

Once Again 261

Chapter 261

Maru closed his script and stretched out his neck. He hadn't been sitting for a long period of time, yet he felt stiff. He put his script on his thighs and locked his fingers. He put his hands behind his head and pushed it forward to stretch his neck. Just then, he saw a shadow drape over his script.

"You were scary back there. Who were you trying to beat?"

He raised his head to look. He saw Suyeon with a smile.

"Someone that's not good, I guess."

"Are you serious?"

"Who knows?"

Maru was aware that there was no good in conversing with this woman. He immediately stood up and left the conference room.

"When did you practice so much?" Suyeon followed him and asked.

Maru stared back at her.

"You have something to say to me?"

"No, I don't have anything like that."

"Then why are you following me?"

"You're a funny one. I just happen to be going the same way as you. Looks like you're full of yourself."

"Alright, then."

Maru nodded and immediately headed towards the men's bathroom. Suyeon, who was following him, stopped in front of the bathroom with a dumbfounded expression.

"It looks like this isn't where you were going, huh?"

Maru shrugged as he said those words. Inside the bathroom, he saw Gwak Joon washing his hands. The already gloomy-looking guy had dark circles under his eyes. Gwak Joon sighed and discovered Maru reflected on the mirror.

"You look tired."

"I didn't get any sleep because of my new work. I'll fall asleep the moment I lie down."

"Sleep is the best medicine."

Gwak Joon laughed back at him as he wiped his hands off with some paper towel.

"You were good back there."

“Thank you. I was inwardly worried, but I’m relieved to hear that from you. Oh, are extras usually not called to the read-through?”

“I don’t know. But it’s somewhat funny to ask them to come to say a couple lines and have them stay for a few hours. So maybe not calling them is the right thing to do.”

Hearing those words, Maru nodded his head. He only had two lines. Since that was done, all he had to do now was to flip over the script as the other actors do their bit.

“By the way, I saw that you changed the line.”

Maru scratched his eyes when he heard those rather scolding words. It was definitely wrong of him to change the lines without the original author’s approval. He was scolded before for this as well - that the script is an agreement between the actors and is the essence of the writer’s intentions. He had changed such a thing without permission, so he had nothing to say back to him.

If Gwak Joon simply said that to scold him, Maru would have apologized, but it seemed that he wanted an answer. Maru organized his thoughts before speaking.

“I tried saying it out loud a few times, and I didn’t like it that much.”

“The latter part?”

“Yes. Actually, I didn’t find anything wrong when I read the first part. It was natural and it contained the essence of that situation. I’ve never found it disconcerting even after I practiced hundreds of times. But... when I looked at the elder reading his script, those lines started getting on my tongue. I inwardly started repeating those lines again and again in the conference room, and even uttered to myself in a small voice, and it did not sound as good as it did before.”

“It didn’t sound as good as before?”

Maru nodded his head. This happened while he watched Moonjoong’s act. Is this line fine as it is? The moment that question came to his head, he started doubting the original script. Once he felt disappointed about what seemed like a flawless script, he could no longer exert his emotions into it anymore. However, that didn’t mean that he felt that the line was entirely wrong. He felt that he just needed to change the words just a little to make it right.

“The original line was ‘What kind of shit have you been doing all this time for you to end up there?’, right?”

“That’s right.”

Maru saw that Gwak Joon turned around to face him completely.

“And the line I changed it to is ‘What kind of shit have you been doing all those years for you to become like that?’. It’s just a difference in words, and not a difference in meaning. However, I wanted something more generalized and negative. ‘After all those years’ is a common expression, but it should sound incredibly offensive to the pitiful old man.”

“Then what about ‘end up there’ and ‘become like that?’”

Gwak Joon lifted his glasses with his index finger as he asked.

“‘End up there’ is referring to the old man’s current situation. He’s lying on a bench. Meanwhile, I thought that ‘become like that’ is more generally referring to the state of his life and the expression of disdain for it.”

“And so, it’s a more generalized line?”

“I’m just saying my thoughts about it.”

After listening to his words, Gwak Joon said ‘hm’, before leaving the bathroom. Maru felt that he had to follow.

“What are the two of you....”

Suyeon, who was waiting outside, talked to the two as soon as they got out, but Maru did not answer and Gwak Joon did not seem to care at all. Maru silently greeted her with his eyes before following Gwak Joon down the corridor. Gwak Joon spoke after stopping in front of a window.

“First, I take it positively that you didn’t just parrot the script and that you have your own opinion. I’m the type of person that does not like people blindly following my words to the tee and like people that actually think about the meaning behind my words. However, you took a step too far.”

Gwak Joon took out the script he had rolled up and put inside his pocket.

“What you said definitely makes sense. A more generalized description of the situation. It’s not a bad choice. After all, it’s true that a difference in words can make a difference in context. However, your opinion is wrong. Not different but wrong. Do you understand why?”

Maru didn’t have to think about it and replied that he didn’t. That line was the answer he came across after a deep contemplation. He never realized that there was an error in his words, at least not until now.

“Your line is a good line in the perspective of the writer. If the writer writes it like that, then he or she is giving the readers something to contemplate about, and it changes the flavor of the sentence. However, what if you think about it in the perspective of a 17 year-old delinquent who has to say that line? Your line seems like it requires a lot of thinking on the delinquent’s part after looking at the old man. What do you think?”

Maru realized what Gwak Joon meant the moment he said those words.

Maru had the opportunity to have a look at the script several times. He was aware of everything that was going on: the order of events, the changes in the emotions of various characters, and the circumstances leading to the ending. He had an objective, omniscient view about all the characters. He found a flaw in the ‘delinquent’ since he had a perfect understanding of the world around that character. Moreover, he had witnessed Moonjoong’s overwhelming skills. It was no wonder he was dissatisfied with the delinquent’s line.

That was the reason he decided to change the line - he did so in order to add more character.

However, the delinquent was not an omniscient god. He was just an ordinary high school student within that world. Would a mere student, who had been drinking alcohol throughout the night with his friends, think about the circumstances behind an old man lying down on a bench, and speak such profound words?

No. In fact, he would utter even more low-quality words. Perhaps, he might have just kicked the old man's body without saying anything. However, violence wasn't enough to awaken the elder's wrath. There needed to be a line that could provoke the elder's emotions, but at the same time, show the surface emotions of the high school delinquent.

"There are different stages to characters. The looks, the surface traits and the source traits. Like what you said, if you dig deep enough into the delinquent, he would have his own philosophy, and might say something like that to the elder. However, that does not fit in this movie. The camera must focus on the elder, not the delinquent. I've learned a lot while I learned film production. A book does not have a runtime. It has an ending, but the reader gets to choose whether to flip the page over or not. Meanwhile, a movie has to tell the message to the audience as efficiently as possible because it's like a ship sailing on the ocean of time. With a book, you can just flip the other way if you don't understand something, but that's not true for a movie. Well, strictly speaking, you can technically pause and rewind, but that's not possible in a cinema," after saying those lines, Gwak Joon made a 'brrr' sound to exercise his lips. He said that his lips were hurting after speaking for so long.

"But I like the 'after all those years' part. I think I'll use it."

"Do I get a copyright fee for that?"

"Just make do with some coffee."

Gwak Joon bought a cup of coffee from the vending machine. Maru accepted the cup with a smile. Actually, it was him that was supposed to buy this coffee. After all, it was natural to pay tuition for something he had learned.

Just when he was drinking coffee, two people appeared from the other end of the corridor. They were Moonjooong, who was holding a cigarette in his mouth, as well as Joonggeun.

