet place where the number of cars and people passing by for an entire day combined would not go past 10.

“Someone might think that I’ve been starving you for days.”

After watching the dogs bury their noses into their plates to eat ravenously, he went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. He had prepared breakfast for his dogs before his own. Junmin wondered what the life of a dog owner was supposed to be like before deciding to stop thinking about it. A salad with a pinch of almonds, one slice of baguette, a boiled egg, half a slice of chicken breasts, and lastly, a banana. He felt his stamina was depleting rapidly ever since he reached fifty, so around that time, he started looking after his health more. He had to drink because of business and he considered smoking to be the food of his soul. Those two were his companions for a lifetime, so he could not abandon them. Perhaps the reason he started eating healthy was to compensate because he wasn’t able to give up those two. I am eating such healthy food so drinking and smoking should be fine - something like that.

After eating breakfast, he left the house. He put the three dogs that were looking at him in leashes and took a trip around the neighborhood. Though, while he called it a ‘neighborhood’, it was just some villas positioned far apart.

He relied on the dogs climbing up the hills to move. They moved quite quickly despite having short legs. They were very restless. Halfway up the mound, which was too small to be called a mountain and too tall to be called a hill, Jumin looked down at his villa.

“This should be considered a successful life.”

Some dogs and a house under his name in a relaxing place. There were also friends - or perhaps enemies at times - who would come at a moment's notice. According to the views of society, he had a pretty decent life. Junmin sat down for about ten minutes before standing up.

It was about time to go.

To the person who was supposed to enjoy all this luxury.

He unleashed the dogs inside the house before opening the closet. It was a large closet, but there was only a set of yellow suits. He got them on clearance, twenty years ago. The necktie was grey and had kimchi stains on it. He also took out the flat cap next to the necktie. He took out the shoes which had their soles all worn out before heading towards the door. He opened the cabinet which had one of its handles missing and took out a stick which was about an arm's length. Inside was a small sickle.

“Dad will be going out for a moment.”

He said goodbye to the dogs who came all the way to the door and sat down before opening the door. The 23rd of April. After rolling the date in his mouth once, he started walking. He walked away from the villa and towards the bus stop. He then got on the village bus, which only came once every hour.

He smelled something nostalgic inside the rattling bus. He rested his head on the window and took deep breaths. Riding this bus made him feel like time was going backwards.

“If only that was true.”

The destination entered his eyes. Junmin pressed the bell and stood in front of the back door. An elderly lady sitting next to the back door smiled at him. Junmin couldn't reply to that smile. He just nodded before getting off the bus. He smelled cow dung from afar. The moos of the cows could be heard as well.

He went to the small shop next to the bus stop. The elderly man who was dozing off flinched and woke up before looking at him. Maybe he didn't like customers at this hour? Junmin apologized for waking him up before buying a bottle of soju, two drinking glasses, a bag of shrimp crackers, and a packet of Anseongtang-myun.

“Did you perhaps come here last year as well?”

“I come here every year.”

“I knew it. My memory isn't that bad.”

Unlike the rather cold first meeting, the elderly man in charge of the shop saw him off warmly. It seemed that he was celebrating that his memory hadn't gone bad. Junmin left the shop after saying that he would visit next year as well.

He moved along the paved paths. A red sedan drove past him. It looked like a car someone young would drive.

He turned right after the big tree that everyone in the village called the 'Big Elder'. From now on, it would really be just mountains. All the buildings that could be glimpsed in the left corner of his eyes disappeared leaving only trees, tall grass, as well as a signpost that the villagers placed in his view. The signpost said one thing: watch out for boars.

Indeed, there were boars in this area. Junmin faintly smiled before walking onto the path with tall grass surrounding it. Junmin kept walking deeper and deeper. The flat terrain eventually turned into a gradient, and Junmin started sweating as well.

"It's about time the Earth is wiped out."

He saw during the morning news that it would climb up to 28°C during the day. 28 degrees in the middle of April? The Earth might explode soon. He used his handkerchief to wipe his sweat as he walked. That continued for twenty minutes until the trees that covered the sky cracked apart and he arrived at a wide open space. In the middle of the basin-like ground, there was one mound, a grave to be exact.

Junmin walked towards the burial mound. In front of the mound, he sighed a little. The tall grass seemed like they were going to poke his eyes. He reached inside his pocket. The cotton work gloves he put inside last year were still there. He put them on before pulling out the tall grass first. As for the thick ones, he used the sickle to cut them. It didn't take that long. Not to boast, but he was quite proficient when it came to cleaning graves.

"The weather has gotten quite hot."

He took off his gloves and sat in front of the grave. He used a handkerchief to wipe the marble tombstone. His gaze lingered on the cleaned tombstone for a long while.

Jung Haejoo - he ran his finger across the engraved name.

"Hope it's a little cool over there."

He leaned against the mound and looked up at the sky. The sky was depressingly blue.

"Don't you feel thankful that I come every year?"

He stretched his legs out and got some rest. A pleasant wave of wind blew, cooling his sweat. After regaining some of his stamina, Junmin took out the shrimp crackers and the Anseongtang-myun. He opened the shrimp crackers and laid them out, and then crushed the ramyun before mixing it with the powder. These were the snacks that Haejoo liked to eat while drinking. Despite being young, her taste in snacks was pretty old.

