

Once Again 821

Chapter 821. Sequence 9

Perhaps this was what it felt like to have unexpected fun. Maru felt rather proud as he looked at the decorative strings that he had hung up. Even in his previous life, he was someone far from being involved with events. He was the type to think that a meal was better than a flower that is bound to wither and that a pair of socks were better than a balloon that is bound to deflate. Although he scheduled date courses and even looked up places with good night scenery when he was in a relationship, he had never brought props and decorated his own place to set up a mood. Looking back, he was definitely not an interesting man. He once again thanked the woman who accepted a man who had never given her a bouquet.

It had been around 10 minutes since Sora went into the room, but it looked like she wasn't going to come out anytime soon. She probably needed more time to get her thoughts together than to fix her makeup. He pretended to not hear her sniffing as he hung the mirror ball on the ceiling. When the mirror ball, which needed four battery cells to operate, was turned on, his living room became pretty colorful. Decorating his living room was pretty fun. He even put together the letters on the wall. 'Congratz On Film Release'. It was a rather old-fashioned text. He didn't have any talent in creating text for sure. Just as he was staring at the light emitted by the mirror ball with the lights turned off, he saw Sora leave the room and laugh immediately.

"What are you doing, seonbae?"

"What else? I'm testing out the stuff we bought."

"You seemed to find it such a bother, but it looks like you actually like it, huh."

"I didn't know because I've never done stuff like this before, but it doesn't feel half-bad. It's pretty fun to see the mood change just because of a few lights. I've always wondered why they decorated places when people gather, and now I kinda get it."

"You've never done something like this before? Don't you do it when you call friends for a birthday party or something?"

"I don't like things being messy. Also, it's such a bother if I think about all the clean-up I have to do later."

"I'm sure the people around you must have scoffed at you when you were a snot-nosed child. Why play with something like that?; So childish, why bother playing around when you're going to have to clean up later – saying things like that. Did you even have toys when you were young?"

"I also had a time when I played innocently like a child. Though, I turned out like this right now."

"Have you never held any events for Gaeul-unni? Even small ones?"

"I was just thinking about it, but no, I don't think so."

"Just what the heck are you planning to do on your anniversary?"

“I was going to eat together at my house like usual, sit down on this sofa, and talk over some coffee. If the weather’s good, we’d take a walk outside and watch a play together. If it’s raining, we’d put on a movie at home and drink over some beer, I guess?”

“I can’t say I’m well-versed in romantic relationships, but I know that I shouldn’t be doing it like you.”

“That’s why I plan to buy some flowers. Also, change out some lights while I am at it.”

Maru turned on the living room lights and turned off the switch of the mirror ball. Sora’s two eyes were revealed under the lights, and they were clean.

“Do you feel okay now?”

“Was I ever not okay?”

“I saw a woman who entered that room crying about 20 minutes ago, but it seems like she went somewhere because she’s busy.”

“If it’s about her, she said she had an appointment and left. You probably won’t be able to see her in the future. She’s a very busy woman.”

“That’s a pity. It’s quite rare to see her, so I wanted to take a photo with her.”

“What kind of terrible thing are you talking about?”

From the looks of her, it seemed that the emotional Sora that cried had hidden herself deep in her heart. Maru was worried that she might still be sobbing, but it turned out that he was worried for nothing. If she was still crying, he would have seriously considered running away. Also while calling Ando to come to his place.

“If it starts at 3, I think we should eat lunch before thinking about leaving.”

“I thought about this during high school as well; I think you’re quite thorough when it comes to getting your meals. You never skip your meals, do you?”

“That’s my only motivation in life. I have less energy whenever I miss a meal. What are you going to do about lunch?”

“What were you planning on eating?”

“For me, I was just going to eat what I have at home.”

“Then I guess all you need to do is to put out another set of cutlery.”

“You know, I’m afraid of those words the most. You must know how hard it is to put another set of cutlery on the table. There’s nothing more flabbergasting than that for housewives, you know?”

“You know how housewives feel?”

Sure I do – Maru inwardly replied. There was a time he took home a colleague he got close to while working as a driver. He texted ‘you just have to put three sets of cutlery on our table’ to her, and Maru had to get an earful that night. His wife, who was fuming to the top of her head, started preaching to him about how men of this nation must know the meaning of ‘putting another set of cutlery on the

table.' Ever since then, he never invited anyone to his house. Even if he had to, he resolved that he would make do with delivery food.

"Do you cook for yourself?"

Sora asked various things at the table: about how he tasted his food, what side dishes he made, as well as what kind of food men liked.

"Are you planning to make a lunchbox for Ando or something?"

"Ando-oppa left his parent's house to live by himself. He doesn't seem to be getting proper food because he's busy finding a job and doing part-time jobs. If I make him some side dishes at least, he can make do with microwave rice."

"You're so devoted."

"Whose fault do you think this is?"

"You're saying it's because of the advice I gave you?"

"Of course. You were the one who told me to try pushing and pulling back then. I tried, and it didn't work. In fact, he keeps trying to run away. When I tried assaulting him just like you told me to, he would get all serious whenever I touch his hand. If there are some things I realized, it's that pushing him away is definitely no good and that I should keep pulling. If I make him some side dishes, wouldn't he be grateful whenever he eats at least?"

"I'm sure he feels plenty grateful even now."

"Who? Ando-oppa, you mean?"

Maru nodded.

"Then the least he could do is to hold my hand."

"Try understanding him. I'm sure he has a lot on his mind."

"I have a lot on my mind too."

"Yes, I'm sure you do."

"Whose side are you on?"

"You want me to be on your side?"

"No but still."

Maru set out some rice and side dishes on the table. Sora ate some seasoned vegetables and exclaimed.

"This is unexpectedly good."

"I've been cooking by myself for ages. I'd be in trouble if it wasn't good."

"Do you think Ando-oppa likes this kind of thing too?"

“I’m pretty sure there are rarely any people in this country who would hate vegetables seasoned with sesame oil, you know? If you have ground pepper paste on top of that, then it’s game over.”

“Teach me how to make this later. No, wait. I should get permission from Gaeul-unni first because I’m going to be borrowing you for a bit.”

“Am I an object to you?”

He smiled as he ate. Sora did not speak a word during their meal. Maru did not speak either since the silence wasn’t too awkward. After they finished lunch, Sora started fiddling with her phone.

“She gave me permission.”

“I have to admit that the speed you work is fast.”

“I explained to her the situation briefly, and she gave me the okay immediately. She’s a really cool woman alright. She even cheered me on. How does it make sense that you haven’t given a girl like her some flowers even once? She’s so lovely!”

“I did give her a couple’s ring.”

“See? That’s why you’re no good. How can you compare a chunk of metal and a flower? Women might say that flowers are a waste of money and a pain to deal with, but they always like it when they receive them, you know?”

“So, why is someone who’s so knowledgeable about love still here and not chasing after Koo Ando?”

“You really have a knack for making people feel speechless. Geez.”

Maru had to hold her back from washing the dishes. She might think that he might be treating her like a guest, but he actually could not let someone not well-versed in housework wash the dishes. If she didn’t do a great job, it would be greasy, and he could not tolerate that.

“It’s not bad to eat and chat. Maybe Gaeul-unni doesn’t have a lot of complaints,” Sora said in a whiny voice.

She probably felt frustrated because she was blocked off by the wall of love after having her way throughout her whole life. The fact that she was the one who had to solve it probably bothered her even more.

“I can’t really call it customer care, but don’t think too much about it. You know that Ando’s the serious type.”

“He should be light-hearted at times.”

“Think about it in a good way. It just goes to show you how deeply he’s thinking about his relationship with you. There’s no one who thinks twice about using disposable gloves just once.”

“So I’m at least better than disposable gloves?”

“By about twice I guess.”

“You always have to ruin it at the very end.”

“I can only handle listening to other people’s worries by having fun like this.”

He finished washing the dishes and turned around. Sora was staring at him.

“What?”

“I did feel it when I met you before we shot the film, but I’m even more sure of it now. You really changed a lot, seonbae.”

“In a good way? Or in a bad way?”

“I don’t know if it’s a good thing or not, but I am sure that you became a kinder person. The sharp aura about you that you had during high school is much fainter now. You don’t have that ‘meh, it’s not related to me, so I’ll stay out of it’ vibe either.”

“That’s the power of love.”

Sora stroked her arms, saying that she got goosebumps hearing that. It may have sounded like a joke to her, but he wasn’t entirely wrong when he said that it was the power of love. He chose his lover and had to give up on a lot of things in turn. He accepted the restraint of the eternally looping lives, so listening to an immature junior’s love life was nothing. As he had gotten ahold of the one person who would be the love of his life whether it was in the past, the present, or the future, he had no qualms about interfering with other people’s matters. In fact, he wanted to interfere. Before, he always looked for a stable path and tried to walk down the path, but his objective right now was to escape his current path after all. If he kept causing small happenings, it might eventually cause something big, so he planned to not avoid the things he got involved in as much as possible. He was going to do everything while trying to protect Han Gaeul’s life so that the flap of a butterfly could eventually become a storm.

“Ando’s coming today, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Do you think you can look him in the face?”

“Of course. Do you think I’m a kid or something? I’m going to act totally normal, so don’t be surprised.”

“I hope you can do that. I don’t want to feel awkward just because you act needlessly awkward or close to him.”

“Like I said, I’m not a kid, you know?” Sora guaranteed while raising her chin in the air.

Chapter 822. Sequence 9

Maru saw banners when he drove past Gangbyeon station. After engraving into his eyes the promotion text ‘Rediscovering Everyday Life’ for the Ttukseom Film Festival, he turned his car to the parking lot. The film festival was held in a movie theater near the station. It seemed to be held alongside commercial films, and there were many visitors who were looking at the souvenir stalls for the festival in a curious manner.

“There are about 20 minutes left, so let’s look around.”

The film started at 3, but there was a meeting 30 minutes before that. Maru was told that he was going to meet the host and preview the questions they were going to be asked prior to the event. Maru bought a ballpoint pen and a t-shirt. Apparently, the sales would go towards supporting the production of indie films. As he waited while looking at the leaflets, people started arriving. Daemyung, Bangjoo, and Aram were the ones to arrive first, and Ando and Hyungseok followed suit. They entered the theater.

“You must be director Kang Sora, right?”

Sora started talking to a woman wearing horn-rimmed glasses and eventually waved at him. Maru handed his leaflet to Hyungseok before walking over.

“First, you two should come on the stage once the film ‘Starting Point’ finishes airing. We can’t have any disturbance in the audience seats, so we placed you two in row A. Even if it’s a little uncomfortable, please be understanding.”

The woman who introduced herself as Shin Gyeongah continued speaking as she showed the question sheet,

“As a whole, the audience will be the one asking you questions, but I’m going to start things off by asking this question. It will depend on your talking skills, director, but there are times when it becomes too awkward because the audience is too quiet.”

“I guess it will be quite embarrassing if no one asks anything.”

“I’m just saying that it’s a possibility. People are interested in this to the point that the tickets sold out, so I probably don’t need to worry. Just take it easy. Think of it as talking to your friends. However, if you do encounter any sensitive questions that you cannot answer, please give me a signal; I’ll try to go to the next question.”

“I want to get questions that will trouble me. Obvious questions and obvious answers are boring.”

“I’m glad that you think that way. We’re thinking that we should do it for 30 minutes, and it can be 50 minutes max. There’s a film we’re airing after that, so we have to be thorough on time keeping.”

Shin Gyeongah gave him a question sheet while saying that he should think of answers beforehand. There were separate questions for the actor and the director. Shin Gyeongah left, saying that they should meet again after the film.

“Seonbae, are there any questions you don’t want to answer?”

“No.”

“I don’t have any either. Looks like this will go without a hitch.”

Sora, who was speaking while looking at the question sheet, suddenly turned left a little. She looked very unnatural.

