

Once Again 711

Chapter 711

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“I-I just wanted to tell you that you are amazing. I definitely didn’t plan on mocking you.”

“But it sounded like you were mocking me.”

Yuna’s eyes looked like they were spitting out fire. Maru raised his concentration. The wave of emotions that Yuna showed was not the shallow one that started off near the beaches, but a giant one that started in the deep sea. If he got swept up, he would lose his balance and would become busy trying to pour out his acts in a busy manner. In order to not let that happen, Maru had to adjust the speed himself. Since she changed her way of acting on such short notice, Yuna probably couldn’t control herself fully. He had to provide her with a guideline to lead her bloated emotions down the right path. He prioritized that for the moment.

He slowly guided her with the experience he had gained from coaching his juniors at the acting club, but as Yuna’s pure breadth of emotions was too wide, Maru’s own mental consumption was considerable as well.

He had to control his own acting while observing himself through an objective eye, and at the same time, he had to watch out for Yuna’s expressions and body language in order to decide on the overall pacing of the scene.

-I think we should bring her out a little more here.

The masked man had spoken. Maru quickly checked if the masked man’s advice was suitable or not before taking action. The times when he didn’t have a line and used just his emotions to act was the time he discussed with the masked man. Controlling himself perfectly consumed too much energy, and it was impossible to look after Yuna as well with just his own power. In that sense, the masked man’s advice was precise and clear. Maru thought that he was above him in the facet of acting by several levels.

-To put it simply, this lady has a really deep well. If given the opportunity, she might be able to cry all day or laugh all day. Of course, she’s a person as well, so she should eventually tire herself out, but as long as she is given enough rest from time to time, she will recover incredibly quickly. People’s talents are really different and come in all sorts of forms. It’s just a matter of whether they can discover it and use it properly.

Maru agreed with those words. If he himself acted like Yuna did, he would have a hard time digesting just one scene. Maximizing one’s emotions all the time wasn’t something easy. Even athletes with the biggest lung capacity were bound to run out of energy if they kept sprinting, yet Yuna kept running like a person with three or four lungs. As envious as Maru was, he didn’t long for such a talent. It was a talent that did not suit his acting methods. Yuna probably didn’t take any damage to her own emotions, even if she amplified the emotions of the character like a balloon, because she was someone who could be

extremely honest with herself. That was something he couldn't imitate, so there was no need to be greedy for something like that.

"I didn't... mean to mock you."

He split up his line so that Yuna could find the right speed. While Yuna acted like an onrush of waves, she wasn't just spending emotions without reason. She was quick to catch on when Maru gave her the hints. Yuna took a breather before continuing her line.

"Okay, fine. I get it."

Yuna started taking back the overflowing emotions. It was at that time that Ganghwan gave them a bowl of udon to continue the situation. Maru was inwardly very impressed. Ganghwan, who received the act at just the right time, when the emotional depth was just the right, was definitely one of the best actors.

"It's hot, so be careful."

"Thank you," Maru said first.

Following the script, Yuna spoke a moment later. A script would never indicate when to speak or take action. Hurriedly, urgently, leisurely, slowly - words like these that indicated the speed would show up from time to time, but it was up to the actor to decide how long he or she should take to do one line or one action. Even a simple conversation would feel incredibly different according to how much time they put in between the lines. Ganghwan went over to the next act before Yuna sidetracked. If he was just a little quicker, Yuna would have stood out from the scene with her remnant emotions, and if he was too late, it would have been awkward and the director would have jumped in.

"Thank you," Yuna replied as she looked at the bowl of udon.

Ever since she no longer restrained her emotions and instead started to project them, her expressions became really plentiful. Even now, her face melted down from a frosty one to a faintly happy one. Maru made a faint smile. While it was the smile belonging to the 'Park Haejoon' in the story, it was also 'Han Maru's' honest emotions towards the junior that followed without getting tired.

"Cut, okay! Let's flip the camera around and do that one again. The mood is good, so please hurry up."

Jayeon's voice could be heard. Yuna put down her chopsticks while relaxing her shoulders.

"Is it hard?" Maru asked.

She nodded.

"I think this is the first time I've been so focused. I'm even more nervous than when I was doing a play."

"There are a lot of eyes on us. The camera lens especially exudes quite a big pressure."

"Yeah. I feel really iffy because it feels like a giant eye is staring at me, and I can't entirely be unconscious of it either."

"I feel like my soul is being sucked out too," Ganghwan said as he sat down on the plastic chair. While he was someone who was used to people's eyes on him, it seemed that the stiff 'gaze' of the camera was something he had not gotten used to yet.

“You should cause some NGs. I want to rest a little too,” Ganghwan said while stretching his arms out.

Maru looked at the camera which was now placed on his right. As this scene was going to be taken from the side, Ganghwan wouldn't be in the scene.

“If you're ready, let's start right away.”

Jayeon clapped and asked everyone to move quickly. It seemed that she didn't want the atmosphere to relax. Maru took a glance at the camera director standing next to him before he immersed himself in acting. He got his emotions together and reminded himself of the nature of the character that he analyzed and grabbed the bowl with both of his hands. There was no need to say that he was ready. Jayeon was very good at discerning the state of the actors.

“Three, two, one... cue.”

Maru picked up his chopsticks and ate some noodles. As he pushed the udon into his mouth with slightly hurried movements, he looked towards the side. Yuna, who was not in the camera angle, was using her chopsticks on an empty bowl. She was probably practicing in order to help him out.

He met eyes with Yuna as well as Ganghwan who was yawning right in front of him. This was the difference between acting in front of a camera and acting on a stage. In a play, all the actors would have their concentration up at every moment while they were on the limited space known as the stage, but in front of a camera, there were cases where only the actor in the camera frame was focusing on acting.

It would be a lot easier for the actors if the other actors around them set the mood up for them, but continuously doing that was practically impossible. While plays had a limited run time of one or two hours, the same wasn't true for dramas. A drama shoot would continue late into the night if they couldn't digest their full schedule. Not to mention the staff, the actors had to save up energy, so actors who weren't even in the camera frame could not possibly act with passion. They had to do their own acting regardless of whether the others were yawning or using chopsticks in empty air.

Before tasting the sweetness of first love, what would Park Haejoon's state be like? Among the core elements that made up Park Haejoon, Maru brought out 'nervousness' and 'worry'. By nature, the character known as Park Haejoon could not be enthusiastic towards women even if it was a girl from his class. What would he feel when he looked at a classmate acting really cold towards him? It definitely wouldn't be something like pity. Park Haejoon was an awkward boy who couldn't even go that far.

A sense of excitement towards the unknown as well as a bit of admiration. It was probably at that level for now. As the word love was unfamiliar to him, he would always act cautious and be ready to run away at any time, but in a corner of his heart, he would have tiny hopes while continuing to just eat the udon quietly without stopping the distance from getting further.

His brain reached the conclusion of the analysis instantly. The masked man talked to him, saying that he wanted to fall deep into the character, but Maru had no plans on letting the man take over. What he needed right now was a variety of experiences. It would be better if it was a first-hand experience as well. He would toss the baton over if he was in a situation that he couldn't solve himself, but until then, he planned to have full control.

The more characters he experienced and the more acting patterns he gained, the easier it would become for him to combine various different elements to come up with something new. Even trivial acting was precious data. If he could engrave his actions into his mind, he would become even better when he came across a situation where he played a similar character.

He picked up his bowl and drank the broth. The camera standing two meters away from him caught his eyes, but his consciousness erased the camera calmly. In a state of complete self-understanding, he even had the space around him under the domain of his consciousness. It felt like the 'camera' that looked at Han Maru, the individual, had fallen back to capture everything around. The objects in his vision didn't disappear into the depths of short-term memory but remained in his mind as though he had memorized them. This increased his fatigue, but it definitely helped him out with the details.

The moment he put down the bowl, Maru heaved out a deep breath. He had put a surprising amount of focus into that act. He felt like the stage where the masked man was, had popped out into real life. He gained the strange confidence that he would be able to do anything in this space. If given enough time, he might be able to find out what his partnering actor would want him to do.

This would be useless when he acted by himself, but if synchronization with the partner was important, he felt like he could get some use out of it. If he could discern the partnering actor's advantages and disadvantages and then adapt real-time, he himself would become better as well. Not to mention, he would be able to go home early.

"Seonbae, are you hot?" Yuna asked as she gave him some napkins.

Maru accepted the napkins and wiped his forehead. He had sweated quite a bit.

"It's not that hot. Yuna, is my makeup okay?"

"Yes. Nothing smudged."

Maru shook his hair off slightly before picking up his script. He compared the things he wrote down about the character beforehand as well as the things he felt while acting and started tuning it. The character kept generating new information as he continued acting with the other actors. Although the character had a set frame thanks to the script and the scenario, they were never static. If the actors became lazy and took their eyes off the character, they would eventually find themselves in a situation where they were the ones acting, but also the ones finding themselves to be awkward. The reason even the best actors sometimes got caught up in an 'unskilled actor' controversy was not because they lacked skill, but because they had become complacent after getting used to the character.

In order to not make such mistakes, actors could not relax their tension. The only time they could let their guards down and rest is at the end-of-series party.

But where did he hear about all this? Maru found the thoughts that came to his mind curious. These thoughts were something he had never learned or heard of before, but they still naturally came to his mind as though he had learned them already.

Maru sought the masked man.

Did the masked man tell him that while he wasn't conscious of it?

The masked man did not answer. Instead, there was laughter that sounded like air escaping a vent. To Maru, the laughter seemed to contain a vow to never have hopes again.

Chapter 712

Koo Ando was the president of the film production club. Last year, the film production club was closer to being a film appreciation club, but ever since Kang Sora entered as a new member, they changed lanes. The scene of the members eating snacks in the clubroom had disappeared, and they were now a club where they passionately put their efforts into creating a film even over the weekend.

It was a little bit of a pity that he could no longer see the cozy film production club of before, but he didn't regret it because seeing the film production club trying their best to make a film wasn't so bad. The clubroom had become a lot more bustling than before, and their activity was at an all-time high. The club was colored in a different color from before, and it would become a magnificent memory for the members in the future.

At least that was what he thought until this morning. He smiled in satisfaction as he looked at the photo that they shot with everyone in it on the last day of shooting 'Classroom'. He thought that the experience was really fun and worthwhile.

"Seonbae. I don't think this is right."

Ando felt his lips twitching. This junior had barged into his house at 10 a.m. in the morning on a Sunday and had managed to buy his parents' goodwill with her smile. He could see the members of the film production club and some of the acting club smiling on his phone screen. To hell with good memories. It had only been two months, but his brain had already started beautifying those events. He remembered the hard times when he had been pushed around here and there and had no days to rest because of the tight schedule that the film director had set up. It wasn't that he was dissatisfied with everything. There definitely were moments of glee, happiness, and pride. The problem was that 80% of the time, it was exhausting.

"Are these all the clothes you have?"

His brain, which had been slowly beautifying those moments, was currently reminding him of the pains and was shouting at him to get out of this place as soon as possible. Ando glanced at the door. This was his room, and he didn't know why he couldn't act, but he felt like he would feel really happy if he could leave this place.

Just then, the door opened 3 seconds after a knocking sound. The one who opened the door was his mother. Ando blinked in confusion. His mother, who had never learned to knock during his lifetime, had quietly knocked and even took out the pretty plates that she never used and had placed them at the top of the cupboard to bring some fruits and snacks.

"Ma'am, you don't have to do this."

Sora, who was just going hard on him about how he didn't have any decent clothes to wear to the award ceremony, had changed her personality and approached his mother. It was that smile. It was that evil smile that made his mother say 'what a polite girl' and 'you should come over more frequently' within 3 minutes even though a complete stranger had barged in on a Sunday at 10 a.m. This junior shouldn't

have played the role of the director. She should have been an actress. Her act could probably sweep all the acting awards out there.

“Sora, was it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Is it true that my child is getting an award?”

“Of course. Ando-seonbae was the camera director.”

“Director?”

“Yes. It’s not a small prize that the school gives you; it is something that’s given by Seoul’s City Hall itself. And the grand prize that we’re getting is something that is given after a decision made by experts in many different areas so it has a completely different meaning.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It is. If it wasn’t for him, we wouldn’t have been able to get the grand prize. He really worked hard after all. Other people were impressed by his efforts and did their best too.”

Ando felt rather queasy about his mother’s eyes. She was clasping her hands and nodding as though she had finally realized her son’s true worth. He couldn’t possibly say that he did everything on the girl’s orders and that everything she was saying was an exaggeration. The only thing he could do was to avoid her gaze with an awkward smile on his face.

“I was wondering what was happening when he kept coming back from school late at night. So he was shooting a film.”

“Didn’t he tell you about it?”

“Do you think boys would tell me things like that? Before, he would tell me about bugs he saw at school in excitement too.”

“That just goes to show that he grew up and became a man. I mean, he’s quite reliable, isn’t he? You must feel proud.”

There had to be someplace to hide in his house.... If possible, Ando wanted to break the window next to his bed like a scene from an espionage movie and leave this place. If his house was not on the 5th floor, and if his window didn’t have anti-theft fences, he might have tried.

“Then take your time here.”