Junmin poured a glass of soju and poured it over the burial mound before drinking one himself. The alcohol that went down his throat felt bitter like a grass root. Junmin frowned because of the bitter taste.

"For some strange reason, drinking here makes it taste really bad. Is it because of you? Or is it because of my guilty conscience?"

He poured another glass before scattering it.

"I say this every time, but what would you be like right now if the traffic accident didn't happen that day? I really can't imagine it. Would you have gone to Hollywood? No, well, you didn't like studying, so I guess English was a little hard for you. Perhaps you might have become one of the numerous actors who disappeared without making a name for themselves."

He emptied the glass in his mouth. It tasted way too bitter.

"I really don't like 'what if's. Haejoo, you should know that as well, about how much I despise uncertain things. Despite that, you know, I keep thinking about those 'what if's. What if I went to the hospital quickly, what if the traffic accident didn't happen, what if you stayed at home that day, and what if... you didn't meet me in the first place."

Perhaps you might have lived - Junmin reminded himself of Haejoo's laugh. It had been 16 years, but her laugh was still vivid to him. The twenty-two-year-old girl was more beautiful than anyone, making him desire her. That was Haejoo, who was eternally a little girl to Junmin no matter how much time passed.

He took a portion of the snacks in front of the grave. He then poured a glass of soju and put it next to them.

"These days, your juniors are doing their best. Thanks to them, the company's getting bigger. I'll bring them here once. You've never seen them before, but I hope you can take care of them. They are the people that work in the company that's named after you. I really wanted to go with AJ, but that was already registered as a company. Actress Jung Haejoo or Jung Haejoo Actress doesn't really make a difference, so please understand. I know you must be getting fed up listening to all this since I tell you this every time I come here, but please listen to me anyway. I really don't have anything else to talk about."

After looking at the grave without a word for a while, Junmin took out his phone from his pocket. It didn't feel like a lot of time had passed, but it was already past 4 in the afternoon.

"I'll get going now. Have a good rest."

After cleaning around the grave one more time, he dusted the mud off his pants and turned around. Just then, he saw someone walking up the mountain. That path wasn't a hiking route. There was only one reason for its existence - to lead to this place. Junmin pressed down on the flat cap that he had taken off before. He wondered who it was. It couldn't be Haejoo's parents, because she didn't have any family members. The figure kept coming closer.

There was a reaction from the other party as well. Junmin narrowed his eyes. The moment his aged eyes discerned who that person was, he exclaimed.

"I always thought it was strange. The grave was way too clean. It didn't take that long for me to realize that someone's been cleaning this place right before the date of her death. The 23rd. That was the day of the accident. I did think it would be you, so I didn't bother coming. But I did come today, just in case. So it turns out I was right after all."

"It's been a long time since we met in private."

“Yes, president. It really has.”

Junmin shook hands with Ahn Joohyun.

“What’s that?” Joohyun asked as she looked at the plastic bag in his hand.

Junmin said that they were shrimp crackers and Anseongtang-myun. When he did, Joohyun shrugged and opened her own plastic bag. There was a bag of shrimp crackers and Anseongtang-myun as well. What was different was that there was rice wine instead of soju.

“I’ll get going first.”

Junmin walked past her.

“You’re going already?”

“I did what I came here to do. Also, you probably don’t like me being here.”

Joohyun had treated Haejoo like a real sister. Junmin still couldn’t forget Joohyun’s eyes that looked at him at the hospital on that day - the day Haejoo died. It’s all because of you - the high school girl’s eyes that just witnessed the death of her elder sister seemed to be saying those words.

“It’s been quite a long time,” Joohyun said.

Junmin did not stop.

“Back then, I needed someone to resent. I was too young to endure if I didn’t do that. No, perhaps being young might just be an excuse. Maybe I just didn’t want to admit that very situation was real.”

Hearing those words, Junmin stopped and quietly turned around.

“Come. So that unni doesn’t feel lonely. Or do you still find me hard to deal with?”

Joohyun took out the bottle of rice wine.

“Haven’t we aged quite a lot to be shy? I’m thirty four and you are...”

Junmin quietly replied ‘fifty-one’ when he saw her eyes staring at him.

“How about it? We’re old enough now, so shouldn’t it be fine? It’s not like we’re at an age where we would get hurt just because we reveal what we’re thinking. Well, if you still don’t want to, I can’t stop you.”

Her faint smile overlapped with Haejoo’s. Junmin nodded before turning around fully.

“Unni, I’m here. Moreover, there’s one more person today. What? He came here just now? It’s fine. You always liked it rowdy,” Joohyun said as she raised the rice wine above her head.

Chapter 558

“Have you come every year?”

“I have.”

“Unni must have liked it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“No, unni should have liked it. She liked it every time you came to the theater after all.”

“I see.”

Junmin quietly looked at the grave. Joohyun poured a glass of rice wine and gave it to him.

“Do you still not contact director Park Joongjin?”

“I don’t think I will ever do that. I did see him because of business before, but he’s still hard to deal with.”

“Still in a cold war?”

“Rather than a cold war, it’s me who’s being one-sidedly hated.”

“Of course. Unni liked you, after all. Director Park can only hate you. Even I would.”

