

Once Again 691

Chapter 691

Maru looked down at his phone. The call had been hung up so suddenly.

“What is it?” Daemyung asked.

“I made a call, but I was hung up on so suddenly. I did hear my name being spoken.”

“Maybe she accidentally pressed the wrong button?”

“I don’t think that’s what happened.”

If it was a mistake, he would have gotten a call back. However, his phone was very still right now.

“Now that I think about it, isn’t it about time for Myunghwa High to arrive as well?” Daemyung said as he pointed at the clock.

Maru checked the time as well and nodded. Since she said that they were going to depart after 2nd period, this was about that time. She was in her 3rd year, so she had a lot of things to take care of. She was probably busy on the way here as well.

“Uhm, seonbae! Can you watch over the rehearsal? Instructor Miso said the seniors should watch once,” Aram shouted towards them as she was opening the glass door.

Maru left the Jayu theater with Daemyung and went to the clearing next to it. In the clearing, from where they could see the Music Hall and the Art Gallery, there were students who had come from many parts of the country. Woosung High had also gotten a spot in a corner as well.

“You’ve all changed.”

The juniors had changed into their stage costumes and were holding their scripts while standing in a circle. The other schools were in the same situation. Students had finished dressing up and putting on makeup, and they were doing their last rehearsals in nervousness.

“You already did a run as soon as we arrived, didn’t you? I think that should be sufficient,” Maru remarked as he opened the script.

“But we have time left. Rather than dazing out and losing our tension, we should do something. Instructor Miso said that as well.”

“If the club president and the instructor say so, then I must comply.”

There were forty minutes until the start of the performance. Since the play was about 1 hour long, they would have to be quick to reach the ending scene. Maru looked at his juniors and spoke,

“It’s just before our performance. At this point, you shouldn’t change anything and should solidify what you already have. There are forty minutes until the performance, so I’m going to have you do it quickly. As you probably know from the preliminaries, going on stage is different from practice. The stage here is much larger than the one in Anyang City Hall. Above all, since it’s a place designed for performance, the lights are strong as well. Once you go up, it’ll feel completely different from anything you have felt

before. Since there's a change of environment, the practice you've done until now will be very important. Practice is about teamwork after all."

Maru looked at the junior in front of him and gave him the signal. The junior took a deep breath before saying his first line,

"There's a reactionary here!"

* * *

The bus shook up and down. Gaeul felt a light car sickness. Even though she had never felt car sick in her life, she felt rather bad today. The reason was probably....

"Attention!"

Choi Seol stood up and shouted. Everyone's eyes were gathered on her.

"We'll be arriving at Seoul Arts Hall soon. Once we arrive, the staff in charge of the set should get off quickly to check the set and the large props. We don't want the props to fall down during construction like what happened last year. Okay?"

"Yes!"

"And actors. Grab your personal water bottles and scripts when you get off. We'll start the rehearsal immediately. I'll ask just in case, but does anyone feel sick?"

The only ones that raised their hand were the 3rd year students who had come for support. Everyone had prankish smiles on their faces.

"We can be sick. We won't be going up on stage anyway. If you ever feel sick, have a sore throat, or something else, tell me immediately. I'm gonna kill you if you hide it and say it when you are up on the stage. Go up on the stage in perfect condition. That's the first thing that actors must do. Understood?"

"Yes!"

"Good. We're going to do a read-through right now. Just think of it as a light vocal exercise. However, you have to be loud enough so that everyone in this coach can hear you. The Jayu theater may have good acoustics and many say that getting heard isn't a problem, but if you don't have the basic vocalization down, you'll sound like a mosquito."

Choi Seol uttered out a low hum after saying that they should exercise their vocal cords. The juniors followed suit. Gaeul looked at Yuna who sat next to her. They'd been talking about insignificant things ever since she got a call from Maru. To anyone else, it might not seem any different from usual, but Gaeul knew that both she and Yuna were avoiding the topic they had to talk about.

"You should practice."

"Ah, yes."

Yuna looked forward and exercised her voice. Gaeul inwardly scolded herself. How pathetic. The senior, who was supposed to help a junior relax, was instead giving her pressure. If Yuna ended up making a mistake on stage, it would be entirely her fault.

Gaeul hesitated. When should they talk about this iffy problem? Before Yuna went up on stage? After everything was over? Her hesitant heart floated on top of the sea of chaos. At the depths of this car sickness was probably her unstable heart.

The read-through began. The juniors were loud enough to engulf the sound of the engine. These juniors had spent the better half of the past half a year purely for the sake of this performance, and they showed their skills without holding back. The moment their efforts had materialized, Gaeul felt even sorrier for Yuna.

When she got a call from Maru, she should have not shown any emotion at all. It was her fault and mistake for provoking Yuna's feelings with a provocative gaze and a scolding voice. It would've been fine to ask after the performance. Gaeul closed her eyes and sighed softly.

"Hey, Kim Yuna!"

Choi Seol's shout burst out. It was before Yuna's line ended. Gaeul was startled as though she was the one who was scolded and looked at Choi Seol. The friend that had protected the acting club alongside her all this time was looking at Yuna with scary eyes.

"Kim Yuna."

"Yes."

"Are you playing jokes on me?"

"I-I'm sorry."

"Sorry? What the heck was that just now? If you made a mistake, I can understand. Anyone can make a mistake, and mistakes can be overcome on stage with the help of other people. But what was that just now? Do you not want to do this? What the hell is up with that puny voice!"

Choi Seol looked very upset. Gaeul looked at her friend and her junior alternately. Yuna was a feeble girl. While she might look bold, it was clear after some time that she was someone who got hurt easily. Such a girl was given tremendous pressure just before the performance. Gaeul clenched her eyes shut. Even she herself felt car sick from that conversation. It would have been a massive pain for this child.

Gaeul saw Yuna bite her lower lip. Yuna was unable to raise her head. She looked like she was on the edge and felt like a candle that was about to flicker off at any moment. Gaeul reached out. She grabbed Yuna's hand which was clenching the script to the point that the script was being creased.

"Seol."

"Yeah."

"I gave her some milk a while ago, and it seems like that was the problem. I feel a little bad as well."

"What? Hey! How can you give her something like that inside a vehicle!"

"Sorry, I'm really sorry."

"You.... Hey, Kim Yuna. Do you feel sick?"

“Eh?”

Gaeul grabbed Yuna’s hand. When she did, Yuna replied ‘yes’ in a small voice.

“Is it bad?”

“No! It’s nothing serious. I’m sorry.”

Choi Seol undid her hairband and shook her hair loose.

“Taehoon! You fill in Yuna’s spot for now. Everyone, focus and continue.”

After saying those words, Choi Seol knelt down next to Yuna.

“Give me your hand.”

“What?”

“I said give me your hand.”

Yuna put out her hand. Choi Seol frowned and started massaging Yuna’s hand on the part that connected the palm and the wrist. Yuna flinched as though it was quite painful.

“Endure it. This is the best thing when you have a bad stomach. There are cases where medicines give you side effects. How do you feel? A bit better now?”

“Yes.”

“Gaeul, do the other hand for her.”

Gaeul nodded.

“Sorry for shouting.”

“It was my fault. I know that eating something inside a moving vehicle is a bad idea, but I still gave it to her.”

“Yeah, you’re a problem because you are so generous to others. Kim Yuna, do you think you’re getting better?”

Yuna quickly nodded.

“For now, keep massaging it. Close your eyes as well. Unless it was actually bad food, you’ll feel better when you get off.”

After massaging for a while, Choi Seol picked up the script and led the read-through again.

“Gaeul-seonbae.”

When Choi Seol walked away, Yuna spoke. She looked like she had a lot to say. Gaeul looked at her eyes. Her eyes contained unease, nervousness, and even a sense of guilt. What would happen if Yuna confessed again and she heard the same thing she heard last time? She probably wouldn’t be able to laugh it off like a character in a movie. Confessions required courage beyond imagination. And after a confession, the confessor would become uneasy because of the potential aftermath.

Was Yuna in a situation where she could endure that storm? Gaeul would have to shake her head to that question. What this junior needed right now was the concentration to go up on stage and the energy to release on the stage. If she wasted energy apologizing and making excuses for a vague matter, she would have little energy on the stage.

“I saw hearts in your eyes as soon as you heard Maru’s voice just now.”

Gaeul looked at Yuna’s expression. There were a lot of complex expressions on her face, but the biggest one of them was confusion.

“You still like Maru, don’t you?”

“Eh? No, that’s, uhm...”

“Yuna.”

“Yes!”

“Don’t get stiff because of something like that. Do you think I would care about something like that?”

Yuna blinked several times. Her lips melted after being frozen from all the nervousness.

“You can stay close to him. You don’t have to mind me.”

“Eh? But...”

“I was like that too. There was an oppa I liked in middle school, and he had a girlfriend. But what could I do? My feelings for him didn’t disappear immediately. Also, it’s not like Maru and I are engaged or anything, so you don’t have to feel so much guilt. That’s just how everyone gets by.”

The moment she finished those words, she heard a voice.

-Pretending to be an adult, pretending to be generous, pretending to have good endurance, pretending like it’s for her sake, pretending to be cool about it. What a good pretender you are.

Gaeul was unable to reply to that voice. That was because Yuna, who looked like she was about to cry at any moment, had a smile on her face. She looked liberated.

“Sorry, seonbae. I still like Maru-seonbae. That’s why I felt scared whenever I saw you. I felt sorry. I knew that I couldn’t be like this.”

“It’s okay, it’s fine. Don’t fret over something like that. You’re going to be acting together in that drama anyway. I heard you two were lovers in it, right? Being close to him is natural.”

“But...”

“I said I don’t mind. Right now, Maru and I are dating because we get along, but you never know what the future holds. You know, I think it’s somewhat funny to tell other girls not to get close to him just because I’m dating him. I mean, that just shows that I’m not confident, right?”

Gaeul took out some tissues from her bag and gave them to Yuna. Yuna dabbed her tears and put on the relaxed smile she had when she just joined the club.

“Do you feel okay now?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have to worry about the stage, right?”

“Yes!”

Gaeul smiled and patted Yuna’s shoulders. It seemed that the sense of guilt that weighed down her body had mostly lifted.

-Hypocrite. In the end, you still appealed to her that you are the one dating Maru; to not to touch him. You just did it in an indirect way so that she doesn’t catch on. You are really evil. You always were. You always had to have everything. You want to stay in a good relationship with your junior, but you don’t want what is yours to be taken away. But you know what? People only have two hands. If your hands are full because you’re greedy, you won’t be able to grab the important thing when it truly matters.

Gaeul looked outside.

She didn’t want to listen to that voice.

-You will have to face it without dodging it. Whenever it is or whatever it is.

Shut up - Gaeul told ‘her’ those two words with difficulty.

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-Would Woosung Engineering Highschool please enter the waiting room.

There was an announcement. The club members, who were doing one last rehearsal, closed their scripts and started moving.

“Just do what you did during the preliminaries. I’ll treat you all to good things afterwards, so if you get nervous, think about the food.”

Miso clapped and patted the back of each member of the club as they went into the waiting room. It was up to the actors and the staff now. Maru looked at the club members calming their breathing inside the waiting room before leaving.

“Han Maru! Let’s move this stuff.”

He heard a voice from the parking lot. Dowook was waving a drink bottle above his head. He went down the stairs and stood in front of the truck.

“What’s all this?”

Maru looked at the box by Dowook’s feet. There was a box of sports drinks that each had a wrap that said ‘Good Luck’ on it. The box had just as many bottles as the number of members in the club.

“I said it wasn’t necessary, but my sister...”

Dowook slurred the end of his words and looked inside the truck. There was Soojin who was writing lines of encouragement on the wrap on the drinks in the driver’s seat.

“Maru.”

Soojin smiled as she got off the truck with the bottle in hand.

“When did you get all these?”

“While you guys were practicing.”

Soojin gave him a bottle with the wrap.

“I’m a senior of Blue Sky too, so I wanted to do something.”

“We received plenty of help already. Thanks to you driving the truck, we managed to get here early, and we were able to get in plenty of practice too.”

Maru received the bottle and put it inside the box.

“I’ll get these to the others.”

“Thanks.”

“That’s what we should be saying. The older sister is much more helpful than the insufficient little brother.”

Dowook twitched when he heard the term ‘insufficient little brother’. However, he didn’t frown or swear like he would usually do. It was probably because Soojin was looking right at him. Even the monkey king would become docile in front of Sanzang.

“It’s going to begin soon, isn’t it?”

“Yes. We unloaded everything, so you should come and watch.”

Maru looked at the bottles as he continued to speak,

“And you should hand these out yourself. They’ll be more encouraged that way.”

Maru lifted the box with effort.

* * *

“It’s Woosung High.”

Hearing Choi Seol’s words, Gaeul reflexively turned her head to look in that direction. There were a bunch of students wearing a black hoodie that said ‘Blue Sky’ in front of the opera house. From how there were around ten or so people, it seemed that the actors and the main staff had already entered the building. Behind them were students wearing casual clothes. From the way they weren’t wearing school uniforms, they seemed to be students from Woosung High who came to cheer for them.

-Woosung Engineering Highschool’s performance will begin at 12:30.

As the announcement resounded, the students from Woosung High went inside.

“Well then. Don’t get distracted and keep moving! We’re going to change after we do a rehearsal here.”

The juniors got off the bus and got into a line. Gaeul looked at Yuna, who was standing at the end, before looking away. From the relaxed expression she had, it seemed that she no longer had any internal conflicts. She wouldn't make a mistake on stage due to being distracted at least.

"Handle the background set carefully. When you carry it, do it with four people. Haeji, where's the sprinkler?"

"Here."

"Fill it up right now. We can't forget it."

After watching the junior run over to the bathroom, the checking resumed. Gaeul looked at the props laid out on the ground and checked the list.

"There are no problems. But do be careful when you move them. The smaller props will easily get lost, so the ones in charge of them should have their eyes on them at all times, okay?"