“I want to do that too, but today’s the award ceremony.”

“Ah, right. You said you were here to pick him up. Sora, please take care of our boy.”

“Of course, ma’am. In fact, he would take care of me. His leadership is outstanding.”

Leadership, he had heard that word used to describe him for the first time in his life today. Ando lowered his head as he listened to the mysterious ‘Mr. Koo Ando’ that was being created by the mouths

of the two women. Given more time, they might even talk about how Koo Ando created heaven and earth. This girl was more than capable of doing that.

Finally, the door closed. It was a short time that wasn't even 10 minutes long, but Ando felt exhausted. He remembered when he forgot to hang out his clothes to dry for a night and when he opened the washing machine the next day. He felt like his current state was a little like the crumpled clothes inside it.

"We're going to take a photo too when we're there, you know?"

"I can just wear this."

Ando pointed at the t-shirt that he frequently wore to school.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because getting a photo taken while wearing a horribly stretched-out t-shirt is bad. I guess I can't help it. Let's go for now."

Sora folded the clothes that had been taken out.

"What about the clothes?"

"We will buy them outside."

"Right now?"

"Why do you think I came here so early? The award ceremony is at 2, so we still have time. We should go to a clothing store and get some clothes before meeting up with Maru-seonbae."

Who's paying for it? - before he could even say those words, he saw Sora take out a credit card.

"Interest-free installment over 5 months. You can pay me back in February, when you graduate."

Ando reached out and grabbed his t-shirt.

"I'm just going to wear this."

However, it was a meaningless resistance. He lost strength in his hands even though all Sora did was stare at him. Ando sighed and stood up.

"Get yourself together, camera director," Sora said as she opened the door.

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Maru looked at his watch. It was 2 minutes past 12. It was the time of the appointment. He looked at the ticket barrier as he grabbed a fish cake skewer in a store inside Yeongdeungpo station. If they were coming from Suwon, they should come out from there.

We'll be visiting some shops before we meet up with you - these were Sora's words from when she called. Before he could ask what that was about, he could hear Ando's stretched-out voice. Maru could picture what happened so he hung up without asking for details.

“Maru-seonbae!”

He saw Sora waving her hand as she walked out of the ticket barrier. Behind her was Ando wearing neat clothes. He always wore a t-shirt and khaki-colored pants, but he was wearing gray-toned clothes today. He had also waxed his hair.

“I knew I didn’t need to worry about you.”

Sora scanned him from top to bottom in satisfaction. He took out a suit that he bought before when he heard that he was going to an award ceremony, but he instead decided to wear a plain cardigan that looked okay to be worn in autumn since the suit looked a little too un-student-like. He did have a sweater he liked, but the weather was still too warm to wear that.

“Koo Ando, you’ve become handsome,” Maru said.

The gray shirt suited him because he was skinny. Ando rubbed his eyebrows and spoke,

“I can’t get used to this. Also, do I really need to do up all the buttons?”

He was used to wearing baggy t-shirts, so it seemed that a shirt that fit him tightly was too awkward for him. He kept touching his face as he looked at the mirror in the restaurant, and he even touched his hair from time to time, but whenever he did that, Sora scolded him to stay still. She looked like a big sister taking care of an immature little brother.

“Why don’t we have lunch and take it slow?” Sora said.

They left the station and followed Sora. She had no hesitation as though she had done her research beforehand. The place they arrived at was a well-known rice noodle restaurant.

“Both of you said you were okay with it the last time I asked, right?”

Maru nodded. He remembered how Sora asked him about this in passing. She really cared about the details as always.

They sat at a table and ordered some dishes.

“Maru-seonbae, I heard that you were shooting another drama these days, right?” Sora asked.

“It’s a mini-series. I was lucky enough to get into it.”

“You must be busy then. Don’t you have a shoot today?”

“Fortunately, there isn’t one today. Also, Ando, give it up now. If you mess up your hair, Sora will nag you about it for the rest of the day.”

Ando, who was touching his hair carefully, looked at Sora with blank eyes. Sora nodded. Ando made a bitter smile and placed his hand obediently on the table.

“I said it suits you.”

“I find it strange.”

“You should make yourself look good, you know? We live in an era where men wear makeup.”

“For celebrities, maybe. Hey, Han Maru, were you interested in things like fashion before you were an actor?”

Maru shook his head at Ando’s question. He lightly ignored Ando’s plea to side with him.

“Don’t regret it when you go to college and learn from her right now. You’ll thank her one day.”

“College is college. If I think about how six months of my salary was spent on this, I feel really sad,” Ando said as he grabbed his shirt.

Not long later, they got their food. As Maru had a lot of udon while shooting the mini-series, he groaned slightly when he saw noodles.

“Maru-seonbae.”

“What is it?”

“How many episodes is the mini-series you’re doing?”

“Four.”

“Then when do you finish your shoot?”

“It depends, but I think it will be around late October to early November.”

“Today’s the 6th of October, so you have around 3 weeks, huh? You’re shooting all four episodes in one month?”

“Usually, when it comes to mini-series, you get about 15 minutes of runtime if you shoot the whole day. But in our case, we don’t have any off-site shoots and do all our shoots in Seoul, so it will take shorter than normal. A full week of tight shooting might be able to get us 2 episodes.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable.”

“I hear about it during the shoot all the time. I just have to listen closely to find out generally about what is happening from the staff.”

“I’ve seen a drama about TV stations before, right? The actors there were treated like kings. But it looks like reality is different, huh?”

“There are actors who do get that treatment. It depends on the actor and the shooting location. But why are you asking all this?”

“Because I’m curious. Though, the most important thing I wanted to ask is whether you have time during the winter holidays.”

“Winter holidays?”

“We’re gonna shoot, of course. With Ando-seonbae too.”

Ando, who was eating the cilantro and the noodles together in delight, suddenly looked at Sora with a sour expression. His entire face seemed to be asking ‘what the heck does that mean?’.

“We can’t help it if something happens at that time, but if possible, give us some time. The scenario that Daemyung-seonbae wrote is almost complete.”

Now he understood why she asked about his schedule. Maru stirred the noodles and spoke,

“I don’t 100% plan on participating.”

“I know, but you are going to if you find it interesting, right?”

“Yep. But how is it? I mean, you should have a grasp of it if you worked on it so much.”

Sora tapped on the table and spoke,

“It’s good enough to make me confident that you’ll do it.”

“Then I guess you shouldn’t worry about it.”

Ando, who had been just listening this whole time, suddenly interrupted the conversation and asked what this was all about.

“What do you mean, what is this all about? It means that you’re going to have to work with us and the camera throughout the winter holidays.”

“Says who?”

“If you do, I’ll waive the cost for the clothes.”

Maru clearly saw that Ando had glee on his face for a brief moment. It seemed that the clothes he was wearing were pretty expensive.

“I’ll help out. I should have plenty of time.”

Whether that was acceptance of the request or the acceptance of his fate, only he knew. In any case, Ando came to a decision pretty easily.

“But what are you going to do about college, Maru-seonbae? I don’t think you did enough studying.”

“I decided on the thing I wanted to do, so I don’t plan to go to one. If I want to do so later, I will look into it then.”

“Well, that’s true. I heard that famous actors are invited by universities. Or, they just get admitted through donations.”

“That’s for the famous ones. Ando, you’re taking CSATs, right?”

The answer came from Sora instead,

“Ando-seonbae is super leisurely because he passed the non-regular admission already. Isn’t that right, seonbae?”

Ando avoided her gaze, saying that he was busy in his own way.

“No, you aren’t busy. Since we’re at it, come meet me and Daemyung-seonbae tomorrow. And come with us to scout locations.”

“Why should I?”

“Just come with us.”

Maru stared at the two quarreling before eating the slightly bloated noodles. There was an hour until the award ceremony.

Chapter 713

“Hey, why are we the only people going there?” Ando asked.

Sora, who was walking ahead, turned her head around slightly and spoke,

“Because only two people other than the director are allowed to attend. Apparently, the award ceremony is done alongside premières for some films in a theater.”

“Then you should’ve called someone else. You know, like that friend of yours who helped out or one of the actors. They should have wanted to come.”

“I did ask.”

“Really?”

“Think about it. How many people do you think are willing to spend morning till afternoon at an obviously boring award ceremony hosted by the City Hall, on a Sunday of all days?” Sora said.

If Sora hadn’t barged in in the morning, he would also have made an excuse and would not have gone to it. He got admitted to college already, so he had zero interest in spending a ‘full’ weekend. He wanted to become one with his bed.

“That’s why you were picked.”

“What about my opinion?”

“You should sacrifice yourself for the juniors at a time like this. Do you think I’m doing this because I want to?”

For someone who was unwilling to go, Sora was grinning like a child the night before a picnic. That wasn’t the kind of expression someone who was forced to go would make. Ando was very willing to nitpick with her, but after seeing Sora’s bright smile, he felt his energy draining. He sighed before looking at Maru.

“Then you were dragged here as well?”

“No, I was asked by her if I could go with her the day she got the call to come to the award ceremony.”

Someone was asked, and someone was dragged. It wasn’t probably just him that thought that the treatment was different.

Ando stared at Sora. She chuckled and fidgeted.

“Fine, I’m easy for you huh. That’s right, I’m easy....”

“Ando-seonbae. What’s good is good, isn’t it? If not for a day like this, when else would we get to go to something like an award ceremony? For Maru-seonbae, he might be able to attend the Daejong awards and things like that in the future, but this might be our last chance, you know? Or what, do you hate me that much? Do you dislike me because I nagged you to come with me since morning?”

Ando was flustered now that a smiling girl was suddenly looking dejected. He tried to look for Maru to help, but he had become distant already.

“No, it’s not like that. I was planning to go as well, but it just surprised me because you came over so suddenly.”

“What were you planning to wear if I didn’t come over?”

Sora had asked with a scolding look. Ando replied while stuttering,

“The things I usually wear... I mean, those clothes aren’t that strange, are they? They might be a little dated, but I find them comfortable.”

“The things you’re wearing now vs that stretched-out t-shirt at home. Which one do you honestly think is better?”

Ando looked at his reflection in the glass on the building next to him. When he just changed his clothes at the clothing store, he felt really embarrassed as though he had become butt-naked, but now that he was used to it, his neat hair and clothes really did look quite cool.

“I guess this one is better.”

“Then did I do well going over or not?”

“You did well...I guess?”

“Then were you in the wrong or not when you said that earlier to me?”

Probably in the wrong - he replied, feeling like he was being driven to the edge of a cliff. Sora, who looked like she was about to cry at any moment, instantly changed her expression. It was the same face she made when she was pondering over which clothes were better back at the clothing store.

“Then as an apology, you should hold the camera during the winter holidays.”

So it comes back to this - Ando sighed as he nodded.

“Looks like you should just obediently follow Sora,” said Maru, who was far ahead of them just until a few moments ago.

Maybe there wasn’t anyone on his side here - Ando thought.

“Anyway, I’m looking forward to working with you over the holidays too, seonbae,” Sora said with a smile.

For some reason, Ando thought that her teeth were really straight as he looked at her. It would be great if her personality was neat just like her teeth - he thought, but it was too late.

“I think it’s over there.”

Sora pointed. Ando followed her finger. On a building that was fully covered with glass, he saw a banner that was hung vertically. The words 'The 1st Seoul Youth Film Festival' were fluttering in the wind.

* * *

"We're going to do the award ceremony after the première ends, and you just have to come down these stairs. We're going to call you by the order you're sitting, so if the person next to you stands up, you should get ready. Also, Miss Kang Sora?"

Hearing the guide's call, Sora raised her hand.

"Photos will be taken when the grand prize is awarded. You just have to smile without getting flustered. As for the handshakes, I'm going to tell you about the order later, so you should do it just like that."

"Yes."

"You can go to the bathroom during the ceremony, but it would be troublesome if it somehow coincides with your award time, so please go in advance if possible. If you take the door on the left once you are outside Cloud Hall, the place you are in right now, you'll see a lounge immediately. We've prepared some snacks and tea, so you can stay there until the ceremony begins. If you sit down in the order I told you by 2:50, the ceremony will begin."

The guide put on a faint smile.

"The people who are giving speeches today are all rather old, so it might not be any fun, but you can't doze off because of that. There are seats for journalists on the side, so if you get your photo taken while dozing off, you might be in an internet news article. You should open your eyes as much as possible."

Then, you can come back after resting - the guide finished her words and pointed at the door towards their left.

Maru stretched his neck lightly and stood up. The people sitting in front of him also stood up one by one and left Cloud Hall.

"There's a lot of people," Ando said as he left.

"There are awards for 10 categories, so there should be around 30 students from that alone," Sora said.

"Anyway, it looks like this is a newly-built building. It's really clean."

Maru looked at the glossy marble floor and the pure-white walls. There was a theater that took up the 1st and 2nd floors, and from the 3rd floor upwards, there were multiplex movie theaters. The Youth Film Festival that was being held for the first time in a building that was built for film & culture businesses in mind should have some meaning.

He went inside the lounge, to which the doors were open. It was completely empty inside and seemed like it would serve a different purpose in the future. Inside, all there was, were some lights and some snacks on a table.

"Quite a lot of people came here in uniforms."