“It’s all in the past.”

Joohyun checked that Junmin empty his glass before drinking a sip herself. She usually did not drink any rice wine. She only drank this bittersweet drink when she came to visit her unni.

“Did you know that director Park’s movie was released?”

“I watched it already.”

“If you did, give me your impression.”

“It’s well-made. I’m sure that that fellow’s talent has reached the skies. I can’t think of him as a director who hasn’t been working in film for years. Being trendy is one thing, but his techniques really show why he’s called a genius.”

“You couldn’t think about anything else, right?”

“That’s the most suitable expression, I guess.”

Joohyun thought back to the movie ‘Those Guys’ which she watched a few days ago. It seemed to be the textbook version of a refreshing revenge story. Actually, the movie itself was very boring when looked at in parts. There were many clichés that were outdated to the point that they weren’t even used in children’s comics. When compared to a man, this movie was wearing a stereotypical suit and shoes, and a fedora to top it off. It was fated to be butchered by critics. There would be no one who would be willing to call it a masterpiece of the ages. It was a repetition of clichés and stereotypes and contained nothing new. The conclusion was very ordinary as well. Critics would use their words to dismantle the movie into pieces before throwing them in the trash.

However, what if it was viewed from the commercial and popularity perspective? Being typical was instead a sign that it was proven to work. No gourmet could deny basic condiments. Even the most intricate of sauces were likely to be just a different ratio of existing additives. Taste was a matter of a suitable combination, and this movie created a splendid taste using a fantastic combination. Another word for that taste was ‘fun’.

“Shooting a movie with director Park wasn’t something so fun. The result was good, but I didn’t feel like I was the one who produced that result.”

“At least you can complain about it. I know what happened during the shoot for ‘Spring Calendar’.”

“Back then, director Park was quite desperate. He was laughing like he always did, but he didn’t look like he had any leisure. Well, it wasn’t surprising since that movie was probably created in memory of Haejoo-unni.”

Joohyun looked at the flowers blooming at the foot of the mound.

A flower that held up its wide petals proudly among the tenacious grass. Yes, unni had such an atmosphere as well.

‘Spring Calendar’. To Joohyun, that movie was a precious one that changed her life. The event where she proved her skills as an actor was a short play, but she was loved by the public thanks to Spring Calendar.

She had known director Park Joongjin since she was pretty young. When she was in high school, she always visited the theater Haejoo was in. Joohyun liked plays, but she liked Haejoo more than that. She liked the Haejoo since she always welcomed her whenever she went there and respected her since she shone more brightly than anyone else on stage.

Haejoo loved that small theater troupe that borrowed a small underground room in the corner of Daehak-ro to operate. Of course, Joohyun cherished them as well. The people working there were like family to her.

One of the people that supported the theater troupe was director Park Joongjin. He did not show up a lot. The director showed up very rarely to the point that even Joohyun, who went there every day, barely had any recollection. The time she realized that the reason such a small-scale theater troupe without a lot of customers could last so long was because of Joongjin was not long after she found out his name. What she also realized at that time was that Joongjin, who worked in the financial district and drove an expensive-looking car, liked Haejoo. She realized that with one look when she found Joongjin quietly looking at Haejoo from the dark spot in the audience seats. However, Joohyun knew very well that his feelings could not reach Haejoo. The straightforward Haejoo-unni was straightforward when it came to love as well. Her love was directed not at the financial man with a solid background, but at the man wearing a yellow suit who visited their troupe quite a lot.

Joohyun looked at Junmin as she ate a shrimp cracker. The yellow suit. It was the same suit she saw 17 years ago. The person that always came to Haejoo-unni and told her that she had to become a bigger actress.

“So you still have that suit, huh?”

“It’s rather embarrassing that you know about it.”

“Whether then or now, I really don’t like that color. Unni really didn’t have a good eye.”

“For what?”

“Nothing, talking to myself.”

When Joohyun found out that the sweet girl, aged twenty-two, was in love with a man over thirty years old, she turned pale in fright and bombarded Haejoo with questions. It was probably back then that she started disliking president Lee Junmin. Back then, the Junmin in Joohyun's eyes was a total scammer. Someone who had lived as a nameless actor until his thirties had given up on becoming successful as an actor and switched to management, suddenly went up to Haejoo saying that she could become a star, so there was no way she could look at him in a good way.

The man wasn't even funny. However, Joohyun's thoughts changed a few months later. As Haejoo spent more time with Junmin, her acting skills rose drastically. She knew that Haejoo was good before, but even Joohyun back then, who was a beginner in acting, could tell that she was improving to the point that it couldn't be called an improvement anymore; it was more like she was leapfrogging.

Energy returned to the theater troupe. Everyone waited expectantly for Haejoo's debut. What put an end to the days that felt like everything was going to go well, was an unexpected accident. 23rd of April. It was today. After talking with Haejoo over the phone about how her debut was decided, Joohyun returned to studying but was called back not long later. She got a call from a woman she didn't know, and she was told that she was called from the hospital. Joohyun's memories were a little blank after that. When she came to herself, she was sitting in front of the surgery room. Haejoo did not have any family members. The members of the theater troupe, who had hurried to the hospital, signed as her guardian, and Joongjin came after that. Junmin was the last one to arrive. He was holding a bouquet.