"Yes."

Gaeul wiped her forehead with her hand and went over to the next thing.

* * *

"Man, look at the sheer scale that Myunghwa High has."

Dowook clicked his tongue as he looked at the students of Myunghwa High get off the bus.

"Apparently their graduates help them out a lot. You know they have a lot of graduates in the entertainment industry," said Daemyung who was standing next to him.

"Don't we have anything?"

"Instructor Miso got us a coach too."

"Not that. I'm talking about whether the school does anything for us."

"Unlikely, seeing as how they don't like us in the first place. I'm actually glad that they let us take classes off."

Daemyung ran off saying that he would go in first. He was probably busy helping the others behind the stage side curtains. Dowook walked over to Myunghwa High while fiddling with a drink bottle in his hand.

"Be careful with the costumes. Check the buttons and zippers especially. If you find any problems, tell me immediately so that we can get them fixed. The wigs too, check the pins inside."

Maru's girlfriend could be seen amidst the students taking care of the props away from the main group that was practicing. She was looking alternately at the items in the plastic box and the sheet of paper in her hands.

"Come to think of it,"

Dowook thought about what he talked about with Maru. Maru said something about how she suddenly hung up when he called in the morning.

“Should I tell him that Myunghwa High is here?”

Dowook took out his phone.

* * *

“There, gather your hands together.”

Aram reached out her right hand. Everyone reached out and formed a tower of hands.

“Let’s do our best just once. We’ll win the grand prize.”

“Yes!”

“Focus. There should be many people in the audience seats, so watch out and do not freak out. Go up thinking that you’re going to have a blast up there. Blue Sky!”

“Fighting!”

As they raised their hands energetically, the door to the stage opened.

“Woosung Engineering Highschool, please come up to the stage.”

The staff from the hall gave them the signal. Maru clapped twice and wished them good luck. The actors went up first, followed by the staff who were going to set up the background and the items on the stage. Daemyung was in charge of the tempo control in Aram’s stead, since she had a role to play on the stage. The overall instructions would come from Miso who would be watching them from the control room.

“Good luck,” said Maru as he pushed Daemyung’s back.

Daemyug put on his in-ear monitors and started moving. Maru started cleaning up the waiting room which had become empty. The next school would enter soon. The other club members were getting ready to watch from the audience seats along with the other students that came to cheer them on. Watching was an important way to study after all.

He finished cleaning up and told the staff about it. The next school immediately occupied waiting room A. Maru stood in the corridor that was to the left of the Jayu theater with chairs in each hand. He could hear the murmurs dying down.

“I hope they do well.”

He left through the door in the corridor. As Seoul Arts Hall was located right next to Mt. Woomyeon, he saw the green forest in front of his eyes. He unfolded the folding chair that he brought out and sat down. He could finally take a breather. He drank the sports drink that Soojin handed out and was relieving his fatigue when his phone started vibrating. He got a text message.

-Myunghwa High is here. I can see your gf too.

Maru stood up with the chairs. When he went around to the entrance of the opera house, he saw students from Myunghwa High standing in a group. The number of students was at least several times

that of the other schools. They seemed to be here to cheer for their team as none of them seemed to be from the acting club.

He went over to the truck with the chairs. He couldn't keep carrying these around after all. As he was loading the chairs onto the truck, he saw Dowook walking over.

"You didn't go inside?"

"I watched them multiple times already, why would I need to see it again?"

There was a trash bag in his hands. The hosts told each school that they should take care of their own trash. Maru reached out and told him to hand the bag over. He tilted the trash bag against one wall of the truck.

"Then why are you here?"

"I was cleaning up the waiting room."

"Both you and I are having a hard time taking care of the others, huh. Rather than that, have you met your girlfriend yet?"

"No, I haven't seen her yet."

"Well, she did look busy. Myunghwa High looked all serious this year as well. I mean, just their prop vehicle was a 2.5t truck. It was a boxed truck too."

Maru looked at the 1t truck that he was standing on.

"They have a lot of members after all. As far as I can tell, there's around 100 of them, I think?"

"That's one hell of a lot."

Dowook opened the door to the passenger seat and went inside. Maru jumped off the back of the truck.

"Are you going to stay here?"

"I'll look after the luggage and the trash. You should go watch."

"Aren't you gonna be bored here?"

"Like hell. I'm going to sleep."

Dowook tilted the chair backwards and closed his eyes.

"Alright, get some sleep. Thanks for all the work since morning. The juniors will all look at you with respect."

After hearing those words, Dowook put up his middle finger with one hand and waved with the other. Maru faintly smiled and walked over to Myunghwa High's buses.

* * *

"Good. We'll take a 10 minute break and practice again afterwards. In the meantime, you should all visit the toilet. The first years should get some rest while looking around, okay?"

“Yes!”

“We prepared some food for you all, so eat if you feel hungry. But don’t eat too much, it will make your head work less. Okay, we’ll meet again in 10 minutes.”

Yuna uttered out a short breath. Perhaps because the opera house was right in front of her, she felt her nervousness intensifying.

“Yuna. We’re going to go inside the opera house, wanna come with us?”

“I’ll stay outside. I don’t think my heart can handle going inside right now.”

“Oh right. You said you weren’t feeling well, didn’t you? You’ll feel better if you get some more fresh air.”

“Yeah.”

Her colleagues went inside. Yuna stretched her arms out and shook her hands and feet lightly. She was in her worst condition inside the bus, but she felt better than ever right now. It was probably thanks to Gaeul-seonbae’s encouragement.

Seonbae is so cool after all - Yuna thought back to Gaeul who had a firm expression on her face. It wouldn’t be surprising if she snapped out, yet Gaeul-seonbae consoled her instead. Yuna was able to feel Gaeul-seonbae’s firm faith in Maru-seonbae at that moment. That was when she realized that she wouldn’t be able to wriggle her way between the two. She was finally able to put down her feelings.

‘I’m just a junior and a little sister.’

Neither Maru-seonbae nor Gaeul-seonbae made a big deal about it. It meant that Yuna herself wasn’t someone charming enough to threaten their romantic relationship. While she felt bitter about it, she also felt like this was a better ending. Feelings would go away someday - the two seonbae said those words in common. Yuna decided to believe in those words.

She drank some water and took a stroll around the art gallery. Just then, she discovered a student walking up the stairs from the parking lot. That student also noticed Yuna. Yuna hesitated for a moment before greeting him cheerfully,

“Maru-seonbae.”

Maru, who was at the top of the staircase, waved back at her.

* * *

“Gaeul, there are no problems with the costumes, right?”

“Wait a sec, I just need to put this on.”

“Did something fall off?”

“One of the buttons is loose.”

“Those first-year students, they said there weren’t any problems yesterday,” Choi Seol said as she tensed her eyes.

Gaeul tapped on her forehead when rage got the better of her.

"It might have come loose from all the shaking on the way here. It's something I can fix easily, so there's no problem. Here, it's perfect, isn't it?" Gaeul said as she put down the needle.

Choi Seol tried pulling on the buttons before nodding.

"We're now going to get changed and do one final rehearsal."

"Do you need my help?"

"You should get some rest now. You were even busier than the first-year students."

"I didn't participate in practice, so I should at least make up for that."

"You did enough, so stay still until the performance begins."

Choi Seol left the bus with the costumes. Gaeul sighed softly before leaning back. She felt tired for some reason. She was dazing out, and her eyes felt blurry as well.

"Geez, what's up with me...."

She pondered how she would deal with Yuna in the future. Today, she acted boldly and glossed over it, but just as the 'one inside her' said, she felt very uneasy. Of course, Maru wasn't some item that belonged to her. If he changed his mind someday and left her, that would be it. However, bad thoughts kept appearing in a corner of her heart. They were telling her to stay wary of Yuna and block her. There was a part of her that told her to not let the relationship between the two people get better.

Perhaps 'her' words were right. A greedy hypocrite. Gaeul rested her hands on her chin and looked outside the window. At that moment, she found Maru standing at the top of a staircase like it was a lie. At the same time, she was reminded of the phone call they had in the morning. She had forgotten about it because she was busy with all the work.

For some reason, she felt happy. Naturally, Maru was in this place and she might run into him, but it felt like a miracle that he appeared right at the moment she wanted to see him. Gaeul opened the bus window. She poked her head out and tried to call him. That is, if she did not see Yuna running over to Maru.

She blocked her voice from escaping her mouth by blocking her mouth with her hands. She immediately crouched low and got away from the window. She did nothing wrong, yet she clutched her racing heart. She couldn't understand why she had to hide, but her body proactively got away from the window. On top of the staircase, which she could see from a diagonal angle, she saw Maru and Yuna greet each other. The phone she placed on her thighs fell down. Gaeul stared at that phone for a while.

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Maru looked at Yuna who had approached him. She was wearing formal attire that seemed a little too large for her.

"Is that your costume?"

"Yes. I play the role of a new employee that is a bit of an airhead."

“You definitely do look airheaded.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Probably?”

Yuna smiled.

“Thankfully, you look like you don’t seem that nervous.”

“Yes. I was really nervous until we got here, but I’m feeling okay now.”

“I’m supposed to be a competitor, so I’d like you to be a little nervous. I can applaud if you make a mistake on stage.”

“Are you serious?”

“We should win the grand prize at least once, don’t you think? Hwasoo High isn’t here, so as long as Myunghwa High slips up, I think we can make it.”

“That’s going too far.”

Maru smiled and looked around. Since Myunghwa High’s performance hadn’t begun yet, it was likely that the actors were together. It would be the same for the 3rd year students as well.

“Are you looking for Gaeul-seonbae?”

“Yeah. I tried to call her in the morning, but the call was hung up so suddenly.”

Maru took out his phone. There wasn’t a missed call. Was she busy to the point that she wasn’t able to check?

“Uhm.”

Yuna’s voice became a pitch lower. Even though she was smiling just moments ago, she looked hesitant to speak.

“Did something happen?”

From the way things looked, Yuna seemed to know something. Yuna nodded.

“I talked to Gaeul-seonbae in the coach for a bit.”

“About what?”

“A-about you, seonbae.”

“Me?”

Maru was unable to understand, so he waited for Yuna’s next words. She licked her lips slightly and spoke after a bit of hesitation,

“Gaeul-seonbae talked to me first. She told me that I can’t help my feelings of liking someone. She also told me that I shouldn’t feel sorry for her and even worse, avoid my feelings.”

“Gaeul said that?”

“Yes. Honestly, before I heard her say those words, I felt scared. I did say I confessed due to a mistake, and I tried my best not to show it, but it looks like Gaeul-seonbae noticed that.”

Yuna fidgeted.

“Gaeul-seonbae is amazing. I wouldn’t be able to do that. I would have scolded them, asking why they did that, and tell them not to do that anymore, yet she consoled me instead.”

“She has a bold side to her. If she was born as a boy, she would have been a general.”

“You’re right, she really would have been.”

Maru scanned Yuna’s face. After a refreshed expression, there was a hint of disappointment on her face. Maru could tell what kind of feelings were going through Yuna’s heart right now, but he did not mention it. It was just as Gaeul said. Time would solve it.

“Both of you, you really suit each other.”

“It’s kinda embarrassing to get told that to my face. Uhm, while we’re at it, can you tell me where Gaeul is right now?”

“Gaeul-seonbae? She should be in the parking lot right now. I saw her go down to check on the costumes before practice was over.”

“Really?”

“Over there, you should go over to our school’s coaches.”

Yuna pointed at the coach with her finger before speaking,

“I’ll get going now.”

“Good luck with your performance.”

“Yes. I’ll do my best to win the grand prize.”

“Don’t do that well.”

Maru waved at Yuna before walking towards the parking lot again. On his way, he called Gaeul on her phone. After a few signal sounds, the call connected.

“It’s so hard to see your face, huh. I’m going to the parking lot right now.”

-You’re coming here?

“Yeah, can I not?”

-No, it’s not like that.

“You’re starting to make me feel disappointed. Are you perhaps busy? If you’re not okay with seeing me right now, we can meet later.”

-It’s not like that.

“Then let’s meet. I’m standing in front of your school’s coaches,” Maru said as he looked at the coaches that said ‘Myunghwa High’. There were seven coaches in total. After calculating how many students they delivered all the way here, he started laughing. The treatment of Myunghwa High’s acting club was totally different from what Woosung High’s acting club got.

“Han Maru.”

Maru turned to the source of the voice. He saw Gaeul poke her head out through the coach window. Maru walked over.

“You’re such an aristocrat that it’s hard to see you.”

“Don’t get started on that. But didn’t Woosung High’s performance just begin?”

“It should be about halfway through now.”

“Is it okay for you to be here when you’re a third-year senior? You should be helping them.”

“Daemyung’s with them, so I’m not worried. Also, I can’t exactly help when I haven’t been participating in practice. The only thing I can do is to carry the luggage and clean up afterwards. What are you doing here?”

“One of the buttons on a costume got loose, so I was sewing it back on.”

“You can sew too?”

“Why? You never thought I could?”

“Your hands are vicious, so I thought the only thing you could do was hit people.”

Maru raised his arms as soon as he said those words. It was to defend against the oncoming hit. Strangely, Gaeul just faintly smiled and stayed still. Maru looked up at her.

“What is up with you today? You’re strangely merciful.”

“Nothing.”

“That makes me feel suspicious. Are you sure you don’t feel bad somewhere?”

“No, I feel really good right now. I’m so itching for something to do that I can’t sit still.”

“But you are standing still right now.”

“I’m resting.”

Gaeul rested her elbows on the window sill and her chin on her hands.

“How was the drama shoot?”

“Barely scraped by the first episode. The set was large.”

“Was it fun?”

“I’ll see when the viewing rates are out. This is the first work that I’ll be doing as a main character, so I hope it does well, but that’s not really up to me.”

“You’ll do well.”

“Is today April Fool’s Day? Your words are so kind that I want to suspect you.”