More than half of the students that came inside were wearing student uniforms. For middle school students, almost all of them were wearing student uniforms. Perhaps their schools instructed them to.

The students were in groups of three throughout the room and they watched each other as they quietly ate the snacks. However, the silence only lasted a brief moment. The students, who came all the way here because they were mesmerized by creating the type of content known as film, immediately became close to each other and started talking about the film they shot.

“Uhm, I heard that you guys won the grand prize.”

“What did you shoot?”

In the middle of them was Sora. As the guide had mentioned that she got the grand prize in front of everyone, they all knew who she was and gathered around her. Maru slightly fell back with a paper cup in hand. Ando also sneaked his way out of the crowd.

“She must feel proud,” Ando said.

His eyes were fixed on Sora, who could be heard clearly despite being in the center of the crowd. Sora didn’t feel pressured by all the attention on her and was speaking with even more delight.

“You don’t seem to like it,” Maru noted as he sipped his drink.

“I do like it. I mean, for the first time in my life, I get to receive an award. I’ve never received an award, you know? Not even an attendance award.”

“Then why do you look so gloomy?”

“Because honestly, I didn’t do anything. She wrote the scenario, and you did the acting. But as for me, all I did was chase you guys around with a camera. I did something that anyone else could have done, so it doesn’t feel real that I’m getting a prize.”

Ando spoke as after he ate some snacks,

“Also, look at those other people. They created a film because they are full of the will to do something and have received a prize as compensation, right? But as for me, I just did what I was told to do. There was no sense of duty in me either. It just suddenly dawned on me that maybe it’s not really okay for me to be here.”

“I heard that people get emotional during graduation season, and I see that it must be true.”

“Maybe that’s why?”

Ando laughed powerlessly. Maru looked at him and spoke,

“If you’re envious of them, then why don’t you try doing it properly?”

“What?”

Ando stopped just as he was about to eat some snacks.

“You might not have had the intention to do it, but the videos you shot were really decent. Just look at Sora. Do you think she’s the kind of person who would be okay with a not-so-decent video?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Yet she still let you have the camera. If, like what you said, shooting is about chasing the actor with a camera, then there would be no reason for her to pick you to hold the camera. When it comes to work, the will to do it isn’t always the most important. Heck, it would be weird instead if you think that this is your path when you are just a beginner. No, you can call that crazy. In your eyes, everyone here might look like they have a specific purpose in life, but people aren’t that different.”

Maru raised his hand and pointed at the people chatting in front of them. Ando no longer spoke and focused on their conversation. The things he heard weren’t anything much. ‘We just shot it for fun’ and ‘we got a prize, isn’t that lucky?’ could sum up the entire conversation.

“That’s true,” Ando chuckled.

“While it might sound funny for me to give you any advice, you should look into learning about shooting videos. I’m not telling you to learn about it seriously; I’m just telling you to do it as a hobby.”

“As a hobby?”

“You don’t have anything to do since you got admitted to college already.”

“Both Sora and you, why do you think that I would have a lot of free time?”

“So, do you have anything better to do?”

“If you say it like that, I’ll get hurt, you know?”

Ando leaned on the wall before continuing,

“After we finished shooting, I suddenly got my hands on a lot of free time. We were really busy during summer, weren’t we? We met up on days when you didn’t have shoots and walked around late at night, and we even went to Sora’s house to shoot more.”

“It was the best when we walked around alleys to shoot street scenes.”

“Yeah, I thought I was going to die. I mean, you guys weren’t carrying anything, but I had to carry the camera bag, the microphone bag, and gee, don’t even mention it. I was sweating like mad, my shoulders were aching.... Back then, I wanted to throw everything away and go home.”

“Yeah, you worked really hard. You deserve the prize.”

“Now that I think about it, if I don’t get the prize, no one here should,” Ando said as he flicked his chin with his fingers.

“How is it during a drama shoot? Are camera directors people who just work according to orders from the overall director?”

“There’s no way that’s true, is there? It depends on how old they are, but usually, the camera director is the one who talks to the producer the most. It is up to the producer to decide on how to shoot a scene, but it’s the camera director’s job to get the perfect picture. There are times where the two clash and delay everything.”

“So you’re saying that they aren’t just lackeys?”

“Why do you think they’re called camera ‘directors’ in the first place? Though, some places call them the cameraman.”

“So in any case, they aren’t just yesmen under the overall director, right?”

“Why, you want to go against Sora?”

“I’ll see how it goes.”

Ando tensed his eyes and looked at Sora. Perhaps feeling his gaze, Sora turned around and looked at him in confusion. Ando looked at the ceiling before putting his head down again. He didn’t seem like he had any intentions of going against her for the time being. After watching others chat for a while, Ando quietly spoke,

“I don’t have anything better to do, so should I try?”

“You should investigate it first. You haven’t fully decided that you are going to do it, have you?”

“Of course not. My dream is to become a civil servant.”

“What a nice dream.”

“People around me always said that becoming a civil servant is the best when you don’t have anything you want to do.”

“Right, civil servants are the best.”

“Or get employed in a big company.”

“That’s good too.”

After saying those words, Ando pointed at the table and spoke,

“Let’s eat all those up. Since I’m here, I’m going to get the most out of it.”

“I’ll treat you to dinner afterwards, so don’t eat too much,” Maru said as he hung his arm around Ando’s shoulder.

Chapter 714

Although it was titled the *Youth* Film Festival, the ones leading the ceremony were adults. Someone went on the stage along with the host’s introduction. This man from the Ministry of Culture, who was in his fifties, cleared his throat before starting to speak. He glanced down at his speech notes from time to time and ended his words with ‘I hope you have a meaningful time’ before he ultimately went down the stairs. Maru mechanically applauded.

“Thank you for your good words. Next, we will watch one of the award-winning pieces, ‘The Reason the Boy went Home Early’.”

Maru turned his head to the left. Three students, who were sitting a little away from him, looked at the screen while exclaiming. It seemed that it was their piece that was being screened.

The lights dimmed and the screen became bright. Five minutes into the movie, people in the audience started laughing. They laughed when they saw a boy trying all sorts of methods to leave school early in order to meet the girl he liked. Comedy was something that was hard to try, so Maru gave his applause to the director, who managed to bring out comedic elements by giving a twist to what would otherwise be slightly boring, as well as the actors who acted oblivious to the whole plot. As the equipment was not up to par, the video and the sound didn't balance that well, but when it came to ideas, it was better than any other commercial movie in the market right now. This was something that only students could make as they weren't bound by capital and could pursue pure fun.

"Awardees, please come forward."

As they had been told about this beforehand, there was no chaos during the moving. All the students became alert and moved sideways to fill the gap.

The award was given by a film director. No titles came to Maru's mind when he heard that name, so he asked Ando about it. Ando listed a few titles saying that he was quite well known.

"Oh, he shot that one."

Maru nodded when he heard a familiar title. When the three students that received the prize stood next to the director, the civil servant from the Ministry of Culture stepped up next to them. Soon, flashes burst out. The civil servant didn't even say a word of congratulations before sitting down in the front row seats again.

"The movie was quite cheerful. I also always thought about how to leave school early when I was a student, so I quite enjoyed it because I thought that the dreams of a student were mixed into the film quite well."

The host grabbed the microphone and proceeded with the ceremony.

"Following that, we will watch 'I Walked the Streets', which got a judges' special prize. It's a monochrome movie, so don't panic when you don't see any color."

The host smiled after that and left the stage again.

The lights dimmed once again before another film was screened. Just like he said, the movie was a monochrome one. A girl who failed the CSATs and was walking the streets endlessly was all that the movie was about. The main character muttered to herself as she projected herself onto the objects she saw on the streets. Even though the plot might become boring at the slightest mistake, Maru was absorbed in the movie because her voice was very cozy yet clear. Furthermore, that was on top of the fact that people around his age could sympathize with her. The production itself was rather simple, but he exclaimed when he felt that the ways the director looked at the objects around them were so different. The daring approach of removing all the colors from a movie as well as the fact that it brought the nostalgia of monochrome movies out well made it seem like it was definitely worthy of the judges' special prize.

Again, three students to Maru's left stood up and walked to the stage. They were awarded the prize and took a photo as well.

The student who had the role of the director grabbed the microphone.

“I will try my best in order to get another prize like this and to become a good film man. Thank you.”

It was short, but the students here could sympathize with him. Maru could see that Sora and Ando’s eyes had changed. Perhaps the term ‘film man’ provoked them.

“Since a monochrome film is hard to come by these days, I believe that there were a lot of difficulties during the planning and the shoot. It must have been a literal challenge. I also wish to learn from your challenging mindsets.”

The host glanced at the cue sheet before speaking again,

“Before we watch the next piece, I’d like to introduce you to the person who will make this place shine today. Please give him a big round of applause.”

Maru yawned as he applauded. The owner of the center seat of the front row, which had been empty this whole time, had finally appeared. The one who entered through the door on the right was a man with a slightly balding head. The civil servant from the Ministry of Culture stood up and welcomed him. The one who made the cold-looking civil servant stand up was none other than the Mayor of Seoul.

“Mayor, please come this way.”

The host politely pointed at the center of the stage. A round of applause much louder than before spread throughout the theater.

“So there was a different main character. I thought it would be us,” Sora said in a sour voice.

The mayor glanced at the audience seats before starting to speak. He talked about something completely irrelevant to the Youth Film Festival for about three minutes before saying ‘lastly’,

“I am incredibly delighted to meet you all who will lead the film industry in the future. I believe that the people who will make the Korean film industry shine will be among the people here. Also, I thank all of the guests for your efforts in the film festival. I’d especially like to thank the person who has built this New Millennia Building a Cultural Complex, Mister...”

The mayor’s words, which sounded like it was about to end, only ended after mentioning the name of the colossal construction company. As soon as the mayor got away from the microphone. The middle-aged men and women sitting in the front row seats all stood up and got on the stage. They stood in line with the mayor at the center and went back down after being bombarded with flashes.

Maru saw the host touch his in-ear monitor. It seemed that he was given instructions to proceed with the next part.

“Following that, there will be the partial awards.”

Unlike how they were guided at the beginning, they did the main award ceremony immediately. Good Title Award, Commendation Award, Fresh Gaze Awards, etc all the prizes were handed out quickly. Presidents from god-knows-which companies gave the awards, and the students were pushed to the left like they were on a conveyor belt in a factory: they went up to the stage, took photos, and went down. The part where the director got to say a few words wasn’t there either. Some of the students even wrote down what they were going to say on the stage, but they couldn’t say a word. Maru felt pity when he saw the students return to their seats and throw away those pieces of paper. Just revealing their

ambitions and getting applauded for it would give them a lot of energy. Perhaps that child might feel disgusted by the film industry and lose interest in the industry as a whole. After all, the most trivial events would trigger them to change their decisions when they're young.

"Then, allow me to announce the grand prize for the 1st Seoul Youth Film Festival. The award will be handled by Mayor Moon Joojin."

Maru stood up from his seat. He went around the left of the audience seats and went up to the stage. He glanced at Sora's face a little when he came up, and her lips looked like they were full of dissatisfaction. Ando also did not hide his bored expression.

Sora went up to the front, got the prize, and did a handshake. Applause could be heard and journalists took photos. One of the journalists requested them to smile. Only then did Sora smile brightly. It was a dry and artificial smile; even an expressionless face would look better than that.

After the award ceremony, they returned to their seats. Maru saw the mayor stand up and leave first with some other people. The host at the front tried to make some jokes to refresh the atmosphere, but the eyes of the students were fixed on the back of the mayor who was leaving. Now they understood why the order of progression was changed. It was the progression team's consideration for the mayor, who was a busy person. Their consideration for the students was probably infinitely near zero.

"Well then, we should naturally watch the movie that will decorate the end of the ceremony, right? This is the work of the students at Woosung Engineering Highschool. The title is 'Classroom'."

The lights slowly dimmed. Maru chuckled as he looked at the empty front row seats. Well, it is a wonder that the mayor made a visit at all for a business that doesn't even make money.

"If it was going to be like this, they should have mailed the awards," Sora spoke as though she found this absurd.

"At least they screened the movie. I thought it was going to end just like that with the mayor gone."

Maru crossed his arms and looked at the screen. Watching the movie on a big screen like this should definitely feel different from seeing it on a small monitor. Even while grumbling, Sora seemed to have realized that her work was going to be screened on a big screen, and started to focus with an expectant look.

The movie screener scattered white light. A moment later, the first scene they were so familiar with came up on the screen. Maru looked at his own acts like he was monitoring. Even the acts he was satisfied with at the time would sometimes later feel flawed, and this time was no different. The way he did his gaze and expressions, the way he changed his tone of voice and breathing patterns. There were a lot of things he wanted to fix.

"We should have zoomed in a little more."

"Yeah. Back then, it looked pretty good, but now that I'm watching it here, Maru's expression feels too distant. Is it because of the big screen?"

"It might be like that. We should consider it the next time we shoot."

"I'll also keep that in mind."

Ando and Sora, who were sitting next to him, also observed their work in detail like a professional Go player going through his match. How many people would be 100% satisfied with the work they created? - Maru suddenly had this thought. Perhaps even God clicked his tongue in disappointment after the creation of Heaven and Earth.

