

Once Again 581

Chapter 581

For a brief moment, he felt like he forgot to breathe. His breathing, which was supposed to be occurring outside the realm of consciousness, had briefly stopped for a while. He took a deep breath afterwards as though he had just become conscious of it. Following that, applause could be heard. Chihwan applauded as well. He subconsciously started clapping harder and harder. The moment he realized what he had just seen, Chihwan even cheered out loud and clapped to the point that his hands felt numb.

This was it, this was Maru-seonbae's acting. Chihwan turned around and looked at the girls who were looking down on Maru earlier. When he met eyes with them, the girls made an awkward smile and applauded Maru louder than everyone else. Chihwan felt proud as though he was the one being complimented.

"Are we done now?" Maru said.

Chihwan nodded without a word.

"So how do we decide who wi-"

"You won, seonbae. I totally lost. You really are the best after all."

Chihwan interrupted Maru's words. Was evaluation even necessary at this point? When he first challenged him, Chihwan thought that he would be able to win. Maru-seonbae was definitely a splendid actor, but Chihwan believed in the hours he put into practice. That confidence continued until his act ended. No, the moment he finished his acting, his mind was filled with the word 'victory'. After all, he had never done better than this during practice.

However, after Maru's acting began, Chihwan put aside the matter of victory and defeat. He focused on engraving Maru's performance into his eyes. Although they were given the same script and the same role, the 'character' was completely different.

Maru amazed him. Just how could he have interpreted the script like that? The character had turned from a lively independence fighter who used his wits and spirit to drive the Japanese authorities into a corner, into a mere civilian who felt fear from the very era itself and was struggling to survive. Considering the overall atmosphere and the relationship between the characters, the lively independence fighter was the more accurate one, but this stage wasn't a display of the whole play but just one character, so there were no problems there.

Chihwan realized that even the same roles become extremely different characters according to the actor playing it by watching Maru's acting.

'No! Perhaps this was what seonbae wanted to show me! I knew it!'

The text was definitely important. However, it was in the end, the actor's job to turn text into an actual performance. Polishing the source stone that the scriptwriter wrote into a beautiful gem - Chihwan felt that that was the essence of what being an actor was.

"But when did you practice?"

This was what he wanted to know the most. Maru never participated in practice. On days where he showed up in the hall, he was always caught up with making props. Chihwan had never seen him reading the script nor practicing, yet he was able to put on such a good performance. It couldn't be considered his talent either, as Maru had utilized a personality completely opposite to that of the original character but still managed to create a suitable character that was completely different. It meant that his character would never have been made without prior analysis.

Just when did he create such a cool character like this? Chihwan wanted to know.

Maru lifted his finger. Chihwan looked at the pieces of cloth right beneath the platform.

"While you guys practiced acting while looking at the script, I kept following you from over there. After all, my hands are what's needed to connect pieces of cloth together, not my brain. With the part of my brain that was playing around, I imitated your words, imagined actions, and tried changing things up a little too."

Ah - Chihwan exclaimed and nodded. He remembered how Maru always worked on making props in the corner. He probably watched everything that was going on in the hall from that space. He wasn't simply creating props, he was studying acting even while creating them, and the result was the character he just showed.

"Seonbae-nim, can I have a look at that script?"

"This one?"

Chihwan received the script that Maru was holding. The cover was in tatters. He then looked at his own script which he had placed on the platform. Although the corners were slightly worn out, it was still clean.

The paper which was smudged in finger oil said everything. He thought that his practice was not lagging behind, yet that didn't seem to be the case. Chihwan felt his cheeks turn hot and his body turn cool. He slowly lifted his head and looked at Maru's face before flipping over the page.

"Ah."

He subconsciously exclaimed. It was filled with text everywhere. The script, which was printed on A4 pages, actually had a lot of gaps. Not to mention the left and right margins, plus top and bottom, there were sometimes gaps as wide as two fingers-width in places where the lines were short. Chihwan went up to the platform and placed Maru's script next to his own. Then he started comparing the two.

'This one, and this one. And even this one?'

Chihwan turned around. He saw Maru talking to Daemyung. For a brief moment, something more than simple 'amazement' popped up in his heart. He started probing around the feeling that started from his heart and went to his head.

Terrified. Rather than being amazed by the wall of text that did not allow for a single gap, he felt terrified.

Was there a need to go this far? Chihwan quickly flipped over the script and looked at it.

'It's not just the character he played. He had a general analysis of all the characters.'

He went beyond the characters and even went on to make notes about the era. Just as he felt dizzy following all the text with his eyes, a line written in red in the corner entered his view.

-Is this enough?

It seemed to be a question he was asking himself, but Chihwan was flabbergasted the moment he saw that text. There was this much analysis. It looked as though the gaps were screaming for help, yet he wrote a line that suggested that he hadn't done enough in the corner.

He looked at his colleagues who were talking about Maru's acting below the platform. Did we ever practice at all? Were we just fooling around under the premise of practicing? The hints of contemplation continued all the way to the last page.

Chihwan closed the script. He looked at the corner seat where Maru always sat. He went there and tried sitting down.

"I can see everything."

He said that with a laugh. Maru didn't come here because he thought that he might be a nuisance to everyone. Maru-seonbae just chose a place where he could see everyone. He observed everyone and broadened his expression range and recreated it for himself.

"I will call this place the sanctuary now," Chihwan said as he looked at everyone around him.

His friends were looking at him like looking at a lunatic, but Chihwan didn't care. He realized the deep meaning behind Maru's choice of seat here. He was incredible after all. Every one of his actions contained deep intent. He realized once again that Maru wasn't someone who would do something for nothing.

'He's so cool.'

Chihwan grinned and looked at Maru. Although Maru was only 2 years older than him, there was an insurmountable gap between him and Maru whether it was character, skill, or personality.

If he was a narrow-minded person, he would have stayed still when Chihwan was shaking. He would then take victory and show the skills of a senior.

'Seonbae was worried about me becoming a laughing stock and advised me because of that. His consideration, acting skills, and even his effort are incredible!'

He was the literal definition of a mentor, no master!

'I will treat you as a big brother for a lifetime.'

Chihwan thought about Maru's gentle advice on the stage and smiled in satisfaction.

* * *

"What the heck is with him this time?"

Maru wondered after he finished drinking some water.

Daemyung looked at the corner of the hall. Chihwan was looking at Maru with an indecent gaze.

“He seems to be in love with you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Anyways, that was unexpected.”

“What was?”

“I thought you’d lose to Chihwan.”

“Huh? Why would I do that?”

“Hm, because that’s a simple way out?”

Maru closed his mouth before laughing.

“No matter how much I like efficiency, I can’t really be concerned about that when I’m being chased by a weird pervert.”

“P-pervert?”

“What else do you call that then? He’s a splendid pervert,” Maru said as he pointed at Chihwan with his chin.

Chihwan stood up like a soldier and saluted him.

“See that? His mental world is strange. I tried my best to put him down a little, but it’s not working at all.”

“Then what was with that advice you gave him?”

“According to his personality, he would have nagged me later to hold another round of this ridiculous ‘battle’ if it ended awkwardly. I set him up so he could act in the best condition so that he can’t come crying to me later. However, why does that guy look like he likes it instead of being disappointed?”

“...Did you put on a different act from the script in order to one-up him as well?”

“There won’t be a clear difference if we acted the same thing after all. He’s been practicing, and he did pretty well, so I couldn’t exactly do the same performance. I tried twisting it up a little. It wasn’t strange, was it?”

“It wasn’t strange, but...”

“But?”

“I thought you helped him out on stage as a senior being concerned about a junior.”

“You’ve gotten a lot more creative with your imagination ever since you started studying directing.”

“Hm, but I think he’s thinking the same thing as I am though?”

Daemyung pointed at Chihwan.

Maru blinked several times, scratched his eyebrows, frowned, and sighed in lamentation.

“No, no. Humans aren’t single-celled organisms. How could he accept everything positively? Right? Chihwan has his pride. I broke his pride on stage, so he should no longer talk to me because of....”

Just as Maru was justifying himself, Chihwan came up to him like a puppy. He then looked at Maru with a loyal look in his eyes.

“Seonbae-nim. I will help you with sewing starting today.”

“I just said that so that you won’t bother me any m....”

“No! Seonbae, I mean, seonbae-nim! I finally realized today why you always sewed in that corner.”

“It’s because it’s comfortable if you lean against....”

“It’s to watch and analyze everything that’s happening in the hall before sublimating it into your acting, right? It dawned on me the moment I sat there. Ah! Maru-seonbae had his reasons when he sat there!”

“That’s because the sun doesn’t shine on me so....”

“On top of that! You kindly reached out to me when I wasn’t able to do anything because of nervousness. Your noble personality is just.... I am ashamed that I tried something senseless like asking you for a battle. You empowered me and even showed a different interpretation of the character. Honestly, I felt afraid when I looked at your character. I don’t have the confidence to do something like that after all. As such! I will try to learn as much as I can from you starting today. I will sew next to you, look at the same things as you, and become a good actor based on that!”

Wow, what a good choice of words. Daemyung looked at Chihwan who cheered after giving his sermon. He was such an interesting kid. Next to him, he saw Maru who was pressing his fingers down between his eyebrows.

This was the first time he saw Maru make such an expression. He was unresponsive even when he was hospitalized for a month after being hit on by burning wood, yet he was frowning while looking at Chihwan, who was running wild in excitement.

Daemyung took out his phone and captured Maru’s face. As for the file name, he saved it as ‘The Scream’. Looking at this photo would cheer him up whenever he felt depressed.

“Daemyung.”

“Hm?”

“Does teacher Taesik have the secession form for the acting club?”

Maru asked him with a serious face.

Daemyung smiled and asked Maru.

“It doesn’t feel that bad though, does it?”

He looked at the members of the acting club.

Maru turned his head and said in a small voice.

“He’s a pain in the butt.”

“Guide him well in the future.”

“That’s the president’s job.”

“Unfortunately, I’m no longer the president.”

“Oh, you guys talked about it already?”

“Yeah. Aram will be the next one.”

“Sounds like it will be a fantastic acting club then. Looks like things are about to become noisy.”

“That’s a good thing.”

Maru threw the empty plastic bottle into the trash can next to the entrance. The bottle drew a parabola in the air and hit the wall before falling into the trash.

“You had it hard until now. From now on, look after yourself more than the others.”

“I will.”

“Don’t just say that. Try actually living a bit more selfishly. Do more things for yourself and let the others be for a while.”

“I’m plenty selfish, you know?”

Just then, the first year juniors all came up to them. They all said that they should resume practice. Daemyung looked at Maru as he was surrounded by the others. Maru, who was standing outside the wall of people, was making a faint smile.

Plenty selfish, my ass - Maru seemed like he wanted to say those words.

Chapter 582

“Bitna, can you lift the product upwards a little more?”

Bitna slightly raised the cereal box at the request.

“That’s a good girl.”

The photographer, who was taking photos from multiple angles, eventually stepped back, saying that they should take a bit of rest. Bitna, who was sitting on a wooden chair in front of a white background, sighed slightly as she came down from the chair.

“Bitna, wait a moment.”

The coordinators came up to her and fixed her makeup. Bitna raised her head as she drank some water. The lights installed on either side were quite hot.

“It’s hot, isn’t it?”

"I'm okay."

"Bitna is such a good girl. I wish I'll have a daughter like you in the future."

Bitna faintly smiled at the coordinator's words. She stared at the coordinator who walked away with the empty cup before turning around to look at the table, where the big monitor was.

"This looks good."

"I like this one too. How about this one?"

"That's good too."

"Why aren't you nitpicking today?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Of course not. If you don't have any complaints, it's better for me."

She saw her mother, who was talking to the photographer.

Bitna sat down on the chair again. She took her time swinging her legs around, when,

"Bitna, we're done for today. Thanks to you, this ahjussi had a really easy time today."

The photographer smiled and approached her. Bitna jumped down from the chair and bowed.

"You have it good, having a daughter like Bitna. I wish I had a girl like her too."

"Why don't you say that after you get married first? I thought you went on a blind date last time."

"That doesn't mean I'm going to get married. Plus, that only works if the other party likes me. But what are you saying in front of a kid?"

"Bitna is smart and ignores what she doesn't need, you know?"

Her mom smacked the photographer on the back. Bitna was more familiar with this photographer's face than even her school teacher's.

"Bitna, you must say goodbye to everyone here, right?"

Bitna said goodbye to everyone, who were cleaning up, after hearing her mother's words. Everyone smiled back at her and said goodbye as well.

"Hope you can take care of us again next time."

"That's what I want to ask. You're the one giving me work to do after all. Bitna, this ahjussi will treat you to something good, okay?"

She left the studio and returned to the car. Her mother, who had disappeared for a bit, returned with some sandwiches in hand.

"My dear, sorry mom couldn't even give you proper food."

"No, it's fine. I don't care since this is tastier."

Her mother looked inside the sandwich.

"I forgot to ask them to leave out the olives. It smells a little, are you okay with that? If you aren't, I can go and change it."

"I can eat it. I'm hungry."

"Oh, dear. You were hungry, weren't you?"