Maru took a step closer to the window. There was less than a foot between the two. Gaeul, who was looking down from the bus, stretched her arms suddenly and leaned back.

“I feel a little tired. Is it because I have been tense since morning? It’s more tiring to look after the others than actually going up on stage, right?”

Gaeul’s eyes did not stay fixed in one place. They moved everywhere. Maru saw that and spoke,

“Do you want to take a walk?”

“Sorry. I’m a bit tired right now.”

“Then should I go inside? Just because it’s Myunghwa High’s coach, doesn’t mean that students from other schools aren’t allowed in, right?”

“There are a lot of personal items of our members here.”

There was no leisure in her voice. Her emotions were excluded from her answer as though she was saying the answer to a mathematical question, and she quickly gave her answers. Maru scratched his eyebrows and spoke,

“I know that being roundabout is usually better for not injuring people’s feelings, but I have heard some things, so I’ll ask. Is it because of Yuna?”

Maru saw that Gaeul had fallen silent. She did not put on a stiff expression and just stayed still without panicking. Maru thought that it was a sign that he was indeed right on the mark. Thinking that he had to set things straight, he was about to speak, but Gaeul spoke first,

“What, you’re on about that too?”

Gaeul made a cheerful smile that did not look different from usual. Maru looked into her eyes. He had a strange confidence that he would be able to read what she was thinking if he did so. However, there was a limit to reading people’s feelings from their eyes. There was no way he could see through the heart of someone else just by looking.

She didn’t look like she was lying. Maru trusted his senses. They had known each other for a long time. He had been by her side when she was sick, and they shared feelings when she cried as well. While he didn’t know what she was thinking deep in her heart, he thought that he would be able to see what she was thinking on the surface at least. She was emotionally stable right now, that was the conclusion Maru came to.

“Both you and Yuna are like this. If you keep talking about that, I’m gonna get angry, okay?” Gaeul said with a frown.

“If it’s not because of that, then why are you acting like this?”

“Geez, why can’t you notice with those good wits of yours? It’s that day of the month! Okay? I feel sick right now, and that’s why I’m here without moving. Did you really have to make me say that?”

She chopped down mercilessly. Maru was able to block that, but he let her hit him. There was a sharp pain along with a small thud.

“Really?”

He smiled faintly and looked at Gaeul. She narrowed her eyes and had pouty lips. Her expression was proof that she was the Gaeul of usual.

“Go over to your juniors. It’s your duty as a senior to watch their performance.”

“I would prefer to spend a sweet time with my girlfriend over that.”

“Do you need another beating?”

Gaeul reached out the window and swung her arms. Maru stepped back.

“I’m glad to see that you have the energy to do that. It looks like it’s not driving you crazy, huh?”

“It’s not that bad, that’s why I’m talking to you like this. But I’m not good enough to move around. Sorry about that.”

“Don’t say that. Get some good rest. I’d love to be in pain in your stead, but that’s not something I can do. You know that right? In many ways.”

“If I sue you for sexual harassment, you’ll get sentenced to a decade in jail.”

“Looks like I’ll have to watch my mouth in the future. Do you want me to buy you something warm?”

“I have water here.”

“Should I hold your hand?”

“Just get going so that I can get some rest.”

Maru nodded. Gaeul, who was staring at him quietly, said something rather random all of a sudden.

“You’ll always be like that even if you are forty-five. You can’t read the mood and you always play jokes.”

“What a pity. I’m going to be a gentleman when I grow up so that won’t happen. But why forty-five of all ages? That’s a rather random age.”

“Nothing. I just felt like it had a good ring to it.”

Gaeul stared at him. Maru was confused but did not avoid her gaze. After looking at him for a while, Gaeul smiled.

“Get going.”

“Fine, I’ll get going.”

Maru waved at her. Gaeul smiled and reached out her right hand when Maru was thinking that she would just wave. Maru looked at the hand that was right in front of him. It was open as though she wanted him to grab it. Maru grabbed the hand.

"I love you," she said.

* * *

Gaeul looked away from Maru, who was getting distant, and closed her eyes. After the sensation of being sunken into the deep sea, a stage unfolded before her eyes. There was a white rabbit standing on a round chair. It was the 'her' that lived within her.

"Why did you do that?"

-Do what?

"Why did you say 'I love you' by yourself?"

-Isn't that what you wanted? Also, you had me take your position because you didn't have the confidence to talk to Maru, didn't you? Well, I guess Maru would have noticed otherwise. He was already suspicious of you after all. If it wasn't for my acting, he would have noticed that something did happen between you and Yuna, and he would have asked questions. If he did, then you would have acted like an adult again while trying to maintain your façade.

Gaeul became quiet. The rabbit was right. When Maru asked if it was because of Yuna, she asked the rabbit to replace her for a bit. She didn't have the confidence to face Maru. She didn't want him to find out that she was a narrow-minded person who was jealous of a feeble junior. She hid inside because she wanted to maintain the cheerful 'Han Gaeul'.

-You're a kid who wants to act like an adult. Ever since your father passed away, you kept acting like an adult because you thought that you don't want to drag down your mother and because of the expectations placed on you by the people around you. Ultimately, when you saw Maru cry, cry like a child in the cinema, you were no longer able to give up that position as the 'adult'. It's a false image that you put up out of your greed.

"I wanted to be of help to Maru! That's not a bad thing, is it?"

-Yes, that is the case. It's not a bad thing. But remember. Lies will become bigger. They might not grow fast, but they will grow steadily. And ultimately, the lies will replace you. By that time, you will play the role of the shadow of your lies, and your lies will replace you.

"No, it won't be like that."

-Let's see about that, shall we?

"You don't know anything about me."

The rabbit suddenly became quiet. A moment later, she nodded.

-You're right. I don't know anything. So, I'll stop here. If you want my help, call me any time. If it's about acting, I'll help you for free. Even if it's for something special like that just now.

The stage started collapsing. Gaeul felt like the rabbit, who was the owner of this space, was telling her to leave.

"I'll ask you just one thing. Why did it have to be I love you out of all things? I didn't want that."

The stage collapsed completely, and she was dragged into a world of white. At that moment, she heard the rabbit's voice, which had turned faint,

-Because I'm a child too. I'm a child who still wants to check on things.

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Music flowed out and the stage darkened. With the top light turning off after shining down on the fallen soldier, the stage turned completely dark. A moment later, the background music became fainter and a faint light appeared on the stage. The main character walked out amidst the actors.

Maru applauded. The other people in the audience started clapping as well. Eventually, the background music was buried under the sound of applause. The juniors, who were waiting behind the curtain, all went out on the stage. They pulled up the actors on the ground before bowing towards the audience. As they bowed, the applause became louder. The main character appeared at the end and grabbed the hands of the actors, joined the line, and raised his hands up high before putting them down while bowing. It was a good curtain call that was worth all the preparation.

-Woosung Engineering High school's performance has ended. The next performance will be in 40 minutes including lunchtime. Thank you.

The lights among the audience seats turned on along with the announcement. Maru stood up from his seat and headed to the stage. The independent soldier, who was shouting 'independence' until just moments ago while dying, was now trying his best to peel off the glowing tape on the ground, and the evil man, who had to choose betrayal for the sake of his family, was struggling to dismantle the set. The actors had returned to reality as though they were Cinderella after midnight.

"Good. You did really well," said Maru as he patted his juniors' backs.

There were two moments throughout the play where they had almost made a mistake, but they managed to gloss it over with the help of those around them. That was when teamwork shone through.

"Daemyung, great job."

"Did you notice that we almost made a mistake in the middle? Was it obvious?" Daemyung asked hurriedly as soon as he saw Maru.

Maru shook his head.

"Only those in the know would be able to catch that, so the audience shouldn't have noticed. You guys did well handling that."

"Gosh, that's good. I was sweating hard when I saw that."

Daemyung showed Maru his script. Daemyung's script was usually very clean, yet now it was crumpled up. He could tell how nervous Daemyung had been from just looking at it.

"Everyone, let's get these cleaned up quickly. Only then will we get some rest and eat," Aram shouted from the center of the stage.

The first-year staff all rushed over and cleaned up the props and the costumes. Maru walked over to the side curtains and took away the water bottles that the actors had left there.

“Seonbae-nim, I’ll do it.”

“Nah. You go and erase your makeup and change your clothes.”

The junior, who had fake blood over his face, nodded before turning around. The actors were all exhausted after spending their energy.

“The energetic ones should be doing the clean-up.”

Dowook had appeared. He had a large trash bag over his shoulder.

“Man, you’re cleaning up trash all day.”

“That’s my job today after all. How was the performance?”

“If you are so curious, then why didn’t you come and watch? I started watching halfway.”

“I said I watched enough of it. Don’t say nonsense. How was it? Were they good? Did they screw up?”

“Look at their faces.”

Maru pointed at the juniors who were cleaning up while high-fiving each other. Dowook grinned after seeing the juniors.

“Dang, they seem to have done well.”

“Dowook, you said you were too nervous to watch, yet you’re here?”

Maru looked below the stage. Soojin was smiling from below the stage. She seemed like she was planning to come up as she placed her hands on the edge of the stage before jumping slightly.

“Noona, watch out. There are stairs on the side.”

“I always came up to the stage like this before.”

Soojin lightly hopped onto the stage and dusted her hands. Maru narrowed his eyes and looked at Dowook.

“So the reason you didn’t watch was because you were nervous? Whew, I see now, my dear little delicate Dowook?”

“Set your face straight before I beat you up.”

“Hey, Kang Dowook. Are you okay with saying such cruel words in front of Soojin-noona?”

Usually, after hearing that, Dowook would throw the trash bag and stomp towards him, but he gave glances at Soojin and hesitated.

“Maru, don’t tease him too much. Dowook gets pissed easily.”

“When have I ever!”

Dowook left the stage while shouting as though he was running away. Maru laughed as he looked at Soojin.

“You two look a lot better.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Is the petrol station busy these days? I saw that Dowook always went home right after classes.”

“It’s not that busy because we hired some people, but Dowook is learning under a friend of our father these days. That’s probably why.”

“He’s learning?”

“Car maintenance. I don’t think he’s going to go to college.”

“Looks like he matured.”

“I wish he had a broader experience though. It looks like he’s firm on his will. He’s just like mother when it comes to his stubbornness.”

“Please watch over him from the side.”

Soojin smiled in acceptance. Just then, Miso called out to her from the audience seats.

“Then see you later.”

“Yes.”

Maru looked at Miso and Soojin before leaving with the rest of the luggage.

“Actors, get changed first! The others, let’s move the props to the truck.”

Aram was leading the others well even though it was rather chaotic after having just finished the play. The first-year students moved quickly and cleaned up the set which was placed outside the opera house.

30 minutes later, the acting club all gathered in front of the truck. Nearly forty people wearing matching hoodies all looked at Miso while sitting down. Behind her was Taesik.

“Good work, guys. There were moments that made me nervous, but it was good overall. I could feel the pride of having put in the effort all this time. Well then, a round of applause for all of you.”

When Miso clapped, the others followed suit.

“And over there, she is also a graduate of Blue Sky, though it should be the first time seeing her for you first-year students. She came over early in the morning with a truck so that you guys can move faster. Let’s give her a round of applause too.”

Soojin, who was standing by the window, stroked her hair backwards and lightly nodded. Maru had a look at Dowook’s expression, and he was smiling as though it was he himself who was receiving the praise.

"I had a look at the leaflet, and I think there are about four schools that left a deep impression on me, including our school. I think you should be able to aim for the grand prize if you can do that much on a high school level."

"How was the school before us?" one of the juniors asked.

Miso shrugged.

"I watched them, but they were honestly so-so. We have only one school to worry about. It's them over there."

Miso pointed at Myunghwa High's students on top of the hill.

"We have the afternoon off from school as well, so let's eat for now. We're going to return in time for Myunghwa High's play. Theirs is worth watching after all."

"Where are we going to eat lunch?"

"We're going to have a feast in the evening, so you can buy some things to eat from the convenience store. Of course, it's on me."

Miso took out her credit card. Everyone cheered as they stood up.

"Aram, take care of it."

"Yes!"

"Don't eat too much if you want to eat delicious things in the evening. For now, meet up back here by 2 after eating. Okay?"

Yes - after replying, everyone ran over to the convenience store. As many of them hadn't eaten breakfast due to nervousness, they became frantic after hearing the word 'food'.

"Let's go."

Maru glanced at Daemyung and Dowook. They waited outside the crowded store before going inside. There wasn't a single piece of bread on the shelves. The same was true for triangular kimbap. Maru ended up going to the counter with one ramyun and some milk.

"Seonbae, is that it for you?" Aram asked.

Maru pointed at the empty shelves without replying. The lady at the counter also chuckled.

"Did you get your stuff?"

"I should take care of the others first. Looks like I'm going to have to get ramyun too. Instead, I'm going to eat properly during dinner."

"Yeah. The instructor did say she's going to treat us to something good, so that sounds like a wise decision."

Maru put some hot water into the cup ramyun before leaving. The tables in front of the convenience store were full, so they had to look for another place.

“Maru, shall we go over there?”

Daemyung pointed at a small park located between the opera house and the concert hall. There was a bench under the tree, so it looked like a good place to get some shade. They waited for Dowook, who was the last one out, before walking over to the bench.

“There’s quite a lot of people,” said Daemyung as he looked around.

Many families could be seen walking around.

“It’s Saturday after all. It also looks like there’s an event in the art gallery.”

“Should we go see that after eating then?”

“I’m gonna get some sleep,” Dowook said as he stuffed some ramyun into his mouth.

“Maru, how about you?”

“Alright, let’s kill some time there.”

Maru blew on the steaming noodles. He couldn’t remember the last time he had ramyun as the first meal of his day. He sipped a bit of the soup before he started chewing when he saw a group of students enter the Seoul Arts Hall. He narrowed his eyes when he saw the familiar uniform. The figures of the students in the distance became clearer.