As they watched the movie multiple times before, their excitement soon died down. Maru turned his head around to look at the reactions of the other students. Fortunately, they were all focusing on the movie. It seemed that the leaving of the people who had no interest in film helped out with the mood making of the ceremony at least.

The film ended after showing the empty desk of the transfer student. At the same time, people started applauding. Sora and Ando looked embarrassed, but they still smiled in delight. This was the one moment when the creator could be happy with their work.

The host grabbed the mic and came forward again. It seemed like he was going to finish the ceremony. Just then, the host touched his ear before nodding towards the back of the audience seats.

“Looks like we have a really special guest here. I hope she can give good words for the filmpeople of the future.”

The host put down his microphone and made way. Maru looked at the woman taking the right staircase up the stage. She was wearing a white t-shirt and jeans. While it might look simple, the presence she gave off was never as so. The woman stood under the stage lights and took off her baseball cap. Maru’s jaws became agape as he checked that face. An unexpected figure was standing in front of the mic.

“Huh? Ahn Joohyun, it’s Ahn Joohyun!”

“Joohyun-unni! I’m a fan!”

“Noona! Wave your hand!”

Grabbing the mic, Ahn Joohyun walked over to the edge of the stage.

“Ah-ah, can you guys hear me?” Joohyun asked.

When she did, the students answered ‘yes’ with passion.

“I’ll say this before I start. The main characters of this festival aren’t the morons that left halfway through the ceremony; it’s you all. So, there’s no need to feel dejected or disappointed. In the first place, they don’t know jack shit about film. No, let me be blunt here. Those guys came here to shoot photos.”

Her words were brutal. Cloud Hall became quiet in an instant. Maru laughed when he looked at the host trying to hide in the corner. Thanks to his laugh, the stiff atmosphere broke apart. People started applauding and cheering.

“I’ll drop the polite speech with you all because I’m the older one. I watched all the movies they screened, and they were all good. I mean, of course, they’re good. You guys put so much effort into them, right?”

“Yes!”

“Don’t feel dejected because you didn’t get the grand prize. It’s just a matter of preference. Everyone here did really well. I mean it. You know me, right? I can’t sugarcoat my words.”

“I saw you swear in a magazine!”

“The F-word? Should I do it again?”

“Yes!”

“Fuck you! Tell them to go fuck themselves!”

That was the moment when the ceremony turned into a crazed party.

Chapter 715

“She’s telling people to go fuck themselves?” Park Taeho said as he pointed at Ahn Joohyun on stage.

He did expect this from the moment she went up there so boldly, but he never knew that she would start off like that. If the people who left heard what she said, they would probably feel their blood rush backwards.

“It’s not like no one knows her foul mouth,” said Lee Junmin, who stood next to him.

He was smiling in delight as he watched the whole thing unfold.

“Did you bring her here for that purpose?”

“I did want her to liven up the mood a little, but I didn’t want this much. Look at all these people.”

“I honestly feel scared when I work with her. It feels like she might fight the director at any moment.”

“She won’t bark without reason, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

“But if she does bark, she does things beyond imagination. I mean, just look at her now. I can hear everyone related to this event getting hot on their butts. The journalists are shooting photos like mad.”

Junmin put his phone against his ear. After a short call, his right-hand man, head manager Kang, entered the theater. Head manager Kang walked over to the journalists taking photos before leaving the theater with them. Taeho could easily imagine what kind of conversation would be held outside.

“Hyung-nim, it looks like you’re quite bored these days, coming to a kiddy event like this. Is it because of Maru?”

“I’ll only be able to catch fish easily if I have many fishing rods fishing at the same time. Now that he should start working, I should give him support when I can.”

“Aren’t you being a little too biased?”

“What’s so bad about being biased? Giving motivation to those who do worse will no longer work anymore. We live in a world where taking care of the good ones is hard enough. Who would want to care about those lagging behind?”

"I just feel like you're investing too much. If you expect too much from someone who's just starting off, you'll be just as disappointed later. An actor's career won't always work out just because you support them."

Joining a large agency would make debuting a lot easier. It would also be a lot smoother to bundle-sell them with a famous actor. They might be able to start off in a better environment than someone who joined a nameless agency, but the entertainment industry was one where it was impossible to predict the immediate future.

"Then, have I ever slipped up like that until now?" Junmin said as he looked forward.

His gaze was directed at Maru. Taeho faintly smiled and nodded. If anyone else said the same words, he would have thought that that person was being arrogant, but when it came to Junmin, he couldn't help but accept. Junmin looked like someone who wouldn't predict only the immediate future, but the far goal ahead of him as well, when he chose the people he decided to nurture. As he had no history of failing, the 'possibility of failing' might be meaningless.

"Also, he's the last crew to board my ship."

"Are you going to quit your job?"

"I'm only fifty, so it's still too early to quit. However, I don't plan on recruiting any more new actors. I'll just make do with the people I have and turn them into stars to my satisfaction."

"Stars to your satisfaction? If my memory serves me correctly, there's only one person who ever fit those criteria. Moreover, that person isn't even around anymore."

Junmin shrugged.

"Taeho."

"Yes, hyung-nim."

"Do you remember what I told you when I saw you for the first time in Daehak-ro?"

Of course, I do - Taeho replied without hesitation. He was in his mid-twenties when he met Junmin while trying to sell tickets to the play that he was an actor in. He considered the words of a man in his late 30s wearing a worn-out suit absurd. You have the look of a person who will blossom soon and become successful - these words sounded like he was some cult leader.

"Back then, I thought you were just cheering for me, but ever since then, things have turned out really well for some strange reason. It's all in the past and now it doesn't really matter anymore, but why did you tell me such things back then? I mean, you never saw me before that."

"The thing is, I don't know either."

"What?"

"I said I don't know why I said such things either."

Taeho thought that he was joking, but Junmin's expression was pretty serious.

“Did something happen?”

“The reason I decided not to raise any more new recruits is one, because I want to focus on the ones I have right now, but the bigger reason is that my eyes aren’t functioning properly anymore.”

“Do you have a problem with your eyes? That’s why I told you several times to quit drinking and smok....”

“My body’s completely fine.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Junmin stroked his chin.

“Until now, I’ve come across numerous people and selected those I saw talent in and nurtured them. But a few days ago, it suddenly came to me. What did I see in them to convince me to make them debut?”

“That’s because your eyes for people are special, so you must have seen things other people couldn’t. You’re someone who told me that I would become successful when I was just handing out leaflets.”

Junmin pulled his chin inward.

“Indeed. I had special eyes that saw special qualities in people, so I dragged in people who might seem completely unrelated to this field and had them practice. But now that I look back at it, even I don’t understand why I picked them. I looked at my interviews from before for a reason to make me accept it, but I couldn’t find anything. That’s why I thought - ah, my eyes for people are dead. The special eyes I possessed a long time ago have disappeared.”

“Are you sure you aren’t in a slump or something? You should take a few days off and have a look at the trainees again. Who knows? You might be able to regain them.”

“I did that already and nothing came to me. The only thing I could do was to pick people based on the data I’ve gained in the past. But that’s something that all moderately-decent agencies do. It’s different from what I was doing before.”

“Well, it did seem like your choices were completely based on instinct before. You didn’t even look at people’s acting and just chose them seemingly at random. Back then, I thought that maybe you had a completely different set of eyes from me.”

“I can’t do that anymore. I don’t even remember what kind of standards I had when I picked people before. I don’t even know if it’s memory loss resulting from psychotherapy, or because my special eyes disappeared with my messed-up brain returning to normal. You know what’s even funnier? I skimmed through the diaries and materials I wrote 17 years ago, and I felt like it was a completely different person writing it. The current me cannot even begin to understand what kind of thoughts I had in life back then, or what kind of confidence I had at the time when I did my work.”

Junmin smiled with a refreshed yet bitter smile. Taeho made a bitter smile as well as he looked at the legend who had zero losses against the industry, quietly declaring his retirement.

“That boy is the last product of my instincts. I’m not capable of picking new people, so I plan to invest everything I have into the people I have.”

“Hyung-nim, you never know what will happen in life. Who knows? You might regain that instinct tomorrow.”

“There are a few things I’ve come to realize as I got older, and one of them is that my intuition has rarely failed me.”

Junmin turned around.

“Are you leaving?”

“Do you plan to go up there?”

Taeho looked at Joohyun, who was talking to the students at the edge of the stage. The main character had completely taken over the stage and the audience was completely captivated by her.

“I don’t see a place for me.”

“Right? Let’s leave now and eat dinner while we’re at it. I let you go through so much effort for this, so I can’t let you starve.”

“I didn’t go through that much. In fact, it was good to see films that were produced without any strings attached. Kids these days are really amazing. They are a generation that grew up watching high-quality films, so they don’t follow the standards. Once those guys grow up and grab the megaphones, I think the movie industry of this country will change a lot.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be too sure about that.”

“Why, you don’t think so?”

“It would be great if that happens, but I question if there will come a day where actors and directors could win against the production companies and distribution companies. It might become even worse in the future, but it will definitely not be better. Businesses do not like standing out. They like being stable. The people gathered here definitely possess different qualities from the rest, but whether that will work in the market or whether the market would allow them to do so in the first place, is up to debate.”

“Did you really have to nip the buds like that? If they can’t, people like you should support them.”

Junmin, who walked towards the exit without saying anything, spoke in a small voice: that’s why I’m earning money like mad right now.

While there was a sense of loathing in his words, he sounded more reliable and credible than any hypocrite.

“I would like to shoot a deep, romantic one.”

“I can’t do that with my powers either. No matter who looks at you, you have the image of a psychopath or a warm father. Very far from feeling romantic.”

“Gee, that was a little too much. Hyung-nim, can’t you do this little brother a favor?”

Taeho smiled and caught up to Junmin.

* * *

“Why did you quit acting midway into your career and switch to commercials?”

A girl with glasses had raised her hand and asked. Maru flinched and looked at Joohyun. Having received a question, Joohyun smiled and replied,

“Should I tell you what really happened? Or what I tell the media?”

She had a smiling face, but the girl seemed to have noticed it was something serious as she hesitated a little before saying ‘the real thing’.

“Does anyone here have the dream of entering the TV or the movie industry in the future?”

Hearing Joohyun’s question, more than twenty people raised their hands.

“That’s quite a lot. Good, it’s not fun to go into the details, so let me put it simply. I was asked to serve someone, and I refused to do it.”

For a brief moment, the theater turned completely silent. The girl who asked the question especially couldn’t say anything.

“The news you see on TV from time to time, while I can’t say that they are all true, they aren’t entirely false either. There are definitely not-so-decent events happening and while there are people who manage to shake off their temptations, there are those who can’t. Don’t ask me who. You shouldn’t ask things like that.”

“Really?” another one asked.

“Whatever you do, illegal things will tempt you from all around. As there are many people who live by selling off their faces in the entertainment industry, the temptations are just usually related to your faces. Of course, it’s not as bad or as forceful as it was before. As I said, it’s a temptation. There shouldn’t be any places anymore that say ‘there’s no future for you if you don’t take this’. There’s the internet after all. But that just makes them even more secretive when they give you suggestions. They make it sound really sweet - they tell you that just once is enough. Let me tell you something because there seems to be a lot of you who want to come to this industry: don’t ever fall for their temptations. If you give in once, you will keep falling for it the second time and the third time. People’s willpower and their urge to restrain isn’t really anything strong. Just once, the important thing is to endure that first time.”

“Did you not have any difficulties returning?”

The girl who asked the first question had asked another. She seemed like she wanted to become an actress as desperation could be felt in her voice.

“People’s gazes. That was the scary part. But the thing is, you know? If you don’t have bad skills, some people are bound to call for you. That’s just how the market works. Even if some company says ‘don’t use her’, there are bound to be other businesses who go ‘use her’. People who have value will not have to worry about feeding themselves. Was I too blunt with that?”

Joohyun laughed out loud. Having listened to the dark parts of the entertainment industry, the students' faces looked stiff for a while, but they soon regained their smiles. Perhaps the shock wasn't as big because it was a distant thing for them.

"Do you have to be good-looking to become an actor?" asked a boy.

"I also have an answer for the media and an answer not for the media."

"I'd like an answer not for the media."

"For men, they're better off. But for actresses, they have to be good-looking, at least right now. That's the truth. Should I show you proof if that's true or not?"

Joohyun raised a finger.

"Raise your hand if you saw an ordinary-looking male actor play the role of a main character in a Korean film recently."

The majority of the students raised their hands.

"Conversely, raise your hand if you saw an ordinary-looking actress play the role of the main character in a movie. I don't mean minor roles, but as a main character."

None of them raised their hands. Joohyun shrugged.

"You get what I mean, right? I'm sorry to say this, but you can improve your acting skills, but there's a limit to what you can do for your appearance. These days, the general trend is that you will be forgiven for undergoing plastic surgery if you reveal it carefully, but there are still people who don't like people who have had knives to their faces. As such, if you are dreaming of becoming an actress, and you think your appearances are at or below average, then I'm sorry to say this, but you won't be able to for the time being. It would be great if actresses with character are loved in the future, but I'm not sure about the future either."

Joohyun put the mic against her mouth.