Joohyun knew that the cause of the traffic accident wasn't that man. However, her thoughts and emotions played separately. On that day, she glared at Junmin as though she would kill.

When her unni died without lasting a single day, Joohyun resolved - though she didn't know why - that she would do acting. In retrospect, perhaps she wanted to continue Haejoo's incomplete dream.

After that, she heard the news that the theater troupe was going to close down. It was around that time that Joongjin quit his work and started a restaurant. Joohyun visited Joongjin's restaurant once. Since he was someone who cheered for and loved Haejoo from afar, she felt worried. Joongjin, who she hadn't met in a long time, was watching the counter with a bored expression. The sparkly eyes he showed when he visited the theater were all but gone. She had talked to him as well, but Joongjin only said that life was boring. He had changed into someone who had lost all interest in life.

On the other hand, Junmin became incredibly famous. All the actors he came into contact with had become superstars and could be seen on TV every day. He even earned the title 'maestro' of digging up new talent. Joohyun was reminded of Haejoo-unni whenever she saw the name Lee Junmin on TV. Perhaps because of that, she felt angry. When she became an adult, she understood that Haejoo-unni's death was not Junmin's fault, but she felt so sad when she looked at the man who led a brilliant life even without her.

It was around that time that she started becoming obsessed with becoming successful as an actress. Simultaneously, she was cast in a short play. Then after that, Joongjin, who suddenly showed up saying that he would become a director, asked her to appear in his film as a supporting character. Joohyun accepted. She liked the scenario, and she did not want to reject the request of an old acquaintance.

From a financial man to a restaurant owner. Joongjin had no affiliation with directing films and treated actors like machine parts in the shoot. You just have to follow my instructions - he wanted living and

moving props. The lead actress was dissatisfied at first but became more obedient as the shoot progressed. Joohyun also listened to him obediently during the beginning, however, the moment she realized that the acting method he wanted to see looked very similar to a certain person, she opposed him. Joongjin aimed for the ideal; by recreating the dead unni's image through another actress.

A movie in remembrance of Haejoo - Joongjin mentioned those words at a private occasion. Hearing those words made Joohyun even more unable to act like a machine. It wasn't that she didn't like Joongjin's ways. It was just that she wanted to honor her with the greatest acting possible. The unni that Joongjin saw was definitely different from the one she remembered, and Joohyun acted the unni that she saw.

As a result of that, she got the nickname 'the supporting actress that gobbled up the main actress', which wasn't even funny. Something terrible happened right after that, but she managed to overcome it.

"Spring Calendar should've been a commemorative piece," Junmin said.

"Did director Park tell you that?"

"No, we aren't close enough to talk about such things. I just realized while I was watching. When I looked at the actors in the movie, I could only think of one person. If you think about it, the title was a dead giveaway. Spring Calendar. In the last scene, the calendar wasn't flipped over from April. The film should have been created solely to show that one cut."

"If she watched that movie in heaven, would she have liked it?"

"Probably. Haejoo was someone who liked everything after all."

"That's true."

The conversation stopped there. Junmin spoke after a long period of silence.

"Sorry. For making you lose someone you loved."

"That's a really late apology. Plus, you know that it wasn't necessary. Also, everyone was sad that we lost her."

Joohyun looked at Junmin. Junmin slowly nodded.

"Can I ask you one thing?"

"Go ahead."

"Is it because of her that you aren't getting married?"

"Probably."

Joohyun laughed. She felt that the last bits of bitter feelings she had towards Junmin had dissolved away. At that moment, Junmin's phone rang. Seeing him trying to reject the call, Joohyun quickly spoke,

"Take it. It might be something important. You are the president of a company after all."

Junmin took the call. After a few minutes of talking over the phone, he hung up.

"I wish I could talk to you more, but I need to get going."

"It's fine. It was me who held you back in the first place."

Junmin turned around and walked away.

Just as Joohyun faintly smiled while looking at the drinking glass placed in front of Haejoo's tombstone, she was suddenly reminded of the name of the boy related to Haejoo-unni's acting.

"Uhm, president."

"What is it?"

"Do you remember what Haejoo-unni said about her acting?"

"About her acting?"

"That there are two separate egos inside her - one focuses on instinctive acting, and one focuses on watching over the other."

Hearing that, Junmin made a longing face.

"I do. It was a rather curious story."

"I know someone who said the same thing as well. He works for you too. Han Maru, you should keep watching him. If he wasn't lying, he might shine like her one day."

After finishing those words, Joohyun looked at the white flower at the foot of the mound.

She longed for her unni's laughter even more than usual today.

Chapter 559

"Come in," Sora said as she walked inside.

Maru took his shoes off as he looked around the inside. This apartment complex, which was located around 20 minutes away from the school by bus, belonging to the more expensive real estate in Suwon, was Sora's home. He did expect that she was well-off from how she bought the items necessary for the shoot with her own money, as well as paying for some of the snacks.

"It's wide."

"This looks good."

The people from the film production club remarked.

"We'll take a bit of a break before starting the shoot immediately. We don't have much time, so we have to start shooting as quickly as possible."