"Huh? You two know each other?"

Joonggeun pointed at Maru and Gwak Joon as he spoke. Gwak Joon said 'yes'.

"What the heck is this? Sir Yoon knows you, and the author knows you. What the hell are you?" Joonggeun asked with a joking tone.

"I'm an aspiring actor."

"Do you think I didn't know that?"

"I'm a high school student."

"Look at this kid. You're talking back at every junction... You caught my fancy! Hey, what's your name?"

"My name is Han Maru."

“Han Maru? Han Maru, Han Maru... Ah! The boy from back then! I have a dumpster of a memory, but I remember you because of your peculiar name. That’s right, Han Maru. Yes, you’re good at acting.”

Joonggeun bought a cup of coffee from the vending machine and gave it to Moonjoong, while Gwak Joon lighted the cigarette up for Moonjoong.

“Sir, you smoke?”

They had met several times before, but this was the first time Gwak Joon saw him smoke.

“It’s a bad habit of mine. It’s somewhat like a jinx as well.”

Moonjoong sucked on the cigarette. The tip of the cigarette turned red. After spitting out some smoke in a slow breath, he rubbed off the cigarette on the ashtray on the trash can.

“I saw that you practiced a lot.”

Moonjoong looked at Maru with a benevolent expression.

“I don’t plan on being luggage after all. Please teach me a lot in the future as well.”

“I have nothing to teach you. You’re doing fine right now. You’ll become a good actor with a bit of experience.”

“Wow, I think this is the first time I saw you praising someone for their acting skills. Moreover, he’s young as well.”

Joonggeun looked at Maru with interest. Maru smiled back awkwardly as he drank his coffee.

“Of course, just that won’t be enough for this movie. I’m going to be very greedy with this piece.”

Joonggeun turned around after saying ‘work hard’. He seemed like a good man because of his chubby impression, but Maru knew from the rumors that he was a scary man during filming. No, the word evil fit him better than the word scary. He would utter ‘again’ at the slightest opportunity, while swear words were the norm. He had heard this from Junmin. He had passion regarding his work and hated to work with actors that were lacking in skill and those that didn’t work properly, so he would be a film director to avoid in the perspective of the production company who wanted a smooth sail for the movie.

Despite that, he was a super popular film director and was hard to scout because his movies always had great results, nearly 7 million to 8 million views for every single one of them. Junmin said that it would have been extremely difficult to scout him if not for his personal connections and the participation of Moonjoong.

“Now that puts pressure on me.”

“You’ll have to be on the edge at all times. Once that guy picks up the megaphone, he’ll swear at just about anything. Had I remained in the industry for just a little longer, he would have sworn at me as well.”

“No way.”

Moonjoong turned around and left.

Break was almost over. The remaining part was a series of violent emotions. The relaxed atmosphere that they started off with would no longer be there.

'Let's go then.'

He finished his lines, but he still had things to learn. He had to gain experience by listening to the lines of his experienced seniors.

Chapter 262

"I never thought I'd see you here, senior."

Dongwook, who was smoking in the smoking area of the building, turned his head around when he heard the familiar voice. A man dressed in a suit was waving his hand as he approached him. What entered his eyes first was not the man's face, but the watch on his wrist. As his job required him to interact with celebrities, he was used to seeing brand-name items, and he was able to tell that the approaching man's watch was a very expensive brand.

"Uh, yeah. Long time no see."

Dongwook smiled stiffly as he looked at the man.

"How long has it been? Have you been doing well?"

"Well, I've been doing okay."

He wanted to act boldly in front of this man, but he couldn't because of the brand-name watch on his wrist.

"It's been what, 10 years? No, it should've been more than that. I heard rumors about you. I heard you became a journalist at a TV station after you passed that extremely hard exam. Right?"

His junior scanned him from top to bottom as he said those words. His gaze reached Dongwook's tattered shoes and the no-brand coat that he bought from the streets, and Dongwook declined replying by turning away slightly.

His junior smiled faintly after licking his lips.

"Senior. Here's my business card. Call me up some time."

His junior, who was very quick-witted and considerate, turned around and left. Dongwook sighed as he saw his junior's business card. 10 years ago, they were close like brothers. He could barely remember that they talked about their bright future over a drink. Dongwook agitatedly sucked on his cigarette because he was frustrated at the fact that he couldn't even talk with the guy properly due to his embarrassment. TV journalist. If he had that title, he might have acted close to that guy and maybe they would've gone out to a meal tonight.

'It's all pointless.'

He only lamented for a brief moment. Dongwook thought to himself that money made people look like proper people as he rubbed his cigarette off on the ashtray. He picked up his notepad and returned to the conference room with his camera. Only a few companies were permitted to film the read-through.

Internet journalists like him had to wait until the end and take photos of the actors at the very end when they were leaving.

‘Anyway.’

Dongwook’s eyes followed one youth. He seemed to be a high school student. The way he flipped over the pages of the script as he leaned against the wall was quite a picture to look at. His eyes and lips showed an indifferent expression. It wasn’t that he was peerlessly handsome, but he had a good face for an actor.

Of course, that wasn’t the reason he grabbed Dongwook’s attention.

‘I can tell from looking at him.’

Acting was a field where it was hard to objectively evaluate others. It was a form of art, yet it did not have any specific standards of evaluation. Despite that, people still evaluated actors on their acting skills. Dongwook was the same. He could evaluate actors with his ‘I can tell from looking’ standard.

“You did well back there.”

Dongwook sat next to the youth.

“...Thank you,” the youth nodded his head once before looking at his script again.

Dongwook inwardly found him precocious.

“I haven’t seen you before. Which company do you belong to? Or maybe you don’t have one yet?”

The youth did not reply to his question and just stared at Dongwook. He seemed wary of Dongwook. Dongwook immediately took out his business card from his wallet. This was the master key to getting kids to talk - the journalist business card. He secretly covered up the name of his company with his thumb. As this country’s education focused on teaching courtesy, they taught that it wasn’t polite to return a question with a question. Youths would begrudgingly reply first if he showed them his business card like this, ten out of ten times.

The youth looked at his business card.

‘That should be enough.’

Just as he was about to retract his hand back, the youth nicked the business card out of his hands. This was the first time such a thing happened, so Dongwook blankly looked at the youth.

“Mint News? Which company is this?”

That was his first question. Dongwook felt as he just received a smack on the back of his head. He never knew that this kid would be as bold as to steal the business card off his hands. What was more absurd was the youth’s words.

“You were giving me this, right? It’s a business card.”

Dongwook barely smiled with his twitching lips as he nodded his head. That was the entire purpose of a business card, so he couldn’t say no.

“Mint News... is relatively well known around here. Do you not know?”

“Is that so? A news company, huh.”

The youth couldn't look more natural as he took out his wallet and put the business card inside it after looking at it for a while. His actions were smooth and refined as though he was already used to such a thing. Usually, kids around his age would just stand there doing nothing because they did not know what to do with it, or just rudely stuff it inside their pockets, but this fellow was clearly different.

“So you seem to be a journalist.”

“Well, yes,”

“Are you here to interview sir Yoon Moonjoong?”

“Yeah, well.”

Somehow, he was no longer the one asking questions. Dongwook gave the nodding youth a question. After all, it would be a loss on his side if this was the direction the conversation was going.

“Rather than that, I thought I asked you. Which academy do you go to? Or maybe you belong to a company?”