“Uhm, isn’t that Hwasoo High?” Maru said.

Daemyung also looked at the approaching students after putting down his chopsticks.

“I think it is.”

“Didn’t they fail the preliminaries?”

“They did.”

“Then why did they bother coming? Are they here to see the plays or something?”

“Probably.”

Maru looked at Hwasoo High approaching as he stirred the noodles in the cup.

* * *

“Didn’t failing mean that it ends early?” Heewon said as he looked up at the sky.

It was almost October, yet the sun was glaring enough that calling the season summer would be more appropriate.

“Is that something you should say as a senior member of the club?” said Park Inho who was walking by his side.

Heewon pouted and turned around. The juniors were following with evil grins on their faces.

“I need Haewon.”

“Your brother is in the English-speaking club, not the acting club. Stop looking for people that aren’t here and get yourself together.”

“But the acting club’s fine without me.”

“We did fine and failed the preliminaries, huh?”

Heewon shut up when he heard Inho’s sharp words.

“It’s not like I wanted to, not participate, you know?”

“I know. Heck, I even felt happy when I heard that the one guy who can’t be bothered with anything in this world was taking lessons late into the night. I was wondering if you were finally finding your place in this world. But what’s a pity is still a pity. If you were here, we would have breezed through the preliminaries.”

“I heard that putting all your hopes on one person is a bad idea.”

“It’s okay when it’s something like school extracurricular activities.”

Heewon shook his head.

“But hey, why are we here?”

“Why else would we come to Seoul Arts Hall? We’re obviously here to watch plays.”

“Why?”

“Well, you and I are done with clubs after summer[1], but the juniors aren’t like that. We got so many juniors thanks to the grand prize we got last year, so we should at least tell them what we can, don’t you think? Moreover, the school even gave us money to go and watch.”

“It was a stroke of luck that we got the grand prize, sheesh. I still don’t get it.”

Heewon looked behind him again. He saw a bunch of first-year students. He even felt a little dizzy. He didn’t have the confidence to become a respectful seonbae who could teach them a lot of things.

“This is nothing new, but being a seonbae doesn’t sit right with me.”

“I’m sure you just can not be bothered. Why don’t you explain to them about acting more kindly when they ask?”

“I would have if I could. You saw what happened last time. When I explained what I felt to those first-year students, they looked at me like some madman. Heck, I felt hurt, you know?”

“I’m talking about ordinary stuff and not your special stuff. You know, tricks that you get from experience. You need to explain stuff like that. If you suddenly went up to people and said ‘sadness is a colorful green’, anyone would treat you like a madman.”

“If you know that, then don’t make me do all that. I’m more suited to watching from the sidelines.”

Heewon sighed.

“Huh? The ones over there.”

Inho, who was turning towards the opera house, pointed at some people sitting on a bench beneath a tree. They seemed to be around the same age and were wearing casual clothes. In their hands were some cup ramyun.

“Aren’t they people from Woosung High? I think they’re Han Maru and Park Daemyung,” Inho said.

Heewon nodded as well. They were indeed the people from Woosung High.

[1] Third year students are busy with focusing on college exams, so most schools allow their students to not participate in extracurricular activities.

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“Are you not going to drink that?” Heewon asked.

Maru handed him the cup ramyun container. Heewon stuck his nose against the container and started drinking the soup.

“Did you not eat anything?”

“I did. Why do you ask?”

“Because you look like you’ve been starving for days.”

“I get that a lot.”

Maru looked at Heewon who was gulping down the soup. Daemyung and Inho went into the opera house together with the shared opinion that they should help their juniors as much as possible. Dowook went back to the truck, saying he wanted to get some sleep.

“Myunghwa High is at 2, right?” Heewon asked as he threw away the empty container in the trash can next to the bench.

It seemed that he had downed the soup which had filled more than half of the container.

“If it doesn’t get delayed, then yeah, 2 o’clock.”

“Gaeul is from Myunghwa High, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Is she in it?”

“No, she’s a staff.”

“Then I guess there’s nothing to see.”

Heewon lay down on the bench. The bench was quite small, but he looked quite at ease. He looked pretty used to doing that.

“It’s the perfect weather to sleep.”

Heewon's eyes lost focus quickly. Maru also nodded. The sunlight seeping through the gaps in the leaves was just warm enough, and the wind was just cool enough. He stared at the round roof of the opera house for a while before speaking,

"How's Gaeul doing during lessons?"

"She's doing too well. I'm receiving harm because of her. She's way too enthusiastic. She can take it easy, but she's practicing like there's no tomorrow. I can't really rest in fear of being compared."

Heewon's eyes contained resentment. He truly looked rather troubled.

"Help her out a little. She's someone who likes acting."

"Hell no, too bothersome."

"Sheesh, you are one thing. That personality of yours didn't change after joining a company."

"You tell me. I thought I'd change if I became busy, but it looks like my laziness is on a completely different level. I was running for an entire day because we were shooting an ad, right? Not gonna lie, I wanted to run away. That was way too much for me."

"I'm surprised you didn't."

"If I did, Haewon would find me and scold me."

"You should really put a stop to that, you know? Your brother needs his own time. How long are you going to make him look after you?"

"It's been a while since we met, yet you're on about that as well? Why are there so many hardworking people around me? There's Haewon, Gaeul, you, and even Inho. There should be just as many lazy people like me to make the balance right."

"It's because you are beyond easygoing and more of a sloth."

"Is that how it is?"

Heewon yawned before standing up.

"Talking to you made the sleepiness run away. I feel like I made a loss."

"You should sleep if you're tired. Once I see that you're asleep, I'll just walk away."

"I don't think I can sleep after that... hey, is that school Myunghwa High?"

Heewon pointed with his finger. There were students heading towards the opera house. A hundred or so students wearing black t-shirts moved in unison, which made the spectators around look at them in a daze.

"Yep, that's Myunghwa High."

"That's a lot. I think there's more than a hundred in just the acting club alone."

"You're probably right."

“20 people was a pain already, yet they have 100? Looks like Gaeul does an incredible job huh, being a seonbae in a club like that.”

“But you’re the club president of Hwasoo High, aren’t you?” Maru asked as he looked at Heewon.

“That’s because Inho pushed that title onto me so that I can take care of the annoying stuff. I didn’t do anything this year as the club president, but I still am. Does that even make sense?”

“Looks like you have everyone’s trust then. Oh, come to think about it, you didn’t participate at all, huh? In the competition, I mean.”

“You want me to participate in the acting club alongside those lessons? I can’t do it. I have to give up on one of the two.”

“Gaeul is taking those lessons with you, isn’t she? Gaeul applied to be a staff member after saying that she had quite a lot of free time.”

“I pulled myself out early. If I participated in the club as well, I would have no free time for the entire week. Also, what fun is there in a club that relies on one person for everything? I pulled out for the sake of the members.”

“So you were pretending to be busy?”

“Well... I guess you can put it that way. It’s a white lie?”

“Well done. Thanks to you, we managed to pass the preliminaries easily.”

“Don’t say that in front of Inho. He might try to kill me.”

“He probably knows already, you know? I mean, Haewon has access to your entire schedule.”

Heewon made a shocked expression before muttering ‘is that why they dragged me here?’ by himself. This guy was quite unpredictable. Looking at his acting, he had the skill to gain anyone’s applause, yet the person himself lacked the will to make use of that. He was the complete opposite of Gaeul who put her best effort into everything she did, so those two might have quarreled with each other quite often.

“Are you getting along well with Gaeul?”

“There’s nothing to say about that, really. She’s like a bull who can only charge forward. If I want to be friends with her, I need to be working hard towards something as well, but I don’t wanna do that.”

“You’re taking those lessons anyway, so try to get some fun out of them. And help Gaeul out when you can. If it’s your acting, she might feel a lot of things after looking at you.”

“Feel things?”

Heewon made a bored expression after yawning.

“Now, I wonder about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“What you’re telling me is that my acting will be helpful for improving her own skills, right?”

“Yeah, and?”

“My acting will not be helpful to her. No, she doesn’t need my help at all. When I first saw her, I didn’t feel much about her, but she has changed a lot recently. The teacher is telling her off a lot less too. It’s somewhat strange to say this, but she seems like a changed person.”

Heewon stared at Maru.

“For example, when I first saw your acting, the feel you gave off was a thick blue.”

“I think I said this before, but only you can understand that color theory in this world.”

Heewon scratched his head.

“To put it in a different way, you’re stuck-up. Your acting style is like a rock. It’s hard and heavy. If people keep watching, they might get a sense that it’s tiring, but it’s fundamentally flawless, so it’s something you can keep watching.”

“Sorry for being tiring.”

“It’s just a form of expression. It’s quite peculiar. I had to explain what thick blue is in words. In any case, when I first met Gaeul, she was yellow. She was shining beautifully. But, that was it. There was no fun in her acting. I can feel her intention of showing something, but that didn’t influence her acting. It was to the point that when I blinked, I would forget what she was doing just moments ago.”

The criticism was rather severe. Maru couldn’t entirely agree with him, but he did nod when he heard that her acting was no fun. Gaeul had splendid skill in interpreting the script, but she lacked character. This was something that Ganghwan pointed out in the amateur acting class 2 years ago.

“But it’s different these days. It’s quite curious. She’s a rainbow. One moment, she would be red, but then she would leap to blue the next moment, followed by green. It’s a chaotic and unsettling type of acting, but she draws attention until the very end. If you tell me to do that, I can’t do that. That’s something like having bipolar disorder. Her emotional mood swings are way too extreme. And yet, she looks natural.”

“I’m surprised you managed to understand all that.”

“It’s just a gut feeling. Anyway, the type of acting she does these days is like skipping back and forth between ages from a newborn to a granny. It’s unpredictable. That’s why the teacher is having so much fun these days. And thanks to that, it’s more tiring for me.”

Maru looked at the opera house. Gaeul’s acting had changed, huh. He couldn’t get a feel of what that would be like. He had never seen her act recently after all.

“In any case, I get that she’s doing well.”

“She’s doing too well. I want her to be a little lazier, but I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

“Why don’t you learn from her and change your habits? Who knows? You might change that lazy nature of yours.”

“You want me to live a busy life like her? If I start making money in the future, I might have no choice but to do that, but no, I don’t want to do that now. I’m going to embrace this leisure as much as possible. What do you have left if you live a busy life when you’re a student? Dying after working your entire life sounds way too sad.”

“If you become a workaholic, even working should change into something fun, you know?”

“What’s a workaholic? Sounds like a magic spell from a game to me.”

Maru stared at Heewon before chuckling.

“Anyway, look after her for me, will you? I think I’ll be more at ease knowing that you are taking care of her since you’re by her side every day.”

“Even if I don’t do it, Haewon is doing it as well, so don’t worry about it. Geez, this is the problem with couples.”

Heewon stood up from his seat and checked the time. Maru also took out his phone to have a look. It was nearing 2 o’clock, the time he was supposed to meet up with the others.

“Looks like I should get going. Inho told me to come inside by at least 2.”

“I also need to go.”

“Okay, see you later.”

Heewon, who walked off while moving his hands back and forth, suddenly stopped and turned around.

“Oh, I almost forgot.”

“What?”

“Thanks. It’s thanks to you that I joined the agency. If I ever become big later, I’ll treat you to something good.”

“Did Haewon tell you to do that?”

“You really are quick-witted. As expected of thick blue.”

“Away with your color theory. I don’t understand anything.”

“But don’t you get a feel of what it is when I say thick blue? Like ‘wham’ or something? Why don’t other people get this?”

“Whim or wham, I don’t care, so don’t go saying that to others. You might get reported to the psychiatric hospital.”

Heewon nodded and turned around.

* * *

“You did well, you did well.”

Gaeul consoled the crying junior. They were reaching the climax point without any accidents when something happened to one of the first-year juniors. One of the high-heels worn by her to represent a 'bold new employee' had snapped off right in the middle of the stage. As this was just her second time going up on the stage, that accident was something hard for that junior to bear. In the end, she froze up, and a character that wasn't supposed to be there had to hop out from behind the side curtains and bring her out. Thankfully, nothing happened after that, but the junior who was at the center of the accident was still trembling.

"You were just unlucky. Don't worry about it. Well then, let's clean up," said Choi Seol.

The juniors started moving. The shaking junior also helped the others after calming down a little. It was colleagues who were helpful when people had it hard, so there were many first-year students gathered around her. It should be fine now - Gaeul sighed before helping out with the cleanup.

It was when she was sweeping the sticky notes scattered on stage with a broom. She saw someone wave towards the stage. It was Maru, wearing Woosung High's acting club hoodie. Gaeul barely managed to smile and wave back. What happened back at the bus still remained in her heart. Honestly, she didn't have the confidence to face Maru right now.

After that short greeting, Gaeul walked around the stage in a busy manner. She wasn't that busy, so it made her feel pathetic to pretend that she was, but she wanted to avoid Maru even if she had to do that right now.

Her head was filled with the thought that she had to calm her heart and go see him next time. She looked at the exit after a long time. All the students had left. Maru wasn't there either.

Just then, she got an alert from her phone. She got a text message.

-You seemed busy, so I just left. Actually, I wanted to keep waiting, but the instructor was noisy about getting food. Sorry.

Gaeul put her broom between her arm and her waist and quickly sent a reply.

-Don't feel sorry. It was me who was in a bad condition and snapped out. Have a nice dinner and see you next time.

-Alright. Hope you feel better soon. If you get really annoyed or something, call me and vent it on me.

-Not happening.

She felt like she could hear Maru's plain tone from the text. It was her who had dodged him, yet he was the one apologizing. This made her sigh. It should be fine to look at him straight and to chat with him, but why did that become so hard?

-It's because of your guilty conscience and jealousy. It's also the difference between a mature kid and a kid pretending to be an adult.

That voice suddenly spoke up. Gaeul ignored it because she couldn't retort. When she didn't retort, the voice faded away as though it had lost interest.