She picked up the sandwich which has been sliced into halves and took a bite. Her mother was also eating a sandwich, and that one had a spicy smell.

"Mom."

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to marry that ahjussi?"

Pfft - her mother spat out chunks of her sandwich from her mouth. A spicy smell spread around. Bitna pinched her nose with one hand and pulled out some tissue with the other to give to her mother.

"Here."

Her mother wiped the food that got on the dashboard.

"Bitna, what do you mean by that?"

"You aren't marrying that ahjussi?"

"Do you want mommy to get married?"

"I don't know. It's just that mom looks happy when you're with that ahjussi, so I don't think it's bad."

"Mom looks happy?"

Bitna put her sandwich on her knees and pulled up the corners of her mouth.

"Mom is smiling like this when you work with that ahjussi."

"I do? Really?"

"Yeah."

Her mother did not speak for a long time. Bitna focused on the sandwich again. Although it wasn't tasty because of the olives, she ate it regardless since she was hungry.

"Do you want to see daddy, Bitna?"

"No."

"You don't want to see daddy?"

"Do you want to see him, mom?"

“Mom wants to see him sometimes. You look really like him after all. That’s why looking at you reminds me of him from time to time.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know daddy after all.”

“Do you want a daddy, Bitna?”

“I don’t know about that either. I just need mom. But if mom likes him, I think it’s okay for you to marry him. I don’t think ahjussi is a bad man.”

Bitna looked at her mother. Her mother made an incomprehensible smile and patted her head.

“Mom isn’t getting married. Mom just needs you two.”

The patting hand felt good. Bitna nodded. If her mother said that she was okay, then she was okay.

“Let’s stop talking about mommy and talk about your school, okay? Have you gotten close with your friends?”

“I have. There’s one guy who keeps bullying me, but I like everyone else.”

“Who dares to bully our Bitna? Mom will scold that person for you.”

“He’s a boy, and he keeps playing pranks on me. I told him to stop, but he keeps cutting up erasers and throwing the pieces at me.”

“Do you think he hates you?”

Bitna thought for a moment. Then she shook her head.

“I don’t think so. He stops when I’m about to get angry. Though, he goes back to doing it again the next day.”

“That boy, does he look straight at you?”

“I don’t think he does.”

“Mom might be misunderstanding, but that boy might like you.”

“Me? Why?”

“I wonder why. Maybe because you’re cute?”

“He likes me but bullies me?”

“At your age, Bitna, it’s more important for boys to play with other boys. He shouldn’t hate you. He wants to stay close to you, but is playing pranks on you because other boys might tease him for it.”

“Mom, didn’t you say liking someone is the same as becoming honest with yourself?”

“I did.”

“Then why do you say that he likes me even though he keeps bullying me? Isn’t that not liking me?”

“Hm, you’ll understand once you grow up a little, Bitna.”

"I will understand once I become bigger?"

"Of course."

"How big?"

"Hm, high school maybe?"

"Then unni knows all about it?"

"That's not entirely true."

"Then what about mom? Do you know everything at your age?"

"Uh, I don't think that's right either."

"Mom, you are strange sometimes."

"...Sorry for being a weird mom."

Bitna looked at her dejected mother before saying that she was just joking.

"My dear Bitna, you know how to make jokes, huh. You got me there."

"I learned from that oppa."

"That oppa?"

Bitna thought back to last summer. The shooting location was incredibly hot, and there was one oppa who encouraged the other oppas during the shoot. Bitna called that oppa the big oppa.

"Is it the Maru-oppa that you talked about last time?"

"Yeah."

"Bitna seems to have taken a liking to that oppa, huh?"

"He was a fun oppa."

"Do you like that oppa?"

Bitna shook her head.

"He's just a fun oppa."

"You're quite picky, my girl."

"But unni seems to like him, I think."

"Unni does?"

Bitna thought about her sister's - Yuna's - expression. Ever since Bitna said that she knew who Maru was when he appeared on TV, she kept asking her about him. She asked when they played together and asked when they watched TV together. Her unni looked really happy when they talked about oppa.

"You said you were meeting him tomorrow, right?"

“Yeah, after school.”

“Bitna is letting her meet him, right?”

“Unni wants to meet him after all. But I am going to have to lie. Is that okay?”

“Lie?”

“I don’t really want to see big oppa that much. However, unni said that I wanted to see big oppa. If I become honest, unni will have become a liar, so I think it will be better if I lie instead.”

“Bitna is going to lie for your big sister’s sake?”

“Yeah. Otherwise, unni will be a liar.”

“But lying is a bad thing.”

“Isn’t it fine if you do it once a year?”

“Santa might not come to you.”

“Do you believe in Santa, mom?”

“...You can lie from time to time.”

Bitna lifted one finger.

“I will lie just this once. I don’t want unni to become a liar.”

“It’s fine because it’s a good lie for your big sister.”

“What’s a good lie? Weren’t lies bad things?”

“Hm, Bitna.”

“Yeah?”

“Try asking Maru-oppa that tomorrow.”

“Can’t you tell me, mom?”

“Mom needs to rest from time to time. Also, it’s no fun if mom tells you everything.”

“Is that how it is?”

“Of course.”

Her mother turned the car key. The car started vibrating with a low rattling noise. Bitna moved her little hands to put her seatbelt on.

“But mom.”

“Yes?”

“Do you get married if you like someone?”

Her mother didn't reply.

"Will I understand when I become big?"

"Mom wants to explain, but I think it needs a lot of time. To put it very simply though, if you like someone, you get married, I think?"

"Then will unni marry big oppa?"

"That won't necessarily be the case... but you can't really say that it definitely won't happen, it's a complicated thing..."

Bitna crossed her arms.

"How hard."

Her mom agreed.

"It is."

The car left the parking lot.

* * *

"Yuna."

"Yeah?"

"I think he fancies you."

"What do you mean?"

Yuna turned around, unable to resist the pull on her uniform vest. The boy sitting at the end of the 3rd column was smiling at her.

"Girlie, you have it good, being popular and all."

"It's not like that."

"What's not? He's completely in love with you. What do you think? I don't think he's that bad. Yuna, I heard you have never gone out with someone, right? Try going out with him at this chance."

"What are you saying?"

Yuna shook her head before taking out her textbook. Her friends covered their mouths and laughed. They always teased her when it was related to boys.

"Think about it seriously. I thought you wanted to become an actress. You won't be able to date as you wish once you become one, so when else will you get the opportunity to date someone?"

"Right. You should do away with it while you still can."

Do away with what? - Yuna pushed her friends away. Her friends giggled and went back to their seats. After hearing that, she felt a gaze on the back of her head. When she turned around, the boy that the girls talked about was still looking at her.

Haha - she smiled awkwardly before looking forward again.

'I don't necessarily hate it, but.'

It didn't make her heart race. Actually, this might be because she was concerned about something else. She raised her head to look at the clock on the wall. She would get to meet him in just five more hours.

'I wonder what kind of person he is.'

Just what kind of lessons did he receive and what kind of things did he learn to put on an act like that? Yuna had a lot of things to ask Maru.

Chapter 583

"Han Maru."

When he lifted his head after hearing the voice, he saw a piece of chalk flying right towards his face. Maru slapped the chalk with his left hand. The smashed chalk fell to the floor. He wondered why such a thing flew at him.

"Huh, you managed to stop that?"

Only when he heard the voice again did he remember that he was in class. His classmates sitting on either side of him chuckled.

"Where did you leave your soul behind?" asked the teacher who taught electric circuits as he rolled his right sleeve up.

"You're a smart guy in the drama too. If you're sleepy, go wash your face."

He slightly bowed to the teacher before standing up. As this teacher liked to be quite authoritative, he always nitpicked students if they did not follow his words no matter how trivial they were. He walked across the corridor and went to the bathroom. Smelling a rather foul stench, he felt his sensitive mind calming down a little.

He wasn't sleeping because he was tired. He was thinking about something else to the point that nothing in the class entered his mind. Maru turned the tap. He looked at the mirror as he put his hands under the chilly running water.

"1989. No, if I expect a year of delay, there should be a change in 1988 maybe?"

He was reminded of last night's matters as he looked in the mirror.

After acting practice, which was rather fussy thanks to Chihwan, Maru went to the classroom on the opposite side of the hall. He sent his juniors home first before taking out the videotape he brought in his bag.

"I was told that you were here. What are you doing?"

When he was about to start playing the videotape, Daemyung entered the classroom. Maru told him that they should watch the video together if he had the time. Watching good actors should be helpful

for directors after all. As it was an old videotape, the sound and video were stretched out at the beginning, but it wasn't unbearable.

The video started off with some chatter between men he had never seen before. The background seemed to be a corridor in a building.

-Are you sure this is filming right now?

-That's curious.

-Hey, this is really small. Aren't video cameras things that people put on their shoulders?

-That's because this is the latest product from Japan. You don't even know that? But Jincheol, are you sure this is working?

-You bumpkins, it is working.

A long-haired man appeared in the video. It was director Lee Jincheol in his younger days. The immaturity and daringness of a man in his 20s showed from his face and fashion.

"Maru, what's this? It looks like an old video. 1987?"

Daemyung looked at the corner of the screen while narrowing his eyes.

"It's a video about one actress."

"Actress? Who?"

"I don't know yet. We're about to find out."

Maru crossed his arms and leaned back against the door. 3 minutes passed in the video without any content. During that time, the only things that appeared were some men putting their faces right up against the lens to play around and Jincheol, who was moving around here and there. A man with a shaved head showed some different facial actions in front of the camera.

-Are we shooting now?

A girl's voice sounded from the video. Maru focused on the screen. The man with the shaved head waved outside the frame at someone and asked her to come. A while later, a girl with bangs peeked into the frame.

-Am I on right now?

The girl waved at people outside the frame. Maru faintly smiled.

-Hey, Jung Haejoo. What are you doing, acting like a bumpkin? Is this the first time you've seen a camcorder?

-Yeah, it's my first time.

-What a bumpkin. What about Joohyun? She always follows you around every weekend.

-She's not here today.

-She should really stop coming. A high school student should be studying. No wait, was she in middle school?

The world inside the screen became noisy. Jung Haejoo - she looked the same as the photo where she was holding the three puppies. She looked like an adult lady, yet still somewhat immature. Her reddish cheeks, rather large cheekbones, as well as the curiosity-filled eyes and hands that endlessly touched her hair when she looked at the lens were indicative of what kind of personality this Jung Haejoo had.

"She's an interesting person," Daemyung spoke next to him.

Interesting person - it was a fitting description.

"That's her. The actress I was talking about."

"She's an actress?"

"Everyone on the screen now is an actor, probably."

Just then, the people on the screen stood in one line.

-Hey, shouldn't we stand in order of height?

-Are we kids? Just stand wherever you want.

-Let's go with age. When someone watches later, we can just say that the one at the end is the oldest

-That sounds good.

The people on the screen switched places. Jung Haejoo was in the middle.

-Well then, if you are done standing in a line, introduce yourselves. I will see how cool you can make it.

Jincheol spoke from outside the frame. The people on the screen coughed and looked at each other in the face before shouting the line in unison.

-Youth to the stage! We are the play-loving Yecheon!

The people, who shouted in unison, looked at the lens blankly for a while before twisting up in embarrassment.

-Gosh that was embarrassing.

-I got goosebumps.

-Do we have to do this? Shouldn't we just go with 'We are Yecheon' or something? We aren't kids.

Jung Haejoo, who was staring at the lens amidst the others, started speaking.

-Why? I like it though. Don't you? It'll be fun when we watch it later. It's definitely better to be funny than to be stiff.

She then tapped on the lens with her finger. When Jincheol told her not to do that, she stepped back with a dejected expression.

-It is embarrassing, but it's not that bad if you think about it.

-I might die of embarrassment when I watch it at an old age.

-That's good. Let's all die together!

The men and women hung their arms around each other and stood in a line.

-Youth to the stage! We are the play-loving Yecheon!

The screen then snapped off. A noisy grey screen filled the TV for a while.

"So they are people who used to do plays, huh. Yecheon. That sounds similar to our Blue Sky," Daemyung said.

Maru faintly smiled. Daemyung would be surprised if he knew the place in the video was currently where Blue Sky stood in Daehak-ro right now, but he decided to tell him that later. He wanted to focus on the video for now.

-I'm starting the shoot.

A voice sounded again. It was Jincheol. The background changed to the stage from the corridor. It seemed that the camcorder was moved. On top of a worn-out stage that definitely couldn't be considered good stood the people who just did the embarrassing greeting. Their clothing had changed. They were wearing jeans and white t-shirts now.

Haejoo, who was looking around from the center of the stage, walked in front of the camcorder.

-We are going to start the play now. The main characters are Yoonsung-oppa, Chasoo-oppa, and Mijin-unni. I hope you have a good time.

She whispered that in a small voice. People gathered around Haejoo, who had gone to the back of the stage with a smile. After shouting to get fired up, the members of the troupe went to their places.

The play that followed was about college students who were activists. It seemed to reflect the environment of that era. The story itself wasn't that boring. The flow was cut off during some parts due to opting to go with the boring route, but the story did not miss the big events, so it wasn't that disturbing to the immersion. The members of the troupe didn't have bad skills either. As a man who seemed to be in his early thirties held the ground, the overall balance did not shift.