Dongwook was not interested in already popular stars. It was too easy to write articles about them. After all, cameras followed them everywhere. However, it was incredibly difficult to find any valuable news from them. The entertainment companies protected their contracted stars very meticulously and did not allow bad news about them to be written, and the stars themselves never did deeds that might be controversial. In the end, the only valuable news regarding stars would be news about their marriage, the release of their new work, or their good deeds. In other words, those news would act in their favor. The customs in this industry meant that those kinds of news were given to select news companies or journalists that the entertainment company had a contract with.

A beautiful flower would have attracted many bees to it, and it would be hard to get any honey from it. As such, journalists that did not belong to major companies looked for new actors that had potential, but did not blossom fully, and tried to make connections with them early on. They would write good articles about those young people with good potential, and become close to them through that. Once that youth becomes a star, the journalist that made early connections would use their friendship to get good articles from them.

In Dongwook's eyes, the youth in front of him had enough attraction. His potential was proven with the act he did during the read-through. Those with potential would immediately grab attention from the public with the right opportunity. He didn't look that bad, and his indifferent image seemed like he would be popular with the girls. No, Dongwook predicted that this boy would lead a noona brigade. In any case, he judged that this boy would become popular, meaning that it wouldn't do him bad to get close to him now. He first had to find out if this guy belonged to a company, or just passed the audition without a company backing him. If he did not belong to any company, it would become easier for him to become close to this guy. After all, no one would have told him about how to act in front of journalists.

“So you want to know where I belong to?”

“Huh?”

Dongwook blinked and looked at the youth. Usually, even the most wary people would answer obediently. After all, there was nothing harmful about it. Despite that, this youth did not answer him. In fact, he squinted his eyes as though he was trying to probe Dongwook out.

‘This boy....’

Dongwook judged that this boy was someone with society experience. At the same time, he was sure that he belonged to a company. He should have been educated not to answer questions asked by journalists.

‘But at the same time, they are told something else as well.’

They had to be vague about any answers, but had to act kind. Performers were not supposed to get in a bad relationship with journalists in any way. Especially if new. The companies always taught not to get on the bad side of journalists.

As such, simple logic told Dongwook that he would soon be able to eke out some information from him, yet,

“I’m just a newbie actor that’s aspiring to make a living out of it.”

“Uh, well, okay.”

He felt like he was talking to a wall. Dongwook never thought that he lacked qualifications as a journalist. He always made the other party talk through a suitable mix of the carrot and the stick. If even that didn’t work, he would persistently annoy the other party until they talked. But what was it with this boy? He drew a clear line from the get go, so he couldn’t ask him anything. This didn’t mean that he was being rude either. He humbled himself with his words and answered properly. There was nothing for Dongwook to nitpick about him.

“Ehem, you were good back there.”

“Thank you, though, I think you told me that just a moment ago.”

“Is that so? My memory is failing me these days. But what do you think about the atmosphere? From the looks of it, it looks like this is your first time participating.”

“It’s good.”

“Ah, okay. Is there a senior actor that you respect among those present?”

“I respect sir Moonjoong.”

“Okay. Sir Yoon Moonjoong is definitely worthy of respect. He’s a legend in this industry, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“What made you start respe....”

“Because he’s a legend.”

“Ah...”

Dongwook barely stopped his smile from twitching. This wasn't really unprecedented. There were some performers that replied with extremely short answers to every question. Those were the worst kind of interviewees that just cut the flow of the interview. The youth in front of him was precisely like that. A conversation required a topic, yet the youth ended all topics as soon as it was brought up. It didn't seem like he was on guard or something. After all, he was giving answers. Was this his nature? Or was he acting a character? If so, then who created this character for him?

At that moment,

“I'm just not good around strangers. I'm not acting a character or anything like that,” the youth smiled as he spoke. Dongwook flinched because he felt as though this boy read his mind. Shamelessness was a necessary trait of journalists, yet his mask was broken for a brief moment.

‘He's a strong enemy!’ That was what came to his mind. At the same time, this boy piqued his interest.

Usually, those who were bold in their actions were a huge scoop, or were nothing at all. Dongwook saw such boldness from this young fellow.

‘However, he's nothing more than a high school student. You will have no choice but to tell me everything. I have tasted all that there is to this world. No matter how good you are at maintaining your poker face, I will dissolve it into pieces and...’

Just as he was thinking, someone approached the young man. This man belonged to a famous magazine company that was one of the parties allowed to take videos of the read-through.

“Uhm, excuse me, but can I ask you a few questions?”

This journalist seemed to be interested in this fellow as well.

‘Heh, hey, you won't catch this guy's heart like that.’

Dongwook waited for the new man to walk away after being flabbergasted by this youth and his short answers.

“Yes, sure.”

‘...What?’

The young man replied with a soft smile. The smile suited his rather cold image that he made for himself. The two exchanged conversations. The youth who answered with short sentences answered properly this time as though everything that happened before was a lie. In fact, he sometimes even gave hints to the journalist so that the two could talk some more.

“If there comes a day you become popular enough to go on the first page, I will put this interview there for you.”

“Why, thank you. I would be really happy if my name goes on QE some day. Though, it won't happen anytime soon.”

“That sounds like you have the confidence to become successful with enough time.”

“A rookie cannot catch up to the experience of the seniors without a suitable amount of ambition.”

“Haha, you’re good with your words. What was your name again?”

“My name is Han Maru.”

“Okay, Maru. If we ever meet again, I will treat you to a meal.”

The interview ended on a good note. After the magazine journalist left, Han Maru started reading his script again with sharp eyes as though that warm spring smile had never appeared on his face before.

‘What’s up with this kid?’

Dongwook was flabbergasted. This young man wasn’t ordinary.

“Are you looking down on me because I’m from a nameless company?”

“I wonder who it was that wanted to be treated well by a nameless actor. Well, I can understand that journalist since he’ll work in my favor.”

“Geez.”

He couldn’t say that the boy was rude since it was him who used market logic to approach the boy first, and the boy just responded in kind. He started off with lies, so he couldn’t say anything even if he was looked down upon. This youth was not a kid, and it was his fault for not noticing that.

“I’m sorry. I’ll apologize first. Mint News is just an internet news company. I’m a pathetic journalist that works for it. The reason I approached you is because I thought that you had potential. Getting close to those with potential while they’re still new means I’ll see profit in the future.”

Who was he supposed to deceive now? They were both experts so he revealed his card first. If this youth was really an expert, then he would give back some kind of reaction. If this youth was not an expert and was just bluffing, then Dongwook would start coaxing him into speaking again.

And then,

“Am I worth investing?”

“...My eyes say so.”

The youth, Maru, closed his script and looked his way. He had a smile on his face. This meant that he was ready to have a proper conversation.

“I’m Han Maru.”

“And I’m Kim Dongwook.”

Dongwook shook hands with Maru.

He met a real expert this time.

Chapter 263

“I never thought I’d see you here, senior.”

Moonjoong curled up his body as he sighed. When his sigh dissipated, he put down his script on the table before heaving out another breath. That signalled the end of the read-through.

Clap clap clap. The actors and the staff all started applauding. The read-through ended without a hitch. The journalists started taking photos of Moonjoong immediately. Even Taeho, the currently hot actor in Chungmuro, was given the cold shoulder right now.

Maru shook his head before applauding. This was just a read-through without any moving action. There was a limit to how real just voice acting could be, yet Moonjoong enchanted Maru from the beginning to the end. If movement action was added to this, it would look scarily good.