“What is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you sneaking towards the left?”

“Me?”

Sora looked at him while staring at him as though to ask what he meant before turning to the right this time. She looked suspicious no matter how he looked at her. Maru turned around. Ando was right behind him. He was talking to Hyungseok, and he didn't look like he minded what was going on here.

“Are you doing that because you don't want to meet eyes with Koo Ando?”

“It's not like that. Do you take me for a kid?”

She's not a kid or so she claims. Maru took a large stride to the left. Sora, who was using his body as a shield, quickly switched places. She stood right in front of him and looked everywhere while looking like nothing had happened.

“You're not a kid?”

Sora did not reply. A notice went up on an LED matrix display saying that the film was about to start. Sora quickly ran into the 6th screen room.

“Where's Sora?” Ando asked.

Maru told him that she went inside first before going towards the 6th screen room. He sat down on seat A8 just as he was told beforehand. Next to him, Sora kept glancing backwards.

“Where's Ando-oppa?”

“Row G.”

“That's far.”

“Should I switch places with him?”

“No. Did I ask you to?”

“I just asked since you seem so anxious. Did you change tactics? Or do you suddenly feel embarrassed to see his face?”

“Hello? I'm completely fine, you know? I'm just being considerate of him because he might feel anxious if he meets eyes with me.”

“Who's being considerate of who now?”

She didn't even retort as though she didn't have an excuse at this point. The way she didn't speak a word and kept looking forward made it seem like she was going on a silent riot until the end of the film. Did she have a change of heart after being by herself in the bedroom? It didn't look like she had decided to stop being a tomboy and become a prim and proper lady instead. Maru turned around to look at Ando sitting in a higher row. Ando jutted his head out as though he was asking if something was wrong. Maru mouthed 'nothing' back to him.

“Is Ando-oppa looking at me?”

“No, he’s fixed on the leaflet.”

Sora just locked her fingers together and fidgeted with her index fingers. She didn’t seem to like this situation. To Sora, who had solved all her life problems until now without getting stuck, Koo Ando must be a tough equation without a formula to solve it.

“It’s going to start soon. Calm down for now.”

“Alright, I should keep my private matters aside for now.”

The 6th screen room, which had been completely empty, was now filled with people. Maru felt rather grateful that the tickets sold out despite the fact that it was announced that Sooil won’t be participating in the GV. Sora was also quite dazed when she looked at the all 120 seats filled with people.

“I suddenly feel nervous.”

“Don’t slip up when you receive questions later. Ando’s watching.”

“I swear your mouth will be your downfall one day.”

After notifying the audience of the emergency exits, the room turned dark. Along with the sound of a motor turning, the screen masking began. When the aspect ratio was set, the video appeared on the screen. The words ‘Starting Point’ appeared in the middle of the screen in calligraphic writing. It felt quite different from viewing it on a monitor.

The film began with dragging a sleeping bag up the mountain. He was reminded of Bangjoo, who suffered in Sooil’s stead inside the sleeping bag. Thanks to him, the shoot became a lot easier. The moment he opened the sleeping bag after realizing that the friend he thought to be dead was still alive, the audience burst out groaning and exclaiming. It wasn’t surprising since a bloody Sooil appeared. The person sitting behind him whispered ‘what, is he already dead?’ in a worried voice.

The scene he shot with Sooil over several takes began. He, holding a sharp stone, was telling Sooil to die because it was too late, and Sooil, begging to spare him inside the sleeping bag, came out alternately on the screen. It was a pretty good scene even when he watched it again. Back then, he really had the impulse to kill him, and Sooil probably had the desire to live as well. The day they watched the finished product together, Sooil shook his head, saying that he almost ended up crying back then.

The moment he smashed down the stone towards the camera, the screen turned dark for a moment before switching to a different scene. It was the scene where the two of them drank together in a room. Maru carefully looked at the reactions of the audience. The switch of scenes could be considered unkind towards the audience. Some people in the audience tilted their heads in confusion because the bloody Sooil was suddenly talking like nothing had happened, but the majority seemed to have realized that time was pulled back and focused on the plot.

“Look at that redness on your face. People must think that it’s makeup, won’t they?” Sora said in a small voice.

Perhaps thanks to the fact that they had some soju before the shoot, the drunk acting turned out very nicely. It was then followed by quarreling with Sooil and smashing Sooil’s head with an empty bottle.

The moment the empty bottle hit Sooil's head, the screen turned dark again. This kind of switching was shown off before, so it probably didn't confuse the audience anymore.

Two men wearing school uniforms were sitting under the street lamps. The orange-colored lights above their heads faintly spread out. The screen looked very pretty, as expected of the location which made Sora exclaim the moment she saw it. The combination of the street lights and the river was cool even when seen through a monitor, and it looked several times better now that it was on screen. From how Sora was smiling in satisfaction, she also seemed to like the final product.

Through an ordinary conversation between the two characters, it showed how the two became friends. The audience probably now understood that the two men had become friends due to a coincidence and were brought to ruin through a coincidental accident as well. At the same time, they must have understood that the slightly twisted beginning of their relationship was what inevitably lead to the murder as well.

The film ended with Maru looking at the sky in a tranced manner while holding a reddened stone in one hand. In the last scene, they used a borrowed light that was a similar color to street lamps. The color temperature was slightly different, but it was adjusted in post.

After the film ended, the lights turned back on again. Along with a round of applause, the doors at the front opened before some microphones came in. It was time for the GV.

Chapter 823. Sequence 9

After the microphones were set up, Shin Gyeongah said hello to the audience.

"I'm Shin Gyeongah, your host for today. I'll be glad if you remember my name, but not many of you probably will, right? If anyone remembers my name at the end of the GV, I'll buy them a drink."

Shin Gyeongah refreshed the atmosphere after checking the microphones before giving a signal. Sora took a short breath before standing up. She looked at the large screen and went forward before turning around. A hundred pairs of eyes all looked at her. She liked getting attention from young and would smile when she got it, but now that she was facing hundreds of eyes, the muscles around her mouth stiffened up and did not move. When she barely managed to put on a smile, she thought that she was going to spasm. She took glances at Maru next to her. He was looking at the audience like a lively fish that had just jumped into the sea. It was probably the leisure of a man who had lived on the stage every day. She clasped her hands behind her and pinched the soft part between her thumb and her index finger with her fingernails. The sharp pain buried the sense of nervousness.

"Would you two please introduce yourselves?"

Sora put the microphone against her mouth and spoke,

"I'm Kang Sora, the producer of 'Starting Point.'"

"Yes, that was director Kang Sora."

"Hello. I am Han Maru, and I played Jinho in the film. I thought there would be a lot of empty seats today since the time is a little early, but seeing how it's full just makes me think about how impactful Mr. Yoo Sooil's help was. If possible, I would love to have called him here, but he's a busy guy, so I wasn't

able to do that. I'd also love to have a life-size cutout of him next to me, but I refrained since I felt like I would look ugly. Aren't I pretty decent without him here?"

Someone shouted 'you're good looking' from the audience. Maru immediately ran over to the lady who said those words before giving her something from his pocket. It seemed to be a piece of chocolate.

"You were way too obvious, but that's enough. Don't forget to do it again in 10 minutes. You just have to say 'you're handsome' in a really loud voice, okay? Here's your compensation."

His whispering voice was caught by the microphone. Seeing his reaction to her words, the lady who received the chocolate covered her face and stomped her feet. Sora saw that the awkward eyes of the audience were now focused on Maru. The couple that was looking forward with an indifferent gaze started smiling, and the four ladies at the left, who seemed to be friends, kept shouting 'you're handsome.' Maru returned to his place while reacting to those words before saying 'stop' in a small voice. It seemed like a well-thought-out skit.

Sora wondered when he had the time to prepare something like this. She only told him that there was a GV today a few hours ago. Sora clicked her tongue when she looked at Maru exchanging looks with the people in the audience and sometimes even winking at them. She even wanted to pay him to learn that skill to liven up the mood and even react to that woman's spontaneous shout.

Shin Gyeonah also seemed relieved to see the atmosphere a little loose as she put on a relaxed smile and continued with the program,

"Before we get questions from the audience, I'll ask you a question since I'm personally curious. I heard that you haven't received any specialized education related to video production, director. Am I right?"

"Yes. I am studying by myself; I have never taken lessons related to it or go to college for it. I do want to focus on it and study it one day, but for the time being, I'm doing it as a hobby."

"I find that amazing. People who are interested in film production know how difficult it is. Isn't it a little too difficult to enjoy it as a hobby?"

"There definitely are difficulties. The first one is money. With equipment, the cost of renting for a day or two isn't that expensive but using professional actors is. That's why I always strive to be an amateur and to leave it as something like a social activity. Actually, film production can be done on a single phone. Of course, the quality wouldn't be that great, but don't you think that that's also a charm of indie film? The quality of a film doesn't entirely come from great production skills."

"I think so too. But isn't there something surprising about this work?"

"You mean Mr. Yoo Sooil's participation?"

Shin Gyeonah nodded. She also said beforehand that this would be the thing that the audience wanted to know about the most. Why did Yoo Sooil participate in the work of a nameless director? Not only that, he had to look like a corpse while doing so.

"If I had to cast him officially, I wouldn't have been able to bear the costs. He is an expensive person after all."

Sora realized that her mouth had gotten a lot more relaxed. The residual sense of tension in fact made her slightly excited. She no longer felt pricked by those gazes. In fact, she now had the leisure to make out their facial expressions.

“I met him due to a complete coincidence. It was an occasion to celebrate the opening of a restaurant. I happened to have the script with me, and I asked him to participate as a joke of sorts, but he actually gave the okay. Of course, I don’t think that’s the only reason he decided to participate.”

“Are there other reasons?”

“First, he is friends with Mr. Han Maru here. I mean, who would want to help if a complete stranger asked you for help? Also, the most important thing is that the script was good. I was in charge of the production, but the one who created the script, the backbone of our work, is writer Park Daemyung. He’s sitting over there.”

Sora pointed at Daemyung who was sitting in the middle. She wanted to boast that a writer who wrote such a good piece was right here. The people around him gave him glances and some even applauded. Daemyung seemed at a loss on what to do because of the sudden attention and just nodded at those people.

“I think that a good piece attracted a good actor. Mr. Yoo Sooil also decided on his participation after reading the script on the spot. If he didn’t like it, I’m sure he wouldn’t have decided to do it.”

“There are definitely actors who would lower their guarantees to work on something that they think is good.”

“For attractive works, I think it’s valuable just to participate in it. Money becomes secondary. Of course, I’m not saying that I’m a supporter of passion pay^[1]. I’m saying that actors just get the impulse to want to do it. I also thought that I wanted to produce it when I heard the synopsis from the writer. I spent my weekends, work leaves, and even my own money to shoot it. It’d be great if the film gives me a profit but even without it, the shoot was fun. The other staff and actors probably felt the same as me.”

“How was it for you, Mr. Han Maru?”

Maru raised the microphone.

“Honestly speaking, things were so busy that I didn’t even have time to feel anything. We did the shoot of a 25-minute movie across just two days. However, there was a great sense of satisfaction when I heard the cut signal for the last scene: Ah, I’ve shot a great piece with great people. I was convinced that I created a proper story. There’s nothing better than that as an actor.”

Maru spoke in a slow manner after putting away his prankster attitude. His eyes were faintly smiling, his voice was quite low, and his calm gestures seemed to convey his genuine feelings. Just from his words, one could tell that he was truly satisfied and truly happy when the shoot was over. However, Sora had to hold herself back by biting on her lower lip as she listened to him. That guy couldn’t be any more shameless. He was speaking as though he was recreating each scene on the spot, and it was incredibly exaggerated.