"It's so hard," Gaeul uttered to herself on the stage after all the juniors and the audience had left.

She didn't want anything amazing. All she wanted to do was to act alongside Maru on a stage like this. Watching Maru's acting, which had become so distant, she wondered if that day would ever come.

She stared at the empty stage for a while before turning around.

"Today, you're a depressing sky blue."

She suddenly heard a voice from the audience seats. She stared at the dark corner towards the right.

"Lee Heewon?"

"Yeah, it's me?"

Heewon looked back at her in a questioning light as though asking why she called him. Gaeul chuckled when she saw that. He was the one who called out to her first, yet he had an expression like that.

"You laughed, so it means I took care of you, right?" Heewon said from below the stage.

She couldn't understand a word he was saying.

Chapter 696

"Why are you here?" Gaeul asked as she held onto the broom with both hands.

"Club activities."

"I see. Then did you come here to watch the plays in the finals?"

"The only one we watched was Myunghwa High's play. A friend of mine said that we had to watch this one at least."

"Ours?"

"Apparently, there's a lot to learn. But yeah, you guys are definitely good. The mistake in the middle was definitely unfortunate."

"That can't be helped. I think we still handled it well. If everyone froze up, it would have been a mess."

"Yeah, if it was me, I would definitely have hid behind the curtains. I'd leave the rest to everyone else."

"If that ever does happen to you, don't ever run away. The other actors will be panicking, you know?"

Heewon shrugged.

"Oh, have you met up with Han Maru?"

"Maru?"

"I just met him, and he told me to look after you. Well, if you're going through something difficult, I guess I can listen, but don't expect anything from me. You know, right? I can't handle anyone relying on me."

Heewon clearly seemed unwilling. Gaeul sighed a little.

"I have no intentions of doing that either. But did Maru really tell you to look after me?"

“Yeah. It’s nothing serious, and I think he told me that because he can’t see you that often. But you know? Isn’t it kinda funny? It’s been a while since I last saw him, and the first thing he does is ask me a favor. Han Maru, that guy is so shameless.”

“You’re talking to me like this though. Doesn’t that mean that you’re listening to his request?”

“Because I got something from him.”

Gaeul tilted her head.

“You got something from him?”

“Leftover ramyun soup. The director that raised me always told me that people are supposed to pay back what they’ve eaten. Anyway, I did my part, so the rest is up to you two. I don’t know any stuff about love and whatnot. You guys didn’t get into a fight, did you?”

“That’s... not it.”

“That just now felt similar to a lie. If you did get into a fight, make up over some food or something. It’s not good to see grownups being mad at each other.”

Just as Gaeul was about to reply, a student poked his head inside the theater and called out to Heewon in a loud voice. Heewon shouted ‘I’m coming’ before turning around. Gaeul, now by herself again, took out her phone slowly.

“Is it really just a guilty conscience?”

When Maru, who always looked calm and solved the problems that came his way instantly, cried in front of her like a little child, Gaeul decided that she would become the supporting pillar for him. It was probably back then that she started wanting to stand on the same level as him. But how did things look now? She was avoiding Maru because she was afraid that the image she built up until now was going to break. This was the same case with Yuna’s matters as well. She had to be honest. I actually don’t like you and Maru being together - if she said that, things might have gone well instead. When she told Yuna that she was okay with Yuna doing well with Maru, Yuna made a rather disappointed expression. After all, depending on the interpretation, the fact that she said ‘I’m completely fine with it’ could convey the notion that Yuna was a girl without any charms at all. If she showed jealousy or anger without holding back, they might be at a standstill for the immediate future, but they would laugh about it in the future in due time. A wound that had healed awkwardly couldn’t be healed again, and with this one, they couldn’t exactly open the wound again either. Only Yuna knew if it was filled with puss on the inside or if it had healed properly.

-Get some distance for a while.

The one within her spoke.

“Get some distance?”

-I’m giving you advice since I have lived longer than you, even though I may look like this. I mean, people say all the time that lovers need some time apart. It’s that distance that makes you feel endearing again and will allow you to find new charms in each other. At the same time, the time spent apart will help you heal your pain.

“You were snapping out at me in the morning so much, yet now you’re giving me advice?”

-I say this all the time, but I don’t want you to be unhappy. I’m someone who wishes for your happiness more than anyone. I don’t think there’s anyone else in this world that wishes for your happiness more than me, you know?

“I don’t want to believe in a stranger’s words.”

-Think what you want. However, you should definitely try getting some distance from him. This is definitely a necessary process, even if it’s for the sake of your self-confidence.

“My self-confidence?”

-That’s right. Self-confidence. Your idols were always your parents. The gentle father is your foundation, and your competent mother is your aim. There shouldn’t have been any problems when you looked at those two in life. That was because those two are people that support you and, at the same time, guide you. However, Maru is different. No matter how close he feels to you, he’s another person. People take a hit in their confidence when they get compared to a member of their family. So how bad would it be if that person was an outsider instead?

“I’ve never compared myself to Maru.”

-Now that’s wrong. You always said with your mouth that one of your dreams is to stand on the same stage as Maru and that it is objectively difficult to do that right now. You know the reason why. The difference in skill; the difference in talent; as well as the difference in your attitude towards life and acting. You started acting as a way to remember the old times and continued it just for fun until you only started desiring to become better recently. Your focus is on becoming successful as a professional. Maru is different. To him, acting was nothing in the first place. It was just a method to earn himself a living.

Gaeul’s mouth itched. She wanted to retort and ask how much she knew about Maru, but there was nothing she could say. Her words were entirely right. They were words that Maru said himself.

-You should know how difficult it is to choose one thing as a means and then put everything into that. But that changed. Acting, which he chose purely because he wanted to make a living out of it, ended up suiting him. His skills improved rapidly. Do you remember the winter 2 years ago? Even back then, he was miles ahead of you. What do you think became of that gap now?

“I know that. That’s why I also...”

-Yes, you’re doing your best as well. There’s nothing false in your efforts. In fact, you’re trying harder than anyone. That is why I’m telling you to stay away from him. Right now, you are definitely improving. Just like what happened to Maru before, this is the most important growth period in your life. You met the greatest teacher known as Choi Gyeonmi, and you are in an environment where you can learn real, practical acting instead of the acting skills that are needed to enter college. You should be feeling yourself changing every day as well. It’s not purely because of my presence. It’s your skills that are finally coming to fruition.

“My skills?”

-A good teacher and the environment has their limits if you lack the talent. You haven't seen your limits yet. You can rise even further. You also have the greatest partner next to you. Lee Heewon will keep giving you more and more inspiration. Whenever you fall into mannerisms when acting, you will look at him, which will enlighten you and allow you to take another step forward. Eventually, you'll become the best. If you realize how important this moment, this kind of time really is, then don't try to create an event that will eat away at you.

"Are you saying that it's unnecessary for me to go and meet Maru right now?"

-If you can see him face to face with a pure heart, then it doesn't matter. But that's not the case, is it? You couldn't even say what was on your mind to Yuna, your junior. Can you really tell Maru your honest thoughts in such a situation?

The one inside her paused a little before continuing,

-Above all, what I'm worried about is how Maru would act when he finds out about your lies and actions that you took to avoid him. What kind of expression would he make when he finds out that you gave Yuna mental pressure when he's supposed to be working with her? What would it be like for Yuna? This may be an important time in life for you, but it's the same for those two as well. No, those two are shooting their first drama as a main character, which might decide the quality of their lives in the future. If they manage to attract attention, they would be among the successful cases of numerous aspiring actors, but if they fail and get that 'unskilled' branding, they would never be able to find work for a while. You should know too about how much of a loss it is to miss the flow in the entertainment industry.

Gaeul gulped. That was definitely true. Maru and Yuna were facing very important shoots in their lives. No, the shoot had begun. Actors who were used to the scene and had been professionals for a long time would proficiently kill their personal emotions and act flawlessly, but that would be difficult for newcomers. Perhaps it was possible for Maru. He was different from the rest after all. However, for Yuna, there was the possibility that she might bring her personal matters into her role. If her acting is affected and it affects the overall atmosphere of the shoot as a result of that, Yuna would become even more nervous and enter a vicious cycle that would result in her ruining the greatest opportunity of her life.

She felt afraid now. She would never be able to get any sleep if bad things happened to those two because of her.

-You aren't an adult yet. You are in the process of becoming one. As long as you get past this, you will grow up a lot. At that time, you'll think back to this day and just laugh about why you were so worried. That's because, by then, you will have the leisure. You will be able to smile.

"But not now?"

-I think you know the answer to that more than anyone.

"Why are you telling me all this? Don't you hate me?"

-I say this all the time, but I wish for your happiness more than anyone in this world. Because your happiness is my happiness.

“...So the conclusion is to stay distant from him for a while?”

-Solitude makes a person mature. People may not be able to live alone, but they definitely need time for themselves. That will make you stronger.

“I don’t get it. I also don’t know what I have to tell Maru and Yuna.”

-Don’t worry about that. I will help you. I’m on your side. You should definitely have felt that there’s no malice in my intentions. I’m happy as long as you are.

Gaeul put her hand on her chest.

“Just who are you?”

The one inside her replied,

-The one who has been watching over you for a long time.

* * *

“Yes, seonbae.”

“Sorry, but I wanted to tell you my honest thoughts.”

“No, seonbae. In fact, I’m relieved that you told me like this.”

Yuna looked at Gaeul who was smiling with difficulty.

“I won’t be able to look at you comfortably for the immediate future, but I just want you to know that I don’t hate you. It’s just because I’m afraid.”

“It’s not like that. If it was me, I wouldn’t be able to say any of this at all.”

“Thanks for telling me that. I will try my best to get my stuff together and try to go back to normal. If I get mad and don’t answer you, please don’t get too mad at me.”

“It’s me who’s in the wrong. I’ll wait until you feel better.”

“Thanks. I’m really glad that you’re my junior.”

Gaeul left, saying that they should meet later. Yuna gasped as she clutched her heart. Gaeul-seonbae’s sudden confession made her feel chaotic. When she heard that Gaeul actually quite hated her, she flinched, but at the same time, she felt relieved. Being jealous meant that Yuna had charm as well.

“I should get myself together too.”

Gaeul-seonbae told her all that. She would never tell Maru-seonbae that she liked him out of her immaturity again. Drinking was also banned. At the same time, she also had the daring desire to think about what would happen if the two broke up. Yuna shook her head. She would never approach Maru-seonbae of her own accord in the future. She didn’t want to be an underhanded woman.

“But what if....”

Yuna thought about some things that she felt apologetic about as she saw Gaeul getting distant. Not a bad thought but an apologetic one.

* * *

"If that's what you think, then okay. I will never contact you of my own accord for a while. But I do wish for you to tell me if something ever happens. I feel like I'm gonna be a little sad if I hear about you through other people. Okay, good work today. Have a good rest."

As soon as he took his phone off his ear, the others, who had been silent until now, turned around and started talking. Maru picked up his chopsticks and spoke,

"What's there to overhear from me that would make you guys sit still in front of meat? You should just get to eating."

Maru put a piece of meat on top of Daemyung's rice as he looked at Maru worriedly.

"Did something happen?"

"Nah. You know, the usual stuff. You know how girls are like, I want some time by myself or whatnot."

"It's nothing serious?"

"If it was serious, she would have told me about it. I'm not opposed to the idea of spending some time alone."

"That's good then. I thought you got into a fight or something."

"There is nothing to fight over. We haven't seen each other that much recently."

Hearing that, Daemyung widened his eyes.

"Isn't it dangerous then?"

"What is?"

"I mean, you haven't seen each other a lot, and yet she suddenly says she wants to be by herself..."

Maru wrapped a piece of meat inside some lettuce before putting it in his mouth.

"Don't just assume."

"You never know. Don't you think you should call her again? I heard that many people break up that way...."

"I don't think Gaeul is that impolite. However, if she's really getting ready to break up...."

Maru put down his chopsticks before continuing,

"Then I can't do anything about it."

"I-is that how it is?"

“Why do you look more serious than me? There’s no grand reason for breaking up. If she wants to avoid me and wants to distance herself from me, then I should let her go. Dating is something that’s done on the assumption that both parties like each other.”

Maru stared at his phone. He didn’t know whether she had become sensitive because of her period, or if there was some other reason, but he was sure that she had thought a lot about it. If that was the case, he had to respect her decision, regardless of the results.

“Eat a lot!”

Miso’s loud voice could be heard. Maru put aside his worries and picked up his chopsticks.

Chapter 697

“Things have gotten really good these days. Back when we were young, we couldn’t even imagine that it would be possible to shoot a film with just one machine.”

“Using large rolls of film was natural back in the day. Not only that, it was impossible to shoot during the night without lights. I had a look at a camcorder from Japan the other day, and there was some attachment that you can put in at the top to use as a light. It is frontal light, so the contours of the actor’s face would all disappear into oblivion, but still, if you think about how you can shoot during the night with that....”

“You’re right. I heard that people make short movies with videos from their phones these days. The quality might not be up to par, but with more accessibility, there will be more good directors in our country in the future. It has become a lot easier to take the challenge after all.”

“I would’ve gathered a few people and tried shooting if I was just 20 years younger. I guess I can’t do it now since I have a family to feed at home.”

“Looks like you’re a good husband.”

“It’s not that I’m a good husband, I’m just kinda scared of her. When she was younger, she was really gentle, but she became a really strict ahjumma once she started raising our kid. Don’t tell me anything unless you had to sleep in front of the door because you went back home at dawn all drunk. Do you know what kind of things I had to go through when I knocked on the door after drinking?”

Many people at the table smiled bitterly after hearing critic Park Jangho’s words. Film director, writer, journalist, critic, film production CEO, and actor. These were the occupations of those who had gathered in order to assess the pieces for the 1st Seoul Youth Film Festival.

Jangho looked at the list in front of him. They were the works of aspiring film directors. Films had come in from all over the country, and the 1st round of assessments ended in the middle of September.