-Well done!

The play ended while the remaining members were mourning the death of one such activist student. The actors on stage applauded each other and gathered in front of the camcorder. They looked agitated and excited. They were truly enjoying acting.

But that was it.

"They're good."

"They are for sure. But Daemyung, what do you think?"

"About what?"

"That lady."

Maru pointed at Jung Haejoo, who was smiling brightly in the middle of the screen.

“Do you think there’s anything to learn from her?”

“Hm.”

“Just tell me what you think. Don’t evaluate her, just tell me what you think about her.”

“Honestly speaking, they all seemed to be good actors generally, but I think that’s about it. They aren’t eye-openingly good. That lady is the same. In fact, I feel like she’s worse than the others.”

“In what aspect?”

“She seems a bit... lighter? The topic of the play is quite heavy, isn’t it? However, she seems too bright. Rather than saying that she’s bad at acting, it feels like her personality is way too positive that it’s influencing her acting or something like that.”

Maru nodded. Daemyung was definitely sharp. Maru was thinking about the same thing. It wasn’t that the people on the screen were bad at acting. They definitely fulfilled their role of imbuing truth into an imaginary world very splendidly. If he watched their stage without any prior knowledge, he would have praised them, saying that a group of youths had done a splendid job.

‘But that shouldn’t be all of it.’

She was the one who had stolen the hearts of two geniuses. He refused to believe that Junmin was surprised and charmed by that level of acting. 1987. Although this was before Haejoo and Junmin encountered each other, her first appearance in the video definitely left room for a lot to be desired.

“Who are you watching this video for, though? That lady?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“It doesn’t look like you’re trying to study by doing this....”

“Why do you think that?”

Daemyung couldn’t reply immediately and hesitated for a while before carefully speaking.

“Because honestly speaking, I feel like you’re better at acting than that lady.”

“You’re putting me on a pedestal all of a sudden.”

“I’m serious. Don’t you think so too?”

“I’m not that into self-flattery, you know?”

“But aren’t you thinking the same? You look pretty disappointed.”

“You’re quick to catch on.”

Maru took out the videotape that finished playing.

“There’s around 50 more of these in order of time.”

“There are so many?”

"I really want to see the last one right now, but I feel like I wouldn't be able to catch the hint like that. I want to know what kind of acting that lady did, and how her changes made people unable to forget about her to this day."

"Just who is she?"

"Jung Haejoo."

"Jung Haejoo?"

Splash, Maru bowled some water with his hands and washed his face. Daemyung's confused expression disappeared along with the cold water that hit his face.

"Two years. No, one year. Just how much did she change after meeting Junmin?"

He thought about the piles of video tapes at home. He brought one today as well. A video from 1987. This one was taken a month after the video he watched yesterday. Maru was curious. He wanted to know how the lady's acting would change since she was called a genius by two other geniuses. He couldn't imagine anything right now. Junmin definitely had good eyes for talent, but Maru had never heard that he was a good acting teacher. Just what kind of magic did he cast on Haejoo?

Maru shook his hands before walking back to his classroom. The teacher, who was teaching the class, gave him a glance before continuing on with the class. Maru sat down quietly so that he didn't make any noise. He touched the videotape he put inside his drawer while looking forward to watching it after school, when he remembered an appointment he had forgotten about.

'Today's Tuesday....'

It was 3 p.m. He would have to meet Bitna in just two hours. Although it was a rather sudden appointment, he had to keep the appointment since he promised. It seemed that he wasn't going to get to watch the video today.

'Is there really no one around me who has a VCR?'

It seemed that he would have to make a visit to Yongsan after the shoot this weekend.

"Han Maru, have you gotten yourself together?"

"Yes. I feel much better after washing my face."

Maru replied as he took his hands out of the drawers.

Chapter 584

"Help me out at the petrol station, will you?"

"Is it that bad?"

"The guy that said he was going to work ran again. We pay more than everyone else around, but we still can't get anyone."

"You must be having a hard time, but what can you do about it? You're going to succeed the business, so you have no choice but to do it."

Dowook climbed down the stairs after complaining.

"I'm leaving as well. See you around, you two."

"Have fun making gukbap."

"Why don't you visit and eat some? Missus hasn't been looking good recently since sales are dropping."

"You've totally married into their family now, huh. You just have to deal with it. Have fun too, Iseul."

Maru waved his hand at the two people that left.

"They're like workers," Daemyung said, standing next to him.

"They *are* workers, and also students. Both Dojin and Dowook that is."

"Sometimes, I envy them. I feel like they've grown up already."

"That's nothing to be envious about. It's best to delay jumping into the working force as long as possible. The best scenario is to not have a job forever and just live off rent if you've inherited a building from your family or something. We have sad lives because we can't do that."

"Did you have to make it that depressing?"

Maru shrugged before looking at the staircase to the 3rd floor.

"You're going up, right?"

"Yeah, what about you?"

"I can't do today."

"Do you have a shoot for the film?"

"No, that's on Wednesdays. Today's a personal thing."

"Everyone should be waiting for you though."

"Waiting for me?"

"When we scattered last night, all the first year students were talking about you. It seems like you left a deep impression on them."

"What an honor. Oh, for Chihwan, it'd be better if you have him do practice runs rather than read-throughs. Putting him on stage will benefit him more."

"The plan was to rehearse as a whole starting today anyway."

"Really? Instructor Miso is coming, right?"

"Yeah. Everyone seems to be happy that basic practice is over and they're going to do a play, so I feel kinda sorry for them."

"They'll find out today that their happy times are now over and hell is about to start. After all, what awaits them when they make a single mistake is a 1-to-1 meeting with the grim reaper after all."

The first year students would find out today how the word 'again' can drive a person crazy. Miso would no longer be lenient once practice runs started. If they made a mistake, they would receive near-traumatizing additional instructions and would have to sweat even in winter. After a few rounds of that, they would start to think that they should stop making mistakes because they would drive them crazy.

"I'll go up then. See you tomorrow."

"Keep up the good work. No wait, I guess I should tell that to Aram now, huh?"

"She's just as tough as instructor Miso, so she should be fine. Probably."

"Nah, she can't match up to Miso-noonim."

"So you think so too, huh?"

Daemyung, who climbed the stairs with an awkward smile on his face, suddenly stopped.

"Did you bring a videotape again today?"

"I forgot that I had an appointment, so I brought one. I won't have any time to watch it though."

"Can I watch it with you if the time is right? If that lady is someone amazing like you said she is, I definitely do want to watch them."

"I'll go through them and show them to you once I feel like I saw something important. The videos taken in 1987 probably won't be that helpful."

"Alright, then."

"Good luck with practice."

Just as Daemyung was about to climb the stairs again, he stopped and took out his phone before sending a text with a difficult expression.

"What's making you so serious?"

"I-it's not that serious. It's just that I've been asked to eat out together... but I'm a bit scared."

"You're scared of eating out together?"

Daemyung smiled wryly before turning around. From the way he acted, it didn't seem to be that serious. It seemed that he just got a text from someone who he has a hard time dealing with.

Maru hung one of his bag straps on his shoulder and looked at his watch. It was 5:16 p.m. The students that chose to stay behind after school for self-study sessions all rushed out of the building to play soccer on the school field. Maru mixed in with the group and left the school.

"Hey, you should just go study at home."

"Shut up. Han Maru, you should hang out with us as well."

Maru waved his hand. These people had gathered together with the aim to enter Seoul National University through special college entrance requirements, but their objective seemed to have been

kicked into the horizon with the ball they were kicking around as they seemed to have turned into a soccer group instead.

“Dreams are the best when they are still dreams. Have fun.”

He left the school after watching his friends running towards the ball for a while. After getting on the bus, he called *her*.

-Hello?

“You’re about to receive a human parcel.”

-Can I reject it?

“I’m sorry, customer. This product cannot be returned. You’re at school, right?”

-I’m packing up to go home. There’s no practice today after all.

“Should we hang out after I meet Bitna?”

-Unfortunately, I have a prior appointment, Mr. Han Maru.

“Prior appointment?”

-I promised I’d eat with mom. Oh, and Hanmi-ahjumma as well. It seems like she has taken a liking to Daemyung. She said we should invite him as well.

“So that’s what it was.”

-What are you on about?

“Daemyung received a text just now and froze up when he read it. I heard that writer Lee Hanmi is quite picky, so it’s not like I don’t understand.”

-She does talk a lot about work even when she eats. She probably told Daemyung a lot of things as well. Heck, even I got nagged at the last time we met. She told me that I’m bad at bringing out emotions.

She laughed awkwardly. Being able to eat with a big-shot writer was definitely a good opportunity, but for a sensitive guy like Daemyung, he should have his troubles.

“But Daemyung probably won’t make it today because of practice.”

-I know. That’s why she seemed a little disappointed. From what I think, Hanmi-ahjumma seems to consider Daemyung as a disciple she’s going to raise in a strict fashion.

“I feel like he’s gained a lot of recognition without me knowing.”

Maru spoke as he looked at the students who were getting off the bus.

“Where should I go after I get there?”

-She should be waiting for you at the school gates.

“You’re going to be there too, right? Let’s meet up.”

-I don't want to.

"Why are you being so cruel? You don't want to see me?"

-We're going to meet tomorrow anyway. You'll see me as much as you want when I go to your school tomorrow, so hold it for today. I need to go right now.

"Alright, alright. I guess I have no choice but to play with Bitna. I should tell her about how I got thrown away by my girlfriend."

-I'll kill you if you tell a kid something like that.

"Violence isn't good. Anyway, wouldn't it be strange if a small girl is standing in front of a high school by herself?"

-Bitna's big sister will be there as well. She's a junior of mine named Yuna. She's a good kid. Plus, she's really cute too.

"I guess I'll just have to play around with two cute girls then. My girlfriend isn't here for me after all."

-Be prepared to get hit tomorrow.

"Please come over to hit me. And shoot the movie while you're at it."

He could hear a laugh over the phone. Maru focused on his hearing. Her happy laughter was always pleasant to hear.

-Anyway, take good care of my junior. She'll be with you since she can't leave Bitna alone. Oh, right. She also said that there are some things she wanted to ask you. She's an aspiring actress too.

"How do you feel having a popular guy as your boyfriend? Don't you feel uneasy at all?"

-Should I switch at this opportunity?

"I might start crying in despair if you dump me. In front of your house, that is."

-That sounds horrific. I won't dump you. I'm going to hang up now. I need to go.

"Watch out for cars, only cross the road when the light is green, and raise your hand."

-Yes, yes, Mr. Han Maru. I'm a good girl, so I'll do everything you just said.

"What do you do when a bad mister is asking to go with you while giving you candy?"

-I take the candy and kick his butt!

"Correct. See you tomorrow. Also, text me the number for this Yuna just in case. It will be a pain if we miss each other."

-Hey, you're trying to pick up a girl's phone number like that?

"I'm quite good at things like that, you know?"

-Fine. Anyway, treat her well. She's a really good kid.

After hanging up, Maru looked outside the window. He started seeing a familiar road. He would arrive at Myunghwa High after ten minutes or so.

He had a look at the number she texted before pressing the stop bell. He saw students wearing Myunghwa High uniforms lined up at the bus stop.

After getting off the bus, he walked along the road until he saw Myunghwa High across the two-lane road. The black vans parked near the school were something like a signature for Myunghwa High.

“Good luck with the shoot!”

“Good luck!”

A girl who came out of the school amidst the cheers of the students got in one of the vans. She seemed to be an idol of sorts. As this school was known for having many young people who worked in the entertainment industry attend, this was not a rare scene. Maru crossed the street and walked over to the school gates. When Maru, who wasn't wearing any uniform, stood in front of the school gates, people wearing uniforms glanced at him before going past.

“Are they not here yet?”

He heard that they would be waiting for him in front of the school, so he took out his phone. Just as he inputted the number he was texted and was about to press the call button, he saw a girl holding the hand of a little girl. Maru smiled and put his phone back inside his pocket.

“Hello.”

Bitna politely greeted him while putting her hands, which were holding a drink can, by her belly button. Her politeness left nothing to be desired. She seemed to have grown a lot over the past year. Well, they did say kids grow up quickly.

“Hello.”

Another girl, a student, greeted him as well from next to Bitna. She seemed quite excited for some reason.

“You must be Yuna then.”

“Ah, yes. Have you heard from unni?”

“Yeah. You're Bitna's sister?”

“Yes.”

“You're better than me, listening to your sister's request like this.”

“O-oh, no, not at all.”

Maru then looked at Bitna who was staring at him.

“I wonder what Bitna wanted to see me for.”

“Uhm, you know...”

Bitna, who was usually clear-cut about everything, seemed hesitant. Did she feel awkward after not seeing him for a long time? He thought that it might be better to put some distance, when,

“Uhm, there’s something I need to apologize to you about.”

The one that spoke was not Bitna but Yuna. An apology all of a sudden? Maru asked what it was about.

“Actually, it wasn’t Bitna who wanted to see you.”