Bangjoo’s dangerous role as Sooil’s double in that sleeping bag, a passionate director who did not tolerate a single mistake and repeatedly took cuts, the use of alcoholic drinks for the sake of acting – he

wasn't entirely wrong; however, Bangjoo was not in danger inside that sleeping bag, the reason she kept taking repeated shots was because they had time left over, and above all, those two drank because they wanted to, not for the sake of acting. If Maru worked in insurance marketing, he would probably be the agent of the month, no, the agent of the year. Maru finished his fleshed-out piece of drama by saying that it was a meaningful shoot.

"I can imagine what the set was like just from your words."

"It became unforgettable memories."

Sora glanced at him, who was showing with his whole body that he had gone back to those times. Maru slightly turned his head before winking. This guy was really shameless.

"Anyway, it's time to talk to the audience about this film. Can you raise your hand if you have any questions?"

About ten or so people raised their hands. Some of them were picked and they asked questions. The questions were just like the expected questions they got before the film was screened. Sora answered the ones she could and gave Maru the microphones for the ones that he had to answer. This was a short film, and it wasn't like the story contained a profound meaning or anything, so there weren't a lot of questions about the content itself.

"Are you of the mind that there is no such thing as a coincidence, director?"

That was the only thing worth discussing. Sora looked at her watch. It had only been 20 minutes. It seemed that the audience didn't have any questions for a nameless director and an unknown actor. While she had expected this, she was put in a tight spot because no one in the audience was willing to participate any longer. It didn't look like she could expect anything from Maru's talking skills either. He was signaling her that he wouldn't be able to do any more good. Just as she thought that it wouldn't be a bad idea to end it early, she saw someone enter through the entrance. Some people in the audience turned around when they heard the door opening. That was when it started. People started cheering in an instant. The wave of exclamations that started from the back soon reached the front seats. Everyone turned around and screeched.

"Sorry I'm late. I wanted to come earlier, but the thing I was doing ended a little late."

Sora felt complex when she saw Sooil who stood there as though it was natural. He said he wouldn't be able to make it because he was busy. Maru shook hands with him naturally. He didn't look surprised at all. In fact, he knew that this was going to happen.

"Weren't you supposed to be busy?"

"The guy standing next to you told me to come if possible. My previous schedule ended earlier than expected, so I came here to give you guys some face."

Sooil got a microphone from Maru and said hello. The level of applause was on a completely different level from before. Everyone took out their phones and shot photos and videos. Sora felt a little disappointed that those people were leaning forward like they were in a concert after sitting down calmly all this while, but what else could she do? Yoo Sooil was here. Actors were definitely above directors.

The members of the audience, who had been quiet until now, raised their hands and started asking numerous questions. They asked questions unrelated to the film itself as though they suddenly became curious about everything. The GV turned into a fan meeting in an instant. She couldn't say anything either because she was afraid that she might buy the ire of the audience if she tried to stop them. The entire cinema seemed to have heard the news of his arrival as people started peeking inside the 6th room. Even the staff, who were supposed to be blocking them, had come inside. In the end, Shin Gyeongah took over the microphone.

"I hope that was a meaningful time for the audience, the director, and the actors. We'll end the GV for 'Starting Point' here. Those of you who want to take photos, please come forward."

As soon as those words ended, a long line formed in front of Sooil. People even rushed in from the outside, causing the theater to become total chaos. Sora was swept up by the wave before barely managing to leave through the exit. She looked for Maru, who was with her, and found him next to Sooil. He was taking the phones of the audience and taking photos with them.

"He's not going anywhere, so take your time. Oh, give me your phone."

It wouldn't be strange for him to get upset at the difference in treatment, but Maru smiled and volunteered to be the cameraman. Watching him from afar, Sora thought that he was really unpredictable.

[1] As explained before, this is when you're doing something out of 'passion' and don't actually get paid.

Chapter 824. Sequence 9

People rushed over, held out their phones towards the actor standing in front of the screen, and kept hitting the shutter button. The artificial shutter noise even buried people's voices. Amidst the ear-piercing noise, Daemyung looked at the screen that had turned white. 30 minutes ago, the story that he had written was brought to life on that screen. His thoughts became words, and his words became a video. Now that he actually showed it off in public, he couldn't stay calm. From the moment the lights turned off, he clutched his hands as though to pray. He felt like he was sitting there without clothes on. After the film began, he was more concerned about the reactions of the audience than the screen itself. He felt a sense of guilt when he saw a guy two seats in front of him take out a phone and start playing games, but he sighed in relief when he saw the person to the right side exclaim and nod. When the film ended, he almost ended up going up to that person and thanking them.

"I'm so tired."

"Why are you tired when all you did was watch a film?"

"Maybe it's because I was too focused on everything besides the film."

Aram had a look at Daemyung's face before leaving, saying that she was going to buy some drinks. She didn't forget to snatch Bangjoo by the arm as she left.

"Congratulations, writer. It's your first successful piece."

Sora had left the stage.

"Aren't you supposed to be on stage?"

“Everyone’s taking photos with Sooil-oppa. I thought I’d be a nuisance if I stayed there. Maru-seonbae is taking photos for the audience with a smile.”

Maru was lining people up while joking around with them.

“If it had been me, I would’ve left because it would hurt my pride.”

“He’s not the type of guy to concern himself with that.”

“I wish he would. They’re both actors, aren’t they?”

Sora looked at the stage for a while before gesturing at him to leave behind a commemorative photo. They took a photo together with the people flocking in front of the screen as the background.

“It’s going to take quite a while if all of those people want to take photos.”

“Don’t you think it’ll take at least 30 minutes?”

“I think it’ll take more because word has already spread throughout the cinema. Although members of the staff are controlling them, it doesn’t seem like there will be an end in sight if he keeps staying here. I should go ask him when he’s going to leave. We should decide on the time to leave so that we can have the afterparty.”

“Afterparty?”

“We’re going to hold one in Maru-seonbae’s house. We already have everything ready, so all we need to do is to go and drink to our heart’s content. When is Jiyeon-seonbae getting off work?”

“Six at the earliest; seven if she’s late.”

“I guess we should just tell her to come after.”

It seemed that she had already come up with plans. Daemyung placed his two hands on the backrest before looking down at the stage. He could no longer remember the suffering he went through when he was looking down at a piece of blank paper with a pen in hand. Only a sense of accomplishment from having done something together with other people swept him away. It finally felt real to him that his first work had ended. He felt thankful for everything, whether it was the solitary time he had during writing or the shoot he did with everyone.

“Thanks for being in charge of the production. I wouldn’t have been able to make one like that.”

“But of course. Anyone else wouldn’t have done it as well as I have. But if the writing wasn’t good, I wouldn’t have been able to make such a good product. Good work, seonbae. If you write anything else good, please give it to me again. I’ll definitely make the time to shoot it. At that time, let’s try using expensive actors. I had a taste of the Yoo Sooil effect, and I don’t think I can make do with ordinary actors.”

Sora’s eyes were filled with greed as she looked at Sooil on the stage. She seemed to be planning a method to coax him again next time. Sooil would probably have a hard time because he just caught the eyes of a greedy producer. Daemyung said that such a thing wouldn’t happen but still hoped for her to come up with a good plan.

“Are you director Kang Sora?”

A man’s voice interrupted him while he was imagining shooting with multiple famous actors and Maru. Daemyung looked at the man standing in front of Sora. He was wearing gold-rimmed glasses without a lens, a Hawaiian shirt, and a pair of red slippers. Sora first said hello to the middle-aged man with an exotic sense of fashion.

“Yes. I am Kang Sora.”

“You look much younger than when I saw you from afar. Are you still in college?”

“I’m taking a break. I don’t really plan to go back, though. Anyway, what brings you to me?”

“I liked the film quite a lot, so I came to have a talk with the director. I didn’t have the courage to go up to you when you were at the front because of so many people, but thankfully, you came down like this.”

The man’s actions and words were quite cheerful. It probably wasn’t just his clothes that made him look younger than he actually was. Daemyung tried to step away in order to give them more space.

“Hold on. I heard the director introduce you as the writer. Are you the writer who wrote the script for the film?”

“Yes, I did write it.”

“Then let’s have a talk as well. I liked the production style, and I was also rather interested in the lines. Or do you have to attend to something else?”

“No, if it’s about this, we can talk about it any time,” Sora said.

This guest was rather unexpected since the attention of the entire audience was on the actor. Daemyung waited for the man to speak.

“First, allow me to ask the director. What is it that you expected from those two actors?”

“What I expected, huh. Honestly speaking, I wanted the acting skills and fame from Mr. Yoo Sooil and just acting skills from Mr. Han Maru. I mean, how many times would I be able to use actors like them in a low-budget film? Especially since neither I nor the writer has made a name for ourselves.”

“I guess you got that name value at least. You got so many people watching it.”

“He’s a guaranteed success ticket after all.”

“What was the hardest scene to shoot? From the way I see it, I think it should be the last scene, where they talk under the streetlamp.”

Sora clapped.

“That’s right. It was quite a still scene, so there was no room to use dramatic effects, and I had to rely entirely on the actors. I thought about splitting the cuts up into little bits and then editing them later but then I thought that changing the angle several times was no good, so I just faced the camera to their front and did a long take.”

“The actors must have worked hard then.”

“Had it been anyone else, the shoot might have taken longer. It was fortunate that the road didn’t have any cars. If there were people nearby and even cars, I would’ve given up on shooting in that place.”

“I also like how you can see the river behind the streetlamp. What kind of intent did you have by putting the river in?”

“Finding that location was a complete coincidence. In the storyboard, all we had was a streetlamp and a bench beneath it. It was a complete stroke of luck that we found that place. I really liked how the light from the streetlamp touched the dark surface of the river. That was probably the luckiest moment throughout this whole shoot.”

“That feeling of ecstasy when you find a good place to enhance your story is quite indescribable. I know.”

“My words exactly. You know your stuff. Do you have an interest in this field?”

“Not a lot. I just happened to get into it. If I may ask one more thing, what did you find the most disappointing while shooting with the two actors?”

“There was nothing I was disappointed about with regards to the two actors themselves. They are both exceptional after all. They might look lacking in other people’s eyes, but within my scope of work, they were utter perfection. If another pair of actors acted the same characters, they wouldn’t have looked as perfect.”

“Your faith in them is pretty high.”

“They are actors who chose to feature in the film I’m directing. Don’t you think it’s a bigger problem if the director doesn’t fully trust the actors?”

“Many directors tend to say that. Trust the actors and leave them to work by themselves. I think it’s right to an extent. Though, it goes against my ways.”

“Your ways? Are you also a film director?”

“I do it as a hobby of sorts. Though, I don’t know how long I’ll last.”

“You’re just like me then.”

“You’re still pretty young, so I’m sure you’ll create many great pieces in the future. I’ll look forward to it. It’s a great thing to find new pieces worth watching.”

The man reached his hand out and Sora grabbed it. There was a brief tug of war between them. Daemyung smiled awkwardly at the man who turned around to look at him this time. He didn’t have the confidence to speak as fluidly as Sora did. Even if this man asked about the writing, he doubted he could say more than a few words. When he was writing, he thought about all sorts of things to the point that he felt dizzy, but whenever the pen left his hand, his head entered a state of zero gravity. All the words would just start floating in the air and then disappear into nooks and crannies. It was impossible to find the right words and combine them to speak properly. There were no ingredients after all.

“Writer.”

“Yes.”

“You’re very good at writing vivid words. It was really good. I didn’t see many participating pieces with good dialogue this time. The beginning was the best among them all. Honestly speaking, the plot itself was rather bland. I’m not saying it in a bad way. I’m just saying that it’s been used quite a lot, and so it wouldn’t be easy to find something new from that kind of plot. Since it’s a short film, the things you could talk about had to be limited, too. From just the storyline, I thought that the film would be rather unchallenging and quite boring, but I changed my mind after watching it. The lines were alive, so it was good to both my ears and my eyes. There are times when people get greedy for the first line. They look for cool – but now dead – words. I was really satisfied because I couldn’t see any of that at the beginning. I thought that it had to be the work of a veteran; I didn’t know you would be so young.”