“There were 90 of them. That’s quite a lot.”

“I would’ve never dared to watch all of them if they were all long ones,” said journalist Kim Dongwook who sat in front of him.

This journalist was someone he got to know through this assessment, and he was quite likable because he didn't have that persistence that journalists usually had. His business card had the words JA Production on it.

"I heard that there were 140 pieces originally. That means that there were 50 or so pieces that didn't fit the criteria. Apparently, there were a lot of prank applications, as well as abridged versions of the actual film," said the drama writer.

Jangho was uncomfortable around this woman. During the whole time they were watching the movies in order to give an assessment, she always complained and criticized. Unqualified, subpar - these were the kinds of words she used. It seemed that she didn't take into account the fact that these youths had just entered the field of shooting film.

"There were a lot of interesting ones considering that it's the work of beginners. I especially got a deep impression from the ones that did horror. That's a hard area to do," said the film director.

The work in question was also inside Jangho's memory. It was a traditional horror-thriller piece, and there were many unique and fun-looking devices throughout the film. That was on top of the production style that stuck to the basics, which was quite enjoyable to look at. However, as the video itself was shot with a limited amount of lightning, and the make-up was not up to par, the outcome was something with a lack of contrast, which made it quite hard to watch.

"Wasn't the train journey quite good too?" commented the CEO of the film production studio.

"That was pretty good too. It should feel just like that if an essay is adapted into a film. There was an element of biography as well," Jangho replied.

"The colors were good too. That one knew how to use lights."

"I liked the film itself, but I also quite liked the extra footage at the end. It was quite cute to see them stomp their feet in order to get permission to shoot inside the train."

"I think that's the good thing about youth. If it was a commercial movie, there would be all sorts of procedures and money involved. It's quite difficult," said the film production CEO.

"What did you think of the documentary about the cow in the stable? I thought that was pretty good," said actor Park Taeho as he reached out to the snacks placed in front of him.

Everyone turned quiet whenever he spoke. While there were many different people ranging from film production studio CEO to drama writer, drama director, and journalist, they only 'worked' in their field and had nothing that could represent them. That wasn't the case for Park Taeho. He was one of the top actors in the current era of South Korea's male actors. In the controversial film released last year, 'Twilight Struggles', actor Yoon Moonjoong did a great job of portraying a father consumed by lunacy, but the acting of Park Taeho, who disdained his father and showed the epitome of immorality, also made many people gasp. When Jangho watched that movie, he thought that Taeho would win the Daejong award that year, but the ones that swept the Daejong prizes last year were the actors of the film that got 10 million views, which happened in South Korea for the 7th time in history. It was actor Yoon Moonjoong though, who won the lead male award, and proved that the Daejong awards had a

sliver of public credibility left. If even that went to another actor, they would have been branded as unifying the commerciality and the quality of the film.

“The cow documentary was good too. But that was way too bland. 20 minutes of showing everyday life should be ‘Hometown Six[1]’, not a film,” said the drama writer.

Her tongue always became more vile after Park Taeho said something. She showed goodwill towards him on the first day, but she was probably unhappy that Park Taeho didn’t reply to her.

“I found it rather refreshing actually. They captured the figure of the child leading a cow pretty well. It’s something you can make because you don’t shoot it expecting commerciality,” said the film director.

The drama writer seemed to have become mad and just drank some water.

“It seems like our young judges liked that one as well. The overall assessment is pretty good. Of course, there’s no dramatic tension or a notion of the subject, and other parts that are also lacking. But I don’t think it was that bad to show a part of everyday life so plainly like that,” added the film production CEO.

Jangho flipped over the list. He saw the assessments of the youth judges. The 1st round of assessment was done by 50 young judges from many parts of the country instead of the professional judges gathered here. As this was a youth film festival, the assessment of those around the same age was pretty important. The professional judges accounted for 60% of the scores, while the remaining 40% was decided by the young ones.

“Their one-line assessments were quite entertaining too. There are many that are even more evil than a critic like me, and there were a lot of funny ones too.”

“Personally, this gave me a deep impression: ‘It looks like the cow didn’t get enough guarantee, that is, feed, from how it kept yawning’.”

“That was pretty funny.”

“I found it absurd though. This is not a joke. I frowned as soon as I looked at it.”

The drama writer clicked her tongue. Jangho did not reply. A rampaging pony was better left alone.

“Since it’s a youth film festival, the eyes of the professionals may be important, but I think we should take into account how it appealed to their peers.”

The film director pointed at the blue piece of paper on the table. It contained the 10 films that received the best scores from the youth judges, as well as their criticisms.

“First up, the film that tried to be heavy awkwardly didn’t make it onto this list. The problems of the era, environmental, and religion. I can praise them for their challenging mindset and deciding to handle those topics, but there were too many of them who just skimmed the surface and went downhill during the conclusion without any clear points at all. Some of them had the wrong approach in the first place,” said journalist Kim Dongwook.

“They must have hit a block while shooting. Anyone can say that there is a problem, but it’s impossible to take that next step unless you have a deep reason for it. There were many that tried the topic out but ended up with an awkward ending because they hit a block. While I can understand them, if you end it

like that, it just goes to show that the director doesn't have any plans when he or she shoots the video, so it's even worse of a reason to the point that it's displeasing," Jangho added.

"Meanwhile, the works at the top have a shared point. It's the point of sympathy. The ones that handled school life especially, got a good score."

"That's to be expected. Children around that age project themselves into fiction pretty easily. Even though there's no power in the story, there were many pieces that got good scores purely because they could sympathize. That's why I don't trust this assessment."

The drama writer flipped the blue assessments on the table.

"Don't be too critical and be a little gentler when it comes to this. You might be a professional, writer, but these fellows aren't. Just think of it as them trying hard," said the film production CEO.

The drama writer seemed to have liked that flattering tone and eventually nodded.

"For me personally, I liked these ten pieces that the young judges have picked. Especially when it comes to the acting. Leaving aside a sense for a topic, and the production quality, I'm not opposed to the idea that these 10 will receive the prize based on acting skills alone. What do you all think?" Park Taeho, one of the top actors in the country, gave an assessment about the acting.

Jangho didn't want to retort to that. Above all, just as Park Taeho said, the ten works picked out by the youth judges showed a pretty decent level of competence in terms of acting. It was clear that they weren't shameful to look at.

"Based on acting alone, maybe, but if you ask me about other areas, then, I'm not sure," said the drama writer.

Park Taeho smiled and nodded. He didn't say anything.

"We just have to decide by this afternoon, so I guess there's no need to try so hard right now," said the journalist as though to mediate.

"Since we're at it, can I ask you a question, actor Park?" the film director asked.

Park Taeho replied after drinking some water,

"I always get nervous when directors say they want to ask me a question. What is it?"

"It's nothing much; I'm just curious as to why you decided to participate in this. I mean, considering the name values of everyone here, the rest of us can't hold a candle to you, can we? I thought I saw the wrong person when I first came here. I was wondering why such a bigshot was here."

Park Taeho shook his hand.

"Oh, no, please. I'm no bigshot. I'm just an actor."

"If you're just an actor, I might as well throw away my film director title."

"What can I say if you keep doing that? Please, don't lower yourself so much."

While everyone was laughing, the drama writer stared at the film director with a pissed expression. She looked as though she didn't want to be lumped with the rest.

"I just had a personal interest. I wanted to see how young people do acting and how they produce a film."

"From what I hear, it seems that you are preparing to become a film director yourself. Did you come here to see if there are any promising ones?" asked the film production CEO.

From how his eyes flashed, the businessman side of him became more intense.

"No, not a film director. I'm just trying my hand at writing. I'm learning little by little from someone I know, and it sure isn't easy."

"I see."

"Anyway, I quite wanted this spot because I would get to see the acting of young people. I can see young actors in the field from time to time, and how should I put it... they're good, but I never get the feeling of wanting to do something with them. Before, there were many people who gave off the feeling of a rough stone to the point that I couldn't find a way to deal with them, but these days, they all look like smooth pebbles. Their overall acting skills may have risen, but it's hard to find people that stand out. Maybe because of that, I want to see raw acting from those that haven't learned properly."

"I guess it's like that these days."

Jangho nodded as there were parts that he sympathized with.

"Let's pick out ten recommendations for now. I think we will only be able to finish in the evening if we pick them out before lunch," said the journalist as he picked up the list.

It was lunchtime already. Jangho picked five pieces that he had decided on his mind. There were quite extreme pieces, so it wasn't hard to pick them. Creative and fresh ideas were good, but Jangho placed more importance on the basics.

"I picked mine."

"Me too."

The lists written by the six people were gathered in one place. Jangho combined the lists together into one.

"Let's get back to it after lunch. We need energy to talk even more."

The film production CEO stood up. The four others followed suit. Jangho, who stayed behind until the end, had a look at the list of pieces that the other judges had picked. Just as he had expected, there were quite a lot of overlaps. Among them were ones that were beyond just 'decent' and could be called good.

"Kids these days are good at everything."

Jangho left after putting down his pen.

[1] A Korean TV program that airs at six in the morning, usually targeted at elderly people. And like what it says, it usually shows a bunch of everyday life stuff.

Chapter 698

“This place has some good food, doesn’t it?”

“Right. I guess you have to go around with someone who goes to a lot of places to be able to go to the good restaurants.”

Jangho left the store and saw that the store owner was shaking hands with Park Taeho. The full-course Korean restaurant that actor Park brought them to suited Jangho’s taste buds perfectly. Thanks to that, he had to loosen his belt buckle a little.

“You paid for the meal too, now I feel bad,” said the film director.

After saying goodbye to the store owner, Park Taeho said that it was nothing to worry about and just laughed.

“Then, I’ll buy the coffee. We might be working together in the future, so I should score some points when I can.”

The film production CEO took out his credit card. They went into a nearby coffee shop and ordered some coffee. While the coffee was coming out, they naturally started talking about the applicants of the youth film festival.

“We should decide on the grand prize first before talking about the rest, right?” journalist Kim Dongwook mentioned.

Everyone seemed to be in agreement with him.

“There are a few I want to pick that fit that criterion.”

“Me too.”

It seemed that everyone had decided on a few pieces in their minds. There were a couple of pieces that came to Jangho’s mind when he thought about the grand prize. If he could vote, he would vote for one of the two.

“How about ‘I Walked the Streets’?”

The one who spoke first was the drama writer. As soon as he heard the title, Jangho could remember what that film was about. It was the only monochrome piece among the applicants. It was a film taken from the point of view of a girl who had failed the CSAT college exam, and it expressed the depressing color quite well by synchronizing it with the character’s feelings and the objects in the scene.

“That one was good. It wasn’t stretched out unnecessarily,” said the film production CEO.

The drama writer looked at other people. Jangho also said good things about it.

“It is quite cliché to have the colors return when she comes back home, but personally, I was a little touched. I quite liked it because the producer’s aims are quite clear,” the film director gave his opinion.

“The acting skills of the characters left room to be desired. Inputting sadness amidst complete ignorance is quite a hard technique to do after all. The overall good structure made the lack of acting skills stand out even more,” commented Park Taeho. He had approached it from the facet of acting.

The drama writer, who always retorted to everything, agreed this time.

“But I think it’s okay to put it as a candidate for the grand prize. Well, I might not have as good of an eye as everyone else here, but from the eyes of an ordinary civilian, that film was definitely interesting. As actor Park just said, there is room to be desired on the side of acting, but I quite liked it because that was the only thing that stood out to me as a flaw.”

Journalist Kim Dongwook also said that he liked the ‘I Walked the Streets’ piece.

“Then let’s put it on the list of candidates.”

Jangho marked it with a red pen on the list that he brought.

“We should choose a few like this and then select the final candidate later, and have the rest of them take the other prizes.”

“Sounds good. But aren’t we putting in too much effort?” remarked the drama writer as she stretched out her arms.

Everyone laughed after hearing that. Just then, they got their coffee. As it was a paper take-out cup, they drank a little in the coffee shop before returning to the judges’ office.

“Having coffee like this reminds me of director Park Joongjin who I met a little while ago,” Jangho said to the others who sat down with drowsy faces.

He brought out a different subject because it looked like they weren’t going to go back to the assessment immediately.

“You met director Park?”

The film director seemed to know him.

“Yes. I was a fan, so I always wanted to meet him, and I kinda got the chance a while ago. It wasn’t because of work or anything; I was just having some food with someone I know, and it was rather unexpected.”

Jangho thought about the Park Joongjin he saw that day and continued speaking,

“You know how everyone calls him a genius, right? I thought that he would be quite peculiar because of that, but it turned out he’s actually quite a prankster and down-to-earth.”

“Director Park does have a prankster-like side to him.”

Jangho nodded when he heard the film director’s words.

“We were going to talk about a film that was released last year, but he said that was no fun and I ended up listening to a coffee lecture on the spot. He talked about how coffee beans taste different according

to the region and according to how they are fried, or whatnot. He also talked about a sense of the body or something, too. I wanted to talk to him about films, but I couldn't speak a word about it."

"Director Park is someone who puts a wall between him and films before he goes into pre-production. I mean, he's someone who says he does it for the money in public places. Of course he's weird."

"Looking at it like that, it does seem like he's a genius. Such a disinterested person gets at least 5 million views whenever he shoots a movie. The one that was released last year also got over 8 million, didn't it?"

"It was a great comeback. Honestly speaking, I thought he would do a romance because he said he's doing a commercial piece after a long time, but he did a noir film instead."

"I really enjoyed it. It had been a long time since I last didn't look at a watch during a movie."

"So you must have looked at your watch frequently while watching my movie, right?" said the film director with a smile.

Jangho quickly replied that he didn't, but in truth, he checked the time about three times during the film director's movie.

"I don't get why that was successful. Everyone was all crazy about it, so I did watch it, but that was so cliché, wasn't it? Moreover, he used a completely inexperienced idol as a main character. I'm shocked that such a thing got 8 million views."