Sora took out some drinks from the fridge and put them on the table. Maru wanted to have a leisurely time drinking, but he drank it in one gulp when Sora looked at him as though to make him hurry. This little director loved labor, to the point that it was a little cruel.

"You done?"

The film production club told her to wait, but Sora took away the drinks.

“Looks like you’re done drinking. Let’s start the shoot immediately.”

“Right now?” Maru asked.

He wanted to rest for at least 10 minutes.

“You didn’t forget who was responsible for us running out of time, right?”

“Looks like I said the wrong thing. Well then, let’s get started.”

Due to the additional shoot for episode 13 of the drama, the film production club’s schedule was delayed a little. Although it was only an extracurricular activity at school, he was in the film as the main character, so he couldn’t make excuses. Since they were running out of time, he had no choice but to decrease the overall time by increasing the density. If they shoot without any NGs, they should be able to make it in time without worries.

“Which room are we using?”

“This one.”

They walked into a small room located between the kitchen and the living room. An empty room with minimal furniture greeted them.

“It was originally used as a storage room, but I cleaned it up a little. I had to visit around five to six furniture stores to get those pointy clothes hangers. I fell in love with them at first sight because they looked so dry.”

Sora put a set of school uniforms on the clothes hangers before stepping back. From the smile on her face, it seemed that she was satisfied with it.

“This is the alarm clock. It looked too new, so I rubbed it against the floor. Pretty good, huh?”

Maru picked up the crude-looking alarm clock. There were minor scratches and dents on the face of the black alarm clock. It looked used.

“Did you prepare these all by yourself?”

“Well, it is my house after all. I couldn’t really get any help from the seniors, so I had to do it by myself.”

Hearing her words, the people from the film production club praised her. Sora said that it was nothing, but she clearly looked pleased.

Maru looked at the electric heater mat on the floor as well as the waist-height drawers. The electric heater mat also looked quite old.

“I got that from the next house over since they were going to throw it out. Apparently, the lights turn on, but it doesn’t become warm. It looks pretty decent as a prop for a main character who’s not well-off, right?”

“If the director likes it, that’s that. What about these drawers?”

"I walked around the neighborhood and brought one from someone who was moving away. I got it for free when I said that I'll put on the stickers and throw it out."

"Terrific."

Maru tried lying down. He thought that it might smell bad, but it actually smelled quite good. It seemed that it had been washed. He turned his head up. There were some stained newspapers on the ceiling.

"I tried to make it look moldy, so I stacked some newspapers and tried painting it. I quite liked it when I first put them up there," Sora said as she lied down next to him.

Maru told the people from the film production club to try lying down.

"What do you think everyone? Looks like the director wants to shoot that," Maru asked.

"Isn't that a little too exaggerated?"

"The newspaper does make it look a little off."

Ando spoke last,

"Let's take them off."

Maru looked at Sora who was next to him. She, who was looking at the ceiling while lying down, just sighed before sitting up.

"Alright. I'll take them off."

"If you really want to try expressing mold, buy a new sheet of wallpaper and try it on top of that. It doesn't take that long if you just make a part of it and stick it on the wall. If it's too hard by yourself, there are always others to help you," Maru said.

"No. I'll just paint directly. We're going to shoot all the main character's home scenes today, so I don't have any time to decorate them right now. I want to focus on producing the film."

Sora bit on her thumb before leaving the room. Maru looked at Ando. Ando just shrugged before saying "You know that she's a reckless girl."

"I think we should apply some of this and rub it."

What Sora brought were some cosmetics. She brought a chair from the kitchen and climbed on top of it before opening the mascara.

"You're going to do it directly?" Maru asked while narrowing his eyes.

Even if this room was used as storage, Sora's parents probably would not want the wallpapers to get dirty.

"It's fine. I won't get scolded over something like this," Sora said with confidence.

She probably meant that her usual actions were proper and that her parents would overlook this kind of thing, but to Maru, it sounded like she caused so much trouble that this wasn't anything much.

"Sora's parents must be having a hard time," Ando said in a small voice.

Maru nodded.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, I didn’t say anything. Also, don’t paint it too thick. It will be obvious.”

“Okay. Ando-seonbae, how does it look?”

Sora used her fingers to apply the mascara. After turning off the lights, it looked like mold.

“That’s pretty good,” Ando said.

Sora climbed down from the chair before wiping her hands on some tissue. There was still some black stuff left, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“Then shall we start right away? Maru-seonbae. Are you okay with that?”

“What about the clothes?”

“I’ll give you a t-shirt and some pants. They should fit you just fine.”

He received the clothes from Sora before going to the bathroom to get changed. The grey t-shirt with its neck slightly stretched out, as well as some brown shoes that looked like they could have been bought for cheap at the marketplace. As for the size, they fit him perfectly. Sora was very awkward and everything she had was incomplete during the planning stage, but now that the shoot had started, she really knew her stuff. Without any help from the film production club, she managed to get the props and the background done. Her passion had to be acknowledged.

“I just woke up, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do I just go with my current hair?”

“No, I already have that ready.”

Sora brought some hair wax and a hairdryer.

“Maru-seonbae. How do you sleep usually?”

Maru did not reply and just lied down. He used the pillow to support his neck and laid upright.

“Aren’t you sleeping a little too much like a log?”

“This posture is good for the waist.”

“The waist?”