Daemyung was at a loss for words because of the continued praise. His face felt quite hot because this man pointed out all the good points about his writing. It was true that he resolved to write lines that weren’t off-putting and didn’t end awkwardly, but he did not realize that he would get so much praise for it. He curled up his toes and thanked him. They then talked about the style of their writing as well as what books they usually read. As the questions weren’t related to the film itself, he was able to answer without a problem.

“It definitely is easier to write inside a quiet small room than a noisy place.”

“I think so too. I tried visiting a café once, and all the music and conversations around me distracted me to no end. After I checked that writing at home is the best for me, I tend to write at home most of the time.”

“It is interesting to watch young people talking and chatting in cafés, but it definitely isn’t the right place to write. But I do know of a really good cat café. You should try visiting it later. I’ll tell you about it. There’s no music and the visitors are all quiet, so it’s quite a good place to write. Though, the kitties that want to play with you can put you in a fix at times.”

The man nodded before taking a step back.

“The two of you look like great partners. The writer is good at writing and the director knows how to make the most out of their work. If you shoot a film again later, please tell me about it. I’ll definitely go watch it.”

Daemyung shook hands with the man. His lips kept curving upwards because of the unexpected compliments. If he didn’t hear that the plot was rather obvious, he might have been grinning from ear to ear right now. The man proceeded to explain his impressions of the film as a whole with various different facial expressions. Having gone through the man’s interpretation, the story sounded completely different. When he pointed out the things that were lacking, he couldn’t help but applaud. This man precisely pointed out the things that Daemyung himself had found after finishing the shoot but just buried in his heart because of the lack of time.

“You don’t have to listen to me so deeply. It’s just a personal thing. When it comes to creative work, the creator is the king. Even if people like me nitpick it all the time, you shouldn’t be shaken by it. It’s a different story if you’re doing a commercial film. but this is entirely yours. I hope you can continue to show me great works in the future.”

The man then turned around to look at the stage. Daemyung also turned around. The flood of people had subsided a little. They were finishing up the photo shoot session and wrapping things up.

“Now there’s finally some room. I should go talk to those people now.”

The man moved first, and Daemyung and Sora moved after him. Sooil, who was smiling while taking a photo with a lady for the last time, took a bow after looking at the man. Maru also acted like he knew the man. Both of the actors knew this man? The man stood in front of the two actors while dragging his slippers.

“We’ve met not too long ago, Mr. Sooil, and as for you, Mr. Maru, it’s been a long while.”

“Long time no see, director.”

Maru grabbed the man’s hand.

Chapter 825. Sequence 9

Sora was confused when the man in the Hawaiian shirt shook hands with Maru, then frowned when she heard the man’s name, and finally widened her eyes when she recalled the name of a certain director from her memories. Park Joongjin. He was the director of ‘Corporate’, a huge film that was released one year ago.

If he was not a different person with the same name, the man in front of her was a bigshot who had achieved the 10 million sales legend. He was also one of the judges for this Ttukseom Indie Film Festival.

“What brings you here?”

“I’m one of the judges. Did you not know?”

“I didn’t know at all. If I had, I would have said hello before and scored some points from you.”

“Maybe I should have told you about it so that I could have said hello beforehand. Actually, the scale of the festival is small plus we didn’t accept applicants for long, so I was quite worried that I may not be able to see a proper piece at all, but I was glad to see two familiar faces in the second film.”

Park Joongjin and Maru seemed to be on pretty close terms. She probed her memories, but there was no case where Maru participated in Park Joongjin’s film. At least, not one that was released in the past four years.

“I had a talk with the director already. She was quite interesting to talk to because she had clear ideas.”

Joongjin smiled at Sora. Sora used her hand to stroke her hair forward and smiled back. Had she known that he was director Park Joongjin, she would have clung to him earlier and asked him to talk some more or if he had anything more to say. She wanted to try and join their conversation, but she only licked her lips because director Park Joongjin never gave her a single glance. She waited for her opportunity to speak after he finished greeting Maru, and her chance finally came. Before Park Joongjin looked away, she spoke as though to interrupt him,

“I watched the movie you made last year five times at the cinema.”

“That’s a waste. Why did you do that? You could have just watched it once.”

“Because it was so refreshing. It was so refreshing that I even forgot about the hot weather. I was really surprised by how you completely hid the leaked documents at the last bit. It seemed like a textbook version of a commercial-oriented cliché.”

“So you caught my signal. That’s how commercial films are supposed to be made. I can’t do art with other people’s money.”

“You have the same thought as me. I believe that if you receive capital, you should create a film that is true to that capital. You have to pursue commercial success and apply your artistic senses in a way that the film’s value wouldn’t be degraded.”

“I see you already have the basics down. You would be able to create a good film if you meet a good investor.”

“Can’t you help me meet that good investor?”

“I’ll have to think about that. This piece was definitely interesting but that had more to do with the script and the skills of the actors than the direction itself. Once you get a grasp of what your capability is like, the people who have money will flock to you.”

“Or I’ll have to use my own money like you did, right?”

Joongjin nodded before putting his palm out. She stared at him because she didn’t know the meaning behind that gesture, so he asked for her phone,

“If it’s not too rude of me, I’d like to give you my number.”

“Really?”

Sora immediately placed her phone on his palm. There was no way she would get a call immediately but just receiving his number was meaningful. Sora took a step back after seeing the number saved on her phone. She had achieved everything she wanted. She had to leave while she could, otherwise, she would lose whatever good intentions she managed to invoke in him.

“Should we switch places if you’re going to talk some more? I’ll buy you two some coffee.”

“That’s good. It’s not something I can talk about while standing.”

Sora led the way after getting permission.

* * *

Sora put down the coffee and sat opposite them. It seemed that she wasn’t planning to leave unless told otherwise. Joongjin also didn’t seem uncomfortable with Sora being here as he didn’t say much.

“I heard through a contact of mine that you’re shooting a drama.”

“I was lucky enough to find a minor character to act as. Are you taking a break since you did a piece last year?”

“Since I had earned enough money, I was planning on eating good things and lazing around for a while, yet maybe it’s because I’ve gotten old, but boredom really got me. I heard that playing golf is a good

way to pass time, but it didn't suit me when I tried it, and as for fishing, it's good when I catch something, but the waiting time is frustrating. The fellow that took me fishing told me that the waiting is the good part about fishing, but I didn't find it that way. Do you like fishing, Mr. Maru?"

"I don't go that often, but I do like it. Though, I'm more interested in the menial things, so I'm more focused on cooking ramyun than I am on fishing. The one who likes fishing is the one next to me, Sooil."

Sooil started praising fishing saying that he'd fall in love with sea fishing if he tried it out.

"I'm the type to get seasick just by looking at a rocking boat, so sea fishing is definitely a no for me. Maybe I'm not suited to being active. I'm used to be a numbers guy since I was young, so I'm really bad when it comes to anything that uses the body."

Joongjin pushed up his glasses with a smile before asking about their recent activities. Sooil said that he was going to shoot a film soon.

"I only have about two shoots a week and I'll be at home otherwise."

"You have nothing else?"

"I'd love to have something, but unfortunately, not yet."

"Then why don't you do a side job with me? You said you didn't have any work, so I'm sure your president will give the okay."

"A side job?"

Joongjin spoke after circling the coffee mug around his nose,

"Shall we do a piece together?"

* * *

Joongjin shook hands with a young man named Bangjoo. He heard that this young man had appeared as an extra when he shot his comeback commercial film a long time ago, and he remembered immediately. It was that cheerful boy next to Maru. He was quite interested in the boy because he said that he dreamed of becoming an action actor, which was quite rare in South Korea. Actors these days focused on expressions and emotions, not action. They considered action as one of the things that they should learn on the side, but this young man staked his life on action. Not only that, he was Joohyun's little brother.

"Let's meet again once you become a good actor."

He said goodbye to the rest of the people before shaking hands with Maru for one last time. When this young man became silent without a single piece of news, he thought that a promising actor had turned his back on the entertainment industry because of life's hardships. When he heard that he had gone to the military, he was even more sure that it was over. There were numerous actors who received attention with great acting but got buried under the sand in an instant. He wanted to use this man once if the opportunity arose since he was attracted by how he did not gamble with his acting skills, but as disappointed as he was, a snapped flower was useless. A flower bud nipped from the stem would rot after all.

He heard news of Maru again in Daehak-ro. Apparently, there was a strange actor who didn't have any notable experience but had a great ticketing power. Maru, who stood on a play stage, proved his worth once again and expressed that he had not lost his senses. It was not the skills of an actor who had let go of everything. He made the audience enamored with his acting as though the two years of military service were not a blank period but a period to hone himself. That day, Joongjin was reminded of the words 'a rotting herring is still a herring.'

However, that was it. There were numerous actors on his level in Daehak-ro. Maru's acting was definitely worth watching and had attractive power, but Joongjin wanted something beyond that. He wasn't shooting a 'film'; he needed an actor for a 'piece.' If all he needed was monetary profit, he could just use obedient puppets, but if he was to do a piece that interested him, he needed actors who would reject the world built by the director or supplement it just as Haejoo did in the past.

There were a few actors that he really liked, but all of them were busy people. Not only that, it was hard to pay their price without getting any investment. He couldn't do 'art' with other people's money, so he had to look for low-cost actors. If that wasn't possible, he was planning to do another commercial film. Maru, who stood on stage, was 'usable' but not in a state where he could work with him. He was just about to forget about him and leave him for the next time when he came across this film.

"I don't know what happened."

Joongjin turned on the radio and stepped on the gas pedal. The Maru on the screen had changed completely from the time he stood on stage. Joongjin saw true desperation in his eyes. The scar of hesitation that he couldn't find when Maru was on stage could be seen from time to time. Leaving aside the acting, he must have experienced a big change himself. He couldn't totally tell through the film, so he went looking for the man himself. After seeing his eyes, Joongjin consolidated his thoughts and decided that he wanted to do a piece with him. What stood there was not a puppet but a man. An interesting man who had become a lot firmer but simultaneously a lot more unstable. That was the kind of man he needed to do a piece with.

Joongjin raised the radio volume. A jazz song he didn't know the name of was coming out of the speakers as though to tell him that the things that were about to happen were going to be interesting.

* * *

It was a sudden offer, but he accepted it without much hesitation. This was a shoot with director Park Joongjin. He would have to make time to do it even if he had other things, so it was unnecessary to show hesitation. On his way back, he thought about what meaning there was in leaving an earnest life when he was bound to die anyway, but his thoughts soon straightened. His life was going to be 45 years long at maximum. Rather than dying a miserable death on the side of the street, wouldn't it be better to die in a luxurious house in Gangnam? Perhaps the whimsical god might allow him to live until the end of his life this time.

He returned home and fed Woofie. As he looked at the pouring dog feed, he was reminded of the film that Joongjin talked about. The director said that he was going to do what he wanted to do since it was not one that had a huge influx of capital. In fact, he even said that he was doing it as a hobby, so there was less pressure on him. He knew that the director had shot several experimental films in the past, and so he asked if it was like that this time as well. Those pieces failed to become popular and failed to be

recognized for anything. The director told him that he was not doing it to spend money but for fun, and therefore, it wasn't entirely experimental. It would probably be something similar to 'Spring Calendar' – he said that in a small voice as though he was revealing a secret.

"Woofie, I'm apparently a lead actor," Maru said as he petted Woofie's head.

Chapter 826. Sequence 10

"He says he's not doing it."

Hong Janghae's eyes twitched. Not doing it? That wasn't the answer he wanted. Until just a while ago, that man said he would wait for the scenario to decide, so what made him refuse all of a sudden? He told the fellow sitting on the sofa to explain.