"Didn't you use an idol in a drama that you wrote last time?" asked journalist Kim Dongwook while spinning a pen in his hand.

The drama writer suddenly became quiet. Jangho inwardly snickered.

"Well then, let's all stop and finish this up."

The film director refreshed the atmosphere. The drama writer stared at the journalist without holding back her displeasure.

"Mr. Jangho. How is it? There are quite a few overlaps, right?"

Jangho replied yes before putting the combined list in the middle of the table.

"The opinions are mostly the same. First up, there are three pieces that all six of us have picked."

"What are they?"

"The first one is 'I Walked the Streets', that we talked about back at the coffee shop."

Jangho wrote it down in big handwriting on a new piece of paper.

"The next one is 'The Reason the Boy Went Home Early'. This was a little unexpected. None of you talked about this before, so I thought I was the only one who found it good."

That film was about a boy who dreamt about going home early from school for the sake of a girl who was going to move away soon. The freshness of people around that age as well as their cute recklessness made him smile throughout the whole film.

“Their idea was good. The subject is rather normal, but I liked how it turned out. They managed to find something that kids these days might do but do not actually do.”

That compliment was from the drama writer. Jangho thought that that was an extreme praise considering that it was from her.

“It’s a fantasy within everyday life. Actually, it’s not easy for students to come up with things like that. I mean, kids these days are very calculative when it comes to their studies, tests, and whatnot. Thinking about missing regular classes up front instead of supplementary classes is something unheard of amidst regular students,” the film director added.

Jangho nodded and read one of the comments left by the youth judges.

“This is one of the criticisms that the youth judges left behind, and it got stuck in my head. ‘That’s what we dream of’. It’s simple, but it’s a statement that represents the film itself.”

Jangho wrote down the second title on the paper.

“The last one is ‘Classroom’. I quite liked the director’s eyes for poking where it hurts so plainly. There were many pieces that talked about controversial topics, but most of them were too emotionally biased and went nowhere because they thought that they had to solve the problem.”

‘Classroom’ was about something that seemed plausible. It was about bullying, which made the headlines pretty frequently these days. Perhaps because of that, a total of seventeen pieces talked about that same topic. However, other than ‘Classroom’, the other pieces did not capture the balance of the film properly.

“‘Classroom’ focused on getting that topic out there. The director must have good skill in setting up the structure. It didn’t talk about the problem and show the bad sides of it before ending it in an awkward note like the others. It actually puts the result of the bullying as well as the bullied student’s feelings on the sidelines when progressing with the story. It does show the pain of the character in the film at the beginning of the piece, but they didn’t dive into it too much. Many students made the mistake of keeping the bullied student within a cruel environment in the frame. Most of them forget that it gets pretty tiring quickly.”

The film director smiled bitterly. Jangho agreed with that. Continuing to show a scene of fingernails being ripped off in order to show the painful side might be shocking at first, but if it was repeated several times, it would eventually get boring. Sometimes, it was necessary to defocus on the topic that they wanted to show. ‘Classroom’ followed that method pretty well.

“The ending was good too, wasn’t it? It wasn’t the awkward ‘justice is served’ ending. The role of the victim and the bully was switched, but they made it sympathizable. They didn’t emphasize the concept of good and evil, and it seemed more like they were asking ‘who is responsible for all of this?’ by showing what happened in the classroom. Honestly, it hurt me a little. I’m a parent, but I never thought about the matter of bullying so seriously after all. Maybe it’s because I think that ‘my child is not involved in such a thing’ as the basis of my judgment,” said the film production CEO.

“The plot itself is rather cliché, but I liked the scene structure. It allowed the audience to see the maximum of the main character’s feelings. It might lack that freshness, but I liked how they dealt with

the topic as well as that mild ending. Of course, the acting was good too. The long take at the beginning made me think that it would have taken a long time to shoot.”

After hearing the drama writer’s words, the film director laughed and agreed. Jangho also thought about that scene. That kid, who ate some food without any fluctuation in emotion, was pretty impressive.

“His acting was really good.”

The film production CEO clicked his fingers. Jangho smiled in satisfaction without thinking. ‘Classroom’ was a film with one main character and many supporting characters, and the power of the lead character was pretty amazing. He has an absorption power that many talked about.

“Well then, let’s choose the grand prize among these three. This is just my opinion, but why don’t we give the two others the judge’s special prize?”

“Doesn’t sound bad. All three of them are worthy of prizes after all.”

Jangho picked up the piece of paper with the three titles.

“Then shall we decide on the grand prize now?”

* * *

Kim Dongwook was about to turn on the lighter for the cigarette in his mouth when he got a call, which made him put the cigarette on the back of his ear.

“Yes, president. You called at the perfect time. Yes, it’s been decided. I didn’t really need to do anything. It was on the list of grand prize candidates. Yes, just like that.”

Dongwook clicked his tongue as he thought about president Lee Junmin’s face which would be on the other side of the phone. Although the entertainment industry was now filled with words about how stars were not born but created, he didn’t know that people cared about a film festival organized by the city. When he was invited as a judge, he wondered what it was about, but he understood what it was about after getting a call from the president afterwards. It was Junmin who had put him in there. Dongwook was rather curious about what kind of methods he used, but he didn’t make the foolish decision of asking. A superior-subordinate relationship was the most ideal when both parties didn’t ask unnecessary questions.

“The ceremony will be in Myeongdong Artrex. Yes, then please have a good rest.”

Dongwook hung up before pushing the cigarette into the corner of his mouth.

“Man, South Korea is such a clean place.”

He puffed once. It was unknown whether the reason his mouth felt bitter was because of the cigarette or because of his underhanded actions. Only a newbie journalist would be able to differentiate between the two. Dongwook threw away the half-burnt cigarette and stepped on it to put it out.

Chapter 699

-The weather is still hot. Yesterday, I saw that it went as high as 28 degrees. Even this principal, who doesn't feel hot that often, is having a hard time, so I'm worried about all the students, wondering how hard it must be for them. It looks like October being the start of autumn is a thing of the old.

The principal, who was talking on the podium, had a look at his watch. At the same time, sighs of relief could be heard. The principal always looked at his watch before finishing his speech.

-Anyway, watch out for heat strokes. Studying is important, but the most important thing is your health, after all.

The principal nodded towards the headteacher standing next to him. The headteacher put his face close to the mic and spoke,

"Next, there will be an award ceremony. Would Woosung High's acting club please come forward."

Maru uttered a short breath before walking forward. The acting club, whose members were standing at the front of their respective classes[1], got out of their line and gathered in front of the platform.

"Don't screw up," he said to Aram who was going up the platform.

Since there were too many of them, only the representative would go up to receive the prize from the principal.

"But I guess we did get one before we graduated," Maru said to Daemyung.

"I feel really proud."

Daemyung was looking up at the platform with a blissful expression. Maru saw a hint of red in the corner of the gentle-looking eyes.

"Are you crying?"

"I'm not."

Although he was saying those words, Daemyung had turned his face away and was wiping his face with the back of his hand. It wasn't just Daemyung who had become emotional. There were many first-year juniors who were stomping their feet in nervousness and those whose noses were twitching. Monday to Sunday. Two months before the preliminaries, they started gathering every single day to practice. They practiced for a minimum of four hours and at least half a day on weekends. Their passion finally bore fruit. It was natural for them to get emotional.

-The following school has achieved splendid results in the National Youth Acting Competition that is organized by the National Theater Association and sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and the Ministry of Education and is awarded this commendation. October 2nd, 2005. Prime Minister Park Kwonho.

Aram received the certificate given to her by the principal. Having received it, Aram immediately turned around and waved the certificate above her head before cheering her lungs out.

"Oh geez."

Maru scratched his eyebrows as he looked at the rejoicing Aram and the principal who was holding his hand out awkwardly. Only the head teacher's awkward cough could be heard through the mic.

"It's the grand prize!"

Aram shouted towards the sports ground.

* * *

"The grand prize, huh. Must be nice."

Maru looked at Kang Sora who was sitting on the other side. She shouted 'seonbae' from afar, and she approached before sitting down after putting her food tray on the table.

"Don't you have any friends?" Maru asked.

"Do I look like that?"

"I'm just asking why you eat here every time you see us."

"Why do I need to get your permission to eat here? I'm a student here too."

Sora grinned sneakily.

"Also, I'm not coming here for you, seonbae, so don't take interest. If possible, block your ears too."

Maru turned to look at Daemyung. Only Daemyung knew why Sora came to the 3rd year electrical engineering class to eat. Daemyung, who met eyes with him, suddenly started to quickly finish his food before standing up. Sora also stuffed her mouth with food.

"I'm leaving first."

"Seonbae, I'm leaving first."

The two left first while talking.

"What the? Daemyung, did you switch your girlfriend? This must be the mystery of the century."

Dojin put down his spoon in disbelief. Maru just shrugged. He knew that these two were up to something together, but he didn't know what it was about. If he wanted to know, he was more than capable of finding out with little effort, but he was staying still since those two told him to stay out.

"Uhm, I just witnessed the ex? Or the current? Girlfriend, I think?"

Dojin pointed at Jiyeon who was standing at the entrance. She was locking arms with Aram while watching as Daemyung and Sora left the cafeteria. Maru put his chopsticks in his mouth and looked at the two alternately. He wondered if it would be better to tell them so that it didn't cause unnecessary misunderstandings.

Maru waved his hand at the members of the acting club who were looking for a place to sit down after getting their food. His classmates had all stood up after finishing lunch. The only one left was Dojin who remained behind due to curiosity.

"Well, if it isn't the club president who one-upped the principal this morning."

“Maru-seonbae, please don’t talk about that. Do you know how much of an earful I got from the headteacher? This was supposed to be a good day, but it was ruined.”

Aram sat down on the spot. Jiyoong sat next to her. Maru glanced at Dojin, who kept poking his side, before talking to Jiyoong.

“Uhm, Jiyoong.”

“Yes?”

Jiyoong was smiling as though her favorite side dish was on the menu, or perhaps it was due to lingering feelings from winning the grand prize. From the way there were no fluctuations in her emotions despite the fact that she saw Daemyung and Sora leave together, she seemed to know something as well.

“You know that Daemyung and Sora are preparing something together, right?”

Maru asked her in a roundabout way. He was planning to tell her that they were working together on something if she said she didn’t.

“Oh, they told me to keep it a secret from you,” she said cautiously.

As he had expected, Jiyoong also seemed to know that Daemyung and Sora were secretly working together.

“If you know, then it’s fine. I thought you might have been misunderstanding something.”

Jiyoong dazed out because she didn’t know what that meant, and when she realized, she shook her hand in the air and spoke,

“Daemyung-seonbae and I are still doing well together.”

“I know.”

“Okay... but who told you about it, seonbae? That they’re preparing a scenario. They told me to never tell you about it since it was a secret from you. How did you even find about it?”

Maru put on an awkward smile. He unintentionally found out what those two were up to. A scenario, huh. When he smiled and didn’t say anything, Jiyoong seemed to have noticed that something was wrong and spoke first,

“Did... you not know?”

“I only knew that they were up to something, but I didn’t know that it was a scenario they were working on. I didn’t mind it since they told me not to stick my nose in, but I guess I just found out.”

“I just made a mistake, didn’t I?”

Jiyoong widened her eyes in surprise and fell silent.

“Just pretend not to know anything. I’ll pretend not to know anything either. But since we’re on the topic, can you tell me what kind of scenario it is? I’ll forget about it afterwards.”

Jiyoong hesitated before speaking in a small voice,

"It's a film scenario. One with you as the main character."

"Me?"

"Yes. I don't know the details either. I think they called it a five-minute film? Anyway, they're working on a really short film scenario. Daemyung-seonbae told me beforehand that he might be spending a lot of time with Sora, so I knew about it."

"A film huh. Alright. Oh, as I said before, I will keep pretending that I don't know anything, so you don't have to worry about it either."

"Seonbae."

"Yeah?"

"Uhm... I don't have the confidence to lie..."

Haha - Jiyeon laughed awkwardly.

* * *

"That's the problem with you, seonbae. Why do you think a surprise is called a surprise? It's because the person in question doesn't know about it. Didn't I tell you back then? To just pretend to not know anything about it? You just don't have the patience, I tell you."

Maru pressed his fingers between his eyes as he listened to Sora's words. He felt like a woodpecker was pecking on his skull. Her sharp words made his ears hurt as well.

"I told you I'm sorry. I was so curious that I grilled Jiyeon about it. She seemed to be in the know."

"Poor Jiyeon-seonbae. That seonbae is really feeble and gentle, so she'll get hurt if an evil person like you pecks her for answers."

"I'm no bird. I don't peck. I just asked her what it was about in a gentle manner. Also, I'm not evil."

Sora raised her eyebrow. Maru stayed quiet. He was unnecessarily causing more trouble for himself.

"Sora, since it's like this, do you think we should get Maru's opinion as well?" Daemyung said from the side.

"Daemyung-seonbae. You are the father of this scenario. Are you saying that you are going to hand over your precious child to someone else?"

"N-no. It's not like that, I was just saying that maybe we could get a little of his input..."

"No! Solitude is important to a creator."

"But we're working together on this anyway..."

"I'm only working with you to write the script. The overall plot and structure of the play is only meaningful if you're the one who comes up with it. How many times do I have to tell you? Seonbae, you have the talent, and in order to make that talent blossom, you have to learn to clash against a blank piece of paper and to fight with it."

“S-sorry.”

He didn't do anything wrong, yet Daemyung apologized quickly. Maru understood how he felt. Being grilled like that would make anyone apologize regardless of their will.

“That's enough. Whether I know about it or not doesn't have a huge influence on your work, does it? Just do whatever you were doing. I'll just stay out of it.”

“It's over now. This is like preparing for a secret birthday party, but the person in question finds out and goes 'oh, you guys can go on'. It's disheartening and unmotivating. It's your responsibility, so you should treat us to something good.”