“Let’s not mind the minor details. Anyway, if you don’t like the posture, just say it. Should I curl up on my side?”

“I think that’ll be better to express the main character’s introverted personality. Try curling up like a pill bug.”

Maru did as Sora said. Sora, who was staring at him from above him, said that he was okay now.

“I think I should touch up this side and this side. Press this side and ruffle that side.”

Whiiiiii - the hairdryer spat out hot air. Ando came up to him and pressed down on the left side of his head. Meanwhile, Sora used the wax to ruthlessly roughen up the hair on his right.

“I think that should do.”

Maru looked in the mirror to check his hair. Even if he did a headspin in his sleep, his hair would look better than this.

“It’ll die down a little once you lie down, so it doesn’t matter. Let’s start the shoot. As for the lights, I’ll use this flashlight instead. Let’s try shooting for now, and I’ll adjust the lights if there’s too much shadow. As for the camera, it will open the door, enter the room and scan the whole room from the ceiling to the floor before looking at you. Maru-seonbae, just move a little while you’re asleep. That is one cut, and in the next cut, we’ll place the camera on the floor and have a close-up of Maru-seonbae’s sleeping face.”

Sora clapped before shouting standby.

* * *

He held up the camera with his left hand and covered the body with his right. He put his left arm right against his side and positioned his elbow like he was putting it between his ribs. His left arm started aching immediately, but the shaking of the camera should stop with this. When he first got into this position, he couldn’t last for five minutes, but now, he was able to maintain this posture for a pretty long time.

Ando walked into the room upon Sora’s gesture. Sora was not standing in front of the monitor but was right next to him. A girl’s breath could be felt on his cheeks, but his heart did not race at all. He had gotten used to this reckless girl’s actions. He reminded himself of Sora’s instructions and quietly scanned the ceiling. During the past few days, when Maru was busy shooting the drama, Sora just showed up at the club before heading straight home. He thought that she would be resting at home, but it turned out that she had gotten everything ready to shoot at her house. Had she told the club about it, everyone else would’ve been willing to help out. Ando felt a mix of disappointment and pride as he slowly moved the camera angle down.

Maru, who was lying down like it was his own house, was on the screen. The club members had tried shooting this scene to play around while looking at the scenario. They thought that they should be able to get a pretty good picture since lying down didn’t really require any technique, but the video they saw after they shot it was incredibly shabby and awkward. It was then that they realized that even lying down required acting skills.

‘He’s an actor alright.’

He didn’t show up on TV for nothing. Maru rolled over naturally. He did not mutter to himself or frown exaggeratedly. Those were things that naturally came to the mind when thinking about ‘acting sleeping’, but Maru did not do any of them. Just sleep - he seemed to be focusing his whole attention on that.

“Cut,” Sora said in a small voice.

"I didn't look at the monitor because of the movement line, but I don't think we need to take another shot for this."

Ando looked at the monitor placed in front of the door with Sora. The video started with some white noise, and like what Sora said, was very clean. The video that Ando shot and the recorded footage on the laptop did not have many differences.

"Looks like I was right to get things ready beforehand. If we prepared it after Maru-seonbae's shoot, we might have lost some time."

"True. If it's Maru's acting, we'll be able to procure good footage quickly and edit it."

Maru asked if they were doing it again. Sora replied that they were going to the next scene.

"One cut to turn off the alarm. After that is the long take. That one lasts until Maru-seonbae stands up and comes to the kitchen and eats breakfast."

They shot the alarm clock scene right away. Only Maru's hand and the alarm clock showed up on the screen. They shot it around three times, and that was because of Sora's pickiness in hand acting. Ando felt like there were no differences though.

"This is the most important scene among the starting scenes. Well, then. Maru-seonbae will stand up and head to the kitchen. He'll sit at this table and start eating. Ando-seonbae, don't shoot the fridge. That one's an expensive model which doesn't suit the picture."

"Alright."

Sora looked at Maru again.

"I want to see a glimpse of the main character not wanting to go to school while doing everything, from the walking to the eating."

"Tell me if you want me to do anything specific."

"Try doing it your way for now. I really like most of your acting. If there's anything I want to see after I look at it, I'll tell you then."

"Okay then."

"Well, then. Go back to sleep. Ando-seonbae! We're continuing."

Ando massaged his left arm before picking up the camera again. It really was quite agonizing to maintain a single posture for a long time. He put the camera on his hand before getting into posture again when he felt a hand massaging his left arm. Ando looked at Sora.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"Not that much."

"I'll give you some medical patches later. Please hold out until then."

"Today's not the first day I'm having a hard time because of you. Don't worry, it doesn't hurt that much."

Ando took a short breath before sitting in front of Maru. The camera director - it wasn't a position filled with glory or any authority, but Ando actually liked his job. He liked how he got to shoot Maru, who was actually an actor, and he felt proud whenever the film production club was happy as they watched the video that he shot. He could endure an aching arm like it was nothing.

A better picture than before - he had gotten ambitious, and Ando wanted to stay true to that desire.

"Well then. Let's start."

The member with the slate stood in front of the camera.

"Scene 2-dash-3-dash-1."

Clack - Ando looked at the world beyond the lens as though he was going to capture everything in it.