"He said that he liked the contract terms, but unfortunately, he had something he wanted to do. Apparently, he was going to shoot a movie or something."

"What the hell does that mean? Are we not offering him the chance to shoot a movie?"

"He wanted to create a piece for himself without concerning himself with money."

"Park Joongjin, wasn't that guy obsessed with money?"

"Looking at his actions in the past five years after his comeback, he definitely isn't someone who hates money. I checked to see if he got any other offers for work, but no, other production companies haven't reached out to him. When I looked more into it, it seems like he really plans to shoot a movie out of his own pockets."

"The money printing machine is suddenly talking about doing his own thing, huh."

"I heard that he used to shoot some whimsical movies like this right after shooting commercial movies. I heard that the reason he picked up the megaphone five years ago was to refill his empty bank account."

"He's full of himself. This is why I don't get close to those that are obsessed with art. They're going to crawl back into this field once they run out of money, so why do they even bother straying?"

"Should I try to persuade him otherwise?"

"Probe him about two more times. If that doesn't work, then hand it over to someone else. I do want Park Joongjin, but I'm not so hung up on him. Make a list for me. Find the ones who are decently capable and obsessed with money. I don't want foolish ones that extend the shooting time to rip more human resources fees from me."

"I'll look into it."

Janghae stroked his beard as he calmed himself down. Whenever a wrench was thrown into his flawless plan, an inexplicable vexation perked its head up from deep within him and flipped him over. He only managed to calm himself down after a deep breath as this was a trivial matter. Had he heard that a large-scale contract was called off, he would have picked up his baseball bat and gone to the 'shed.' He would have stuffed dogs into some bags and beat them up to relieve his anger. Sometimes, he missed

that sensation and thought about going to the shed, but he was so busy these days that he didn't have the leisure to go. It was quite unfortunate that he wasn't able to visit the solace of his heart.

"Are things going well in regards to Garam production company?"

"Yes. For now, the loans have gone well. The employees of the production company have been asked to shut up as well. The president-in-name this time is doing quite a good job."

"Put an end to it once it reaches a moderate point. We're bound to get hurt if we try to make too much off of it."

"The joint surety matter has been dealt with as well, so the trial should begin soon. He'll probably get a year and a half. He doesn't have good health nor is the company in a good financial condition, so he should be able to apply for a personal bankruptcy rescue procedure once he's done with his sentence^[1]."

"Redistribute the money as you see fit so that they don't complain. Also, he's going to jail for everyone else, so you have to feed his family at least."

"I'll make sure to handle it properly so that there will be no words about it later."

"The movie scene isn't like before. Distributors are also playing the role of production companies so there is no gap. Until just seven years ago, I was able to rip 10 billion won off of individual investors."

"People are becoming smarter now. That kind of business won't work anymore."

"Is the fellow in charge from back then doing well?"

"He's running a hotel in Taiwan. I just heard that he will come and see you once he comes to Korea in October."

"It's fine as long as he's doing well; he doesn't have to come see me. It doesn't feel bad to know that a member of the family is doing well."

Janghae looked at the YM Group's motto on the wall: Honesty and Charity. As he sat down in this place every single day, he reminded himself not to become honest and not to become charitable. The fact that it was used as a motto meant that it was the ideal, and idealisms didn't exist in real life. What didn't exist had no value. Being obsessed with invaluable stuff was something that uneducated people did. If one under the classification of 'social animals' did not know how disgusting 'honesty' was, then they might as well remove the 'social' part and just become animals. This was why honest people were exploited. Only those that exploited the gaps in the law, the incompleteness of rules, and the dark sides of customary practices could be regarded as having perfectly adapted to society. Janghae was ready to treat capable people like a human and give them love. The person on the sofa, head manager Kim, was very 'humane' in that sense. Humans saved up, while animals spent. Just as society was before, it would continue to be so in the future.

"What's that female journalist doing?"

"She's living a quiet life in that flower shop. I've had some men watch her a few times, and I don't think she'll open her mouth. From how she's continuing to receive psychotherapy, I think she'll be quiet."

“What a pity, that woman. It had been a while since I met a true journalist.”

“She was a pitiful woman who didn’t know how to use her pen properly. If she got her direction right, she would’ve been very successful.”

“That’s just how life is. There are no suspicious activities, right?”

“Yes. I think she has completely cut all ties with journalism.”

“That’s fine then. What can an isolated fellow do? Let’s let her go now.”

“Understood.”

“President Kang is opening up a store soon, so order some congratulatory flowers from that flower shop. We should raise the sales of the pitiful flower shop owner.”

“I’ll have it done.”

He liked people who put in effort but gritted his teeth in pity whenever he looked at people who made an effort in a strange direction. They were humans who didn’t even become animals and chose to become lesser than animals instead. He wanted to fix their foolishness himself, but it was a pity that he couldn’t do it. A few massages with a bat should solve the problem, so it was such a pity. That female journalist was a foolish human as well. Her observation skills to discern the important point of the incident as well as her proactivity in finding out was impressive, but her disadvantage was that she didn’t have any situational awareness. It was such a big disadvantage that all of her advantages were eclipsed by it. For those who had a taste of ink and had proud shoulders, he could figure out a way to deal with them after shaking them up a few times. For journalists that would glare at huge companies and pick a fight with the resolve to go to jail, the best thing was to avoid them. Those people were monsters who couldn’t be controlled through social means. The only way to stop them was to use a physical method, but that was too risky. Burning a whole house down to catch a few bugs wasn’t really an option, wasn’t it? On the other hand, there were journalists who would kneel down if their pens were broken and their social foundation was shaken. The female journalist belonged to this area. It wasn’t even that difficult. All he needed was a little paperwork. The good thing about living in a constitutional state was that a few sheets of paper could flip a living person’s life upside down several times. How efficient was that?

“Anything else to report?”

“I do have something to report about Junghwa Hotel.”

Janghae felt a headache as soon as he heard the words ‘Junghwa Hotel’. Junghwa Hotel was the playground of high-class ladies. It was the place where ladies from famed colossal companies held parties with good-looking boys, and Janghae became responsible for that work as he was put in charge of Seoul. His job was to create a safety net so that those high-class ladies can play around without getting into trouble. Once, he tried visiting that party room. It was flabbergasting. A man who had half lost it because of drugs was shaking his nether region in front of ladies while those high-class ladies were giggling as they watched. The smell of cigarettes and booze was everywhere, and moans and bass-heavy songs never ceased. It was a place that made his hands itch. If he had a bat, he would have smashed the heads of everyone present.

“What is it now?”

“Lee Miyoon is holding an event, and she said she needs some new faces. She wants people desperate for sponsors.”

“That hag keeps getting on my nerves.”

“Should I tell her no?”

“If you do that I’m sure those above will nag me again. The chairman seems to look out for her quite a lot. I heard that those two meet pretty often. Have you checked that?”

“I’ve put people on them, but it’s hard to catch a tail. They seem to be using some people as well. Also, the chairman’s influence is quite big even though he has stepped down from the front lines.”

“Forget it then. Let’s not put our positions in jeopardy by getting on the chairman’s nerves. I think he’s already turning a blind eye to some things.”

“Then what should I do about Lee Miyoon’s matter?”

“Try looking into some from the trainees. I’m sure there are a lot of boys who are in difficult situations. I heard that they welcome sponsors like that these days, don’t they? Quite ambitious, I must say.”

“I’ll try to gather some of them who have tight mouths.”

Head manager Kim stood up, saying that he was done with his report. His way of work was as clean as ever and didn’t disappoint him. This was why he looked after him a lot. Just as he was about to leave, head manager Kim stopped and spoke,

“President.”

“Anything else?”

“It’s about Kang Giwoo.”

“What about him?”

“He’s been obedient for the past few years, but I think his prankster nature has kicked in again.”

“He was docile for a while. Why do you think he’s like that all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know either. I thought there would be no problems since he knows his own position and was acting obedient, but he seems to be stressed out recently as he’s contacting his old friends again.”

“How bad is the prank? If it’s on the level of breaking someone’s arm, I don’t think we should be mindful of it.”

“He didn’t cause any big problems that would make us worry. He’s not doing anything himself and is having other people do it, so it’s easy to take care of.”

“If it’s on a tolerable level then let him be. He’s grown up now, so I’m sure he won’t do something risky. He would probably be reminded of his grandfather’s face too.”

For Janghae, Kang Giwoo was a burden. The problem was that the burden was so expensive that he couldn't handle it as he wanted to.

"Keep tabs on him and report to me once you find out why he started that thing again. It should be easier to deal with it if we know the reason."

"Should I prioritize it?"

"He's the son of the chairman, so it'd be good to find out about it quickly. I am in a position to look good to him for the time being."

"Understood."

After head manager Kim left, Janghae turned around the chair and looked outside. When he was assigned here from logistics, he thought that he was getting exiled, but it wasn't like that. Soul was a new business line that received great attention from the former chairman. As long as he could consolidate his foundations here and prove his skills, he should be able to return to logistics. This was why he couldn't miss the smallest mistakes. That was especially true when it came to the chairman's grandson whom he cherished more than his own life.

"I wonder what irked him this time."

Janghae pondered over it as he drank the orange juice in front of him.

[1] "Personal bankruptcy rescue procedure" is the procedure in which an individual debtor (not a business debtor) is legally rescued from his/her debts due to his potential to earn money in the future.

Chapter 827. Sequence 10

Hyungseok made a visit. As Maru had told him that he would not open the door if he came empty-handed, he brought a large bottle of water in one hand and some dog food in the other. While Hyungseok, who came inside his house, played with the dog, Maru set up the drinking table. Two bags of snacks, some dried squid, and a beer pitcher.

"Hey, it's starting."

He raised the TV volume. The ad for the kimchi refrigerator ended and the screen switched to something else. An ambulance was rushing across the street. A child was crying in the middle of a fiery traffic accident site. Along with tense music, the car that the child was in started emitting smoke. The camera quickly scanned the scene where screams and groans were strewn all over the place and eventually focused on the child's dilated pupils. The fire was coming closer. The fuel that leaked out from the fuel port foreshadowed the worst possible event. Just then, there was a man who rushed across the fire and grabbed the door to the capsized car.

"There's the main character," Hyungseok said as he pointed at Lee Heewon.

Heewon dragged out the child from the car and started running with all his might. The car exploded as though it was just waiting for that to happen. Heewon's face was zoomed in on as he hugged the child tightly. He said 'I saved him' while gasping for breath and wiped his forehead with a hand covered in soot. That was when the camera started falling back. Heewon's figure became smaller as he lay next to the big fire until the scene was switched to the hospital.

"That's a big impact for a first scene. They even blew up a car. That must have cost a lot, right?"

"Even if it does, it's not a loss as long as they can retain viewers."

Maru took a sip of beer. There were a lot of talks before the drama even began. Many people wanted to know which one – 'Doctor's Office' or 'Doctors' – would take the crown for the Wednesday-Thursday drama series. The fact that their genre and not just the airing time were the same made many of the viewers want to compare the two. 'Doctor's Office', which started earlier, had 18% viewer ratings last week. It wouldn't be strange to call that a super hit. Today was the third episode of 'Doctor's Office'. If 'Doctors' could not one-up them, they would not be able to defeat the first comer and get pushed out of the competition. As many people watched dramas due to momentum, the one with more viewers today would get to laugh next week as well.

"I'll look at Doctor's Office for a bit."

Hyungseok changed channels. As though to fight off 'Doctors' which started off with a big boom, 'Doctor's Office' also showed many doctors in white gowns walking through the corridor under intense music. The story writer's ambition of wanting to lay bare the politics occurring within the hospital was complimented with great production, resulting in a great sense of tension. The narrow gaze of the founder of a foundation wanting to build a new facility as well as the gazes and expressions of the head of the hospital and the heads of various departments were caught on camera. They fidgeted with pens, sipped drinks, made creaking noises with their chairs, coughed lowly, etc. There were no lines, but the cuts that changed every second increased the immersion. Maru felt like he was sitting inside a conference room where he would be chewed on the moment he got distracted. The director seemed to be telling him that this was the reason he hired a veteran actor.