He was about to act in tandem with such a person. The pressure on him suddenly increased. If he was to not make a fool of himself; if he was to not be pressured by Moonjoong's aura, he would have to do better than he was doing now.

Maru saw Taeho who was having a conversation with Moonjoong. He thought to himself that a pro was a pro after all. Taeho's voice acting did not lose out to Moonjoong's at all. If there was no strength behind his lines, his lines would have been gobbled up by Moonjoong's lines, but the two were on equal footing, and he added more to the tension of the read-through.

'That's experience for you.'

It was hard to do a scene where Moonjoong didn't even talk, yet the actors around the table actually had to converse with Moonjoong. Without enough skills, their character would be trampled upon by Moonjoong's presence and become faint. The reason why the actors near Moonjoong could be at ease should be because they have the confidence not to be trampled upon. Meanwhile, the minor actors who were sitting far away from the director looked very nervous. Overcoming that pressure, or fading away as an extra. This was a threat and at the same time, an opportunity. The ones that overcome that pressure would receive attention from the media.

"Thank you all everyone. We're going to do rituals on the roof of this building so don't go anywhere and come join us."

The director spoke with a hoarse voice. The people inside the conference room started standing up one by one.

"Well done," Maru said to Yoojin, who looked exhausted. After she made a mistake in her screaming part where she found the dead bodies of her parents, she looked pale. It seemed that she was afraid after making two mistakes.

"You have it good."

"What's this about?"

"Haa, I don't know. I'm tired, I'm really tired."

Yoojin walked behind Maru's back and put her hands on Maru's shoulders and loosened her legs so that she was practically hanging off Maru's shoulders. Maru frowned as he put strength into his legs.

"You know you're heavy, right?"

“Oh, please!” Yoojin grumbled. Maru wanted to shake Yoojin’s hands off his shoulders and go to the rooftop first, but he found her pitiful and decided to act as her servant for now. He took the limping Yoojin and walked towards the elevator. The important people seemed to have gone up already as the ones remaining in the conference room were just some journalists and minor actors.

“Who’s that behind you?”

Geunsoo asked him in front of the elevator. Geunsoo was the third son in the movie, and he was the first one to get killed by the ‘elder’. Unlike his usually witty attitude, he was one of the villains in the movie who dearly wished for the elder’s, his father’s, death.

“M, my name is Lee Yoojin.”

Yoojin immediately stood up straight and looked at Geunsoo. Geunsoo replied,

“Oh, you’re Yoojin.”

“We don’t have any scenes together, but I hope we get along.”

When Geunsoo extended out his hand, Yoojin immediately grabbed it.

Maru saw that Yoojin was smiling after the handshake with Geunsoo as she looked at her right hand. From her expression, it seemed that she knew who Geunsoo was. Otherwise, there was no way she would rejoice that much.

“Aren’t you going to ask me anything?”

Maru thought about the meaning behind those words before speaking,

“From how I don’t hear anything about him, he must be doing well.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Did he not cause any trouble? He’s the kind of guy who doesn’t appreciate help.”

“Family members are supposed to get angry at that statement, but somehow, it doesn’t feel offensive at all. Maybe it’s because I’m a weird one myself,” Geunsoo chuckled.

Yoojin judged that this was a conversation she wasn’t supposed to hear and distanced herself.

“At first, he didn’t even eat anything and did the exact opposite of what I told him to do, but these days, he’s at least getting his meals. It seems like men are equal before the desire to eat.”

“Well, he that would eat the fruit must climb the tree.”

Maru lowered his voice before following up.

“Did you check on what I told you last time?”

Geunsoo nodded back.

“Are you going to report it?”

"I'm not sure yet. I don't want to poke around my younger brother's mind when he just stabilized. To make a report, I'd need his testimony, but I still can't imagine him going against father for the time being."

"Okay."

"For now, I've distanced him from the house, so I'll keep watching over him for the time being. If he's frustrated, he'll ask me for help, if he doesn't, well..." Geunsoo did not finish his words.

Although he was speaking as though he was a third person in this matter, Geunsook's father was Geunsoo's father as well. If his emotions were completely separate from his rationale, then he would immediately report it to the police and get an approach prohibition order, but that wasn't as easy as it sounded. Moreover, there was the possibility that Geunsook would deny any events of violence and speak badly on Geunsoo's behalf, so Geunsoo had to be careful about reporting this matter.

"It's about time he grows up."

After that, Geunsoo no longer talked about Geunsook. It wasn't that good of a topic, and telling others about family matters wasn't something that anyone would be comfortable with.

"Is that your girlfriend?"

"No way. My girlfriend is a hundred times prettier than her."

"Wow, she's that pretty?"

Yoojin approached after realizing that the topic had changed.

"What was that just now?" Yoojin whispered to Maru in a low voice.

Maru just replied, "I said you were pretty," before getting a smack on his waist. Maru dodged sideways to parry her hand.

"She's a bit violent, don't mind her."

"Why? She's cute."

Yoojin grinned when she heard Geunsoo's words. Oh? Maru hopped on the elevator as he thought that this girl was helpless. Just as the elevator doors were about to close with the three inside, they saw Suyeon who was shouting 'wait' as she ran towards them. It seemed that she was fixing her makeup until now.

Maru looked at Geunsoo, and Geunsoo smashed the close button on the elevator without hesitation.

"She's pursuing you, why don't you two go on a date once?"

"I'm a free spirit. I don't like scary women."

A giggle escaped Maru's mouth. As the doors almost closed all the way and Suyeon's panicked expression could be seen, Suyeon ran with all her might and put her leg between the closing doors. She really had good reflexes as she exercised frequently.

"That's strange. I thought I told you to wait."

Suyeon returned to her precocious self as she shook off the dust on her jeans.

“Yeah, that’s strange. I pressed the open button. Why didn’t it work?”

Geunsoo spoke with an expression without any malice. He was definitely an actor, alright. The shift in his expression was instant. However, the one talking to him did acting for a living.

“No way. You must have been smashing the close button. How about you buy me dinner as compensation?” Suyeon spoke.

This woman really wasn’t ordinary. Maru coughed awkwardly as he turned his head. He didn’t want to get caught up between the two.

“Actually, Maru was the one pressing the close button,” Geunsoo said with a refreshing smile.

“No way. I saw you pressing the button with all your heart. Yoojin, you saw it too, didn’t you?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah.” Yoojin replied obliviously.

Maru ignored Geunsoo’s eyes that looked at him calling for help as he got off the elevator, hoping that the two would become a good married couple.

He took the emergency stairs to the rooftop. On the rooftop, he saw a ritual table with various kinds of food on it with the pig’s head at the center. There was also a folding screen as well behind it.

Geunsoo and Suyeon immediately walked towards where the other older actors were, while Maru and Yoojin stood a little far away.

“Please let our movie do well.”

The director and the other people from the film industry stuffed envelopes of money in the pig’s mouth. After offering soju to the spirits, the director did a kowtow.

“Lord pig, please let our movie shoot through break-even point and occupy half of the views of movies for this year!”

The director then raised the plate with the pig’s head on it and kissed the nose of the pig. The journalists took photos while laughing, while the main actors immediately went up and stole the plate from him, saying that he was cursing it.

After the ritual, someone said that the members of JA Production would have a meal together on the 16th floor restaurant.

“Let’s go, then, shall we?”

Suyeon hooked her arms around Geunsoo’s as she went down. Geunsoo was powerlessly dragged along.

“She really is good,” Yoojin said as she watched the two.

“You mean Kim Suyeon?”