“Then?”

“It was me who wanted to see you, seonbae-nim... may I call you that?”

“Call me whatever you want. Han Maru, Maru, hey, you, et cetera.”

Yuna seemed taken aback. Maru scratched his eyebrows when he saw that her thought process seemed to be stuck. It seemed that he should refrain from making jokes.

“Just call me seonbae.”

“Ah, okay.”

“I don’t think I need to listen to the rest. You asked Bitna to meet me because you have business with me?”

“Yes! You found out pretty quickly.”

“Anyone would know that if you’re making an expression like that. I did find it a bit strange when Bitna suddenly said that she wants to meet me. I guess Bitna helped out her big sister, huh?” Maru said as he looked at Bitna’s eyes.

She was a calm child who did not complain even under the scorching sun, but she was still a child. He couldn’t let her mind about what her sister and this brother were thinking about. Bitna should probably be at ease just by notifying her that there was nothing wrong with this situation.

“Sorry, oppa. I lied.”

“This isn’t even considered lying. People like me know best since I lie all the time.”

“Do you lie a lot, oppa?”

“I do.”

“Then does that make you a bad person?”

“Does Bitna see me as a bad person?”

Bitna stared at him for a while before shaking her head.

“If Bitna says I’m not, then I shouldn’t be. Uhm, Yuna, was it? Shall we switch places? This place is a little crowded.”

“Shall we?”

Bitna naturally grabbed Yuna’s hand. They seemed to be sisters who got along well.

“Yuna, why are you looking around like that?”

“What? Oh, I was worried that someone might recognize you and come, seonbae. I heard that image management was important for actors....”

“You’re clearly overly worried. There’s no one who recognizes me.”

“Not at all. You’re famous, seonbae-nim.”

“I’m famous?”

“...You’re probably famous.”

Maru then grabbed a random person who was walking by.

“Uhm, excuse me, but do you happen to know who I am?”

“What? No, I don’t seem to know you.”

“Sorry about that. I seem to have been mistaken.”

That student scanned him from top to bottom before leaving. Maru looked at Yuna, who was blinking her eyes.

“See? No one knows me.”

“A... ah! It’s because you aren’t wearing glasses. You’ll definitely be recognized if you wear glasses.”

Yuna then suddenly started rummaging through her bag.

“What are you doing?”

“I have a pair of glasses I wear when I’m studying. If you wear that, people will recognize you.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be problematic if they do?”

Hearing that, Yuna’s actions suddenly froze. She stiffly raised her head, not knowing what to do.

“You have a peculiar character, huh.”

“Sorry.”

“Not at all. I meant to say that I quite like you. Bitna, your sister seems to be an interesting person, isn’t she?”

Bitna faintly smiled while nodding.

“Where shall we go? I don’t know the area that well. Preferably, we should go to a place where we can eat.”

Whenever he came here, it was his girlfriend who always guided him around. Most of the time, she took him to restaurants that were gaining popularity.

“There’s a place I visit a lot with my friends. Can we go there?”

“Sure.”

Yuna nodded. Maru took a step back and looked at the sisters who were holding hands.

‘Now that’s the kind of daughter I want.’

The word ‘daughter’ gave him a sense of nostalgia, but he didn’t know what that was about.

Maru smiled and followed the two.

Chapter 585

“Nice place.”

“A friend of mine told me about it.”

Maru looked around the café. There were shelves with books on them, ranging from liberal arts books to comic books. There was a faint smell of coffee in the air, as well as the smell of something sweet. It seemed to be milk tea. The music playing inside the café was very faint, and one would miss it if they didn’t focus on it. As for the interior design, there was no sense of uniformity other than the color. Square tables, round tables, and even triangular tables that they got from god-knows-where. There were many different kinds of spots where people could sit down and enjoy reading a book.

“Don’t girls around your age prefer louder places? Or a board game café where you can enjoy yourselves?”

“It’s not always like that. Maybe it’s because of the atmosphere here, but we end up talking about what we usually wouldn’t. I like that sense of unfamiliarity here,” Yuna replied.

Bitna took out a book as soon as she came to the café. It was a thin essay. It was about travelling on a bike. Although half of the book was filled with photos, Maru thought that a child wouldn’t enjoy something like that due to the nature of the writing, but Bitna kept reading calmly. She had a higher concentration than most others of her age. Usually, children like her would get fed up with any kind of reading after ten minutes and would look for dolls or something.

‘Dolls?’

Maru tapped on his arm and focused on his thoughts. Why dolls of all things? He was reminded of a teddy bear as though he had experienced it for himself. Just as he was entrapped in a strange sense of déjà vu,

“Seonbae-nim?”

“Ah, what is it?”

“Nothing. You seemed to be engrossed in something. I interrupted you, didn’t I?”

“Nah. I was just distracted. Shall we eat something for now? They seem to sell some simple meals here.”

“Actually, the bagels here are one of the reasons I come here all the time. They’re really good.”

“What would you like to eat, Bitna?”

Bitna took her eyes off the book and said 'anything that doesn't have olives'.

"Do you not like olives?"

"They don't smell good."

"It's not good to be picky with food."

"Mom tells me that too, but isn't it worse to force myself to eat something I don't like? I become happy when I eat what I want, but it makes me feel bad if I eat something I don't like," Bitna replied clearly.

Her way of expressing her thoughts was really refined for a girl of her age.

"Looks like I wasn't thinking far. Then I'll order something without olives for you. What about you, Yuna?"

"I'll go with you to order. I need to pay too," Yuna said as she took out her wallet from her bag.

"I'll treat you."

"Oh, no. You came all the way here for me."

"It's just a few bus stops away. Let's go for now. I'm a bit hungry since I haven't had dinner yet."

They walked over to the counter.

"I'd like an onion bagel and a cup of black coffee. Yuna, you can order yours."

"I'd like a cream cheese bagel and a blueberry bagel. As for drinks, a grapefruit juice and a chocolate latte."

Upon order, Yuna quickly took out a 10,000 won bill. Maru said that it was okay, but Yuna just shook her head and did not take back the bill.

"I'll pay with this card."

He gave the store owner his credit card and took the bill from Yuna.

"Does this satisfy you?"

"Yes."

"Also, if an adult says they'll treat you, just accept it. It's one of the privileges you have when you're young."

"An adult?"

Yuna stared at him strangely before nodding in acceptance. I guess you're an adult, too, seonbae-nim - she said to herself. Maru smiled awkwardly. After waiting for a while, they got the food they ordered and returned to their original table with the tray. Bitna was still focused on the book she had chosen.

"How's the book?"

"It's fun."

Bitna closed the book and quietly placed it in the corner of the table.

“Isn’t the bagel too big for Bitna to finish by herself?”

Maru looked at his own bagel as well as his palm. The owner here seemed to be very generous, as the bagel was pretty massive. Since it was bigger than what would suffice for a meal, it would probably be hard for Bitna to eat it all.

“It’s fine. She has a good appetite. Bitna, you can eat all of that, right?”

Bitna did not speak and just started eating the bagel with her two hands. Maru was reminded of a hamster nibbling away at some pumpkin seeds.

“Should we talk while we eat? I feel hungry after seeing Bitna eat.”

“Yes.”

He split the bagel in half before taking a bite. A smile appeared on his face, since the taste wasn’t too stimulative.

“It’s good.”

“Right?”

Yuna replied almost at the same time as he spoke. Maru smiled and looked at Yuna.

“So you are an aspiring actress?”

He asked a question first. Since he was looking for a question that wouldn’t make her feel uncomfortable, he naturally had to talk about acting.

“Yes. Bitna is my senior in that regard. I wanted to act after seeing Bitna acting.”

“Bitna is pretty good too. You are in the acting club at Myunghwa High, right?”

“Yes.”

“Myunghwa High is known for being pretty strict. How is it?”

“It’s harder than going to an acting school, but it’s just as much fun. The seniors treat me well, and it’s fun to try and put on an act together with my friends. You are....”

“I’m also in the acting club. At the school that’s always 2nd place thanks to Myunghwa High, that is.”

“Oh, you mean Woosung High?”

“Yes.”

“The seniors told me a lot. That we should just watch out for Woosung High in Suwon. As for the nationals, it’s Hwasoo High and Jinwon High.”

“Tell your seniors to go easy on us. I want to touch the trophy at least once before I graduate.”

“...Uhm, I’m not exactly in a position where I can say something like that.”

Yuna became stiff. She really couldn't take a joke.

"I was just joking. We got a bunch of new kids this year, so we won't slip before the nationals like last year."

"Are you going on stage as well?"

Yuna's voice clearly went up a pitch.

Maru shook his head.

"I'm just a staff. The performance will be done by the 1st and 2nd year students."

"Why aren't you in it?"

"Because I don't exactly have enough time. I don't want to do things half-assedly when everyone else is trying their best."

"Oh, I see."

"How about you? Are you going on stage?"

"Yes. I was lucky."

"I don't think there's luck involved when it comes to performance."

Yuna stared at him in a daze for a while before smiling, however, she soon covered her mouth and calmed down her expression. While the conversation was stopped, Maru reached out to his bagel. As he was enjoying the faint smell of onion from the bread, he saw a pair of clear eyes staring at the bagel.

"It's onion-flavored. Do you want to try it?"

Bitna immediately replied yes. When Maru had a look at her plate, the large bagel was nowhere to be seen. Did she finish it off while they were talking? He did just hear that she had a big appetite, but he didn't know she would eat this much.

'Well, she did finish a lunchbox made for adults by herself during shoots.'

He ripped a chunk off the bagel and gave it to Bitna. She started eating it as though everything that didn't contain olives was okay. Maru thought that parents weren't lying when they said that they were full just watching their children eat. As Maru didn't feel hungry anymore, he gave Bitna the rest of the bagel as well. Bitna accepted it and immediately started eating it. The little glutton only seemed satisfied after that.

"You got some on your mouth."

Yuna wiped Bitna's mouth with some tissue. While siblings close in age fought each other all the time before getting close in their later years, there were many cases where the older sibling would become a secondary parent for the younger sibling with siblings who were far apart in age like these two. Maru thought about Bada before snorting. If Bada treated him nicely now, he would doubt her instead, wondering what she wanted from him this time.

"Bitna has it good, having a sister like her."

“Yes, that’s right.”

The honesty of children made him emotional from time to time. Everyone had a time when they were honest with their feelings without calculating what others would think about. Only after enduring the hardships of life did they realize that being honest was a weakness, not an advantage. That would be the moment when a child grew up and became an adult.

“You’re different from how I imagined, seonbae-nim,” Yuna said in a daze.

After saying that, she got startled by herself and no longer spoke.

“If you say that, I can only ask what is so different.”

“Uhm....”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to.”

“It’s not like that.”

Yuna started fidgeting with her fingers on the table.

“I watched your acting in *The Witness*. To me, it came as a shock. You seemed to be around my age, so how can you act so well? I really thought a lot about it.”

“That only looked so good since Joohyun-noonim was there to back me up. It’s because the receiver was so good that such freaky acting looked good.”

“...I also watched your scene in *Twilight Struggles*.”

Maru then replied while sipping on his coffee.

“That shouldn’t be available to minors though.”

“I only watched a short clip on the internet.”

“You mean, my scene?”

“Yes. After I saw that, I became sure that your acting wasn’t due to a coincidence. Unlike that rough, violent acting you showed in *The Witness* which even contained a hint of craze, you looked very cynical and evil in the film. It might sound similar since the words I used are all used negatively, but you understand the slight difference when you’re acting, right?”

She seems passionate - Maru thought as he looked at Yuna, who spoke clearly. He could see her mindset towards acting from this conversation alone.

“Oh, sorry about that. I guess I sounded quite strange since I said that all of a sudden. It’s a bit rude too.”

“It’s not rude at all. It’s not like you did anything wrong.”

Maru put down his cup before continuing to speak,

“So you thought that I’d be cold and stiff since all my roles are like that, and were disappointed to see that I’m actually quite ordinary?”

“Of course not! Of course I’m not disappointed. I know well that people acting an evil role aren’t evil at heart, so I wouldn’t think like that.”

Yuna grabbed her cup with both of her hands.

“I was just curious about how you could show such a performance.”

“You’re doing pretty well in your acting club though, aren’t you? You managed to win a role too. I think you’re doing plenty well.”

“No. I have never had confidence in my acting skills. I was told reasons for that at the academy as well - that my expressions are boring. Of course, I have never thought that acting was hard. It’s always enjoyable and fun. I think that I’ll never get fed up with it.”

“Really? That’s amazing.”

“What?”

“Should we ask Bitna about it then?”

Maru turned around to see Bitna. She was reading the travel essay after finishing her food and raised her head when Maru looked at her.

“Bitna. Did you always find acting fun? Did you ever think that it was not fun?”

“I can’t lie, right?”

“If you want to, you can, but I hope you can be honest right now. Your sister is listening as well,” Maru said as he pointed at Yuna.

Bitna licked her lips before looking at Yuna and speaking.

“It’s not always that fun. There are times when I want to stop because it’s hard.”

“Do you hate acting?”

“No, I don’t hate it.”

“But it’s not always fun, right?”