"You can't look down on experience, huh."

Hyungseok moved his face. He was imitating the expressions of all the people related to the hospital on the screen. Maru also paid close attention to their gazes and hand gestures, and he even imitated them at times. It might be awkward to imitate them at first, but if he got used to it, it would become a part of his skill set which he would then be able to use at any time. Considering that there were numerous people who paid money in order to do such acting, he couldn't miss this opportunity. As with all forms of studying, acting was also like a tower that was built from the bottom. Placing that one brick in front of him might not look like anything meaningful, but when the tower reached the top one day, he would know how important that single brick actually was. The twitch of the eye and the fickle movements of the hand were all bricks that he could take.

"This looks dangerous. Doctor's Office is actually quite fun too. I want Doctors to do well, but my tastes lean more towards Doctor's Office. How about you, Maru?"

"For now, I'm on the side of Doctors because of my affiliation."

"What if you leave aside your affiliation and think purely about the fun aspect?"

"I've been watching it, so I like Doctor's Office more. Political struggles fit the taste of old men like us too."

"I can't exactly deny it when you say we're old men."

"But the important fact is that it is usually the women of the household that possess the authority to change channels. There may be women who like political fights, but time has told us again and again that romance is vastly superior."

"Doctors is much better when it comes to romance."

Hyungseok changed the channel again. Unlike Doctor's Office, where a bunch of men were glaring at each other over the power of the hospital, Doctors showed the warmth of the doctors as they looked after the patients. The reason that people pointing fingers at daily dramas and calling them out for having implausible plots didn't affect the viewing rates was that there was an overwhelming majority that still wanted to see such a thing. Even with dramas related to specialists, there were many people who criticized the dramas for not doing surgeries or investigations that the jobs of the characters required them to do and just focused on romance instead. Regardless, there were many cases where viewing rates would increase instead. Totally implausible plot twists as well as sweet, polished love stories, had the incredible power to cover up the disadvantages of the piece itself. As the trend of dramas was changing, it wasn't entirely sure if that would be the case this time as well, but considering that the one acting was Heewon, there was a very high chance of success. That fellow knew what it meant to charm people out of their souls. As long as he managed to provoke the romantic feelings of women, the outcome of this competition of viewing rates was unpredictable.

"I'm on it!"

Hyungseok put down his glass and took a selfie with his camera. After smiling in satisfaction in front of the camera, Hyungseok suddenly frowned.

"Why do I suddenly look so dumb?"

"Because that's how you look."

"I stood there looking stupid like that? No way."

"Then you can conveniently think of it as CG. You actually did well, but someone who was jealous of you put computer graphics over your face."

"I can't believe my sharp eyes look like that on camera. Isn't the camera malfunctioning?"

Hyungseok tapped on the innocent screen and was grumbling until he shut up when Heewon and Yoonseo stared at each other affectionately.

"You know? Heewon isn't that good-looking. but he's strangely cool after you look at him for a while."

"Heewon is on the better-looking side."

"No. Honestly, Kang Giwoo is much better when it comes to looks. He's a total pretty boy."

"What do you think if you put the two of them side by side?"

"Based on photos, Kang Giwoo is the overwhelming victor, but from the way they act, I think Lee Heewon's going to win. The girls around me told me that Heewon can 'act' good-looking. He's a total slowpoke when you see a photo of him on the street, but his acting literally makes him the male version of the Venus statue, apparently."

"Slowpoke, huh. That suits him."

Maru sent Heewon an image with the word 'slowpoke' on it. He soon got a reply, saying that it was cute. Heewon was probably watching the drama at the get-together alongside other actors. Although the director said that they should drink together, Maru declined, saying that he had a prior engagement.

"But hey, why didn't you go to the get-together?"

"So that I can drink with you."

"Really? I'm touched. Honestly, if you said you were going by yourself, I would have called you and cried, asking if you went there to see Yoonseo without me."

"That's why I stayed behind at home. Also, it's much better to be at home if I want to compare Doctor's Office with Doctors. If I did that during the get-together, people will fling their cups at me."

"But if you get invited to the get-together next time, you should go. Of course, you'll have to take me with you."

Maru shook his head as he looked at Hyungseok who latched onto him.

* * *

Kang Giwoo kept changing channels as he looked at the real-time reactions. People these days had so many things to comment even while watching dramas. Even without watching the screen, he could figure out what was happening in the dramas just by looking at the comments on the internet. Someone did something, what OST was coming out, and even what food they were eating.

"That's so childish."

He chuckled as he watched 'Doctors'. No matter how he looked at it, it was an overwhelming victory for Doctor's Office. He could obviously see that they were trying to attract viewers with childish romance because they didn't have any strong points in the plot area. Is that even possible with Yoonseo, who's an idol? He had to admit that Lee Heewon was good at acting, but you need two hands to clap. No matter how good one side was, it would be meaningless if the receiver wasn't up to stuff. In that sense, Yoonseo was incomparable to Han Gaeul. A proven actress versus a starting idol actress. People were even saying that Lee Heewon was the only one doing this drama justice, so it was game over. Doctors was also pretty good overall thanks to the veteran actors who held their ground, but the viewers who disliked Yoonseo would leave bad comments whenever she appeared. There was a saying in the drama industry that rumors were scarier than promotion ads, and there were bad things being talked about her from the very beginning. He felt like he could hear the groans of the production staff who used an idol just because of her pretty face.

Just as he was about to switch the channel, thinking that there was nothing more to watch, a face that he wanted to trample on the most appeared on the screen. It was the scene where Han Maru joked around and walked among the doctors. He had a trivial role and didn't have any influence on the plot. He was in a pitiful situation overall. Compared to himself, who was always among the list of top male actors in their twenties, there was nothing good about him. Giwoo put his thumb between his teeth and started nibbling on it. Even though there was nothing notable about him, this guy kept getting on his nerves. He despised the fact that he subconsciously flinched whenever he came across this guy at the

gym. Whenever he found himself wanting to get his acknowledgment even while trying to act boldly in front of him, he felt like vomiting. Han Maru, who had once driven him to a corner and whispered to him in a low voice, reminded him of his grandfather. The figure he saw back then still remained in Maru's face. Whenever he came across Maru, he could hear his grandfather's wrathful voice through Maru's face. You are no good against me – his face always seemed to say those words.

"Son of a bitch."

Whenever he saw that face, Giwoo felt as though the refined 'Kang Giwoo' that he created was collapsing. The only flaw to what was supposed to be a perfect man was him. He already felt frustrated whenever he saw that guy, so when he saw Han Gaeul stand up for him, he felt as though his guts were going to spill out from all the churning. He's incomparably better than me when it comes to acting – whenever he remembered Gaeul saying those words shyly, veins would pop up on his neck even now. He only managed to hold back from slapping Gaeul on the cheek thanks to his extreme patience. Why did that guy wound his pride every single time? He felt displeased.

"I should trample on maggots like him."

Giwoo picked up his phone. He had just heard something interesting from a friend of his. Apparently, there was a young person who was focusing on acting amidst a financially weak household, and that person was getting praised for acting skills from around, and he felt like he would feel a little better if he trampled on the guy. Giwoo called up his friend. He was just about to call him to drag that person down the stage discreetly so that there would be no consequences.

"I'll send you off one day too," Giwoo said in a small voice as he looked at Maru on the screen.

Chapter 828. Sequence 10

That man walked along in the darkness. He would walk a few steps then turn around and stay still as though he was lost before moving again. It didn't seem like he had a destination. Even if he did, it was pitch-black darkness all around, making it impossible to have a sense of direction. She looked at the man walking around aimlessly before suddenly questioning why she was standing there. Why was she still in her place watching the man? She walked towards the man. When she took a step towards him, the man became just as distant. No matter how much she walked, the distance between the two didn't shrink. It was the same when the man was standing. Just like two same poles of the magnet, he was pushed away. She started running. The fact that she had completely forgotten about started crawling up from her heels. It was the fact that there was no one and nothing in this world apart from her. She wanted to approach him and talk to him. A sense of solitude pressed her down. The man must have felt the same. She wanted to tell him that he wasn't alone and gain a small sense of relief. Her legs trembled, her lungs shriveled up, and her heart raced. She thought that she would die if she kept running. She stood still and buried her face in the ground and gasped for her breath before looking ahead. The distance did not shrink at all. Even though they were so close, even though it seemed like just calling out with a simple 'hey' would reach him, she couldn't speak as though her mouth was sewn shut. The only way she could tell the man that she was here was to approach him. She was watching that little yet incredibly far distance while clutching her head due to dizziness from the lack of oxygen. She didn't notice anything because she was so out of it, but she felt as though the distance had shrunk a little. She couldn't be sure of this. After all, the eye wasn't a reliable measurement of distance.

There was only one thing she could do. It was to keep running. She stepped on the ground as she proceeded forward. The man became distant as though she was playing a game of unending tag, but she did not give up. When she felt like her heart was going to pop out of her mouth, she would take a rest on the spot and slap her shaking thighs before running again. She didn't know how many times she had repeated that, but she eventually became sure that the distance had definitely shrunk. The numerous questions in her mind when she started running had scattered like a group of pigeons being startled in the park. The only pigeon left in the park was the thought that she wanted to meet the man.

She eventually managed to reach the man. He was just an arm's length away from her. A warm sensation that was beyond simple joy, melted her whole body and enveloped her as she placed her hand on the man's shoulder. The darkness in the background suddenly rushed towards them like an angry beast. It devoured the man's legs like a leopard that had tasted blood and dragged him into the darkness. The darkness ate the man's arm before burying it within itself. Everything disappeared save for the man's eyes and mouth. The man was smiling, as though in relief.

Gaeul opened her eyes in shock. She felt pain from her stiff waist. It felt as though the thin duvet was pressing down on her like a big chunk of metal. Even though she had opened her eyes, she couldn't see in front of her and had a hard time breathing. Just as an uncontrollable cry was about to burst out of her mouth, she smelled something cozy. It was the smell of mint. Her stiff neck loosened up, allowing her to breathe once again. Gaeul sniffed with all her might. She could feel a warm, human smell. Her vision returned to normal. The faint light that seeped in through the curtains was shining down on Maru's face. Gaeul reached out to him and hugged his neck towards her. He, who was rolling around, opened his eyes. Just as he looked like he was about to ask what was happening, he looked into her eyes before silently hugging her. Under his gentle strokes that started from the top of her head, her muscles that were groaning due to being twisted became docile. Gaeul hugged him more tightly. It was a strange dream. She kept running towards that man. Her entire body hurt as though she had really run a whole marathon. There were minute twitches in her thighs, and the soles of her feet had become scalding hot. Only her upper body, where Maru's hand touched her, had escaped the vicious sense of fatigue and had regained stability. Maru hugged her for a while before carefully asking,

"Did you have a nightmare?"

"I don't know. I wonder what I should call such a dream."

"You must be tired from your shoot, looking at how you even dreamed about something."

"Maybe."

"Should we stay like this for a little longer?"

"Yeah, just a little longer."

He rhythmically patted her back. She was reminded of when she was young and was lying down at home instead of going to school because of a sickness. Her father sat by her head and hummed for her, saying that she would get better soon. When she heard that song, her trembling body as well as her constantly dizzy head, became okay.

"Do you remember my humming song?"

"I do."

"Can you sing it for me?"

"I'm not as good as you though. Are you okay with that?"

She nodded. Okay then – he added before starting to hum. The hand that touched her back was warm, and although the humming song was wrong in some parts, it was pleasing to hear. She could feel the remnants of the dream stuck on her body being peeled off. She closed her eyes. Darkness pervaded her again, but she wasn't afraid this time. That body warmth and the song protected her from the darkness this time.