"But still, I'd like to tell you to try. It might sound arrogant of me, and I can't help it even if you call me irresponsible, but I don't want to tell you to give up on your dreams just because of your looks. That's because I've seen someone who could dominate everyone with her acting skills alone despite looking really ordinary."

"Who is that?"

"There used to be an unni like that. That's why, I'm telling you that while reality might be harsh, I believe that you can do it. Bluntly speaking, if looks decide what kind of acting you do, that would be really sad, won't it?"

Joohyun looked at the girl who asked the question.

"It didn't help that much since I sounded irresponsible, didn't I?"

The girl shook her head.

“No, in fact, I want to try challenging it. I just have to do what everyone couldn’t do until now, don’t I?”

“I really like that mindset of yours. I hope we see each other on set in the future.”

Joohyun raised her thumb and smiled.

Chapter 716

“Can I ask how much you earn?”

“Isn’t it strange to ask if you can ask when you asked already?” Joohyun said as she crossed her legs.

She had come down from her chair and was sitting at the edge of the stage.

“I can’t really tell you a specific amount. Actors don’t have a fixed income. Of course, if you sign a long-term commercial ad contract, you will earn money even if you’re resting, but there aren’t that many actors in the country who will get offered something like that.”

“Aren’t you one of those few, unni?” asked a girl with side part hair.

“First up, thanks for complimenting me, and as you said, I’ve earned enough to the point that I won’t starve to death even if I don’t work immediately. Money, yes, it’s important. However, there’s no other job that has as big of a disparity between the top earners and the bottom earners, so speaking from my standards won’t help you in any way, but...”

After blurring the end of her words, Joohyun lowered her voice before speaking,

“You want to get a clear answer, right? I can’t tell you about my contract fees and guarantees because those are sensitive pieces of info, but I can tell you how much I own right now. It would be too long to list everything, so I can pick two things that make me the most money. One is properties and two is stocks.”

“What building in which area? What rank is the company you’ve invested in on the KOSPI rankings?”

Maru turned around to the side. Sora was the one asking and her eyes were shining. The concept of economics for a girl from a well-off family seemed to be more developed than her peers.

“I won’t answer that because revealing that would make me feel naked. Well, I can tell you that there’s one on Gangnam’s main street.”

“That means that you have more than that, right?”

“Probably?” Joohyun smiled and no longer spoke.

“Do you have anything else you want to ask? There are about 10 minutes until the end of the ceremony, so you guys should ask everything you want until then. However, you guys know that it would be your loss if you ask questions that aren’t beneficial for you, right? Even if you guys find out about what’s in my possession, it won’t do you any good. Ask things that can benefit you. I will answer as much as I can.”

Maru quietly raised his hand. Joohyun flicked her eyebrows upwards before pointing him out.

“What should we not do in order to become a good actor?”

“So you’re not asking what you have to do, but what you shouldn’t do, right?”

“I’ve heard a lot about how to become a good actor.”

“I see. But that was unexpected. I thought you would ask about how to get good earnings as an actor.”

“Me? I know that money is important, but I’m not so hung up on it.”

“Really? You sound different to the kid I know. I don’t know whether you had a change of heart or some sort of realization, but I will answer you anyway.”

Joohyun crossed her arms and started pondering. Sora, who sat next to him, poked him and moved her lips. Are you two close? - she seemed to be asking. Maru just shrugged.

“Things you shouldn’t do, huh. To think about it simply, you can think about the things opposite of what you should do, but that would be boring. So, let me tell you the things you would really regret based on my experience. First is, as I said before, to not fall for temptations. You will hit a lot of blocks while doing your work as an actor. You might not get any decent jobs or fail all the auditions you try before running out of them. If you are given an offer at times like that, you will feel really tempted. You should first endure that. Are you so poor that you won’t be able to continue being an actor if you don’t accept such offers? If so, then quit being an actor immediately and start working somewhere else. Anything is fine. Once time passes and you are financially better, and you still want to become an actor, then you should try again at that time. I can guarantee you that people who have gone through such experiences will see dramatic improvements in their acting. After all, what actors are capable of acting comes down to the quantity of life they’ve experienced.”

“Don’t you think it would be too late by then?” one of the students asked as she looked up at Joohyun.

“If your dream is to become an actor or an actress who’s young and is active during his or her most beautiful days, then yes, it would be too late. It is a natural desire to not want to miss the time where your beauty and body are at their peak. However, how many people do you think can debut in the role they want, when they want in this world?”

Joohyun paused a little before making a phone call. After a while, she hung up and spoke again,

“You all know who Park Taeho is, right?”

The students all nodded. Maru did the same. Was there anyone who watched movies in Korea who did not know that name?

“That senior worked for a theater until he was 28 and played a minor role in a film when he was 30 before getting his first main role. That’s probably what you guys want. From the side, it might look like he climbed the ladder without any hardships or experience being nameless. But what do you think he was like when he was young? Didn’t I tell you? The quality of your acting is decided by the life you’ve lived. The role he played in the first film he was the main character in was a murderer. He played the role of human trash who beat up his wife and son ruthlessly. That senior was freakishly good at acting that part out. That act only looked realistic because it contained his youth. He lost his mother due to domestic violence when he was young. Such terrible times filled up the majority of his youth.”

The venue became quiet. Not even a single breath could be heard. Joohyun coughed faintly.

“Actors can only make use of what they have. Just like other creators. People that don’t know him well always say that he must have god-sent talent and luck because his debut was quick and his rise to fame was fast. Yes, but we can’t entirely rule out the presence of talent. He probably survived in this competitive market where tens of thousands of people exist because he had the talent. However, talent cannot replace experience. Senior Taeho was able to show an empathetic act that also looked realistic because he had piled up sadness in a corner of his heart since he was young. He himself said those words after all. Actors need to learn how to use their hardships as fertilizers. Right now, the future might look unclear, so anything you do might feel meaningless, but the moment that experience meets the right role, you will be rewarded for it. You will feel that those hardships weren’t entirely meaningless.”

“But don’t you think that acting doesn’t necessarily require experiences and is possible to do with imitation? You can’t kill a friend in order to long for a dead friend,” a girl asked while staring holes at Joohyun.

She didn’t look like she was trying to nitpick. She looked like she was desperately waiting for an answer.

“It’s called ‘acting’, so you might be asking the question ‘can’t I just copy it off someone else?’. You can start off with imitation, yes. But if you want to keep living as an actor, you should one day realize that you have reached your limits. That limit equals your bottom line. No matter when it is, the day they see their bottom lines is the day their future is decided. There are actors who will rise to become stars, and there will be actors who will stop there. They might even quit acting altogether.”

Bottom line. Maru thought about the conversation he had with Joohyun a long time ago. She said that it was important to get to the bottom of his emotions.

“If you keep continuing your career as an actor, you will definitely gain skills in terms of acting. You are bound to become proficient and improve if you keep repeating one thing. When you just start off, smiling and walking forward might feel awkward, but you will eventually become used to it and will be able to do it without feeling awkward at all. After that continues for a while, you would think - hey? Acting isn’t anything that difficult?; or perhaps - Why don’t I get a good role when I’m doing so well? How am I failing all the auditions I’m trying?”

Joohyun held up two fingers.

“This is the second thing you must not do. It is using momentum in acting. Acting definitely has technical parts, and it might feel easy if you become proficient at it. Make this expression when you’re sad or make that expression when you’re happy. You will gain tricks and methods with time. I’m not saying that it’s a bad thing. Every actor goes through that point at least once in their career. The problem is that many people stop there. Acting, which felt awkward at first, would start to obey your will and will look natural like clothes you’ve been wearing for a long time.”

Joohyun nodded once.

“Numerous actors push themselves into environments similar to what the character goes through in order to understand their role better. There are people who even block off all sound in order to understand the world that a deaf person sees. However, you can’t say that you understood all the uncomfortable parts of being a deaf person just by doing that. In the same notion, it would be hard to

experience the sadness of losing a friend. Of course, it would be a different story if murder becomes legal,” said Joohyun with a laugh.

Though, not many students laughed with her.

“Well then, what do you do now? Should you just give up since it’s something impossible and just imitate a scene that’s widely considered to be very good? No. That’s not an actor; that is an acting machine. What actors need to do is analyze the numerous indirect experiences he or she had and assimilate them by empathizing with them and understanding them to recreate the emotions necessary for the specific role they’re playing. They can’t become 1, so they have to be a 0.9 recurring that’s infinitely close to 1. The result of that is what the audience experiences as 1. An actor who can only imitate will never even become 0.9. There’s nothing inside them after all.”

The girl who asked that question sealed her lips and nodded. She looked like she was given a satisfactory answer. Joohyun smiled and continued to speak,

“For that reason, the last thing you should not do is this one thing: to be satisfied with one thing and then stopping. Being happy with little things would definitely make you live a happy life. I also wish to live with the bare minimum once I quit being an actress. However, while you still possess the occupation of an actor, you cannot stop. To an actor, a resting period is a period for them to accept new things. New things always bring tension and stress. You have to keep repeating that. Of course, even I sometimes think that I should just throw everything away and just keep doing what I was doing. As long as you are human, you can’t help becoming tired. The important thing is whether you’re being dragged by time while you’re stopped or whether you continue to change along with time. If you want to keep playing similar roles, then it’s fine to stop there. However, if it’s not like that, you must pursue challenges and change endlessly.”

She was right. It was completely in line with the views he had, so he would have been very impressed by those words. The moment he felt a sense of rejection was when he heard the words ‘challenges’ and ‘change’. His face tilted sideways and he subconsciously clicked his tongue. It was quite peculiar. Primitive emotions that ignored his reason were welling up inside him. Maru raised his hand.

“A person specializing in one thing doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re bad though, does it?”

“Generally, yes. I’m not saying that specialists are bad. I’m just saying that it doesn’t fit my ideals of acting.”

“You might lose what you already have if you take on challenges and lose the image you originally had. Is there really a need to do that?”

Maru sighed as he finished his words. He was blurting those words out subconsciously. Challenges and change. Why did he feel a sense of disgust towards the two words that he admired?

Just as Joohyun was about to speak again, the host, who had been watching quietly until now, approached her.

“Uhm, our rental time is over.”

He smiled awkwardly.

Chapter 717

“Seonbae, you aren’t angry, are you?” Sora asked.

Ando, who sat next to her, also looked at him worriedly.

“No, it’s not like that.”

Maru felt that his answer was poor. The last words he said to Joohyun were pretty aggressive. The words he said were completely contrary to what was on his mind. He felt like his mouth was beyond his control.

“I just felt so nervous as I kept talking to her. I think maybe that’s why I sounded so stiff.”

“Was that what happened? I thought you got angry or something. Your voice was really low and rough. I was worried about you for a while.”

“Sorry.”

“So someone like you becomes nervous too?”

“I’m only human. Of course I do.”

“That’s not an answer I like, but okay, let’s leave it at that. You don’t look like you want to answer. This quick-witted junior will stay quiet now.”

Sora grinned and no longer said anything.

The ceremony, which became heated along with the appearance of Joohyun, was brought to a close in an awkward fashion. The important people from the host side had left already, so it ended with the host reading the closing comments.

Students exchanged words as they left the theater. Most of them were talking about Joohyun. As she left a deep impression, she would probably continue to be their conversation topic.

“Let’s leave too. Oh, who’s going to take the plaque?” Sora asked as she held up the plaque.

“Don’t you think placing it in the clubroom is the best option?” Ando said.

When Sora glanced at him and said that she wanted to bring it home, Ando quickly took the plaque away from her. Sora pouted.

“I can’t make a joke, can I?”

“You sound serious when you say things like that.”

“Fine. I’ll make do with taking a photo of it and taking that home. Oh, apparently, the prize money is going to come into my account. I hope we get it early.”

Sora hummed and walked forward. Ando shook his head and followed her.

As Maru was walking, he thought back to the recent conversation he had with Joohyun. Her advice all came from her own experiences. Even people with different ideals would respect her for her values, not

be angry with her. The more he thought about it, the more confused he became. Why did he snap out at her when he had similar ideals as her?

There was a need to look back at his thought process. He should be able to approach the essence of this problem if he thought about which part his reason was unable to retain control of himself. At first, he had definitely accepted her words and was even impressed by them. The part that changed him was as he had expected, when he heard the words 'challenge' and 'adventure'. He became more confused. Why did he react so sensitively to the two words that he liked quite a lot?

As he was pondering, he got a call. He looked at Sora and Ando before taking the call.

-It's been a while since we last met, so let's have a meal together. Come with your friends.

It was from Joohyun.

* * *

"I'm not dreaming, am I?" Sora said as she sat down.

When he said that Joohyun invited them to a meal, Sora and Ando told him not to lie. Maru gave them the phone while he was still on call with Joohyun, and having listened to Joohyun's voice, the two people came to the restaurant in disbelief and in a daze.

"I've only seen this in movies," Ando said as he slowly rotated the circular table.

Sora also agreed and started rotating the table. When an employee came in with a bottle of water and some cups, the two people flinched and grabbed the table to stop it from spinning.

When the employee, who was wearing a Chinese dress, was placing the cups down, the door opened and Joohyun came in.