“Yeah, that unni is really amazing.”

“You think there’s something to learn from her?”

“Of course. She shows how a woman can use her weapons. Practice is inevitable to become a seductive character,” Yoojin said with a smile.

“That really doesn’t suit you.”

“What was that?”

“Don’t you go around places trying to show off. Someone really might pick a fight with you.”

“That’s how you wanna play this, huh? I’m going to tell everything to her. Everything!”

“Why does it suddenly change to that?”

Maru had to surrender himself to Yoojin. He couldn’t take any countermeasures. He seriously considered calling her up and telling her to stop being friends with Yoojin.

“But hey, how did you do your practice?” Yoojin asked as the two climbed down the stairs.

Her sweet-sounding voice crept Maru out.

“...”

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“I was wondering if you were sick or something. You’ll creep me out if you get embarrassed like that all of a sudden.”

“You are a... no, let’s not.”

Yoojin sighed as she looked upwards. Her bangs lifted into the air for a brief moment before sinking down.

“Then I’ll ask you straight. Do you have a special practice method or something?”

“Why do you ask? That was random.”

“I’m asking because you’re good. I want you to tell me if you have any secrets.”

Yoojin pouted before sighing.

“I made a stupid mistake. Twice to boot. No, let’s forget about the mistakes, they can happen. But I don’t like my acting. The academy didn’t point me out on anything, but my acting skills pale in comparison to everyone else. I can see that myself so how would the others see me? I don’t even want to imagine it. It scratches my pride.”

Yoojin stared at Maru’s eyes straight on. Maru wished that he could applaud her courage for asking such a question despite her embarrassment, and wanted to tell her the method, but he didn’t have any. Right now, the man named Han Maru was a mixture of the blessing that was the experience of a grown man, and the challenging mind that came from his youth.

To sum it up, his advice would be ‘to die once, meet god, and start over’. That wasn't valid advice at all.

“...Talent, I guess.”

“Whoa, you are so full of yourself.... What does she find good about such a guy?”

Yoojin went down first as she shook her head. Maru scratched his eyebrows as he followed. As they went half way down the stairs,

“Then the ones with no talent won’t get good no matter how hard they practice, huh?” Yoojin turned around and asked.

“That depends on how much effort they put in... is what I want to say, but I don’t like the word effort. After all, if those with talent put in effort, it would be impossible for those without talent to make up that gap.”

“You’re such a pessimist.”

“Better than being an optimist.”

“I am going to get acknowledgement in this movie just because I don’t wanna see you getting cocky. Talent? Hmph, persistence and effort will win over talent!”

Yoojin left through the emergency exit with a grin.

“...Then why did you ask?”

Maru licked his lips before walking slowly.

Chapter 264

[I got them!]

That was the post from a close friend of Bada’s on Cyland. Bada’s friend, who was in the photo, was laughing brightly with two tickets in her hands. Bada looked at the photo with envy before scrolling down to the comments section. Her friends had commented that they were envious as well.

“She has it good.”

She rested her chin on her hands and blankly stared at the monitor. The two tickets in her friend’s hands were much more envious than a good grade card right now. Bada slightly turned her head around to look at the poster of TTO on her wall. There were five oppas in various poses. Bada was especially looking at the young man standing on the left, Ahn Sungjae, as she sighed.

“I wish I could go, too.”

Ever since she started liking TTO, she visited music program live shows without telling her mom, wrote fan letters, and was even active on the fan cafe, but she had never once been to their concert. Up until a year ago, she was fine with just reading reviews of the concerts, but these days, those reviews made her thirst even more.

She faintly brought up this topic half a year ago to her mom and asked if she could go to their concert, but she was refused because of the ticket prices. Well, they were expensive after all. Moreover, it was hard to buy them at their regular price, so most of the time, they had to be bought with more money. To top it all off, she was no longer able to bring up anything remotely related after a news broadcast about failing safety measures in concerts.

“Aah! I wish I could go there too.”

She lied down on her bed. If she went to the concert, she would be able to see her oppas up close. If she was lucky, she would even receive a gift from them as well. Bada rolled around in her bed for a while before calling up the friend that just posted that she got two tickets.

“Hey, how did you get those tickets?”

-My dad told me he would get them for me if I do well on the tests this time, and he really did.

“Really? That’s incredible.”

-Yeah. I feel like I might cry. You know, don’t you? The things I did in order to go to their concert.

“I do, I sure do. Haa. I want to go as well.”

-Didn’t you tell me that you might get them if you do well on your tests this time?

“...I’m doomed. I screwed up English.”

Bada and her friend chatted for 10 minutes non stop before hanging up. Bada couldn’t ask her to bring her along. From the looks of it, she already had a friend she planned to go with, so she didn’t want to make their relationship awkward.

Then, she thought that she could ask them for posters and the wristbands. Bada was about to text her when she remembered that there was still quite a long way to go until the concert.

‘I really did my best this time, too.’

Although she had to see her grade card to be sure, it seemed like getting into the top five of her class seemed out of reach this time. Up until yesterday, the fifth place was a hair’s breadth away, but the English test ruined all that. She put the most amount of effort into this, yet she screwed up badly.

“They helped me out a lot, too.”

There were quite a lot of TTO fans in her class. When she told them about her circumstances, they started helping out as though it was their own matter. They showed her the notes they made during classes, and even had study sessions together after the tests.

We won’t make it, so you should make it at least - was what they said as they looked after her so much during the exam period, yet it was all ruined.

The concert. Yes, strictly speaking, it wasn’t anything much. It wasn’t like the TTO oppas were of any help to her life, and it was also possible to relieve her frustration through watching videos online. However, wouldn’t everything be pointless when you think about it that way?

To Bada, TTO was a refuge. At first, she fantasized about dating one of those oppas, but now, she was at the stage where she was fine with just watching over them. She knew the difference between reality and fantasy.

However, she just wanted to watch them up close for just once. She wanted to sing her lungs out, and wanted to jump around. All of her friends that went to the concert even once all said that it was worth going there at least once. They said that it felt as though their minds were cleared.

Bada blankly stared at the ceiling as she listened to TTO's new song on her MP3 player. She could hear the front door opening.

'Is he back?'

Her brother had gone out early in the morning. He said something about reading the script with the other actors, and seeing that, she felt that her brother was rather unfamiliar. She always thought that her brother would always play games at home or play soccer with his friends, but ever since he entered high school, he acted as though he was a different man, and right now, he looked as though he had entered society.

That didn't mean that she didn't like him. In fact, she was thankful since he was so considerate of her and looked after her in various ways. There was no way she disliked her brother who secretly gave her a credit card for her to use.

However, as he changed so drastically within just one year, she felt strangely worried. Before, whenever she talked with her mom, she would always say something along the lines of 'I wonder when your brother will mature', but these days, none of that happened.

'In fact, she says that to me.'

It wasn't that she was displeased because she was compared to her brother, but that she felt rather powerless when she looked at her brother since it made her feel like she had to do something productive. When he said that he would help her go to TTO's concert, she thought that he had changed a lot.

Was that the difference between a high school student and a middle school student? Would she also mature and forget about TTO and start studying or do productive things?

Probably not. Some of her friends, who had older brothers, always told her that they got into fights all the time and said that they were terrible brothers who shouted at them and made them do errands all the time.

She heard a knock on her door. She stood up and spoke.

"What is it?"

"Have you eaten yet?"

"No, mom said she'd be late."

"You should've eaten regardless."

"...I wasn't hungry."