When she opened her eyes again, Gaeul could see Maru staring at her.

"What time is it?"

"10 in the morning."

"When did I wake up?"

"6:30 I think?"

"You kept that up the whole time?"

"I couldn't wake you up because you were having such a good sleep. You were even drooling, you know?"

Hearing that she drooled, she quickly wiped her mouth. Contrary to her expectations of finding something wet, her mouth was dry. She found Maru smiling. She sighed. He stroked up her hair that flowed down her forehead. She could see Maru's face more clearly.

"We can stay like this a little longer, but I'm starting to feel hungry."

Gaeul touched the beard on Maru's face. She didn't want to get up due to the pleasant sensation that felt as though she was in a warm bath even though she was shivering right after that nightmare.

"Just ten more minutes."

"Alright."

Maru pulled up the duvet that had spilled down her shoulders.

"Did I sleep talk or something?"

"You did move around a little."

"Looks like I must have run pretty hard in real life too. I kept running in my dream until I became exhausted and almost collapsed."

"See? You've overworked yourself. You can just see that from how you were running inside a dream. Don't do anything for today and just get some good rest."

"Maybe I should. It was a dream, but I'm still exhausted and don't feel like moving."

Gaeul recalled the smile that the man put on his face the moment he disappeared into the darkness. As it left such a deep impression, that expression became vivid contrary to the rest of the contents of the dream that had become blurry. She looked at Maru. For some reason, that man's smile looked similar to Maru's.

"When I collapsed due to exhaustion, the one who saved me was my stylist. I was only okay because she found me collapsed in my house and reported me to the ambulance."

"That makes me want to thank her. Without that person, you would've been in big trouble."

"Probably. If I was left alone unconscious, something really bad might have happened to me. But what is curious is that I had an afternoon schedule that day, and she wasn't supposed to come over in the afternoon. She told me at the hospital that she came to my house due to a dream."

"A dream?"

Maru turned towards Gaeul and showed interest.

"Apparently, she saw a certain man in her dream. That man kept screaming inexplicable things to her, and she thought that it sounded like my name. According to her, that man was pitch black from top to bottom."

"What a peculiar dream."

"I saw someone similar in the dream I just had. Only the man and I were the ones in a place where you couldn't see anything, and I kept running towards the man. But I couldn't shrink the distance between myself and the man. No matter how much I ran, I was in the same place. Just as I was thinking about giving up, I felt like the distance had shrunk just a little bit. That's why I started running again. I don't even know how long I was running. Eventually, I finally grabbed that man. I wanted to see how he looked, but the man was suddenly dragged into darkness. What I saw just before I woke up was the man's seemingly relieved smile as well as his pitch-black body."

"Don't concern yourself too much. I'm sure it's not a meaningful dream."

"I think so too, but it is a little curious. I have a vague feeling that the man my stylist saw back then and the man I saw today are the same person."

If it was before she met the rabbit, she would've thought that what she heard from her stylist had remained in her subconscious, manifesting in her dream. However, she now knew that the world wasn't entirely composed of scientific logic. Because of the fact that the pitch-black man appeared twice and each time was related to her, she didn't think of that as a coincidence.

"Should we eat first?"

Gaeul stared at Maru, who gave her a kiss on the forehead before standing up. Why did it look like he was trying to run away?

"You should stay lying down. I'll call you once I'm done."

"I'll help you."

"It's okay. You can stay warm."

"I feel a lot better now. I'm sure nothing bad will happen even if I stand up."

Gaeul put on a t-shirt and got up from the bed. It was fortunate that she had the nightmare today. She felt shivers just thinking about what would have happened if she opened her eyes in that state by herself at home. Thanks to Maru's gentle caressing, she was able to fall back asleep and recover to her full condition.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"For being next to me."

Maru smiled and shrugged.

Chapter 829. Sequence 10

"So, I win the bet, right?"

Gaeul declared her victory as she took her eyes off the monitor. The number on the screen announced her victory. Doctor's Office had a viewing rate of 18%, while Doctors had 13%. Just like the Wednesday viewing rates, Doctor's Office was ahead of Doctors on Thursday as well.

"This is why forerunners are scary."

"I think it'll be like this next week too."

"You don't know that. It'll only take an instant for the viewing rates to flip once rumors spread around."

"I don't think it'll happen though."

Gaeul smiled and embraced her victory. The way she pondered over what wish to make while resting her chin on her hands was quite cute, but on the other hand, he was also slightly worried that she might make an absurd request. Although the viewing rate bet was started as a joke before they fell asleep, Gaeul didn't look like she was going to end it as just a joke.

"Anyway, I won. I wonder what wish I should make."

"Please go easy on me. How about making some coffee?"

"It's a wish, so I can't waste it on something like that. Can I increase my wish to three?"

"I don't think even the Genie of the Lamp would allow that."

"Then I wonder what I should wish for. Now that I actually won, nothing really comes to mind."

"If you don't know, then you can always skip it."

"No. Can you make me some coffee now? Who knows? If you make me some coffee now, I might make an easy wish."

"In movies, people who say that usually never keep their promises."

"If you don't want to, then fine. Oh, suddenly I want some of that fish cake that is sold in Busan. You know, the famous shop that only sells there."

Maru immediately said that he would bring coffee before going to the kitchen. While he was putting the coffee capsule into the machine, Gaeul approached him. She sat at the table and kept tilting her head from side to side while wondering what wish she should make.

"Hey, are you going to keep that hanging up there?"

Gaeul pointed at the mirror ball. Although he had taken down all the other decorations after the film festival, he did not take down the mirror ball.

"It's quite fun if you turn it on with the lights off. Woofie likes it too."

"It must be fun to dance with that on, isn't it?"

"Try it later. I'll watch you."

"If I'm dancing, you're dancing with me."

Having accepted the coffee mug, she turned on the power for the mirror ball. When the shiny lights scattered, Woofie, who was crouching under the table, hopped out and started jumping around. Gaeul walked around the living room with the cup alongside the dog. Maru started playing some music with his phone. She glanced at him before putting the cup down on the table next to the sofa and walking around. She was just nodding her head repeatedly with a smile in embarrassment but then she started moving her upper body. Her hair waved around, brushing her neck and shoulders. As for her shoulders, they swayed up and down and sometimes from side to side according to the rhythm. The monotone living room, the fancy lights, the fast music, and a woman dancing to the music. Oh, and a dog jumping around. It was a rather funny combination. Maru secretly shot a video of her since she was dancing with her eyes closed. The music was cut off for a brief moment when he pressed the record button, but she didn't seem to mind and kept dancing. Only after dancing across two songs did Gaeul blink and walk over.

"Why are you just grinning? You should dance with me at a time like this."

"If that's your wish, then sure."

"You are so petty. If you keep doing that, I might as well actually send you to Busan. No wait, I heard that Japanese chocolates are really good."

"Have a look at this before you send me to Japan."

Maru showed her the video he took. The moment she saw her own figure raising her hands above her head and swinging her body, she immediately reached out for the phone. As Maru was expecting her to do that, he quickly hid it behind him.

"Give it to me."

"Is that your wish?"

"That's how you want to play this?"

"If I show Chaerim-noona this, she'll talk about it for at least two months, won't she?"

Gaeul said that it was her wish for him to hand over the phone. Maru obediently offered her his phone. She resumed the video and turned around. At the chorus of the song, she flinched before tapping on the video several times.

"I danced like that?"

"If I were to give you serious advice as your boyfriend, you should cover up your face when you dance in a place with a lot of people. If you just swing your shoulders a little, it looks cute, but once you raise your hand and start dancing properly...."

Maru recreated her dance. He opened his hand wide like a kindergarten learning how to dance to nursery rhymes, and he moved his waist and upper body like an uncoiled machine. Although Gaeul would not lose out to gymnasts in terms of flexibility thanks to looking after her body from a young age, being able to dance well was a separate matter. She had an easy time digesting still movements, but adding rhythm on top of it would turn her actions into something that could be described as 'spectacular.' Maru danced awkwardly and covered his face with his palm.

"If you cover up your face like this, you'll feel less embarrassed."

"Why did no one ever tell me that I dance like this?"

"Because it's in human nature to keep watching what piques their interest."

She started throwing punches. He got hit on the arm, and it hurt quite a lot. An enraged punch flew at him again. He thought that he would actually get bruised if he got hit anymore, so he started dodging her for the time being. The mirror ball was sparkling above their heads as Gaeul chased him with both of her hands clenched into fists with Woofie chasing after them with her short legs. They went from the kitchen to the living room, then to the bedroom, then back to the kitchen.

Maru declared forfeit and raised his hands into the air. Then, his prankster nature kicked in, and he imitated her dance once again before getting hit properly this time. Maru approached her when she was gasping for breath before holding her.

"Let go of me."

"If I do, I think I'll get beaten up to death, so no."

"I'll bite you."

"If you do, then please do it on the neck."

With glaring eyes, she buried her face in his neck and bit hard enough for there to be marks left.

"This is pretty lewd. Can you do that one more time?"

"You are so hopeless, geez. You must be the weirdest pervert in the world."

"I wonder who it was that clung onto that pervert the whole night last night."

"Well, I wonder who."

"If you don't know, do you want to go check again?"

"Are you okay with that? You seemed to be having a hard time last night."

"Me? What are you talking about? I eat eels often so that I can save up stamina."

"That's strange. I don't think I saw such a man."

"This won't do. I was going to let you rest because I was worried that you'd feel exhausted."

He slowly put his face closer to her, who was staring at him from below. Gaeul's eyes slowly closed. Maru looked at her, who was waiting with her eyes closed, before lowering his head a little more and biting her neck, where a few strands of her hair could be seen. He could feel her twitch. Not to mention her face, he found every part of her adorable, whether it was her neck or the length that led to her shoulders. She was a piece of art that he wouldn't get fed up with even after staring at her for days in a row. A small art gallery that only he could appreciate.

"Wait a sec."

Maru loosened his hand. Her phone was ringing. As though to tell a dog to wait in front of food, Gaeul tapped on Maru's nose before picking up her phone on the sofa.

"Hello?"

While she made her call, Maru drank the cooled coffee. He wasn't bored for a single second when he was with Gaeul. No matter how splendid a movie is, it was bound to become boring after watching it hundreds of times, yet she felt new every single time. He even wished that he could live in this moment for eternity. She finished her call. Before he could even ask what that was about, the phone on the table started ringing. It was his this time.

"Pick it up."

Gaeul seemed to be aware of the caller. He picked up his phone and checked the caller ID. It was not a name he welcomed.

"Yo, Kang Giwoo is calling me of all people. What's up?"

-I was wondering if you had time today.

"Time? Well, I'll have to listen to what it's about."

-Let's eat out together.

"You and me?"

-The two of us will make it boring. I invited Han Gaeul as well. I told her that we should eat together later. I know of a really good stew restaurant. Let's have a talk, the three of us, over a meal.

"Did Gaeul give the okay?"

-She said she'd call me back, but she'd probably be okay with it. She's someone who's good at keeping her promises. Do you have time?

"Wait a sec, I'll be right back with you."

-Alright. We should really eat together. We'll talk about various things face to face. Honestly, we haven't even talked properly at the gym because both of us were busy working out. It's been years since we got to know each other, but we've never eaten together in private either. If you aren't busy, you should come and hang out.

"Alright. I'll get right back to you."

He hung up before looking at Gaeul.

"That call was Giwoo just now?"

"Yeah. I did promise him that we'd eat together, but I kept delaying it because I was busy. I was supposed to be treating him, yet I completely forgot."

"So, are you going to go?"

"I'd feel sorry if I delay it even more. Giwoo, that guy, he's pretty kind, so he won't show it, but I'm sure he must feel disappointed. Maru, how about you go with us? The restaurants Giwoo says are good are really good, so you won't regret it."