“That’s right.”

Maru then looked at Yuna again.

“Have you really never ever hated acting even once? No, let me change that question. Have you never felt afraid of acting?”

Yuna’s expression stiffened after hearing that question. She rested her lips on her right hand, unable to speak.

“In my case, I had fun when I first got on the stage. I was excited. So this is what acting is about! I felt like I was going to get addicted. However, from some time onwards, I found out that I can’t control myself. Actually, no, I only found out because someone else told me about it. That’s when I realized. Oh! I was showing a performance without proper control over myself. When that realization popped up

inside me, I thought of a question that should come before that. Is the acting I'm showing really satisfying the standards that I've set?"

"The standards that you've set...."

"I was originally someone who was generous to myself. Whether it's studying or sports, I always found a suitable middle point. That's the only way I can receive less stress. If I lower the standards even further, I wouldn't receive any stress at all."

Yuna's gaze lowered even more. Maru tapped on the table. Yuna, who lowered her head with a low groan, raised her head again.

"I'm not telling you this to be mean to you. You might actually be right. I mean to say that you might be in love with acting at every single moment. I wish I was like that. That would be a blessing after all. Unfortunately, it's generally not like that, so I can only think my way."

"Am I wrong?"

She looked like she did something wrong. Maru grabbed the handle of the coffee mug and spoke,

"When you say that you like every facet of something unconditionally, is that really liking that something? What do you think?"

Chapter 586

"Unconditionally liking...."

Yuna thought back to yesterday. She went to her clubroom after school and passionately practiced. She did some stretches, then did some vocal exercises, and then did some acting. She physically felt tired, but while she was acting, she forgot about the sweat on her forehead and enjoyed it. Becoming someone other than herself was something exciting. It was like going on an adventure.

She rewinded the clock some more. She was in her 3rd year of middle school. She saw herself, who was acting at the acting school. The lessons were a bit hard to follow, but it did not change the fact that the very act of acting itself gave her excitement. To her, acting wasn't the sweet fruit that she could get at the end of a harsh class, but the sports drink that enabled her to last the harsh class.

She went back even further to when she just entered middle school. Bitna, who was a child model back then, tried her hand at a drama for the first time, and successfully won a role. Yuna became interested in acting after seeing her very young sister acting on TV. Her mother happily enrolled her in an acting school, telling her that she should try it out. When she first went to the academy, she felt rather overwhelmed since everyone around her was already good at acting. The people that received the so-called 'camera massage' were different on a fundamental level. She felt like an ugly duckling amidst a group of elegant cranes. Did acting not suit her after all? - she had such negative thoughts when she received her first lesson. Indeed, she was overwhelmed and couldn't do anything. She was the only one who lacked basic voicing and pronunciation skills and had to receive personal lessons from the instructor. Her first lesson was terrible. She even had the feeling that she couldn't do anything there. When she had almost given up, the instructor told her to try some simple acting. As she hadn't learned anything yet back then, the word 'acting' seemed like a big wall to her. Her peers next to her all displayed good acting one after the other. They became angry, smiled, and cried. Just when she felt

deeply impressed by them, it became her turn. Her head turned blank since she didn't know what to do. As she stood there frozen like a statue, the instructor told her that it was okay and told her to express anything she wanted. At that moment, a clothes hanger entered her eyes and Yuna imitated that clothes hanger without thinking. She stood upright, bent her arms into an L shape and pressed her fingers together. She saw her own figure reflected on the wall and she found herself really freaky. She thought that she was going to get laughed at, but no one laughed at her. In fact, what she received was a compliment. Yuna was curious. The performance she had just shown was too different from the acting that her peers had shown. It was nothing more than an infantile form of imitation, so she couldn't understand why other people would say that she was good. The instructor smiled gently at her and replied to her:

That. That is what acting was about.

The moment she heard those words, Yuna's body shook, without knowing why. Acting, which existed in another world and was something that she could only watch from afar, felt like it was right in front of her now. Ever since that day, Yuna became engrossed in acting. Expressing something other than herself - that kind of excitement was what she liked.

Until now, Yuna had never once felt afraid of acting nor felt that it was hard to do. She may have thought that a technical aspect of acting might be difficult, but she never felt burdened by acting itself. To her, acting was a refuge, a playground always filled with new and fun things. Being afraid of going to such a place? She couldn't imagine such a thing.

"Learning to act is definitely a difficult thing. There were many times when it was hard, but I've never felt afraid or like I was afraid of acting even once."

"If you think that, then there's no problem. You don't need to hesitate and can just keep doing things the way you've been doing until now. The path you've been treading on is very solid and must be heading in the right direction," said Maru, who sat in front of her.

They were words of encouragement, but the same words were echoing inside Yuna's head. Is unconditionally liking something really liking something? When she thought about it simply, there was no need to hesitate. She unconditionally liked it because there was nothing to hate about it, right?

Yuna shook her head. With years of practice and effort, her skills had definitely improved. She knew that she had improved dramatically when she thought back to how she was during her 1st year of middle school.

However, as the years passed by, her technical skills may have improved, but the instructor became even more strict. The instructor that used to compliment her for her improvement now started pointing out the dullness in her emotional expression. The way you express it is not bad, but the appeal is lacking - that was what the instructor said about her.

It was around that time that she saw Maru's acting. That was the first time Yuna felt dazed by an act from someone around her age. The words that she lacked appeal became a mallet and smacked her head. The moment she saw Maru's acting, she realized that what he was showing her was the 'appeal' that she lacked. She thought that she wanted to be like that as she continued with her acting. Acting was

still enjoyable and she felt happy whenever she acted, but what increased was only her technical skill, while the emotional expression that couldn't be formally verified did not improve at all.

If she was doing nothing wrong, then shouldn't she be improving? As time passed, the instructor's opinion of her became worse by the day, and recently, she even felt hopeless.

She wanted to know how this person named Han Maru could act like that. The explanation from the adults didn't feel real to her, and always felt distant, making it hard for her to accept. She also felt like she would have an easier time understanding if someone around her age told her about his own experiences.

However, the result of the conversation made Yuna feel more confused than ever.

'Afraid of acting?'

Yuna had a look at Maru's face. He was talking to Bitna with a smile on his face. When she looked at his face, she was reminded of his acting. The person that displayed such chill-inducing acts was afraid of acting? They say a genius cannot win against one that puts in the effort, and that one that puts in effort cannot win against one that enjoys. Isn't enjoying something the same as liking it? Yuna couldn't understand how it was possible to like something and be good at it when he was afraid of it.

"Is unconditionally liking something a bad thing after all?"

"I told you it's not. It's more likely that I'm wrong. If you think of something as infinitely good, that's an incredible thing. If you truly never felt afraid of acting, then there are no problems at all. In fact, it would be me who would be envious of you."

"But my performances don't have the attraction that yours does."

"That's probably because the roles I played were impactful ones. I don't have any presence in the drama, right? My acting is nothing special, so there's no need to worry about it."

"In the drama, you're so natural that you feel flawless. When I perform an ordinary life act, I always get told that I'm bland. You really are different from me."

"I'm happy that you see me so highly, but I wonder if that's what's troubling you instead. You acted until now without any worries at all, didn't you?"

"I did have my worries. I just didn't mind them that much since I enjoy myself a lot while I'm acting. Now, however, I have a dream to debut as a proper actress. There won't be a problem if I'm just acting as a hobby, but I think I need to change if I want to become a pro."

At that moment, Maru sighed and turned his eyes towards the counter. Maru spoke for the first time without looking her in the eyes.

"I do not know a lot about you. That's why I can only tell you basic and fundamental things. I think I have a vague grasp of what you're worried about, but I can't answer you precisely because I only have a vague grasp."

"I'm fine with anything. I just want to hear your story."

“Will my advice have a chance to change you?”

“Yes. I want to act just like you.”

“Then that’s all the more reason I can’t tell you anything.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s because I don’t want you to resent me. If my words influence you, and you end up failing later on in life, you will remember this moment. You might swear at me. I don’t want to get sworn at in a place I don’t know.”

Yuna widened her eyes.

“I won’t do something like that.”

“You might.”

“I’m not someone who would do that.”

“I can’t be sure that you aren’t someone who would do that.”

“I just wanted to hear your opinions though....”

“Why don’t you look for someone that’s much better than me? Someone who can take responsibility for their words, that is. You said you go to an acting school right? Asking the teacher there is also one way.”

“The instructor’s advice doesn’t really feel that real.”

“How about your seniors at school then?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Yuna bit her lower lip before speaking,

“You were the only one. You were the only one I was deeply impressed by. Of course, I am deeply impressed by some adults acting on TV, but you were the first high school student who impressed me that much. That’s why I tried to meet you even when I had to end up lying to a senior I really liked. I thought that you would tell me something different.”

“I have to apologize, but I’m no one special. I just happened to grab some lucky chances, and I managed to make use of them.”

Yuna felt her chest tightening. Maru’s words were right. Someone he had seen for the first time was asking him for an answer with a serious face, so it would be even stranger if he replied properly. However, she felt frustrated and sad when she thought about how she wouldn’t be able to get any hints from the meeting she looked forward to so much.

This is not right - Yuna forced herself to smile. She couldn’t inconvenience him here. After all, she had to thank him for meeting her in the first place.

"I'll keep doing my best like this then. Since it's what I like to do, I will definitely change if I keep doing it. I learned a lot from meeting you today, seonbae-nim. Thank you."

She decided to let him go and hoped that Maru didn't feel bad for coming today. She didn't want to be hated by Maru. It would be horrible if the actor who made her excited looked at her with contempt.

Just as she was about to stand up,

"Oppa, don't hate unni," Bitna said.

Yuna looked at Bitna in surprise.

"I don't hate your big sister."

"Then why aren't you answering her?"

"Because it's not something I can solve."

"Can't you just tell her something? Unni really looked forward to meeting you today, like, thiiiiis much."

Bitna created a big circle with her arms. Yuna grabbed Bitna's hands.

"Bitna, unni is fine. I'm completely fine."

"You're lying. You're about to cry."

"No, I'm not."

"No, you look sad."

Large teardrops appeared on Bitna's face before she started crying. Yuna quickly embraced Bitna.

"Sorry, Bitna, your sister was in the wrong."

When she patted Bitna's back, Bitna stopped crying. She never thought that the docile girl would cry all of a sudden. Yuna felt her heart aching. It felt like everything was her fault. Just as she was wiping Bitna's tears with her palms, she heard a voice.

"If I assume that you're in a similar situation as me, I can tell you a few things."

"Seonbae-nim?"

"I feel bad now since I feel like Bitna will hate me if I go just like this. I'm weak against children. Especially against good girls like Bitna."

Maru brushed his hair upwards with his hands before speaking,

"If you're okay with regretting after hearing my story, I can talk to you for another hour or so. However, there's no customer service after that. Even if what I tell you sets you off-track, the only thing I can do is to hear you swear at me."

"I don't care. I want to listen to you."

Yuna had a look at Bitna. Bitna was smiling brightly as she looked at Maru. Maru also looked at Bitna as though he had lost.

“But seonbae-nim. What changed your mind so suddenly?”

“I told you. I don’t want to be hated by Bitna.”

“Is that really it?”

“That’s really it. I find it strange too. I usually never step into other people’s business when they aren’t related to me. For some reason though, I can’t win against Bitna’s eyes. Perhaps this is what a father with a daughter feels like.”

After saying those words, Maru frowned and didn’t speak for a while for some reason. He seemed to be in deep thought as he thought he was going through his memories before he eventually sighed.

“Not that I would know what a father with a daughter would feel like.”

Chapter 587

“What I’m about to tell you uses me as the basis. None of it might apply to you. If you can’t sympathize with something I say, then just ignore it. That’ll be better for you.”

“Okay.”

“First up, let’s have a look at what the problem is. Before that though, is Bitna going to be okay? She looks tired.”

Yuna looked at Bitna, who was dozing off.

“Bitna, are you sleepy?”

“No.”

“I think you are.”

“I’m not.”

Bitna then stood up, saying that she wanted to go to the bathroom.

“I think she’s being considerate for her sister.”

“She thinks deeply. Sometimes, I can’t believe that she’s my sister. That’s why I like her.”

Yuna looked at Bitna until she entered the bathroom before turning around to see Maru again.

“This isn’t something worth talking a lot about, so let’s finish it quickly. Both you and Bitna need to go home.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what you’re troubled with in detail. While you’re turning your troubles into words, you’ll realize that most of the things you are thinking about aren’t actually that problematic at all. If there’s still something that remains in your heart at the end, that’s something you must think about.”

Yuna thought about Maru's words and tried summarizing the events she experienced starting from when she started acting to now. While they were talking, Bitna returned. Yuna's heart tingled when she saw Bitna trying to stay awake and felt thankful.

Like what Maru said, unlike when her thoughts were running wild everywhere, when she put it into words, she could clearly differentiate between the important things and the not important things. To be precise, she found something she couldn't say easily, and that seemed to be her biggest problem. However, she did not know what it was exactly. Only a strange sense of rejection towards talking about it remained in her heart. She felt like she might catch a clue to resolving her current situation if she managed to put it into words.