She was well aware that she had nothing against him, yet her words were slightly sharp. She herself thought that she was childish.

“Then come out and eat some food.”

“Eat?”

She heard rustles from outside the door. She started sniffing. It smelled of something savory. She got off her bed and opened the door to find a white plastic bag in front of her. Her brother was setting up a table in front of the living room TV.

“Father said he’d be sleeping at the factory, right?”

“Yeah. But what’s that?”

“Whole-fried chicken.”

“Really?”

Bada smiled cheerfully and sat in front of the table. She no longer felt depressed at all. Inside the yellow paper bag were two whole fried chickens. Just as she was drooling in front of it, her brother poured the pickled radish into a bowl and poured the coke.

“There’s sauce as well, so you can dip them if you want.”

Bada nodded and grabbed the chicken leg. The chicken was still steaming hot and a little too hot to touch. She was flabbergasted at herself for changing so drastically in front of food, yet she couldn’t stop grinning.

‘Yes. I’ll just do some part time work and earn my own money to buy the tickets.’

When she thought about it like that, she felt much more at ease. She bit into the chicken leg and started chewing. Just then, her brother turned on the TV, and TTO just happened to be on it. They were doing a fundraising event for those in need.

Her brother raised the volume before giving the remote to her.

“You’re going to watch, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

Her brother ripped off a wing and started eating it while he looked at his phone with the other hand. This would be unimaginable if he was still in middle school. He would instead steal the remote from her saying that he had a video game show to watch. On top of that, he would have teased her for liking people like them.

“What did you do today?” She swallowed the meat in her mouth before asking.

“A read-through, a ritual, and ate some food.”

“There are rituals as well?”

“Sure. It’s not pocket change that goes into creating the film, so it should be better to pray to the gods for help, don’t you think?”

“Is that how it is? But wait, do you believe in stuff like that?”

“Yeah.”

That answer was rather unexpected.

Bada kept chewing as she watched TV. Coincidentally, Sungjae was singing on TV. He had strong eyes that did not fit his skinny face, and the long bangs that slightly covered the eyes looked very cool.

Her dear Sungjae-oppa was in charge of Charisma within TTO. He was really cool.

“What happened to your tests?”

She almost choked when she heard those words.

“W-well, I did not too bad.”

“You don’t sound that confident. I heard top 5 was easy for you?”

“When did I say it was easy? I said... that it might be doable.”

“Your scores are not as high as you expected?”

“I dunno!”

Bada started chomping on the chicken with a pouty expression. She had never been as focused as this time during tests. She even went over her answers three times. There weren’t any possibilities of putting her answers in the wrong questions, so there was no way the scores she self-scored would change. In other words, it was impossible to get in the top 5.

“And you did your best?”

“My best... I did. I mean it.”

She wanted to talk about the efforts she put in; about how she had study sessions with her friends and the like, but decided not to. It was over anyway, she didn’t want to sound like an obstinate child.

“So the concert is a no-go?”

“Even if I did get in the top 5, I wouldn’t have been able to go anyway. There’s no way mom would allow me, and also, the tickets are really expensive. Your part-time job is nowhere near enough.”

“Well, they were expensive, alright. It was over 100 thousand won.”

“You looked into it?”

“I tried. After all, I did promise to send you to one if you got into the top 5,” Maru spoke as he rolled around the neck bone in his mouth. She found that rather unpleasant.

“I’ll do my own part time work and earn my own money and buy them. I’m going to work this summer.”

“I don’t think middle school students are allowed though.”

“Not allowed? Why?”

“Because people would rather hire high school students instead. Also, consent from a legal guardian is necessary for a middle school student, I wonder if mom will let you do it.”

Crunch, Maru chewed on the crust of the chicken.

Why did he look so full of himself today? Bada made a pouty expression before poking him on the waist. Maru, who was sitting cross-legged, fell over to the side just like that.

“She’ll tell you to study if you have the time for that. I’m 100% sure.”

Her brother still spoke regardless. It felt as though they were back to the old days again. Bada chomped on some pickled radish as she watched TV. There was no point in talking to him any more. If her mom won’t let her do a part time job, then she could just save up on pocket money.

Thanks to the credit card that her brother gave her, she had saved up quite a lot. She had around 40 thousand won. Though, that was nowhere enough to buy a ticket...

“What do you think your average will be like?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.”

“...Around 92, I guess?”

“That’s good. Your average for your 2nd year finals was 80 wasn’t it? You put in some effort.”

“What good is that? I didn’t get in the top 5. There are a lot of smart kids in my class, you know?”

“Then without them, you’d be in the top 5?”

“Probably.”

“That’s good progress. Congratulations.”

“....”

Bada pouted as she changed the channel. She found herself childish for feeling happy when she was congratulated, and she also found herself pathetic for expecting something.

‘That’s right. I should do it with my own powers.’

Whether saving up pocket money, which her mom gave her, was ‘her own powers’ was up to debate, but she had no choice but to do well if she wanted to get what she wanted.

“Next time, try to motivate yourself, okay?”

Saying that, Maru stood up with the coke in his hand and entered his room. Bada was about to say ‘aren’t you gonna clean up?’ but decided not to. He was the one who bought this, so it would be shameless of her to ask him to clean up as well. She was putting the bones into one pile and was picking up the empty cups when she found an envelope where Maru was originally sitting.

Hm?

Bada reached out and grabbed the envelope. When she had a peek inside, she found a rolled up piece of paper.

“Hey, you left something.”

She called out to her brother out loud, but there was no reply. Out of curiosity, she took out the piece of paper. As the piece of paper slid out, something fell on the floor as well.

“...Oppa!”

The things that fell on the floor were tickets, tickets to TTO’s concert this summer. Moreover, there wasn’t just one, but a whole six of them. Bada then looked at the rolled up paper as well. The inside of the paper was pink, and she found these words on it.

[Thanks for cheering for us.]

Bada kept staring into the names below those words. Sungjae, and then Bada. This was Sungjae-oppa’s autograph!

“Wow! Oppa!”

Bada jumped around and held up the tickets against the lights. She could hear her brother saying ‘be quiet already’ in a small voice.

Chapter 265

Bada returned to her room with the autograph and the tickets. It still felt like a dream. She not only had her beloved Sungjae-oppa’s autograph, she had six tickets as well! Not only that, they were r-seats, not ordinary seats. She would have a seat at the very front. If she was lucky, she would be able to shake TTO oppas’ hands.

“I should laminate it!”

She immediately left the house with the autograph. Then, she started running towards the stationery store that was within the apartment complex. Although the sun had set, the stationery store was still open. She gave the owner lady the autograph and asked her to laminate it. She did not forget to add that it was very important.

“TTO, huh. My daughter really likes them too.”

The lady laminated the autograph with a kind smile. Bada left with the still hot laminated autograph.

She was thinking about how good it would look on her wall. She couldn’t stop smiling. She was even wondering if it was okay to be so happy about an autograph.

‘Oh yeah, I should call them up.’

She reminded herself of her friends who helped her out so that she could go to the concert. Since she had six tickets, she could bring them as well. Everyone will sing their hearts out together and watch the concert. Just imagining it made her thrilled. Just as she was fantasizing, no, planning her future, a voice entered her ears.

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

Bada was startled by the sudden voice and turned around. There, she saw Dowook, riding his bike. He was wearing a black bicycle helmet, and it suited him quite well.

“Ah, ah!”

Bada pointed at him.

“How dare you point your finger at me.”