"I don't really care, but won't you be tired?"

"It's fine since it's in Seoul. I wanted to go outside with you, so this is a good opportunity. While I do like rolling around at home, we should definitely get some outside air with the weather like this."

"If you're okay, then I don't mind either."

"Alright then. We'll go. I'll text him."

"Then I should be calling him I guess."

Maru called Giwoo and told him that they should meet in the evening. Regardless of what his true nature was like, Giwoo was very meticulous when it came to maintaining his public image. The man known as Kang Giwoo was probably a 'guy with manners who smiles a lot' in Gaeul's mind. Not only that, she would glare at him if he told her to be wary of Kang Giwoo because she didn't know what that guy might be thinking. He didn't want to tell her that either.

If he was so worried then he could just watch over her from the side. The reason Kang Giwoo invited Gaeul was also a procedure to maintain a good public relationship and should not mean anything special. If he had other intentions, Gaeul would have noticed it first, and he wasn't stupid enough to try weird things at an occasion where the three of them were together, so it should be fine to just enjoy dinner in relief. While he wanted to spend the night just with her, she must have her personal social life too.

"So then, how should we continue that awkward cutoff there?"

"I wonder how."

She made a sneaky smile. Maru put his hand around Gaeul's waist. Before his hand even touched her waist, Gaeul's lips touched his first. The kiss tasted like coffee.

Chapter 830. Sequence 10

"I got a bunch of fresh ones today. I'll give you some as a bonus, so don't you go around spreading rumors."

"Auntie, you didn't have to do so much. I feel sorry all the time because you give me so much."

"Don't worry about it. I'm giving them to you because you're such a good boy. My hubby will get jealous, but what can he do about it? Kang Giwoo likes our stew house and wants to come. Also, I'm really grateful that you upload things about my restaurant to uh, what was it again, Insta-whatever(?) every time you come around. Thanks to you, my sales have skyrocketed. I really want to feed you for free, but there's no way you'd accept that, young man Giwoo."

"Food tastes the best when it's paid for in full. I'd get punished if I earn free food off of people."

"You're such a sweet talker too. You can't blame me for liking you, young man. I'm telling all the visitors to the store to watch 'Doctor's Office'. All the people in this neighborhood watch Doctor's Office on Wednesdays and Thursdays, so the viewing rate should be good."

"It was really good this week, and it turns out that it was thanks to you, auntie. Thank you. I'll come here more often."

"Right right, you can be a regular in the future. But when is your company coming? The food won't taste good if it's cold, so I was planning on getting it ready once they come."

"They'll be here soon. I think you can bring out the food. Your food is still good when it's cooled down after all."

"Warm stew is best eaten when it's hot. I'll bring over the sashimi for now. As for the stew, I can boil it when they come."

Giwoo watched the auntie leave the room after telling him to wait a little before turning his eyes away. The tattered wallpaper he saw last time was still there. The changed prices on the menu were marked by crossing out the old prices with a sharpie and writing the new prices next to them. The beer ad poster was discolored, the electric fans were so dusty that he doubted they had been cleaned even once, and the TV was small and old, with the text all blurry. Nothing about this restaurant was to his liking. He wanted to immediately call for a contractor and have this place made over right now. Or maybe, it might be quicker to tear down the whole place and build it anew. In the main dining hall outside, day workers had come to a get-together. He saw them through the gap of the open door. Whenever he watched laborers pouring rice wine into their throats inside this tattered restaurant while shouting, he felt a sense of relief. He found himself really fortunate that he didn't live like a beggar in a dirty place like this one. People really had to look down and feel humble. Whenever he looked at people squirming for survival below him, he felt gratitude for the things in his possession.

"Have some of this before your group arrives. I just got them early this morning, and they're so fresh and tasty."

The owner said that it was a bonus just for him and gave him supposedly expensive raw abalones. Giwoo picked up a piece of thinly sliced abalone. He couldn't hold back his laughter when he saw the auntie speak as though she had given him something incredible when what she did was slice abalones into

oblivion. The texture was what was good about them. How ignorant. He felt like he was watching a clown. They act like they know despite not knowing anything. He put the raw abalone inside his mouth and chewed it a couple times. Compared to the raw abalone prepared and given to him by a master chef last week, the thing inside his mouth was no different from food waste. He wanted to spit it back out, but he held back.

"Auntie, it's really good."

"Right? This is expensive stuff, so I don't give it to other regulars. I'm giving it just to you."

"Thank you."

Seeing the auntie stare at him, urging him to eat more, he ate some more of the abalone. It was hard to pretend to chew on the slices because they were really thin. He ate them all before putting the plate before the auntie. She, who should be taking the plate away and leaving, kept sitting by the door in anxiousness. Giwoo knew why she was acting like that. As expected of the auntie of 'Jeonho Restaurant', known for being proud. She was probably going to stay like that until he spoke about the matter she wanted to talk about first.

"Oh yes, how is your son's acting career coming along?"

The auntie spoke as though she had been waiting,

"Actually, that's what's been worrying me these days."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not saying this because I'm his mother, Youngho really has the talent. He has a talent for acting. Moreover, he also wants to become an actor. A man should do something he wants to the fullest at least once in their life, right? Don't you think so too, young Giwoo?"

"You should at least do it once so that you don't leave behind regrets."

"I think so too. That's why I enrolled him in an acting school so that he can learn and sent him to college too, but."

The auntie sighed. Giwoo poured some water in a cup and gave it to her. The auntie seemed to be feeling frustrated as she tapped on her chest and drank some water. He almost ended up bursting out laughing after seeing her contorted face for a while. Oh, no - it was about to get more fun, so he wasn't going to spoil it now.

"But?"

"He entered some agency a little while ago, and apparently, they need some upfront money in order to do a good piece. Youngho doesn't know that yet. They only told me about it in secret. That's why I wanted to ask you if things like this are common. I know I shouldn't be asking you this, but you're the only one I know who can answer questions like this."

"Well, it's a sensitive topic."

"Please don't say that and tell me about it. If it means that my son will do well, I can give them that money."

"That's not a question I can answer for you."

"So it's like that after all, huh? This is about money, and you have your position to think about after all. Sorry, I asked you something I shouldn't have."

"Not at all. I'm sorry that I couldn't help you."

The auntie tapped on the floor while smiling cheerfully, telling him that it was okay. The shadow of anxiousness behind her smile said that it wasn't okay, though. Giwoo rubbed his hand and waited until the auntie turned around about halfway.

"Do you remember the money envelopes you gave to teachers in the past?"

"I do."

"Apparently, that's quite effective. Even students who have similar grades can have different student records, or one might get a recommendation."

The auntie blinked several times in confusion before smiling brightly and standing up.

"Young Giwoo, thank you."

"I've never said anything worth thanking."

"Right, right. You didn't say anything. I'm just thanking you. I'll give you an extra-large, no, an extra extra large stew for today, so you can look forward to it."

"Alright, I'll look forward to it."

The auntie left the room while dancing. Giwoo stood up and closed the door before blocking his mouth. That was close. He almost burst out laughing after seeing her smiling brightly. That auntie will probably prepare the money for the sake of her son. The start will be around 5 million won, and the cost will keep increasing, so the auntie will use all sorts of methods to prepare the money until it reaches an unmanageable state. He didn't know how much money she had saved up, but if she actually got a loan, she would be putting her restaurant in jeopardy. After all, the landlord's call to increase the rent will soon be heading her way after all. A laugh leaked out of his mouth when he thought about the despair she would feel after getting the call.

Giwoo called up his friend and told him that he had set things up and that he could begin. Youngho, who was praised a little for his acting skills, should be hearing about his mother wasting her money because of him. By the time he hears about it, the money she spent would be in the fraudster's hands, and the fraudster would no longer be seen anywhere. Those who fall for the temptation of using money to solve a problem are bound to keep spending foolishly without giving up. It would be fun if the auntie didn't betray his expectations and actually got a loan. Just imagining it made his stress go away.

"Right, this is how it should be."

It would be really fun if she moved according to his expectations like a chess piece. Giwoo wanted to see the contorted expression of the auntie in a few months, but this was the last time he was visiting this restaurant. He brought some people here because it was the perfect place to cosplay as an ordinary civilian, and it was about time he looked for a new restaurant. After all, it wasn't going to last long once the landlord, a friend of his, increased the deposit and the monthly rent. Moreover, the auntie would touch her savings in order to pay a fraudster, so this restaurant was as good as gone.

"You should have known your place. Who do you think you're discussing acting skills in front of?"

As the son was known to be quite dutiful, he would probably stop acting once his sole parent, his mother, collapses. Giwoo was so happy that he was in a position to toy with other people's lives as he wished to. Just as he felt good and wanted a drink, the guests arrived.

"You two came here together?"

Giwoo offered seats to Maru and Gaeul, who entered the restaurant.

"After I got your call, I called him up and said that we should go together since we're going. But hey, this place is pretty good. The people outside are saying that the stew is good too," Gaeul said as she took off her coat.

"I told you this place is good. What do you think, Maru? Isn't this place pretty good?"

"This is a restaurant, so I'll give my opinion after eating the food," Maru said as he looked around inside.

Giwoo poured some water for the two of them.

"It just occurred to me that we haven't eaten together even once. It's been years since we got to know each other too. It's a curious thing, isn't it?"

"I'm sure it was because we weren't close enough to eat together face to face."

Maru drank some water after saying those words. Gaeul tapped on Maru's arm, scolding him for always speaking like that. It seemed that she was taking it as a joke. It was definitely not, though. Giwoo thought that he should really deal with this guy somehow for the sake of his mental health. For the past five years when Han Maru couldn't be seen on TV, Giwoo lived without knowing stress. Even when he met him at the gym, he was sometimes taken aback by his eyes but could soon ignore him by consoling himself with the fact that Maru was a loser in life. However, ever since his face appeared on TV, especially when he found out that they were in competing dramas in the time slot, he had a hard time sleeping. He even had a dream once where he was pushed out by Maru in terms of popularity and had become a mere minor actor. That shitty dream kept getting on his mind. Maru overlapped with the figure from the past when he acted in his stead as a demonstration when shooting Apgu a long time ago. He could also picture his pathetic self that barely got a passing score from the producer by imitating his act. When he imitated Lee Hyuk's acting, he felt proud that he was improving, but when he imitated Maru's acting, he was full of shame.

What pissed him off the most was that he kept leaving the chess board despite being a chess piece. A chess piece that should go forward if told to and go back if told to was doing whatever it wanted and even ended up threatening the king. Giwoo wanted to rip him apart to death, if possible.

"You're gonna make me fall for you if you keep staring at me like that", Maru said.

Giwoo responded with a laugh. To him, Maru was a trial. Once he overcomes it, he would no longer have to wake up in the middle of the night because of a bad dream nor would he have to take antacids because of a bad stomach. His grandfather used to tell him that superior species would encounter trials in order to evolve. Giwoo was convinced that he would be able to overcome it. That was how the world was after all. Its very structure was formed so that the superior entities were protected. It was just like how the flight trajectory of a fly was hard to predict. This guy's movements were hard to predict, but that did not change the fact that he was insignificant. As long as he solved the problem where he felt his grandfather's presence from his face, he would be able to stomp on that guy like stepping on an insect. Though, at that time, he might ignore him because just being concerned might make him feel pathetic.

"Both of you are so good-looking, as expected of young Giwoo's friends. As for you, lady, I feel like I've seen you somewhere before too."

The auntie brought some food. Giwoo portioned the food out into some bowls and handed them to the two people. He was planning to see this guy as much as possible in the future. If he did, then he would gain immunity, and if lucky, even find a weakness.

"We should drink a little too, right?"

His way of dealing with a problem was to smash the problem apart as that was his grandfather's way. Today, he planned to have a look at the problem and figure out what he needed.