“Sora, you should definitely look into being an insurance saleswoman or selling things to oversea travelers. You should be able to earn hundreds of millions of won per year.”

Maru calmed Sora down by promising to treat her to dinner.

“But hey, you are pretty well-off. Do you really have to get food from me?”

“My mom always told me that getting cheap food from others is always better than getting expensive food for yourself.”

“What a good teaching at an early age.”

Maru sighed before looking at Daemyung.

“So you two were creating a five-minute short film because of what I said before?”

“Yeah. I thought that gathering like this would be difficult once we graduate. I wanted to try shooting a film with my scenario and your acting. The thing with the film production club also motivated me.”

“But you increased the time while you were doing it because you felt like 5 minutes was too short?”

“That hasn't completely been decided yet, but I think it'll be around 20 minutes.”

“You do know that a 20-minute short film is pretty hard, right?”

“I know. I heard it from Sora. She told me about how many times you guys had to move around.”

Sora, who was listening from the side, raised her chin upwards and snorted.

“For me, I'd love to do your scenario as long as I can fit it in the schedule. Since we're at it, what's the plot like? Is it based on the auto-biography-like novel that you were working on before?”

Daemyung shook his head.

“No, it's not that one. That one's not even complete yet.”

“Then what's it about?”

Daemyung looked at Sora. Sora nodded once.

"It came to me after watching your acting until now; I think you get absorbed when you handle negative emotions. The pains in life, should I call it? There's a sense of experience as well. That's when it came to me to write about something very sad, and I want you to do it."

"Something sad?"

"A sad love story. A bit cliché, isn't it?"

Daemyung looked down.

"Do you not have confidence in your story?"

"No, it's not like that."

"Then you shouldn't make a face like that as the original creator, especially in front of the actor you want to cast. Geez, I wonder if I can shoot in peace."

Only after hearing that, did Daemyung faintly smile.

"So scripted by Park Daemyung and produced by Kang Sora?"

"It's scripted by Park Daemyung and produced by both of us. I heard Daemyung-seonbae was also an aspiring producer, wasn't he? That's why we decided to do it together. Oh, I guess it's sponsored by Kang Sora. I am in charge of the equipment and the food."

"The rich sure are different."

"That's basic."

Maru looked at the two alternately. Did he pursue something passionately when he was at that age? Striving towards a concrete objective, for some reason, made Maru feel proud of the two.

"Wait a sec."

Sora took out her phone. After parroting 'yes' for a while, she widened her eyes as she hung up.

"What made you so surprised?"

"Uhm, Maru-seonbae."

"What?"

"Let me pinch your cheeks for a sec, okay?"

After saying that, she suddenly approached and grabbed his chin. Maru groaned because of the sharp pain. After pinching ruthlessly, Sora asked,

"Seonbae. Did that hurt?"

"Get your cheek over here. I'll let you find out."

"So it does hurt, huh? Then it must not be a dream, right?"

"Do you think it's a dream? Just what was it about?"

“Uhm, the thing is...”

Her voice, which always sounded bold, was shaky for some reason. She clasped her hands and licked her lips before speaking in a dazed manner,

“We’ve been invited to an award ceremony. It’s the grand prize.”

Chapter 700

“Here, have a drink.”

Dongwook tilted the soju bottle.

Park Taeho, who had put his soju glass at the tip, got the bottle from him before pouring him a glass in return.

“Never knew there would come a day where I would drink with a celebrity like this. Looks like I should try buying a lottery on the way home. If I win 1st prize, I’ll give you 10 million.”

Taeho laughed before replying,

“But don’t you have a lot of places like this as a journalist?”

“That’s for the journalists who have actually made a name for themselves. A shabby journalist like me would get rejected at the manager level. Here, let’s toast.”

The soju glasses clashed and produced a crisp sound. This barbecue restaurant in Seongsu-dong was apparently one that Taeho was a regular at. Thanks to that, the owner gave them a private room in the back. Dongwook couldn’t begin to imagine how many people would gather if Park Taeho started grilling meat in the main hall. All the people in the neighborhood would at least gather.

For a while, they talked about the lives they led as they drank. Taeho was the first one to talk about his younger days, and Dongwook also talked about his high school days, when he was a goody-two-shoes, and they laughed about it.

When they emptied a bottle, Taeho switched the topic.

“Did Junmin hyung-nim call me here?”

Dongwook, who was chewing a piece of meat with ssam-jang pasted over it, stopped after hearing those words. The scent of garlic inside his mouth felt like it was being amplified. Dongwook slowly chewed and swallowed the food in his mouth. While eating, he thought about three ways to counter that argument.

“I don’t understand what you mean...”

“You don’t need to be so wary. I’m not here to talk about who did wrong nor morals and things like that. I’m just purely curious.”

“Sounds like you are acquainted with president Lee Junmin. Am I right?”

“We’re like brothers. We’ve seen each other for a long time too. Also, I’ll soon be a member of the same household as you, journalist.”

“Does that mean that you’re signing an exclusive contract with JA?”

“Yes. I believe that hyung-nim will probably tell you about it soon.”

Taeho picked up the soju bottle. Dongwook smiled without letting down his guard as he accepted another glass.

“I was quite surprised when I first met you. There was a journalist belonging to JA among the judges. At the same time, one thought came to mind. Ah, that hyung-nim might have used his powers here too.”

“You’re overthinking. Prizes for snot-nosed brats are not that important.”

“Really? When he found out that I was invited as a judge, he immediately told me this: a high school student who shot the same work as you has applied for the film festival. Have a look and if it’s on par with the others, I want you to push him forward.”

Dongwook rubbed his nose. They were the exact same words that Junmin told him, word for word. When he first heard that he was going to be a judge for the festival, he thought that he was going to be told to push Maru’s piece unconditionally, but the reality was slightly different. He was told that, if he thought that it was worth the prize and wasn’t that different from the other pieces, he was to support the piece that Maru was in.

“Can I make a call?”

“No, you don’t have to do that.”

Dongwook was soon able to realize what Taeho meant by those words. Someone outside said that a guest had arrived before the door opened and Junmin and the drama writer came in. Dongwook had a look at Junmin with a flabbergasted expression before looking at the drama writer following behind him. She also looked rather surprised. It was clear that she came here without anything being explained to her.

“Looks like you two were up to something interesting.”

Junmin took off his top hat before sitting down next to Taeho. The drama writer looked around before sitting next to Dongwook.

“Uhm, president? Forgive me for being stupid, but I don’t really understand what’s going on right now.”

He already had a hypothesis that would explain everything in his mind, but he wanted to get a clear answer from the person himself.

“It is indeed what you’re thinking about right now, Dongwook.”

Dongwook laughed.

“Then the drama writer too?”

“She listened to a favor of mine that’s not so much of a favor.”

The drama writer interjected immediately,

"I never got any favors. I just heard that perhaps I should focus on a piece that handles controversial topics these days."

Dongwook faintly smiled before speaking in a small voice,

"I wonder why someone like that is here, then, eh?"

The drama writer didn't say anything. Her face had turned red as though she had downed half a bottle of soju already.

"Why are you being so nasty when we're here to make friends? Taeho, you seem like you've lost weight these days?"

"I should get ready for my next piece. A certain agency president told me that a contract was a no-go if I lost value."

"What a cruel man that is. I wonder who can say such a thing to the actor that many look up to within the country."

"You tell me. Maybe it's because he lives with ugly dogs and without getting married despite being in his fifties that he's really narrow-minded."

Dongwook, who was listening to the conversation, couldn't help but flinch when he heard that. The man living with dogs in his fifties that Taeho talked about was none other than Junmin. He had kinda expected things to happen when he saw the two greet each other, but he didn't know that the two were this close.

"Why does your mouth get even more merciless as the years pass?"

"This is all because of your influence, hyung-nim. You should've shown your little brother good things so that he could have learned those things from you."

"Fine, this is all because I'm not good enough. Oh, you don't need any introduction, right? This is Park Taeho and Kim Dongwook. And this is writer Lee Sinae. Thank you all for the film assessment. You must be hungry, so let's get to eating first. Though, the two that were here before us seem like they had a meal already."

Dongwook shrugged and put down the soju bottle on the table. Had he known that the president was coming, he wouldn't have eaten anything without him.

"It might be a little uncomfortable for you, writer Lee," Junmin said softly.

Sinae, who looked like a resident who had missed paying rent, immediately changed her face to a lofty expression before speaking,

"Not at all. These things are quite common in life, aren't they?"

"As expected of writer Lee. You're just the kind of person I thought you were."

Sinae faintly smiled when she heard the slight praise. Seeing that, Dongwook inwardly clicked his tongue. Junmin had completely understood this woman named Lee Sinae. He made her unable to leave

by touching on her pride. Scolding her after getting her excited. What was amazing about Junmin was probably that tongue of his, rather than his business practices.

Some drinks made rounds. The atmosphere became heated, and people talked about all sorts of things ever since Lee Sinae put down her guard. Dongwook pulled his glass backwards when he felt like he was getting slightly drunk. While he loved getting drunk in a pleasant atmosphere, he despised being consumed by alcohol.

“Just what is an opportunity, do you think?”

There was only one person here that Junmin would use polite speech to. Sinae, who wiped her mouth with some napkins, spoke,

“An opportunity is what it says, an opportunity. Luck? Fortune? Well, those can be other names for it.”

“I think so too. Then what are the characteristics of those that grab opportunities?”

“Either they are lucky, fortunate, or maybe prepared. Opportunity avoids stupid people because it has eyes.”

“You’re right. Opportunity is discerning and does not show itself to people who look like they wouldn’t be able to make any use of it. But you know? Since opportunity has a factor of luck involved, there definitely are cases where it goes to people who are completely clueless and get consumed without any meaning.”

Sinae slapped the table and agreed.

“Right. I was like that. There are two works rotting in my cabinet because of the trash working at public TV stations who don’t know their value. What good is winning money in competitions? It simply won’t get used. But I can’t give them to somewhere else either. It drives me crazy. Those pieces of trash don’t know the opportunity when they see it. They just don’t realize that my golden writing is an opportunity for them.”

“Right. That’s why opportunity must go to the right people, to the capable people, and to the people who are ready to grab it.”

“You’re right.”

“In that sense, how was it? Was the piece titled ‘Classroom’ worthy of the grand prize?”

Sinae smiled mockingly.

“It was a rather bland one, but well, it was decent among the applicants. Of course, it is true that I gave it a better look since you told me that you’d look out for me.”

Dongwook looked at Junmin as he heard her speak. Junmin was shaking his head.

“Writer Lee Sinae, what do you mean by that?”

“Eh?”

“That sounds like I asked you to do a personal favor. Did I make you commit fraud?”

Junmin looked at Sinae with a smile. Sinae's slightly loose eyes suddenly turned nervous with a slight spasm. Dongwook understood the reason why the president suddenly talked about such things.

"I just told you that you should give the prize to a fitting work, did I not?"

"Ah, yes. You did. You definitely said that."

Dongwook saw Sinae's eyes looking down. She put down her pride in an instant, like a dog putting down its tail, and showed submission.

Dongwook quietly poured himself a drink before drinking it. Exposed to sudden authority, she should have thought about her own state, compared her position to his, and going further, thought about what would happen in the future. As she was someone who made a living on writing, she should be smart enough to understand what Junmin wanted to say as well as the atmosphere that was tightening in towards her.

"Anyone has the potential. There can be an infinite number of stars. It's just a difference of who supports who. Of course, not everything goes the way people expect, but some people can at least pave the road for others."

Junmin grabbed the bottle of soju with both of his hands before offering Sinae some. Sinae grabbed her glass with both of her hands as well.

"You should drink less in the future. Let this be your last one for today."

"Yes, I think I should."

"I will talk to you later about the things I said before."

Sinae nodded before drinking.

* * *

Junmin and Sinae left. It hadn't even been an hour since they came here. Dongwook looked at the glasses that Junmin and Sinae left behind.

"Today, I realized that not anyone can take the title of 'bigshot' in an industry."

"He might look like that, but he's very cautious, so he doesn't do risky things. Well, this was quite unexpected though. Perhaps he might have decided to give him proper support," Taeho said.

"Well, it's not that surprising. He's someone the president brought with that absurd contract after all."

"Oh, you mean that 300 million thing?"

"Yes. No matter how much money he has, 300 million is definitely not a sum he can chuck around like that. Yet, he did. He also signed on a napkin. When I first heard that, I thought it was a joke, but it turned out to be true."

"Hyung-nim told me that he's worth guiding since he's someone who'll do well by himself. I think he's planning to support him properly once he graduates."

"Looks like he's planning on a two-top formation with him and Yoo Sooil."

“Maybe. I can never understand what he’s thinking though.”

“Whether it’s you or me, we both have a tremendous person as a superior, huh.”

“If you get to know him, there’s a pure side to him too. Especially when it comes to love.”

“Love?”

“Yes, first love. He hasn't gotten married at his age because he couldn't forget about his first love. How does that even make sense? Of course, this is a secret from him. He gets mad when others tell him that.”

That president? Getting mad? Dongwook laughed out loud.

“Anyway, journalist Kim. Let’s get along as people from the same agency in the future.”

“Yes, actor Park.”

Dongwook emptied his glass before speaking,

“But hey, do you think I passed the loyalty test?”

Hearing that, Taeho just smiled. Dongwook did not ask him for answers. That smile was enough. Dongwook first came across the president because he was discovered while digging into JA. Back then, Junmin said that he was just checking his skill. This time, he was probably checking on his tongue. He probably didn’t need a tongue that said what should not be said.

“Geez, it’s really hard to gain his trust.”

“He’s someone who even suspects himself. Don’t worry about it too much.”

“Yeah. It’s fine as long as I get my salary on time.”

He toasted with Taeho as he thought about a junior who was pursuing an event for over a year now. Dongwook tilted the glass against his mouth while thinking that the ink must be expensive for a pen that writes down the truth.