Dowook waved his hands sideways, gesturing for her to get out of his way. As he did so, he flashed the headlights on his bicycle handle. Bada frowned due to the bright light.

“It’s bright! Turn it off.”

“You can just move away.”

“I don’t want to though.”

“...”

Bada became precocious and blocked his path. She still couldn’t forget about the drink incident from last time. She gave it to him out of appreciation, and he dared to reject? Though, it didn’t make her feel bad or anything.

“Like brother, like sister, huh.”

Dowook got off his bike and lifted his bike up. It seemed that he was planning to go around her. Bada snorted and watched as he did so until the headlights caught her eyes.

“A cat?”

It was a cute cat-shaped lantern. The light was actually from a cat shaped lantern on the right handle. Bada had a look at the lantern once before looking at Dowook again. Dowook avoided her gaze and got on the bike. He clearly looked like he was going to run away.

Bada grinned and grabbed Dowook’s clothes. This was an opportunity. She had asked her brother several times to introduce this man to her, but had failed each time. She couldn’t miss this opportunity. It wasn’t her style to act calmly.

“What’s this? A cat, huh. You have a cute side.”

“Let me go.”

“What are you going to do for me if I let you go?”

“What?”

“Oppa, do you know that this is our third time meeting already? And all of those times, it was a coincidence like this too. At this point, aren’t we fate?”

“Wh, what the heck?”

Dowook was a little flustered. It was probably because of the cat-shaped lantern. Bada found Dowook, who covered up the cat-shaped lantern with his hands, really cute. Though, it was somewhat weird to call a vicious-looking man cute.

“Is that a gift from your girlfriend?”

“Mind your own business.”

“You actually get embarrassed quite easily, don’t you?”

“What the heck are you saying?”

“Then why are you trying to run away?”

“I’m not running away, I just... forget it. What the hell am I doing with a kid.”

“We’re only two years apart, you know?”

Bada liked Dowook. When she first came across him in Myeongdong, she couldn’t look at him in the eyes because he looked like a delinquent, but he ended up saving her when she came across real delinquents. Her friends told her that he was a little scary, but Bada thought differently. Helping others was a really hard thing to do.

She found out that there were some circumstances behind that, but the fact that she was helped didn’t change. To overstate it a little, he was like a prince on a white horse. After all, he appeared just when she was in danger.

On top of that, this guy looked quite handsome. Although he gave off a cold impression, he never ignored other people and replied to their questions. If he was a really bad guy, he would just simply ignore her and go past her, yet he was using words.

“Wait a minute! If you run this time... you know what will happen, don’t you?”

Bada went to the convenience store across the street and bought banana milk.

‘I’ve never seen people hate this!’

She left the convenience store with the banana milk in hand. However, the bicycle couldn’t be seen anywhere. Did he really leave just like that? She looked around in search of him when she saw a bicycle distancing itself with its lights turned on. Bada started running towards the bike with all her might. She was always the last runner in relays. She was plenty capable of catching up to a bike that wasn’t pedalling at full speed.

“I said don’t run!”

When she shouted, the bicycle stopped. Bada panted and caught up to the bike. Dowook looked flabbergasted.

“H-here,” still panting, Bada held out the banana milk.

“You’re really obstinate.”

“I’m quite persistent, yes. Pant, pant.”

“So I just need to drink this?”

“Yes.”

“Geez, both of you siblings are weird.”

Dowook took the lid off the banana milk and emptied it on the spot. Bada looked at him happily.

“Alright, happy?”

Dowook gave the empty plastic bottle back. Bada asked as she received it.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

Did he really not? When Bada tilted her head and looked at Dowook, Dowook looked as though he was about to depart again. Bada wanted to talk to him a little more, so she tried to grab him, but she ended up missing. The bicycle went forward, and Bada’s hand grabbed empty air. As she had expected that she would be able to grab him, her center of gravity, and therefore, her body, leaned forward. As she had good reflexes, she didn’t fall over, but the laminated autograph in her other hand flew into the air. The autograph then slid down across the floor before hitting right on the side of the sewer. The area around the drain still had a puddle of rainwater around it, as well as bits and pieces of trash.

Bada became dejected and crouched down in front of the sewer. The tip of the lamination was cracked open and water slipped inside.

“.....”

Her joyous mood fell rock bottom in an instant. This wasn’t anything much, but for some reason, she felt like crying.

* * *

Dowook stopped and looked behind. Maru’s younger sister was crouching and picking up a laminated piece of paper. When the cheerful girl became dejected in an instant, Dowook became worried as well.

‘...What the heck am I doing, I wonder....’

He was about to ignore her and go his way when her depressed expression entered his eyes. She was an obstinate kid. He was annoyed by her, but didn’t really hate her. She was the younger sister of a thankful friend of his, so there was no way he would dislike her for no reason at all. It was just that he found her annoying because she held him up for no reason. No, to be honest, he realized to some extent that that girl had feelings towards him. She was so obvious about it, how could he not notice?

As he wasn’t really ‘the good kid’ in his middle school years, he used to have a few friends in his age group that were girls. He would sometimes smoke together with them and go to noraebang together. None of them asked someone else out, but the people around them all treated them as couples. The girls back then, were, well, for bragging rights. That was how delinquents acted. They would get proud of themselves if others praised them for playing with girls that hung out with them.

Ever since he entered high school though, his relationship with them was cut off. After going separate ways with Changhu, he didn't even exchange messages with those kinds of people. Relationships built on top of sand crumpled just like that, and the only friends he had now were the people from the electrical engineering class. He was able to get close to them quite easily as they were all good people. Oh, there was the acting club now as well.

It was just that there were no girls his age in both of those groups. There were two juniors in the acting club, but one seemed to be interested in Daemyung, and the other was practically a boy, so he didn't even treat her like a girl.

In such circumstances, the approach of a close friend's younger sister was pressuring him. This girl didn't look like the type to smoke, nor did she look like she would spit everywhere and use swear words. Dowook honestly didn't know how to, or what to, speak with such a girl.

As such, he didn't know what to say to the depressed-looking Maru's sister and just kept on watching. He was afraid that saying anything here would make her lash back at him, and felt that he might look irresponsible if he stayed still. Just as he was stuck in a dilemma, Maru's sister stood up.

"I'll get going then."

She sounded very dejected. Dowook, who watched as she walked away with the wet laminated paper in hand, followed her.

"Give it here."

"Huh?"

"I don't know what it is, but I'll wipe it off for you."

He took the laminated paper from Maru's sister, who stood there stiffly. The dirtied piece of paper had someone's signature and her name on it. It seemed quite important, so Dowook felt sorry for some reason, even though, strictly speaking, it was her fault. However, he couldn't say that to her.

Dowook took out some tissue from the bag attached to the bicycle frame. Although some water had seeped inside, it didn't look that dirty after wiping it off.

"Here."

She received the paper before bowing to him.

"Sorry about that. If it's something important, tell it to Maru later. If it's something I can do, I'll do something about it."

He had a debt to Maru, so he decided not to be rough with her. After saying that, Dowook turned around to leave. However, that familiar hand grabbed his clothes again. When he turned around, he saw Maru's sister with a big grin on her face.

"Then give me your phone number, and also, treat me to a meal sometime."

Dowook frowned as he looked at that face. Maru's smile could be seen in his sister's smile as well.

He felt somewhat frustrated as though he got caught up with something very annoying.

* * *

Maru, who was reading his notes to do some revision, suddenly saw that his phone was vibrating. When he opened it to see who it was, he was surprised to see the name.

“What is it?”