"Give me some time to think. If there are things you couldn't tell me, then think about those really carefully. Why couldn't you tell me about them and how are they troubling you?"

Maru started writing something. Seeing Maru write, Yuna looked inside her.

'I lack too much skill to enter the ranks of pros. That's what made me worried and hasty. My technical skills are definitely improving, but the instructor told me that I have a problem transmitting my emotions to the audience. I wanted to seek Maru-seonbae's help because of that.'

After thinking about that, Yuna sighed. Was that it? She felt like there was an even more fundamental problem. She still felt like there was something inexpressible with words cluttered up inside her. She felt stuffy. Even though it stemmed from herself, she couldn't tell exactly what it was. This was the first time she felt like this. It felt like something completely different existed inside of her. A sense of displeasure spread out inside her.

"I've summed up what I heard so far somewhat, so hear me out."

Maru started talking. Yuna exclaimed from time to time and nodded. Just listening to her own problems from an objective point of view cleared her head up a little. She found Maru amazing for summarizing and narrowing down the problem in such a short time.

"In the end, you feel uneasy because your emotional expressions in acting aren't improving even though you're enjoying acting, right?"

"Yes. I think that's what it is."

"Good, then let's start here. Before that, though, did you try doing what I told you to do? Organizing things that you couldn't tell me?"

"Uhm... it might sound strange, but I can't express what I'm feeling right now. I know there's something important, but I can't put it into words."

"You can't explain something that you don't have a full grasp on, however, you instinctively know that you have a problem, so keep thinking about it for now. Also, listen to me while you think. I don't want to drag this out, so I'm going to be as extreme as possible. First, why acting?"

"Because I like it."

"Aren't there other things that you like?"

"I like acting the most."

"More than anything else?"

"Yes."

"Then second, why are you worried that you can't become a pro?"

"That... I think, is a realistic problem. No matter how much I like something, I can't help but think about the future. Just because someone likes playing around doesn't mean that they can play around forever, right?"

"So it has to be a means of economics, you're saying?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you earn money through something else and do acting as a hobby then? These days, there are a lot of civil theater troupes and there are acting clubs in district centers too."

"I want to become an actress."

"So you want to live off your acting?"

Yuna replied 'yes' in a small voice.

"Third, what is the baseline of 'living off your acting'?"

"Baseline?"

"I mean how much profit you want."

"I just have to be able to live off it. I think it'll be fine even if I'm poor as long as I can continue acting."

"Do you really think so?"

Yuna nodded without hesitation. At the same time, Maru put down his pen. He locked his fingers and stretched his arms upwards as though everything was finished.

"Then we have a solution."

"What?"

"Regardless of the occupation, as long as you do it steadily, you'll be able to live off it. This society isn't that bad. You might not be able to eat things you want, nor have a house under your name, nor possess a car, and you might live in a semi-basement apartment without any hopes of getting married, but you will be able to live off your work. That was your baseline, wasn't it? That you want to live off your acting; that you don't care how poor you are as long as you can continue acting. If that's your baseline, then there's no need to worry. Congratulations, you can live off acting."

Yuna became speechless for a moment. She opened her mouth, but she couldn't say anything. Living off her acting. Yuna believed that she would feel happy as long as she could continue what she wanted to do even if she was poor. Nothing shook her faith in that until just now. The moment she heard a detailed explanation of what such a life would be like, she felt something twitching inside her.

“What about getting cast in a good work and...”

“I told you. I am going to be extreme here. If that’s what you want, this conversation was unnecessary in the first place. You have the potential to display good acting, you have the potential to solve this problem easily, and going further, you have the potential to become a huge star. Everything in the world is your potential. When you want to know about the essence of a matter, you should exclude abstract things. You should think about the extreme case scenario. If you wanted to hear a hopeful story, then I guess I shouldn’t have said any of this. I thought you looked a little desperate. I know that vague hope is essentially the same as poison to people who are desperate. That’s why I started off with the extreme, but if you aren’t ready for that, then I think we should stop talking about it here because no matter what I tell you, you will dream of the moment the sun shines in your little rat hole. There’s only one thing I can say to someone like that.”

I’m sure you’ll do well in the future - Maru said with a smile.

He then grabbed his bag and stood up. He tucked his chair in and slowly turned around. Yuna watched him turn around in a daze. Was this what she wanted? Did she need someone to console her to make her feel better?

‘What I wanted...’

Yuna abruptly stood up and grabbed Maru’s sleeve. She felt like she would regret this moment forever if she sent him off right now.

“Mark Twain once said: ‘It isn’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just isn’t so.’ Sometimes, you should doubt things that you’ve never doubted before. You’ll get unexpected answers from unexpected places.”

The moment she heard those words, Yuna felt like the lump of indescribable emotions inside her dissolved away. What she had blind faith in, what she never thought was wrong, what she thought that there was no way could be true.

She thought about herself acting. That self was smiling and enjoying herself. She felt like she was able to overcome any kinds of trials and pains as long as she hopped into the pond known as acting.

That was why to her, acting was a sanctuary. It was a perfect place that could not be tainted or become imperfect. She put a barrier around it so that sadness and pain couldn’t enter the realm of acting. Acting was always something enjoyable and happy - that was her faith when she did acting.

But what if acting was painful?

That couldn’t be. Acting had to remain an eternal oasis. The source of the pain lay in something else, not acting. The instructor’s words, her lack of skill in emotional expression, the pressure that she had to become a professional. Those were the problems while acting itself was something pure and clean without any malice. No, it was ‘supposed to be’.

“...I’m fed up with acting.”

The moment she said those words, Yuna could no longer control her emotions. Her head felt chaotic. She felt like the only way she could quell the chaos in her heart was by letting the boiling emotions

inside her out. When she came to herself, she found herself crying. The tears she had such a hard time seeing when she tried to cry while acting, flowed out uncontrollably right now. She wanted to cry out loud as well. She didn't want to cry 'prettily'. She wanted to bawl her eyes out, with her snot dripping everywhere and drool flying everywhere while crying in a disgusting fashion. However, there were too many people around her for that. Even amidst the world-turning shock, her pride still raised its head up high.

Yuna needed somewhere to lean on, and Maru happened to be right in front of her. She took a step forward and reached out to Maru, who was making a difficult expression right now. She thought that it couldn't be helped even if she wasn't accepted, but she couldn't stop there. Her body was just that uncontrollable right now.

"How young."

A warm hand gently patted her back. Yuna buried her face into the chest right in front of her until she felt suffocated, and cried while clenching her teeth. She felt like she would be embarrassed to death after this, but she couldn't help herself right now.

"Just cry without minding about others. You just have to come here wearing a mask next time, isn't that right?"

"Even if I wear a mask... people will... recognize...."

"Forget it. Let's not go there. Are you done crying?"

"No...."

Yuna grabbed Maru's sleeves again and cried until she felt her throat go numb. She saw Bitna looking at her worriedly amidst her hazy vision. In her hand was a piece of tissue.

"Mom said that you'll become sick if you can't cry when you want."

Yuna sniffed and nodded.

"Why don't you be the big sister starting tomorrow, Bitna?" Maru asked.

Chapter 588

"Go back to the past?" She asked as she put some salmon salad in her bowl.

"Yes, what do you think you'll feel if you go back to the past?"

"Well, I'm not sure."

She couldn't reply immediately. There were a few times in life when she wanted to go back to the day before. She had wished to go back one day after tests or when her acting performance was terrible or when she made a mistake. However, she had never thought about going back even further in the past so she couldn't answer easily.

"Unni. Being young is the best. They don't think about such things."

"Hanmi, you're plenty young too. So you should get mar...."

“Haesoo-unni! You always talk about marriage this, marriage that. I get it, you have a pretty daughter, okay?”

“I’m sure that there must be a lot of men who like you, so I wonder why you say something like that. Get married. You’ll start nagging an old woman like me less with your life stories.”

“We have only met a few times after several years, but you’re fed up with me already?”

“Hanmi, three times a week is more than enough. What you need is a man who will listen to your stories.”

“What are you talking about in front of a kid?”

“My daughter is doing fine. She knows what she needs to know. Since we’re at it, shall we ask how far she went with Maru?”

She immediately picked up her cup and started drinking. She drank as slowly as possible and looked alternately at her mother and writer Lee Hanmi, who both stared at her. She should have secretly put back the soju bottle when she saw it at the supermarket. She didn’t know that she’d be handling two drunk adults.

“Unni, stop teasing her. She’s going to get mad.”

“My daughter is not that petty. You don’t know because you are not mar....”

“Ah! Just drink! Stop talking about getting married and just drink. Here, here. Unni, pick up a glass. Would you like to drink as well?”

“I’m okay.”

She shook her head with a smile. The two women snapped their heads back with their drinks before putting down their beer glasses.

“Oh, right. We should keep talking about that.”

“About what?”

“I mean the past. What would you do if you return to the past, unni?”

“We’re still talking about that?”

“Give me some ideas.”

“Is this for your next work?”

“No, I just wanted to write down a few ideas. I went to the cinema a while ago, and there was a movie about a military soldier who went back to the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592. Watching it made me wonder what kinds of things would happen if I went back to the past. I’ve never written anything in the sci-fi genre, so it looks fun as well. No, wait, is time travel a fantasy? Anyway, since we’re both writers, I wanted to hear your stories. Don’t think about it deeply and just tell me whatever’s on your mind.”

“How are you going to take care of my intellectual property if it gets adapted to a video format? What are you going to give me for my source?”

“Fine, fine. If I sell this, I’ll buy you a fur coat.”

“I don’t want things like that, just give my daughter an entrance gift.”

“Unni, there’s still a lot of time left this year. College is still far away for her.”

“Time flies, you know? April is ending and then it’ll be May soon. After the flower season, it’ll get hot, and then chilly and once it snows, that’ll be the end of the year. So that’s why you should get married before it’s too la...”

“Why does it always end with my marriage? That’s a serious condition, you know?”

Hanmi clapped once.

“Well then, you start, unni. What are you going to do if you end up in the past? You can think about it starting now, you’re up next.”

A finger with a purple manicure pointed at *her* face. She nodded. Hanmi wasn’t someone who would accept an improper answer, so she decided to think about it. When her mother, who was staring at the clock on the wall, was about to speak, Hanmi half-stood up, saying that they needed more beer.

“I’d have him take a medical test,” her mother said.

She understood what her mother meant immediately. Her mother omitted a lot of words, but her expression said everything that she didn’t say out loud.

Hanmi, who was about to stand up, sat back down again.

“Is this about your husband?”

“You’re knowledgeable.”

“I had a hunch. It was heart disease, right?”

“He was healthy. He told me that he was just a little tired, but then he went just like that. If I can go back to the past, I’ll put everything aside and drag him to the hospital first.”

Her mother picked up a bottle of water instead of the beer glass. She gulped down water in large amounts and looked like she was suppressing something with cold water.

“Hanmi, what about you? What do you want to do?”

“I want to go traveling with my mother. And be a filial daughter. You know, things like that.”

“That’s not that much different from mine. This is no fun.”

“Perhaps that indicates that what everyone desperately wishes for is similar? Being able to stay longer with loved ones. It’s quite cliché, but that’s human nature after all. When my mother closed her eyes, I regretted so much. I never showed up in front of her because I wanted to write, and then when I heard that she had terminal stage cancer, I just lost it. It was so absurd. Why did it have to be my mom of all people? Just when I thought that I could repay her, she left this bad daughter here as though she was in a hurry.”

“Both you and I need to visit the hospital, huh. Going back to the past doesn’t sound that fun.”

“At least we get an opportunity that way; an opportunity to live our lives once again.”

After saying those words, Hanmi looked at her.

“Have you thought about it?”

“I want to see dad as well. I want to hold his hands and go to Daehak-ro together, and if possible, I want to show him my acting. Dad will love it if I can show him how much I can do. I want to show him that his daughter became so big.”

“Then you should go back with your current body, huh. But that causes a time paradox. If you go back to the past, only your mind should go back to your younger self. If there are two of you in one era, it will cause an endless amount of trouble,” Hanmi said with a smile.

She could tell that Hanmi had intentionally switched the topic. Talking about people that weren't here anymore and falling into sadness didn't suit an occasion like this after all.

“So only my mind flies into the past and enters my younger body? That sounds good, becoming young again. I thought I was going back to the past with my body.”

Her mother joined the conversation as well. The atmosphere became brighter in an instant.

“Unni, would you meet another man if you’re younger?”

“No. I wouldn’t be able to meet my daughter if I did that.”

“Geez, you’re too silly.”

“You’ll understand once you give birth to a child like me.”

“I already had indirect experience through writing. How many moms do you think I’ve written about that are obsessed with their children? You wouldn’t know how many emotional babies I’ve given birth to.”

“Fine, you’re popular, okay? What would a third-rate romance author like me tell a big-shot writer?”

“Now you see the difference?”

“I think you need some slapping.”

Seeing the two giggling, she was reminded of something she wanted to think about.

“Ahjumma, what if you have to throw away your memories in order to go back to the past?”

“Throw away my memories?”

“Yes. If some god or alien tells you that you can’t bring your memories back to the past with you, are you still going to go?”