"Oh, the food isn't here yet. Will it come out soon?"

"Yes. I will prepare them for eating immediately."

The employee quietly closed the door and left.

"Oh, you're the girl who asked me where the building I owned was," Joohyun said with a smile to Sora, who was sitting opposite to her.

Having met Joohyun up close, Sora hid her usual cheeky side and just smiled. Maru didn't know if she was probing Joohyun out or whether she was really feeling shy.

Joohyun asked for the two's names. Ando and Sora introduced themselves.

"Kang Sora, Koo Ando. I have a pretty good memory, so don't forget to greet me the next time you see me. But man, I'm so hungry after not eating anything since morning. Moreover, I talked so much, so I'm running low on energy."

"Was that event in your schedule from the beginning?" Maru asked.

Joohyun shook her head as she placed her cup against her mouth.

“Originally, senior Taeho was the one to do it, but somehow, I ended up going there. That senior is really sneaky. He tossed something so hard to me and left by himself. If I think about it carefully though, I feel like I was fooled by your president into doing this, not him.”

“The president is here?”

“He came to the ceremony. Seems like he took quite an interest.”

“Looks like it was pretty meaningful then. Or maybe he was here to do business.”

“In my opinion, I felt like he came here to see you.”

“Me?” Maru questioned as he wiped his hand with a wet towel.

He wasn’t notified of anything like this beforehand. Just then, they got their food. It was pine nut porridge as an appetizer and some warm tea.

“Should we talk after we eat? You guys should eat a lot. If you want more, tell me anytime,” Joohyun said.

When they finished about half of the porridge, other dishes were placed on the table. While Joohyun said they should ask for more if they wanted to, there was an endless stream of dishes. When the pieces of pineapple came out as dessert, Sora, who had a great appetite, gave up on finishing the meal. The course meal was just that plentiful.

“That’s a lot better,” Joohyun said as she put down the teacup.

Maru also stroked his stomach. Although he would usually finish a meal given to him for free, he decided to leave some behind for today.

“I can’t keep occupying busy people here. Shall we go?”

Joohyun stood up first. Sora looked like she wanted to talk more, but she left after reading the mood.

Just as Maru was about to follow Ando out, Joohyun called out to him and waved at him. Maru told Ando and Sora, who were outside the room, to leave the restaurant first.

“What is it?”

“I’m not someone who likes leaving things on an awkward note.”

Maru could imagine what Joohyun had to say.

“You’re talking about what happened at the theater, right?”

“Yeah. You being cynical is not that rare, so I didn’t really care, but back then it was a bit different. It even made me wonder if I did something wrong to you.”

Maru apologized first. He wanted to explain why he became so emotional, but he couldn’t make others understand when he himself didn’t have a clear understanding.

“You didn’t know why you did that? I’m rather confused because that doesn’t sound like you.”

"You tell me. I don't even know why I felt so angry back there. There was nothing in the things that you said that made me angry, but for some reason, anger got the better of me. I did think about filtering my words calmly, but my mouth didn't follow my intentions. I was in a fix too."

"Are you tired lately? I heard your president mention that you're doing two dramas at once."

"The schedule isn't that tight, so I'm not that tired. No, wait, I guess I don't really know about that. Perhaps I'm too tired to the point that I can't judge my own condition properly."

"It's not easy to work while going to school. Most people take time off classes and take remedial ones later, but it doesn't look like you're doing that. Also, Bangjoo told me that you're looking after the acting club quite a lot these days."

"I felt like I was too detached when I was in my 2nd year. I should at least act like a senior."

"If it's like that, I guess it isn't strange for you to be exhausted mentally, even if you aren't tired physically. I'm not that worried since it's you we're talking about, but don't miss the danger signals that your body is giving off. Just because you're young doesn't mean that illnesses will purposely avoid you."

"Yes, I'll keep that in mind."

Joohyun smiled faintly.

"Was I being too nosy? I'm not sure if it's because of Bangjoo, but I feel like you're a little brother of mine. Bangjoo is the immature little brother, while you're the reliable one."

"Please treat me like that in the future too. Teach me a lot, and treat me to a lot of good food."

Joohyun approached him and patted him on the head before leaving. Maru faintly smiled and touched his hair. Even in terms of actual age, he was the little brother, so there should be nothing that awkward, but he felt strange for some reason. He felt like he was consoled by someone much younger than him.

-She's a good person. There shouldn't be that many people who look out for others so much just because they're indebted.

The masked man, who had been silent until now, had spoken. Maru inwardly spoke: is it because of you that I said all those words regardless of my intentions?

-If I had the power to do that, I would act like a villain from a movie and do all sorts of things in an attempt to take over your body. From how such cliché things didn't happen, it proves that I don't have such amazing abilities.

"Then what are all the strange phenomenas that's been occurring around me recently? I'm guessing you know something about it."

-Phenomenas, you say. Are you talking about how you feel like someone completely different wrote your old diary or things like that?

"Yes."

-Well, I don't really know either.

“You really won’t tell me anything other than things related to acting, huh.”

-That’s just how I am. I am in an extremely limited position, so what I can say is very limited. But isn’t that diary thing pretty common? Many people feel really unfamiliar with the photos they took when they were young. Even photos feel like that, so old things you wrote must feel even more strange.

“It’s only been two years. I don’t think my brain is so flawed that I won’t remember my personality from two years ago.”

-The person in the middle of the problem does not know what the problem is.

“You sound very suspicious.”

-There’s nothing to be suspicious about. There are slight changes, but it doesn’t change the fact that you’re in a hamster wheel. Oh, no. The fact that I can say this means that that time is coming close.

“That time?”

-Happy birthday.

The masked man left those words before disappearing into the dark.

“Birthday?”

He probed his memories, but there was no one around him who had a birthday in October. Did that mean that the masked man’s birthday was in October? The clown who liked puzzles always disappeared after throwing out a question. Would there ever come a day he says an answer?

“Han Maru?”

Joohyun, who was standing outside, looked at him in puzzlement.

“I just remembered something I forgot. Sorry for dazing out.”

“Looks like you are tired. Managing your body is a part of work. If you want to be a long runner, you should watch out.”

Maru nodded.

* * *

Having returned home, Maru washed himself before sitting in front of the computer. These days, there was something he did before opening his script. It was the process of trying to understand his past while reading the diary he wrote before. While the masked man spoke like it was nothing much, Maru was still concerned about the traces left by himself two years ago. Twenty-nine. That was the age where people’s recognition of society solidified. If he was actually a student, he would be able to accept the dramatic change in his personality in two years, but he was not a high school student.

“Why did I think like this?”

It felt new every time he read it. It felt like reading an autobiography of someone else. He had the memory of writing it, but the memory was superficial at best, so he couldn’t remember the emotions he had back then. Where did the dramatic shift in his personality come from?

Maru compared the conversation he had with Joohyun during the day to the diary entries he wrote in the past. Their ideals were surprisingly similar. The elements shown in these entries showed how much he despised challenge and adventure, and how he was even disgusted by them.

“Something’s happening.”

Even a miracle known as coming back to life had a clear cause and an outcome. The meaning of the ending lay in the beginning. The opposite was true as well. His past self from two years ago as well as the personality that suddenly protruded today could be classified into one. This meant something simple. What happened today wasn’t a sudden protrusion of emotions, it was the expression of emotions that he already possessed.

Maru wrote down the things he thought about. He also wrote down the hypothesis that some of his memories might be missing. When he put the final period and turned his head around....

That woman was sitting on his bed.

Chapter 718

That woman, who was sitting on someone else’s bed like it was nothing, was wearing a white suit again today. She looked like she was remembering something from the past. Maru wondered if he had to offer her a drink or something. Unlike before, she was quiet today. It was as though her business here was to watch.

Maru looked at her with a calm look but inwardly, he was exclaiming. She had the face of a human, but her face possessed a beauty that couldn’t be described as anything human. Her beauty looked like it was about to suck him in.

Looking at her in detail, there were ordinary parts about her as well. For example, her nose. From the perspective of western beauty, her nose was slightly low and round. Her eyes and mouth were also very normal-looking when viewed separately, but with all of them together, she was practically the goddess of beauty. Maru, who admired her like he was admiring a splendid piece of art, suddenly came to himself. She wasn’t a sculpture. Though, she wasn’t human either. Would she have emotions then?

“What were you doing?” the woman asked as she looked at his desk.

“I thought people with your job all knew? I thought you were watching my every action.”

He blinked once. The woman, who was on the bed, was now right next to him, reading a memo in her hand. From up close, her skin looked like semi-translucent glass. He felt like it would be hard and cold like glass instead of soft like real skin. The moment he realized that she was different, the ‘mysterious beauty’ about her vanished, giving him a look at her true appearance. The side of the face was familiar to him. He could smell something human from her. The smell wafting into his nose was remembered by his brain cells.

“Have we seen each other before?”

He remembered back to the time he awkwardly asked for her number. It was a rather crude question and one that was meaningless, but he had to do it. A sharp sense of déjà vu. Something told him that she was a woman he had seen before. And from real close too.

“Looks like you forgot that I’m the first person you saw after you died.”

She sounded like how a lady at the counter would give him a receipt. Her words didn’t contain any emotions and she looked expressionless as well.

“Why are you writing down things like that?”

“Am I obligated to say it?”

“You aren’t, but I’m personally curious as to why you’re writing down such things.”

“If it’s something personal, I guess I don’t need to answer you.”

Only after he said those words did Maru realize that he was strangely uncooperative with her. Her monotone words put him off. Why? - he asked that question to himself. The answer came quickly. It was because of her unkind-sounding words.

It was strange. Why did he feel awkward and even feel a faint sense of rage when he experienced her cold attitude even though he didn’t have any specific relationship with her? She wasn’t someone who worked in the service industry. Her being unkind should not be a target of rage. A fire was set to his emotions and it burned in a strange direction that was hard to describe. However, Maru was also able to derive another feeling. He felt disappointed, enraged, and even sad that she spoke without even looking at him.

She started reading other memos. Does she, a spiritual being, read text word by word like people did? She took quite a long time to read a piece of text written on a small piece of paper.

“You were born again.”

“I was.”

“The fact that you were born again means that your previous life is a thing of the distant past. The past isn’t something you can change just because you look back.”

“That sounds about right.”

“It’s the same for this life as well. Even if you look back at the past, you will not gain anything. As someone who lived another life, you should be aware of the importance of preparing for a better tomorrow rather than looking back and regretting the past.”

“I know. But isn’t it strange? Something I wrote a mere two years ago suddenly feels strange, and I can’t understand the actions I took back then. Yes, since this is my new chance at life, going forward is very important. But that doesn’t mean that I can abandon the past entirely. It is extremely iffy to know that there is a me that I don’t know of.”

“Everyone changes with time. They have to change with time. What’s so important about the past? You are walking down the correct path right now. You should have your hands full going forward. Why do you keep minding something that has passed already?”

“It may have passed already, but ultimately, they lie on the same path. If I keep walking when I don’t even know that my trajectory has veered a little, I might end up having regrets. Once that happens, I won’t be able to do anything, so that’s why I’m trying to think about it now.”

“Time is not continuous. It’s discrete. That’s why looking at the past is something meaningless. You already have plenty of experience, don’t you? You are going to run out of time even if you move forward with your experiences as the basis. Why do you keep looking back? You are going on the right path. You should believe that and...”

For a brief moment, Maru saw a tinge of red on her pale face. The way she expressed a big of vexation and discomfort made her, someone who had transcended humanity, human again.

Maru reached out and took away the memo in her hands.

“Whatever I do, it is my freedom to do so.”

“No, your life is something that someone else gave you. Is there a freedom to a life yielded to you?”

“Then take it back. I feel incredibly confused and displeased right now. Just what are you planning to say? Is the reason you came here to mock me for wrestling with my past? Or is there a reason that I can’t look back at my history?”

Her overbearing eyes closed before opening again. The humanity about her that was faint but definitely present, had disappeared at once. She seemed to have changed into god’s messenger: someone flawless and perfect.

“Okay then. I’m not qualified to say anything. But please, do keep something in mind: there is no meaning to the things that have already happened. The world is strict, and you should have your hands full trying to move forward.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sure you can. Like what you just said, I hope you can take care of only yourself.”

She looked at the memos before turning around. Her body slowly turned translucent. Just before she disappeared, she spoke at the last moment,

“It was not my intention to get annoyed at you. I’m sorry.”

Her body completely disappeared. Maru put down the memo in his hand on the desk.

“Oppa, you should eat some snacks.”

Just as he was analyzing her words and actions on his bed, he could hear Bada’s words. He opened the door and came out to the living room.

“Were you calling someone?”

“No.”

“Really? Then what were you doing by yourself?”

“What else? I was practicing my lines,” Maru said with a smile.

He put a snack in his mouth and bit on it. He could hear a short snap. What was she trying to say? Her lips, voice, and image kept playing repeatedly in his mind. The parts of his brain responsible for memory were trying their best to capture her figure.

“Did something happen?” Bada asked.

Maru looked at the stick-shaped snack in his hands. The chocolate part had long since disappeared in his mouth. He realized that he was clattering his teeth in empty air. It was natural for Bada to ask if something was up.

“If you’re sleepy, you should go to sleep. I’ll eat these in your stead.”