Chapter 560

When eating, one acted before the will to 'pick up the spoon'. Drinking water was similar. There was no one who put thought into the movement of the shoulders, the angle of the elbow, the gap between the fingers, and the gripping strength. Action occurred before the will to 'grab the cup'. There should probably be no one who worries about every minor detail when taking actions that happen in everyday life. However, actors had to get used to seeing the obvious as not so obvious.

Maru had his eyes closed. He was acting sleeping. If he was actually asleep, there would be no need to worry about his action. The height of the pillow might be a point of consideration, but the angle of his face, the curling of his body, and the number of breaths per minute would not be something to worry about. However, since he was acting, he had to put thought into everything.

'Maybe it's better if I move a little?'

He slightly twisted his right arm, which was between his body and the floor. He pictured what an organic movement would look like in his head and opened his chest as naturally as possible. Being conscious of his every action was an incredibly tiring thing, but as his bodily actions were what transmitted the message to the audience in this scene, he had to concentrate on everything.

Sometimes, actors would get told to 'relax' when they're shooting. This was usually said because the stiff movements looked unnatural and that the actor should loosen the tension and act naturally. The director might say it as though it was something simple, but the actor who receives those instructions would probably have their head go blank. Just relax which part and how?

Maru also did not know what a completely 'relaxed' acting was like yet. He just had a vague grasp of it as he watched the elder and other senior actors do their work. They made up his thoughts of what a 'relaxed' acting was like. How do those seniors act naturally? Was there a formula for 'being natural' and he just had to follow those guidelines? Or did he have to immerse himself to the point that he forgot that he was acting?

There was probably no correct answer for this. He had never heard someone say that there was an answer to acting theory. The people that say that one path was the true way were probably fraudsters.

The actors who looked natural when acting probably gained that naturalness through hard effort and/or the accumulation of time. Just listening to them describe what being natural was would not let a new

actor gain that naturalness. It might help out somewhat, but in order to truly make it their own, they would have to find their own unique ways.

This was a topic thrown to all those that aspired to be actors: imitate being natural.

Acting and being natural. These were two contrasting concepts. Acting was an artificial art of becoming a certain target with a specific purpose. The moment 'acting' was added into the mix, it would move further away from being natural. How could there be any naturalness in abandoning oneself and becoming someone else? The life of actors was perhaps the path to resolving the contradiction that 'natural acting' contained.

"Okay. Maru-seonbae. We're done," Sora said.

Maru slowly opened his eyes. His body, consciously drained of energy, was telling him that he was tired. He felt that he might actually fall asleep if he kept lying down.

"Come and check it out."

Maru stood up and walked over to Sora and Ando. The video that was shot just now was being replayed on the laptop.

"Ando had it hard, huh."

Ando controlled the camera for a long time while crouching down in order to shoot a person lying down. He was holding a heavy camera in a fixed posture for a long time, so the pain in his arms had to be substantial.

"Are we going with this?" Ando asked.

Maru looked at Sora and said that he liked it. Sora also didn't have any complaints. It seemed that she quite liked it as well.

"Let's do the long-take now. Please get ready."

Maru sat down on the electric heater mat and read through his script again. As they did a rehearsal, he knew what to do. What was left was to express the emotions requested by the director in detail and as naturally as possible.

He slowly closed his eyes and controlled his breathing. He felt his thought processes separating. He had the funny thought that he might be able to hold a discussion with himself later.

'2nd year of high school. Ordinary family, both parents working, cheap house, the damp and moldy smell of a semi-basement, mold strewn throughout the home. The home might not be much, but to me, it's my only shelter. Once I leave this 40 or so square meter area, I would start breathing heavily. This place is my shelter. Leaving it is worse than death for me.'

Powerlessness overwhelmed him. He also felt like he had a stomachache. He could hear a mocking laugh from somewhere. His instinctive self, which was thrown into the role of the main character, was dissolving into the character quite well. While the grey-colored inner state of the main character surfaced, Maru's other self took a step back and watched and evaluated the other one in a rational sense.

A tired high school boy. A student who found no joy in life and was afraid of the school. He was pained with diarrhea and stomach aches every Monday morning, yet could not tell his parents that he was being bullied at school. It was a depressing character background, but this place was his shelter. It would be better if the unease inside him slowly leaked throughout in a progressive manner. It would keep increasing as he opens his eyes and goes to the kitchen to eat breakfast then reach its peak when he leaves through the front door.

A self that was trying to understand the psychology of a cornered student and a self that had turned into that student. The important point was to pick out just the advantages of each.

Maru did not know how other actors did their acting. To be exact, he did not want to. Having another, recognizable self was probably not a typical case. It was clear that no one's acting theory could explain his current situation. Maru intuitively realized that this gift was from god. As the woman in white said, it wasn't a superhuman power or anything, but it was definitely useful.

Before, when he did the audience-participation act in Daehak-ro with Ganghwan, he saw an illusion that came alongside extreme pain. He had witnessed many instances of what could not be possible: the man and himself standing as though they were close friends. Back then, he wondered if there was a problem with his nervous system and visited the hospital, but there were no anomalies found. Such an accident probably happened because the rational self and the instinctive self were not as distinct as they were now.

"We're starting the shoot. Please get ready. The camera will keep moving, so bear in mind the camera angle when you take action."