“Now that, I’m going to have to think about it. If I can go back to the past with my intact memories, I think I can go without hesitation, but if I can’t then there’s no merit, is there? If I have the same ego in the same era, I’ll probably end up living a similar life. Is there a reason to go back to the past then?”

Just then, her mother interrupted.

“There’s no charm in that story. Why is the main character a main character? It’s because he or she has something that other people look up to. Let’s just assume that the character goes back with all of their memories.”

“Unni, the trend in dramas these days isn’t like that. Where’s the fun in a character who knows everything? They need to go through a trial. Just like your romance novels, there needs to be a love rival to be more interesting.”

The conversation started burning brightly again. She felt like she had stepped on a landmine, but the two women were already deeply immersed in talking about the topic. She could only listen to them. Ah, one more thing. She had to be ready for Hanmi’s sudden questions.

“What if you slowly lose your memories? At first, you passionately fall in love with your loved one, but the memories become faint, and then time-transcending love turns into just an ordinary love for a youth in that era,” Hanmi said.

She listened with interest as she ate some salmon salad.

“But there’s no problem with that right? They love each other already.”

“That’s why we should change it up a little. You’re going to meet your husband even if you go back to the past, right?”

“Am I supposed to give you a serious answer?”

“Of course.”

“Like I said before, I am going to meet him again. And I’ll meet my daughter again too. As long as I have my memories and affections of this life, I don’t think I’ll be able to easily meet someone else.”

“That’s precisely it. That’s what a time-transcending love is. The person you unwillingly departed with in the future is still alive and well in the past. If you really liked that person, you would grab him thinking that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“Right.”

“Even if that person in the past does not like me, I’ll still like him, right? Because I’ve been in love with that man in the ‘future’.”

“My husband will probably confess to me on our first meeting, you know? He couldn’t live without me after all.”

“Fine, stop boasting, sheesh. Anyway, it’s all good until you go back and meet the person you love and live a happy life. That’s when the trial starts. You slowly start losing memories. The personality, impressions, and preferences you knew about that person slowly disappear.”

“I think I’ll still love him though? Memory is just information after all. I believe that a person possesses something that is superior to memories formed by the brain’s electrical and chemical signals.”

“Like a soul you mean?”

“Maybe it’s something like that, or maybe it’s called a heart.”

“Unni, you know what amnesia is, right?”

“I understand what you’re trying to say, but I still believe that there’s something that transcends information. Otherwise, it’s just too cruel, you know? I’m sure that love is something special that does not rely on memories.”

“Do you really think so? In our heads, there’s something called the frontal lobe, and damage to that part causes a lot of disabilities, one of the significant ones being the loss of emotions. That’s why that might cause someone to become antisocial, and such a person doesn’t have something called altruism. They would justify themselves with anything they do without realizing what they’ve done wrong even if they make a mistake. That’s just a result of a part of the brain not functioning properly. And here, we’re talking about losing memories as a whole, which make up the foundation of a human. In some sense, that’s the same as becoming dull to emotions. You know that even the most passionate love is bound to cool down, right? If your warm moments get erased, don’t you think you’ll fall in love with a new person just like everyone else?”

“So you want to say that memories are everything?”

“Reasonably speaking, one’s personality is the amalgamation of experience, right? And experience becomes systemized into a mechanism that reacts to external stimulation. Doesn’t that mean that everything is caused by memories?”

“Despite that, we can’t even be sure of the existence of god, right? As long as agnosticism exists, the theory that the mind comes before memories will always exist as well.”

“That’s too unscientific.”

“Is going back to the past scientific? Einstein would love to have a word with you.”

“But this is an agreement.”

“I’ve never agreed to it.”

“I can’t get anything through to you, can I?”

“Hah, that’s funny.”

She looked at the two women who glared at each other and sighed. She thought about the topic while she did so. Memories versus the soul. Which was on a deeper level?

‘I wished it was the soul.’

If the disappearance of memories meant the disappearance of emotions, that would be too sad.

“Forget it, just drink!”

“Right, let’s drink!”

It seemed that the two adults reached the conclusion that they should get drunk. She shook her head. These two adults were really hopeless.

'Rather than that, I wonder if he went back home properly after meeting her.'

She looked at the clock on the wall. It was 7:40 p.m. She felt that it was still quite early. She wondered if she should text him or something, when,

"Unni, you should've been careful."

Her mother spilled some water. *She* put her phone down and went to the kitchen.

for more details.

Chapter 589

She wanted to die - Yuna raised her head before sighing. Maru was wiping his clothes with some tissue. The tears from heroines crying in movies looked pretty like flower petals, but hers were far from it and in fact, were rather ugly instead. The moment she saw that other forms of secretions(?) were on Maru's clothes, Yuna wanted to run into the window of the book café.

'But that's still okay.'

There was an even bigger problem. Yuna barely managed to turn around and looked at some girls in the corner of the café. They were students that entered while she was crying, and unfortunately for her, they were her classmates. The classmate that sat next to her and told her about this place was also among them. They walked past while she was busy crying, so they should have seen everything. Her head turned blank when she realized that her friends had seen her crying in Maru-seonbae's arms.

"Are you feeling okay now?"

"Ah, yes."

Yuna looked at Maru before taking a slight glance at her friends sitting behind her. They were chuckling and whispering among themselves. She felt even more gloomy because she was close to them.

'I don't want to go to school anymore.'

She vowed to never cry again. When she cried, she felt like she was liberated from something incomprehensible, but the embarrassment that came afterwards made her feel heavy as though there was a lump of lead inside her.

"Sorry, seonbae. I really wasn't planning to do that."

"Sometimes in life, you just can't hold yourself back. I understand what it's like."

"I'll wash your clothes and give them ba..."

"This is the only thing I'm wearing though?"

"Like I said, I'll get them washed an... no. Oh, it's nothing!"

She was so flustered that she did not realize what she was even saying. He would be half-naked if he took off his t-shirt. Yuna violently shook her head.

"If you're calm now, let's go home. While I don't really mind that much, you look like your face is going to burst at any moment. Bitna, wait for just a bit longer, you're going to go home soon."

Maru reached out and patted Bitna's head and stroked her hair. She didn't realize since she was so flustered, but Bitna was dozing off. The sleepiness she had been holding back since coming to the café seemed uncontrollable now.

As she stroked Bitna's cheeks and told her to sleep, she heard a noise from her bag. She took out her phone, which was vibrating, and received a call from her mother.

"Mom."

-Bitna's next to you, right?

"Yes, she is."

-I suddenly got some work, and I think I'll need to bring Bitna to Seoul for a bit. Where are you right now? I'll be there immediately.

"We are at the book café near the school."

Her mother seemed to know about this place as well and hung up after saying okay.

"I didn't intend to eavesdrop, but is your mother coming to pick up Bitna?"

"Yes. She should probably be here in less than 15 minutes."

"That's good. I'll get going first."

"You're going?"

"If you want, I can stay and say hello, but are you okay with that?"

Maru smiled and scanned her from top to bottom. Yuna came to herself and told him to go first.

"You should wash your face a little. Also, your makeup is a bit smudged. Though, it doesn't look terrible."

"...Okay."

Only then did she remember that she wore faint makeup around her eyes. She carefully looked at Maru's shirt. There was a faint trace of black around the part that was wet with her tears.

"Sorry."

"You should get yourself together if you have the time to apologize. Also, don't make your mother worried."

"Okay."

"How do you feel now? A bit refreshed?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"I'm sure that's the case. If you keep leaving behind that vagueness in your heart though, you'll definitely end up regretting it sooner or later. It's a painful thing to dig deeper into your worries, but I feel like this is the right time for that. Think carefully about what made you say that you are fed up with acting, and once you come to a conclusion yourself, you should be able to improve your acting a lot. I believe that you will."

Maru patted her shoulder. Yuna sighed silently. They were words of encouragement, but she couldn't smile when she saw the stains on his t-shirt. She wanted to find a hole to hide in when she thought that she caused a massive inconvenience to a boy she had never met before.

"I'm leaving then. Thanks for telling me about this good place."

Maru faintly smiled and left the café.

Yuna stood still and watched him as he left. The door swung past the entrance and the bell that was hung on the door rang. At that moment, Yuna subconsciously started walking. She pushed against the door that was still swaying. A loud bell noise pierced her ears. She grabbed the banisters on the stairs and looked down. She saw Maru walking downstairs while checking his watch.

"S-seonbae-nim!"

Maru wordlessly looked at her. Yuna shouted at him.

"Next time, contact me next time!"

As she was driven by emotions, she blurted out her thoughts without thinking.

"I mean! Can I contact you next time? As an apology, I'll..."

"As long as you don't cry, I'm okay with it."

"Ah, okay."

"Take good care of Bitna and I hope you can get your emotions together."

Maru waved at her from the bottom of the staircase. Yuna waved back. Maru then disappeared from her sight along with the low sound of his footsteps. Her hands holding the banisters lost energy. At the same time, she lost power in her legs as well. She sat down on the spot and blankly stared at the wall. The events that happened during the past dozen seconds flashed past her mind.

"C-c-contact him ne-next time!?"

Yuna banged her head against the wall. She wanted to fly to somewhere unknown right now. Why did she do that? What she should've said was goodbye, but why did she say that she wanted to meet him again? It had to be that her embarrassment had caused her brain to malfunction. See Maru-seonbae a second time? That was just crazy.

She barely got a hold of herself and stood up. When she went back into the café, she could feel other people looking at her. Well, it wasn't surprising since she cried the heck out.

Bitna had fallen asleep at the table. She wanted to wake Bitna up and leave, but she couldn't after seeing that her sister was sleeping so soundly. Truth be told, it was Bitna who had it the hardest today.

After all, she created this opportunity for her big sister and stayed with them until she tired herself out to sleep.

“Unni will buy you something nice later.”

This girl was totally an angel. As she was looking at Bitna,

“Ohmigosh, what was that? Yuna, what was that just now?”

“Boyfriend? That was your boyfriend right? Why did you cry? Did that fucker two-time you? Is that what it is?”

“If he two-timed you, you should kill him!”

She had forgotten. Her friends all came up to her and demanded an explanation with all sorts of expressions on their faces. The friend that sat next to her in class even grabbed her hands worriedly.

“It’s not like that. He’s not my boyfriend either.”

“Really? I’d be sad if you’re lying to us.”

“I’m not. I saw him for the first time today. He’s a seonbae I really appreciate.”

“You appreciate him even though it’s your first time seeing him? Then why did you cry?”

“That’s... a bit complicated.”

“What was it? What was it?”

Her friends changed their expressions. They asked her questions with bright smiles on their faces. Just then, Bitna moved a little. Yuna pressed her index finger against her lips and switched places.

“Tell us quickly. So first, who is he?”

“...A seonbae I got to know.”

“Oh, my. Look at you, girlie. A seonbae you got to know? That sounds suspicious.”

“I said it’s not like that.”

“Then why did you cry? We were really surprised, you know? I thought he did something wrong to you. I almost went up to him and was about to ask what he was doing to you. When I had a closer look though, he was consoling you. You two looked like lovers.”

“What lovers! I’m not in that kind of a relationship with him. He just listened to my story.”

“What story?”

“...About acting.”

“Does he belong to our school’s acting club? Why is he not wearing a uniform?”

“He goes to a different school.”

“Really? That sounds suspicious.”

“There’s nothing to be suspicious about.”

She didn’t realize that explaining would be this hard and felt her energy draining away from her. However, these girls were sure to start rumors if she didn’t explain properly now, and that might affect Maru in a bad way, so she had to set things straight now.

Yuna took a deep breath and explained to them what happened. They were good girls, so they wouldn’t start rumors as long as she told them honestly what happened and asked them not to.

“So while you were talking, you suddenly had the urge to cry and jumped into his arms?”

“...Yeah.”

“So you like him then.”

“It’s not like that. I feel really sorry for him right now, and I would be really embarrassed to see him again.”

Just thinking about Maru’s face made her face turn hot. It wasn’t because she liked him, but because she felt apologetic and embarrassed. After looking at Yuna’s face, her friends eventually nodded and said,

“Well, I guess even I would be creeped out if a girl I’ve never seen before suddenly cries the heck out in front of me.”

“Yuna has a pretty face so he shouldn’t be totally creeped out.”

“But hey, I feel like I’ve seen him somewhere before.”

“You too? I thought the same. I feel like I’ve seen him.”

“He looked pretty decent.”

“I don’t like his sharp eyes. He looks scary.”

They started evaluating him for some reason. Yuna waved her hand and stood up.

“Anyway, he’s a good person, and is not anyone strange, so don’t let your imaginations run wild.”

“Alright, girlie. And here I was thinking that you ran into trouble while dating in secret.”

“It really isn’t like that....”

“You know that you’re kinda suspicious for denying it so strongly, right? Maybe you’ve taken a liking to him? I mean, isn’t it plausible? Someone you’ve never seen before gave you consultation and even lent you his shoulder. I think he has good manners.”

Her friends grinned in an evil fashion.

“Do you really not feel anything towards him?”

“I don’t. It’s the first time I saw him today, so there’s no way such a thing would happen. I just... found him amazing.”