Bada pulled the basket over to her side. Maru told her to eat moderately before returning to his room.

Everything in the world was tied by the laws of cause and effect. His expression of emotions during the day and her appearance shouldn’t be coincidental. Did the gods not look favorably on the people who came back to life and were being clingy to their history? Or was something he was not allowed to know buried under the 2 years' worth of time?

Maru lifted up his memo and shone it against the light.

“Is something happening?” he wondered to himself in a small voice as he looked at the semi-translucent memo.

* * *

“An audition?”

“Yes. I thought that the role fits you so I brought it over. If you like it, then you should try it. Trying an audition is also a form of experience.”

Gyeonmi gave her a stack of A4 papers in a clear file. When she received it and opened it, she saw a scenario, the characters appearing in it, as well as the script.

“Can I have a look?”

“It’s not like you’re going to tell other people about it, are you?”

Gaeul started reading the scenario. The story was that of many people getting trapped under a collapsing building, relying on each other while waiting for rescue, and beginning to suspect each other, before ultimately reaching their demise.

She looked at the list of characters.

“I don’t see a high school girl here though?”

“Because there isn’t one among the leading and supporting roles. Were you expecting one of those?” Gyeonmi asked with a smile. Gaeul felt slightly embarrassed.

“But don’t be too disappointed. It’s a minor role that gives off a deep impression at the beginning of the story. It should be quite hard because the act is quite dynamic, but if you do it well, you will be able to make yourself known. Have a look at scene 68.”

Gaeul flipped through the script to find scene 68.

-Scene 68. Inside a collapsed building.

A schoolgirl has a leg trapped under debris. She breathes heavily while struggling in pain. In the complete darkness, the camera shows the whole scene. The girl groans before finding signs of cracks. Amidst the silence, she could start to hear cracks. Happy then appears.

“What’s Happy?”

“The name of a dog.”

“Ah, a dog.”

Gaeul nodded and kept reading on.

-Seeing Happy approach with big, clear eyes, the girl feels relieved for a moment before seeing an iron rod starting to bend. The building is about to collapse at any moment. The girl shouts at Happy, who approached her. Happy runs away startled. From the view of Happy, the building debris, which was maintaining a delicate balance, could be seen falling on the girl.

Gaeul pictured the scene in her head. The appearance of a dog just as she was about to die. The meaning the dog had should be very special amidst extreme pain and unease. She should have wanted the dog close to her, but the girl knew that the building was going to collapse. How would the girl feel when she shouts at a dog to run away at the last moment? Just imagining such a scene made her feel suffocated.

“You would have to see the final product to be sure, but you’ll be on screen for 30 seconds by yourself at the very least. It’s not ordinary for a nameless role to take up so much time in a movie. This film director places importance on human love, so as long as the acting is up to par, he’ll put you on the screen. That is, if your acting is up to par.”

“Do you think I have the potential, teacher?”

Gyeonmi replied as she rubbed her wrist.

“Gaeul, I’m not an incompetent woman who gives others false hope. You definitely have the potential. When I watch you act these days, I feel like you should be able to digest dynamic acts like this quite well. How about it? Are you going to try?”

“Of course I am. I want to do it.”

“That’s the kind of attitude I like. The audition for this role will probably be done through the connections of the director. Prepare this act and one free act. Even if you don’t win that role, you might be able to get another role if you manage to impress the director, so try your best.”

“Yes!”

An audition for a film. Gaeul felt her heart racing. She had to show violent struggling and also the emotional part of shouting at the dog at the last moment. As the change in emotion was quite big, if she could do it well, she might be able to leave behind a deep impression.

“For the time being, try focusing on that script. The audition is in two weeks, but it might get pulled ahead. That’s why you should try focusing on different types of pain per day. Go into as much detail as possible. Think about how you’re going to express the pain of your leg being crushed, and what happens to people’s expressions when they experience pain that is beyond their scope of handling. This director pays a lot of attention to things like that.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You also might want to look into documentaries about people in wards. There’s nothing more educational than learning what reality is like. Do your best to prepare. I already told the director that you’re someone I cherish.”

“Really?”

Gyeonmi smiled faintly and stood up.

“Anyway, Lee Heewon, where is this guy slacking again?”

“He’s probably on the rooftop. Should I call him?”

“Tell him to come down if he doesn’t want me to beat him to death.”

“Yes, teacher.”

Gaeul put the script against her chest as she started to make the call.

Chapter 719

“So you’re shooting a film?”

“Yes, grandfather. I’m playing the lead role,” replied Kang Giwoo politely as he put down his spoon.

His grandfather scooped a little of the radish soup with his spoon and put it in his mouth. Giwoo watched as his grandfather’s chin moved slowly. His grandfather’s spoon then headed to the multigrain rice. He scooped out enough for just half of his spoon before putting it in his mouth. While his grandfather savored the rice, Giwoo waited as he placed his hands on his lap.

“The lead role, good. Since you’re doing it, you might as well be the main character.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, yes. Isn’t Jaeho working as an actor too?”

“Yes, Jaeho is also working in the entertainment industry.”

“What was his stage name again? Sooil?”

“He goes by the name Yoo Sooil.”

“Sheesh, I never knew that chairman Lee would let his grandchildren be entertainers.”

“I’m not sure because I don’t meet him that often, but from what Eunjoo-noona is saying, his house still seems to be against it.”

"If a man has made up his mind, he should try at least once. Jaeho, that boy, his eyes looked smart, so I'm sure he's doing well."

Giwoo replied 'yes'. His grandfather's words were always correct. It was on the level of foretelling. Giwoo admired his grandfather for his exceptional judgment and decisiveness.

"Eunjoo, that girl, she's pretty decent for being a girl. They say a hen crying means doom for that household, but it should be fine for a girl of her caliber to cry. Giwoo, how about it? I think she's not so bad to be your companion."

"Eunjoo-noona isn't ordinary. She probably still treats me like a child."

His grandfather smiled pleasantly.

"Yes. Chairman Lee's blood won't go anywhere. Both his daughter and his granddaughter. They would be generals if they joined the military."

"Last time I met her, Eunjoo-noona said she wants to meet you, grandfather. Apparently, she got her hands on some good wine."

"Tell her to visit any time."

His grandfather nodded before continuing his meal. After making sure that he did not have further questions to ask, Giwoo picked up his spoon again. He filled just half of his spoon like his grandfather did, remembering his grandfather's words: don't put too little because it will make you look poor but don't put too much because it will make you look greedy. His grandfather's spoon was an old iron spoon. Compared to a normal spoon, the head was more concave compared to other normal spoons, and the handle was rough, making it look bad compared to factory-made spoons. But, while his grandfather was okay with changing out anything else, he never changed his spoon.

"Giwoo."

"Yes, grandfather."

"It's up to you to do what you want, but you have to look after your health at all costs, okay?"

"I will bear that in mind."

"Yes, yes. Losing health means losing everything. You must be healthy in order to look around you. You must chew your food before swallowing, and wash your hands after going o...."

Ugh - a groan interrupted his words. Giwoo didn't mind, but his grandfather's face had turned stiff.

"Junior director Kim."

His grandfather put down his spoon.

"I-I'm sorry."

"Junior director Kim. You've worked with me for years. Can you still not fix that habit of yours? Who am I talking to? I'm talking to my cute little grandson, aren't I?"

"Y-yes. I'm sorry, sir. I subconsciously...."

Giwoo looked at junior director Kim, who was kneeling next to the dining table, through the corner of his eyes. It had only been an hour. He found kneeling for merely an hour^[1] so hard that he twisted his body and ended up making a sound. He was pathetic. He had been serving his grandfather for months, yet he couldn't even keep his table manners.

His grandfather took his spoon and went to the kitchen. After hearing running water, junior director Kim became shocked and shouted 'sorry'. Giwoo inwardly clicked his tongue. He was so stupid. If he made a mistake, he should get punished for it, yet he was trying to make do with an apology. He needed a beating.

After shaking off the water on the spoon, his grandfather stood in front of junior director Kim.

"Junior director Kim, you can do better, can't you?"

The spoon was placed on the ground. While kneeling down, junior director Kim started shaking. Giwoo held back from letting a smile creep onto his face. He didn't want to become a rude boy in front of his grandfather.

Junior director Kim bashed his head against the handle of the spoon. Thud- a heavy thump resonated across the ground. Giwoo looked at the rough curves of the handle. Whenever junior director Kim bashed his head on it, the curvature of the spoon changed little by little. How many foreheads have gone through that spoon? He started feeling admiration for his grandfather. Giwoo looked at his own spoon. Perhaps it wasn't a bad idea to get one ready right now.

His grandfather spoke again when junior director Kim's forehead started bleeding,

"Enough. You are getting on with age, so I should give you proper treatment."

"Thank you, chairman."

Just as junior director Kim picked up the bent spoon with both of his hands, he put it back down again.

"Chairman, the spoon is a little bent, allow me to straighten it back out."

"This is why I cherish you, junior director Kim."

His grandfather patted junior director Kim on the head like how he would treat a child. Junior director Kim flipped the spoon over and started bashing his head on it until the curved handle became flat again.

After washing the spoon and placing it on the table again, junior director Kim bowed before going away.

"Giwoo, people, you know, are very sneaky. Give them an inch, and they will try to take a mile. They don't know their graces."

His grandfather picked up his spoon and looked at all sides of it.

"But objects are honest. Just look at this spoon. This one has never betrayed me. It has always made those arrogant, bow their heads to me."

Giwoo nodded.

“Sometimes, you come across people who are mistaken. They are strange creatures that believe that they are more precious than objects because they are people. That’s because they are not educated properly. If people were more important than objects, people like this grandfather of yours would have long since been thrown out onto the streets.”

After looking at the spoon with sharp eyes, his grandfather eventually put on a gentle smile.

“Giwoo, people like us must be able to discern the sea of objects very properly. And we must also know how to handle people like objects. It does not matter where you are. Regardless of your position, you must know how to order others. That is the duty of those who own objects. You must never let the foolish ones make a mistake. If you let the stupid people be, society will become a mess.”

“Yes, grandfather,” Giwoo replied as he looked at the old spoon.

* * *

“When does the shoot start?” asked Ahn Yeseul, who sat next to him.

Giwoo accepted the yuja tea that she gave him and replied,

“I think the crank-in will be within the year. I’m not sure about the details, but since the background is set in winter, it’ll probably start before the season passes.”

“You said it was a disaster film, right?”

“That’s the frame, but the plot is closer to a thriller. The content is really good. I read it a few times, and I keep getting absorbed in it.”

“That sounds good. I want to try acting in a film, but I don’t have the skills.”

“Yeseul, you are more than good enough. I’m sure you’ll be able to do it if you have the opportunity.”

Giwoo smiled and put the cup against his mouth. Talkative women were annoying to deal with. They lacked wits, so the conversation could drag on limitlessly. She seemed to think that her smile was her charming point, but to Giwoo, she looked stupid no matter how he looked at her. If possible, he wanted to splash this hot yuja tea over her face to stop her from grinning, but he decided to hold back since it would be such a waste of tea.

“Uhm, Giwoo.”

“What?”

“It’s my birthday the day after tomorrow. Can you come?”

“To what?”

“What else? My birthday party of course. I’m going to rent a party hall and invite some of my close friends to play around. You should come over too,” Yeseul said as she moved closer.

Giwoo maintained his smile and scanned her from top to bottom. Was this girl not capable of differentiating drama from reality? He had realized that she was showing more than just goodwill towards him from a while ago. She seemed to like him. It seemed that romantic feelings blossomed

inside her just because they hugged and kissed once in the drama. He, on the other hand, just found it absurd.

“I don’t think the day after tomorrow is a good time.”

“Why? Do you have a shoot?”

“I have something to do.”

Yeseul smiled awkwardly. She looked away while saying that it was okay, but she clearly seemed disappointed. Giwoo thought that this was enough and put his hand on top of hers.

“But it’s your birthday, so I can’t be the one to miss it, right? I’ll try to make some time.”

“No, it’s really okay. You can’t miss your work because of me.”

“But I want to go.”

He tapped the back of her hand with his fingers. He could see Yeseul flinch before relaxing her expression. The way she was swayed by her emotions without using her head was the stereotypical example of a foolish person. She was such an easy thing to toy with. There were people worse than objects all over this world.

“Can you really come?”

“Just text me about the details. I’ll definitely make it.”

“Thanks. It’ll be a great party.”

His grandfather once said that having the other party say ‘thanks’ would mean that he would be in the superior position in the relationship. Giwoo didn’t consider Yeseul someone he needed; however, he believed that she would be a decent lackey that he could make use of some time. It was a trivial investment towards a better tomorrow.

“It’s starting to get cold.”

Park Jichan arrived. Giwoo greeted him with a smile. Jichan approached him and started talking about what happened yesterday even though no one told him to. When Jichan looked around cautiously, Giwoo signaled to him that he was listening. After receiving that signal, Jichan became more excited and talked about all sorts of things. Giwoo looked at Jichan, who rejoiced at every one of his reactions, and thought about junior director Kim. The sense of superiority that seeped into him felt thrilling.