Hearing Sora's voice, Maru got his emotions ready. He lied on the mat and watched himself as a 3rd person.

"Ready, action!"

He pushed back Han Maru's consciousness and put forth the ego that had turned into the main character of the film. Unpleasant emotions stormed inside his body. He extracted the negative emotions from the numerous events in his life. The depressing consciousness soon took over his body.

He then slowly opened his eyes. He looked at the alarm clock placed next to his head. 7:30 a.m. What a painful number.

Being conscious of the camera was the job of the rational self. The instinctive self, which had practically become the main character with method acting, probably could not recognize the camera even if it was within his vision. The instinctive self was really thrown into another world. This was why the directing part had to be done by the self that was aware of everything going on around him.

"Haa."

He sighed as he stood up. The fact that he had to go to school tightly wrapped around his heart. His body became heavy regardless of his will, and an unpleasant burp kept escaping his mouth. He blankly stared at the clock before standing up. He didn't want to go, but he had to. He didn't have the courage to pick the choice of not going.

'Think about the distance between the camera when walking outside.'

What was for breakfast? This was the only moment he could have any expectations in his day. After breakfast, hell would unfold. He went to the kitchen and lifted the tablecloth. Stir-fried anchovies, cooked beans, and fried fishcakes. At that moment, egg-fried sausages entered his eyes. That little bit of happiness made him smile. At the same time, he was reminded that this might be the last smile of the day.

'Don't do any exaggerated actions. Eating is what's important, not showing that I'm eating. Seeing is the worth of the audience. I just have to eat.'

He scooped out a bit of the cooled rice and put it in his mouth. He looked at the family photo placed at the tip of the table as he stuffed his mouth. He was suddenly reminded of his middle school days. Back then, he got along well with his friends. But what led him to his current state? Once he finished eating, he had to get washed, change his clothes and go to school. Ah, twenty thousand won. He just remembered that he had to bring twenty thousand won today.

"...Fuck."

Maru calmed his agitated emotions down. The main character of the film was someone who had never expressed any distress in his life. Swearing at the table was the only relief he was allowed. He couldn't get emotional and smack on the table with the spoon or anything like that. An extremely shy boy - that was the impression he had to show the audience.

'I guess it's not that bad until this part.'

The absorbed self ate slowly as though this was the last meal of his life. He felt that it was too artificial and sped up a little. Until last year, he had the tendency to break the immersion when the rational self directly interfered with the instinctive self, but he had now gotten used to it so his emotions did not waver.

As planned, he ate around a third of the rice before putting down his chopsticks. He covered the food with the tablecloth again before slowly standing up. There was a camera right in front of him. At this moment, he had to leave everything to the self immersed in the main character.

I don't want to go. I don't want to get washed. I want to stay here. This is bad. I feel like what I just ate is coming back up. What can I do?

"I need to go. I need to go."

If he had the courage to run away, he might as well have talked to the bullies to stop. He knew that he couldn't do anything; other than just going to school.

* * *

Ando clenched his teeth. He even held his breath. He instinctively realized that his scene was the best one. Even if they took another shot at this, Maru might not be able to produce this level of quality.

Looking at Maru's face through the LCD screen of the camera, Ando swallowed his groan. There was no dark makeup on his face, and it wasn't like the lights were off either. There were fluorescent lights on the ceiling, and Maru's face had a good color thanks to the light from them. His complexion looked good. However, his expression - those eyes - looked devastatingly depressing. Ando could feel with his

body why they called the eyes the window into the soul. It did look a little over the top, but he didn't think that it was a flaw.

Maru acted as though there was no camera in front of him. But it wasn't that he wasn't entirely unaware of it. He moved his head and body slightly so that the contours of his face could be captured on the camera. It was curious. Actors were really different. Ando was realizing the wonders of someone who got paid for acting.

'That's right, come slowly. Just a little more, just one more.'

He matched his steps with Maru backwards to the bathroom. His left wrist was screaming at him to rest for quite a while now, but this wasn't the time for that. He had to capture this fellow. He closed up on the face so that it was at the center, and slowed his breathing down so that the camera did not shake when he was trying to capture Maru, who was looking at the lens with disinterest.

This was one of the things that Sora requested. Maru was not looking at the camera right now. He was looking at the audience that would see this film. Sora intended to throw a question at the audience with this scene by having a similar one right at the end.

As this was the most important cut, he didn't want to make mistakes. He stepped backwards so slowly that his feet had cramps. When Maru's feet finally touched the doorsill of the bathroom, Sora said 'cut' in an extremely small voice, so small that he would not have heard it if he didn't focus, even in this silent situation.

Ando definitely heard her voice, but he did not put the camera down.

The main character was still in front of him.

When he breathed about two times, Maru, standing in front of him, suddenly frowned and violently breathed out. From that moment, various noises could be heard as though the silence was broken with a hammer. Ando also spat out his breath as he put down the camera.

No one spoke for quite a while. Even Ando did not. Only after about 10 seconds of silence did Sora say something.

"Hm, I think we finished the shoot, right? Haha."

Hearing her laugh, Ando finally loosened up his tension. Maru was faintly smiling as well.

"That was awesome! Let's check the footage for now!" Sora shouted excitedly.