“You said he’s someone doing acting, right?”

Yuna slightly turned around and said yes. Even though she found it unfortunate that no one recognized Maru until they came to the café, she kinda wished no one would recognize him right now, for some reason.

'He's a celebrity after all.'

Just as she made an answer for herself and accepted it,

"Yuna."

She turned her head around when she heard the voice from the entrance. Her mother was waving at her with a smile. She felt better now. Since her mother was here, her friends wouldn't be able to nag her anymore.

Her friends ran up to her and greeted her. Her mother returned their greetings before looking for Bitna.

"She's asleep right now. I'll go get her."

She carefully picked up Bitna, who was sleeping at the table and passed her to her mother.

"Are you going to be late?"

"Probably. Mom will give you some money so you should go eat out with your friends."

"Okay."

"But Yuna."

"Yes?"

"Did you cry?"

She forgot to wash her face. As she was at a loss what to say, her friends came in.

"We asked her to show us some tear jerking action. Yuna's really good at acting, so she ended up crying."

The girl that sat next to her in class stepped up.

"You should redo your makeup around your eyes. It's smudged. Yuna, your mother has to get going, so have fun with your friends."

"Okay mom. Have a safe trip."

"Okay."

Yuna sighed and turned around.

"I saved you this time."

"Yeah, thanks."

Yuna smiled and looked at her friend, who managed to get her through this situation.

"But do you really not have any interest in him at all?"

She retracted her thanks.

Yuna pouted.

Chapter 590

“Have a good day.”

Maru smiled bitterly as he left. He visited a local electronics store after parting with Yuna just in case, but unfortunately, all he heard was that they weren't selling VCRs. The once must-have item for marriage had disappeared into the annals of history ever since it abdicated its throne to the CD player. As electronics stores usually handled the latest devices, it would indeed be quite strange for them to have something that was past its popularity.

It seemed that the answer was to go to Yongsan after all. While Maru was thinking about the maze-like dungeon of Yongsan, he got a call.

-How was the meeting?

It was her.

“If you ask that all of a sudden, then I guess I can only say that it went pretty well.”

-You did treat her nicely right? Yuna, that girl, might seem spirited at a first glance, but she's quite feeble at heart.

Feeble, huh. Definitely. Maru replied as he rubbed the makeup stain on his chest.

“I did treat her nicely, so don't worry about that.”

-Somehow, that makes me even more worried.

“Why can't you trust me? Rather than that, how's dinner going?”

-Don't even start. Those two are hugging each other and laughing. Alcohol clearly got the better of them.

“Looks like you must be having a hard time then. Don't worry, I won't make you worried over something like alcohol.”

-We'll see about that.

“Oh? So you're saying that you're going to continue watching me in the future? Why don't we set an engagement date right now?”

-Hell no.

Low laughter tickled his ears. He felt like it was yesterday when she became all embarrassed and snapped back at him due to it, so he felt really pleased when he heard the smooth reaction.

“You know, you should really listen to what Yuna has to say. I feel like she's at a loss on what to do, and it's a lot easier to have someone to talk to at times like that.”

-Did something happen?

“Ask her yourself. If she doesn’t answer, then don’t pry her. Actually, she should’ve looked for you instead of me. She made the wrong choice.”

-She said she had something to ask you as an actor. So you... are better than me.

The voice from the phone became smaller as though it was coming from afar. Maru stopped walking and spoke.

“You don’t sound energetic.”

-It’s not like that.

“It clearly is. What’s wrong?”

-There’s nothing like that.

“I just opened up a consultation business that is free of charge, and I’m worried because I’m not getting any customers. I wonder if there’s one nearby?”

-When did you open a consultation business?

“Just now. Don’t make me start imagining what’s happening and just tell me. If it’s really not anything much, tell me anyway.”

She didn’t answer for quite a while. Maru went into the nearby convenience store and bought a packet of soy milk. He sat under the parasol and waited for her to speak. After a while, her voice could be heard again.

-These days, I sometimes think that maybe I don’t have any talent as an actress.

“Did someone tell you that you were bad? If it’s the producer of the sitcom you did last time, then....”

-It’s you.

He momentarily couldn’t understand what she was saying. He even wondered if ‘It’s you’ had any other meaning.

“Me? Did I ever say something like that to you?”

-You didn’t. You wouldn’t dare.

“Can I ask what you mean then?”

-I don’t want to say since I might sound like I’m complaining.

“One way of using a man is to complain to them. Moreover, it’s 8:40, the perfect time to listen to complaints.”

-Do you always prepare commentary like that?

“You didn’t know? I have multiple scripts when I’m talking to you. Just consider how far this man goes to entertain you... and just tell me about it; what I did to you. You know that I’m kinda stupid and won’t understand if you don’t say it properly, right? Consider it as talking to a bear and tell me in detail.”

-What are you going to do if I say that we should just forget about this?

"I'll just let you be. I don't plan on forcing you to tell me something you don't want."

-You know what?

"What?"

-If you say something like that, it makes it even harder for me to hide things from you.

"I know that. That's why I said it."

-How sneaky.

"Why don't you call me a splendid businessman instead?"

-Fine. You're the type of guy who would pick up a rock in the middle of nowhere and then sell it to a complete stranger saying that it's a gem with special powers. At an expensive price too.

Maru smiled and perked up his ears. He could hear her coughing to calm down her voice.

-When I just watched you, I didn't feel it that much. You're rather good at acting - that's the only impression I had of you after all. It was the same when we were a part of the amateur acting class in first year. No, honestly back then, I thought I was better than you.

"In acting?"

-Yeah.

Maru nodded as he looked at a couple that entered the convenience store.

"And?"

-It came to me when I shot the film with you. We only did it three times, but it is clear that there's a big gap between us.

"So you feel hasty now?"

-A little? I told you, didn't I? I want to go to Joonga university.

"Yeah. Thanks to that, I also decided to go there."

-I'm not sure if I can pass the practical exams. It's not like I don't have the confidence, but when I watch your acting, I honestly feel really uneasy. How far can I go with my current skills? Jiseok seems a lot better than me too. So... I just don't know.

"You're doing plenty well."

-Thanks.

"I can tell that you're down just from your voice. You know? There's one thing I can say for sure. You aren't lacking. You are definitely improving. How would I know that? Just like you have been watching me, I've been watching you. I understand that you're hasty. When you look back, the path you've walked on until now seems really short, while the path that other people have taken looks really long.

Everyone has experienced something like that. You entered puberty just like everyone else once did. Congratulations. All that's left for you is to be true to your desires and push forward."

-This is why I didn't want to tell you about it. It puts me at ease. It's like I was stupid for being worried in the first place.

"That's why I'm here. So use me anytime you want."

-No. I'm going to do things my way.

"Being stubborn as always, huh."

-Today though, it doesn't make me refreshed from the bottom of my heart. This is all because of you. Why did you make me jealous?

She spoke as though she had shaken her worries off somewhat. However, the moment he heard her words, he realized that her worries weren't something so simple that they could be resolved with a simple talk. There was a thick shadow behind her words.

"Should we meet up?"

-Right now?

"Why? You can't?"

-Sorry. I can't exactly leave the house right now.

"Then I'll go there instead."

-What?

"Oh, and since we're at it, do you have a VCR at your house?"

-VCR? You mean the thing you use to watch videotapes?

"Yeah."

-We do. Though, it hasn't been in use recently.

"That's one more reason for me to go to your house then. I want to borrow it from you. Meeting you is only secondary, so don't stop me."

-You're coming right now?

"Don't worry. I'm really not going there to meet you. I'm just going there for the VCR. I can take it home with me for about a month, right? Oh wait, I think I should talk to your mother about this. I'll buy some hangover drinks then."

-You're really coming?

"Yes, I'm really going."

-Don't.

“Usually, I would listen to you, no wait, I would listen to you for the rest of my life, but for today, I think I’m going to have my way. You don’t have to put on makeup just because I’m going. You look cute without it.”

-You must be crazy, geez.

“So you aren’t telling me not to come?”

-You’re going to come even if I tell you not to, aren’t you?

“Probably?”

-That’s why I didn’t say it.

“It’s too late already. Anyway, since I’m in front of your school right now, I should be there soon. It’s only a few stops away. Should I buy some strawberries? Your mother likes them, doesn’t she?”

-I don’t know!

“Okay, then. I’ll take that as a yes and go right now.”

-...Come slowly.

“I told you, you are pretty no matter what you do.”

-My hair is in a mess!

“It’s fine, it’s fine.”

She then hung up. Maru looked at her name, which was on his phone screen, for a while. Forced smile. When she really felt pained, she would smile. Something like this happened before as well. She acted like usual and smiled as she always did without saying that she was okay. Compared to back then, it was much easier to find out from the younger her if he probed her out just a little, but the adult her hid her pains so deeply that it was hard for him to tell how she was feeling without watching her for a long time. That was her way of being considerate. She tried to digest her pains herself without sharing them with others.

‘I got really angry back then too.’

When he found out that she was trying to endure the pain by herself as though it was her own matter, Maru felt like he was betrayed. Remembering that moment still ached his heart to this day. The tragedy he felt when ‘your problem’ could not become ‘our problem’ was beyond imagination.

He entered a supermarket nearby. He picked up a basket and made rounds. He bought some fruits that his mother-in-law liked, some hangover drinks, and also some dry snacks just in case. A lot of people had come just before closing hours, so the line at the counter was pretty long. While he was waiting for the line to become shorter, the stand next to the counter entered his eyes. The chocolate on it boasted their aura as though tempting him to buy them. Maru looked at his basket. He was only thinking about his mother-in-law and had almost forgotten presents for her.

He picked up a bar of chocolate with almonds in it. It was her favorite.

'She ate a lot after we got married too.'

It was to the point that Maru had to hide the chocolates high up in the cupboard. It was so cute to see her bring a heavy chair to climb on to try to reach the cupboard that was close to the ceiling....

"...Climb a chair?"

The moment he realized something strange, he got a call from her. He looked at the almond chocolates as he put his phone against his ears. What was that just now?

"Yeah, what is it?"

-Are you really coming right now?

"How many times do you have to ask? I'm buying some fruits and dry snacks right now."

-Wait, did mom call you already?

"What do you mean?"

-When I said that you were coming, she told me to tell you to buy some snacks. She also said that she'd pay you.

"She and I click together. Should I start calling her mother-in-law officially now?"

-Don't say anything strange. Seriously, I mean it.

"Fine. Oh, I'm bringing something for you as well."

-For me?

"Yeah. You'll jump in joy if you see it."

-What did you buy to make you feel so confident?

Of course, he was confident, Maru smiled and spoke,

"Almond chocolate."

-Almond chocolate?

"It's your favorite."

-It is? Since when?

"Why are you doing this to me? I know everything."

-What?

This conversation wasn't going anywhere. Maybe she didn't like them when she was young? It was possible that her tastes changed as she grew up since some people picked up an urge for desserts as they grew up.

"I tried to guess, but I guess I guessed wrong then. Try it anyway though, you might end up liking it later."

She couldn't live without chocolates. He definitely remembered that. She might sound oblivious right now, but it was very likely that she was going to be a fan sooner or later. No, she will become such. Her obsession with chocolate was just that strong.

-Uhm, I'm really thankful that you're thinking about me.

She clearly sounded reluctant. No, it was more like she was apologetic.

"What is it?"

-Did you buy them already?

"No. I'm still in the line."

-That's good. Actually, I can't eat almonds. Well, I can eat them, but they give me slight rashes afterwards. So I avoid them whenever I can.

"...You can't eat almonds?"

-It's not like I can't eat them. I just feel itchy afterwards, so I tend to avoid them. I probably won't seek them out of my own accord in my lifetime. I went to the hospital just in case, and I was told that it was only a mild allergy, so there's no need for me to be super careful. Oh, I was told not to eat too much. Hello, Maru? You still there?

Maru blankly stared at his phone. Her voice cut off after echoing around the phone for a while.

"Uhm, excuse me. Are you going to pay for your items?"

Maru nodded when he heard the voice of the lady at the counter. He took out the items from his basket and gave her his credit card, all the while thinking about *her* words.

'Allergic?'

No way. Didn't she like almond chocolates above anyone else? That's why he sometimes did evil pranks like hiding them on the top shelf or on top of the fridge. When he did, she would get flustered and cry....

"Cry?"

"Would you like your receipt?"

The moment he heard the voice again, a sharp pain pierced his head. He clutched his head as he accepted his credit card and the receipt from the lady.

"Uhm, excuse me. Are you okay?"

"What?"

"You don't look good right now."

"Oh, I was just feeling a bit dizzy. Thanks for being worried about me."

He put the card inside his wallet and picked up the plastic bag. Just as he was about to turn around, the lady stopped him again.

“Sir, you should take this with you.”

It was almond chocolate. Maru thanked her as he accepted it.

“...Why did I buy this again?”

It wasn't like anyone liked it. Maru stared at the packaging for a while before putting it in the plastic bag.

“Rather than that, allergic, huh. I guess there are things even I don't know about.”

Finding out more about her was always fun. Maru smiled and started walking.