Everyone on the set welcomed him. As long as he acted politely, the others created good rumors about him and raised everyone’s opinions of the actor known as Kang Giwoo. How convenient tools could they be? Using money to promote himself was very inefficient and expensive, but with people, it became possible to promote himself free of charge. Seeing people being toyed around with just a few words from him made him realize that his grandfather’s words were entirely correct.

As he was listening to Jichan’s words with a smile, something that vexed him entered his eyes. That boy, who was walking with a script in hand, was the only person Giwoo avoided. If his grandfather found out what happened between the two of them, he too would have had to kowtow towards that spoon. The

people that his grandfather hated second most were incompetent people, while the people that his grandfather hated the very most were incompetent family members.

When it came to Han Maru, things didn't go the way he expected them to. Maru had noticed the 'play' like he was someone who could read many moves ahead and even threatened him. For the first time ever, Giwoo lowered his gaze in front of someone. It was a shameful history and a great humiliation. And also, there was fear. Fear became the fertilizer for hatred. Giwoo felt burning hatred whenever he saw Maru, but he couldn't project it. He wasn't someone foolish who would get swayed by emotions after all.

Until some time ago, there wasn't a big problem. Maru was someone who only raised his edge when he touched him, so he could just ignore him.

"Kang Giwoo, let's go through lines together."

Maru approached him with a bright smile. Giwoo stood up while trying to hide his rotting feelings. If he was mocking him, it would be better. It would be understandable at least. He smiled and looked at Maru's face. The smile on this guy's face was relaxed to the point that he couldn't think of this guy as the same person as the cold man from before. He looked really pure without any evil intentions.

Giwoo felt confused. At first, he felt like Maru was toying with him. After some time passed, he realized that he wasn't toying with him and that he truly wanted to become close to him. Giwoo couldn't believe it. The eyes Han Maru showed him that day were similar to his grandfather's. He flinched back due to the presence that was similar to a god for him, but the current Han Maru looked like all the other idiots he could toy with.

Was it a trap? Or did he want something else?

"Sounds good. Let's practice."

Giwoo went along with him for now. He had to stay docile before he found out what was on the other guy's mind.

Chapter 720

"You're pretty diligent. I thought you were going to quit school just like that."

"I haven't completely decided yet. I didn't tell the teachers because I felt like quitting school like this isn't right."

"It's up to you to do what you want, but I don't think quitting school is a good idea. If you're having a hard time to the point that you have to start working immediately, why don't you tell the others about it? If we collect a few tens of thousands of won per person, you should be able to fend off immediate trouble."

"I don't want to go to school if it means bringing harm to others. Above all, I won't be able to last long like that. If I get contacted about work tomorrow, I might quit school right then."

Giwoo looked at Maru as he calmed down his breathing. He was more serious when he was practicing. A slight change occurred in Maru's expression. He remembered that slight change in facial muscles and

tried imitating it. The muscles around his left cheekbone didn't follow his will properly. It would look slightly different if he looked at a mirror.

To steal, he had to be able to perfectly imitate. Giwoo felt a sense of superiority when he did a better act than the original creator after finding flaws and fixing them. He had stolen actor Lee Hyuk's acting a long time ago and made it completely his. When he realized that acting was nothing different from memorization, Giwoo felt that he would become successful. There was no failure on this path after all.

"I think that should do. I hope we don't get any NGs during the real run," Maru said.

Giwoo smiled and started doing simulations in his mind to probe this guy out. His grandfather once said that people were like stones and would not change if left alone. He had to find out what changed Maru. Whether it was goodwill or ill intent, he would feel at ease if he found out what Maru's intentions were.

"How's it going with the other shoot?"

"The director there is full of energy. Unlike director Park Hoon, who keeps watch from afar, that director approaches the actors and discusses with them. There's so much energy that I'm having a hard time following."

"It must be bustling."

"Yes. Thanks to the producer being like that, everyone's all laughing."

"That sounds fun, shooting with a director like that."

"Yeah, it is."

The conversation was very smooth. Maru didn't look like he was wary. Giwoo felt nervous. He felt that those who approached him with a smile were much harder to deal with than those bearing their fangs. Was he planning to threaten him to do something if he made a mistake with his words?

No, Maru knew about that 'play' already. While not many people would believe such a thing, he had indeed done some things, and people would start suspecting the person known as Kang Giwoo. That would tarnish his reputation. If Maru was still the same guy that told him to stay quiet with eyes that looked similar to his grandfather's, he would definitely have done so.

What was the reason behind his current actions then? - Giwoo's thoughts started straying. What if Maru didn't have any malicious intentions and was purely trying to get close to him? There is no such thing as implausible - these were his grandfather's words.

"You know, about last time."

He spoke first. If this guy pretended not to know anything, it would mean that he was up to something.

"Last time? Oh, when I told you off?"

He was unexpectedly blunt about it. Giwoo felt his lips go dry. He thought that Maru would twist his words at least once.

"Was it a mistake? I thought we were done after that."

Maru nodded.

"I guess I was a bit too strong back then. You must have had your circumstances. Of course, you made a mistake. Using others to bully adults who can't resist is not a good thing to do."

"I'm repenting."

"I know. There's a sense of rebellion in kids our age, right? You want to stand out, which can be by rebelling against adults. I'm sure your actions were a part of that."

Giwoo found it harder and harder to maintain his smile. He was angry that his graceful 'plays' were being sugar-coated as some childish pranks. If possible, he wanted to twist that mouth of his. He also thought about the spoon handle. It would be quite a sight to see Maru bashing his head against rocky sand.

"Y-you understand me, I see," he said while barely suppressing his emotions.

Maru wasn't looking at him with frosty eyes. Was he practicing universal, agape love or something? The Han Maru who showed the epitome of distrust towards humanity didn't seem like the same person in front of him right now.

"You don't do that these days, do you?"

"Of course not. I've gotten myself together. I regretted my actions a lot after thinking about your words for a while. I think you were right. Maybe I was in a rebellious phase."

"Yes, everyone makes mistakes like that. What's important is to repent after you made a mistake."

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course. There aren't people who do not change. People are bound to change if they strive to change for the better. I mean, you've changed and are leading a better life."

"That's true."

He laughed his ass off when he got a call from his friend yesterday about how he trampled the hands of his driver, but there wasn't a need to reveal that right now.

"So don't avoid my eyes when we meet eyes in the future. You make me all sorry."

"I thought you hated me."

"I was a little tired back then. I should have talked to you about it slowly. I don't know why I did that either. You're such a decent kid too."

Maru turned around, telling him good luck with the shoot. Giwoo touched his lips. It didn't seem like Maru was planning a smokescreen tactic. Giwoo had seen that stupid smile several times before. It looked similar to the smiles of his idiotic peers that wanted to befriend him. Where did that chilling gaze go?

If that was an act though - Giwoo opened himself up to that possibility. Maru might have set up traps in a place he didn't know. Pushing other peoples into these 'plays' with the excuse to 'get close' was his specialty.

"What a cocky bastard."

He changed his mind when he saw that smiling face. There was no way Maru truly wanted to get close to him. They say the devil comes with a smile. He could not be fooled by that spiteful face.

"Giwoo, did something happen?"

Giwoo turned around. He saw Yeseul standing there with a worried face. Annoyance surged within him. Who are you to worry about me?

"Did you want something to happen to me?"

"N-no, I didn't mean it like that."

Yeseul looked at him without any will to fight back or put up her defenses. She was like a puppy being punished. Yes, this should be the correct way. Weak and stupid people had to look up to those higher up with this kind of attitude.

He felt like the humiliation he got from Maru was being washed away. Giwoo immediately put on a pleasant smile.

"Sorry about that, I couldn't hold back my emotions because I was too absorbed in the script. You know, right? My character has a really heavy mood these days."

"Is that what it was? I almost thought you were angry at me. But Giwoo, you're really good at acting. I think you're improving day after day."

"I'm not that good. In fact, Yeseul, you are better than me. The director doesn't give you any comments. From how I still get an earful, I still have a long way to go."

"That's because the director expects a lot from you."

Seeing Yeseul doing her best to buy his goodwill, Giwoo felt like everything had returned to the way it should be. His position, his authority, his feelings... if there was one flaw....

"Giwoo, let's go."

Giwoo looked at Maru in the distance before turning around. If an opportunity came, he would definitely do something about him.

* * *

The prickly gaze on him disappeared. Maru scraped the back of his upper teeth with his tongue. Giwoo's reaction was outside of his expectations. He thought that Giwoo would at least be repenting, but he realized something from his gaze and expression just now. Forget guilty conscience, he was gritting his teeth to get revenge.

Maru opened his notepad. He brought his pen tip to the place where Kang Giwoo's name was written: not friendly; no evidence suggests he has changed; it is unclear why he looked good until now.

In this situation where he couldn't clearly remember the basis of his past actions, the only thing he could do was to re-analyze his own relationships with those around him. Resolving the acting club's matters efficiently instead of pursuing a warm ending, driving Geunseok into a corner, not protecting Yurim. There were many other incidents where he put up a wall around his relationships in the past and thought about benefits and losses so meticulously. How much has he changed since then?

He chose Giwoo in order to calculate the changes that occurred within him. Giwoo was someone who enjoyed bullying the defenseless. He even made his own group and gave out orders. He was just that meticulous and evil.

While he was a bad boy, Maru believed that he should have changed now that he knew his wrongs, and he 'believed' in him to have changed himself. Before he discovered the disparity in his history, this was the thought he had when looking at Giwoo: he just goes a little too far with his pranks, but he's not a bad kid at heart.

That thought made a chill run down behind his back. As to why that happened, he did not know.

He did not think that Giwoo was a bad kid. Since he was young, it was natural for him to make mistakes, and he deeply believed that people grew up that way. What generated such beliefs in him? He thought about that fundamental question. Maru kept asking and answering his own questions. He thought that it was natural for him to believe in others because he believed in others before he came back to life.

Then what was the identity of this sense of disgust? Why did he find it so terrifying that he believed in Giwoo?

He felt like emotions were split into two within himself and were at a war; they were tearing each other apart. The distrust and blind faith towards humans created a sharp conflict.

-There's a storm in your heart.

The masked man had spoken.

"Don't you know something about this? I feel really confused right now. Emotions I don't know where they came from are surging inside me. I have a strong urge that I cannot trust Kang Giwoo at all. I believed in him. He's a partner that keeps this drama together after all. I believed that he had repented and changed. But the Giwoo I just saw tried to fool me. He probably thinks that he glossed over it quite well, but I saw it clearly. I don't think that was a mistake. It's closer to conviction. I'm sure he's still repeating that trashy behavior."

-I have nothing to tell you. However, there is something I do want to ask.

"What is it?"

-Just like that woman said, is there really a need to be so hung up on your past? It's the past you forgot after all.

"Just because I forgot it doesn't mean that it disappeared."

-Don't you think that the fact that you forgot about it means that it's not important?

"Maybe, but the more I dig into this, the stranger it becomes."

-Mr. Han Maru.

"Yes?"

-Don't try too hard. The waves of forgetfulness are not something that human strength can hold back. I also tried my best before not to forget, to transmit to you as much as I can. But it didn't work. After I painfully saw for myself that it's useless, I didn't know what's right or wrong anymore. I'm tired of watching, and I might be tired of getting tired.

It wasn't the energetic voice of the masked man. His voice sounded vain as though he had seen the end of the world. It was the skepticism of one who had all of his expectations betrayed, the resignation of someone who had lost hope, and the vanity where even despair felt like a luxury. The masked man laughed dryly.

"I will not become tired."

-Everyone was like that.

"I will not forget."

-There is no one who forgot because they wanted to.

Maru could hear a clock ticking noise from somewhere. The masked man's sigh could be heard on top of it.

-Mr. Han Maru.

"Yes."

-Maybe it's a good thing to forget. Just one more time, just this one time - perhaps it's these decisions within you that caused the problem to become so big in the first place. Perhaps you became unable to forget what you need to forget because of the sin of not letting go when you need to let go.

"Why do I need to let go? Is it absolutely necessary that I forget?"

-There is a word that everyone talks about in the world, 'flow'. Think about it. Think about whether being born again is according to or against that 'flow'. Mr. Han Maru. The reason you find your memories strange and why you can't understand your past actions is maybe because that's just how the flow is. Perhaps God is setting right what's twisted and wrong. You are a lucky person. You got to live again, didn't you? So why don't you give up on suspecting? It'll make your life a lot easier just as that woman said.

Tick- the ticking noise stopped. The masked man stayed silent for a bit before making his cheerful laugh again.

-Well, that's how it is. Mr. Han Maru, don't think too much. You've done plenty well until now. I know because I've been watching you from the side. Maybe it's not a bad thing to forget about it now.

The moment he heard those words, Maru felt like everything became meaningless. Why was there a need to make himself tired by suspecting other people? What was the benefit in comparing his previous actions to his current ones? After that ticking noise stopped, he felt like his head became numb. He felt like it wouldn't be so bad to forget about it.

Just then....

He remembered a hum, it was a song he had heard a long time ago. It was a familiar humming song that he had heard not in this life, but before he died. His hands clenched tighter. He grabbed the notepad he had half-let go. He tied a rope around the scattering memories.

"Is forgetting, really according to that 'flow'?"