-Your sister is just... urgh, nothing. It's all my fault.”

“What the heck is this about so suddenly?”

-Forget it.

Then, Dowook just hung up.

What was this about? Just as he stared at his phone trying to figure out what this about, he heard the passcode beeps from the front door. Maru left his room to see that Bada had come back home. She stiffened as soon as the two met eyes. The way she hid the autograph and her phone behind her back looked very suspicious.

“I just got a call from Dowook.”

“D-Dowook? Who's that?”

“Oho? You're practically acting like the culprit here. So, what happened?”

“Nothing!”

Then, she darted off to her room. Maru was very suspicious but he couldn't pry. If he was to pry someone, he had to pry Dowook, not Bada. He called Dowook. However, all he got was that the other party was currently on the phone. At the same time, he heard Bada whispering inside her room. Well, that was blatantly obvious.

‘I don't know anymore.’

As he was someone who thought that romance was a good thing when young, he did not plan to oppose his sister's romance. Though, it ticked him off that the partner was a friend of his.... He had no excuse to stop her from doing so when she looked so adamant about it. He only wished that she wouldn't come crying to him later saying “why is your friend this and this....” after breaking up.

Maru glanced at the door to his sister's room before turning around.

Chapter 266

“Did something happen yesterday?” Maru asked Dowook whose seat was diagonally in front-left of him.

Dowook would usually reply ‘what do you mean’ to such a question, but this time, he answered ‘no’ after contemplating. Maru twitched his brows since Dowook was obviously acting suspicious.

“Then why did you call me?”

“Just cuz. I can call anyone I want.”

“Okay, then. That's how you want this to go.”

Maru crossed his arms and stared at Dowook. After holding it in for a long while, Dowook exploded out.

“Your sister asked me my number. Satisfied?”

“And you gave it to her?”

“She was about to cry if I didn’t give it to her, what am I supposed to do? Tsk.”

“Hey, you should’ve realized that they were crocodile tears. You look like a rational kid, but you’re weak at heart.”

“...Let’s not get into this,” saying that, Dowook turned around. Maru scratched his eyebrows and asked.

“Are you going to date her?”

“Wh-what kind of freakin’ nonsense is that?”

His desk and chair, made of metal, created a huge rattling noise as he turned back around. Such a violent reaction? It seemed that dating wasn’t entirely out of his mind.

“If you’re gonna date her, then treat her well. She’s a little cocky, but she’s not a bad kid. No wait, she might be a bad one after all. From where she’s going right now, it looks like she’ll roast any man in the future.”

“Hey, you damned shit. When the hell did I...”

“I’m saying this just in case you do. I can say a word or two as her brother, can’t I? If you do date her, then play with her well and don’t let her cry if you can. Also, don’t come to me complaining about her. Okay?”

“It’s not gonna happen so you don’t need to be worried.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. They say the affairs between a man and a woman is unpredictable. Though, you’re the son of the petrol station owner, I’m okay with that. Hey, my little brother-in-law. Treat me well in the future, yeah? You can buy the house when you two get married.”

Saying those words, Maru stood up from his seat immediately. That was because he saw Dowook standing up while holding his mechanical pencil upside down. He burst out into laughter as he ran outside the classroom. Although Dowook was chasing him, the distance only widened.

“Hey, I won’t forget about this!”

Maru caught the mechanical pencil that Dowook threw. Dowook panted and returned to the classroom. Maru fidgeted with the mechanical pencil in his hand.

‘It should be a good experience for Bada to meet with different people.’

It was obvious that a person who had seen a thousand flowers was more knowledgeable about flowers than someone who had only seen one. The person that saw a thousand flowers knows what suits him or herself, and is able to decide wisely when purchasing flowers.

It wasn't that humane to compare human relationships to purchasing items, but what about real life? There were still people in the current era that judge other people on their values as though they were items. No, in fact, it was impossible for everyone to be completely unbiased.

The relationship between two people wasn't that simple. Of course, it could be made simple under the word 'love', but romanticism was only called romanticism because those blessed with 'love' in their relationships were very rare and few in between.

'She needs that judgement skill.'

The love of covering up or even supporting people with delinquent practices might be something that everyone had to respect, but for some, it might be foolishness itself.

There was a saying that went 'Marrying your first love is the same as pushing your ideals into hell'. Maru thought that meeting various kinds of people was for the best, whether it came to men or women. The best scenario would be to live happily ever after with the first love, but everyone in the world knew how hard that was. That was why it was called the 'best scenario'.

"Have a good romance, you two."

Maru fidgeted with the mechanical pencil as he returned to the classroom.

* * *

"It's over!" Jiyoong shouted hurrah.

She was able to take the tests with comfort until the very end. Ever since the nervousness and the pressure disappeared, tests ironically gave her joy. The sense of achievement coming from the fact that she did it, and the sense of relief coming from the fact that she was no longer bound, overwhelmed her mind.

"Aah, Jiyoong, you have it good. You're smart."

Aram, who swayed across the classroom to her desk, fell on top of her desk. Their last test, history, was the one that Aram hated the most, and from the looks of it, it seemed that she had spent all of her energy solving those questions.

"Did you do well?"

"I don't know. I don't want to think about it. But then, some of the things I studied during break time appeared on the test and I answered them. I don't know if I got them right or wrong though. Ah, why do we have to memorize the years like that? Don't we just need to know that those events happened?"

Aram grumbled endlessly until she screamed and ripped the test papers in half. Others in the class did the same. Jiyoong smiled awkwardly as she looked at them. That was because she found history easy.

"The tests are over. What should we do today? When else would we be able to play like this?" Aram spoke as her eyes sparkled.

Her face looked like her head was full with the word 'playing', and it seemed that she had already forgotten about the tests.

“...Uhm, I have something to do today.”

Jiyoona thought that she said those words as naturally as possible, but Aram looked at her with suspicion. Jiyoona thought hard. She always thought that lies were bad things and she should never lie, but right now, she was in desperate need of one. That was because if she told the truth, there was a high probability that Aram would, no, not just her, but the friends gathered around, would follow her.

“Hmm? I wonder what it is that you have to do.”

Aram lowered her voice as she asked. She tried directing the topic away, but it didn't work on her.

“Suspicious. It's very suspicious.”

“I-it's not.”

“What's not?”

Jiyoona was stuck in a dilemma when the homeroom teacher came in. Thanks to that, Aram returned to her seat, and Jiyoona was able to sigh in relief.

“Don't relax just because your tests are over. Those aiming for university should try drawing as well. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“At least you guys answer properly. Once the results are out, you know what will happen, don't you? Those below average, prepare yourselves.”

As soon as the homeroom teacher left, everyone started booing. Jiyoona also participated in it. Although he said all that, the teacher was actually very likable, and they were only able to boo him because they were close.

Jiyoona looked at Aram and her friends. They had gathered around and were discussing where they should go. Right now was the perfect time. This was the perfect opportunity to leave the class as no one paid attention to her. She left after saying 'I'll be going then'. Fortunately, the others waved at her goodbye. She sighed in relief and headed towards the 5th floor. Just as she arrived at the 4th floor, her phone notified her that a message had arrived.

-Have fun on your date.

That message was from Aram. Jiyoona felt faint the moment she saw those words. She even stopped walking because her face felt hot.

She calmed down and wrote 'it's not' on the message box, but couldn't press send. Strictly speaking, it wasn't a date. After all, she was just going somewhere with Daemyung to buy props for the play.

'...A date, huh.'

Jiyoona smiled for a brief moment when she read that word, but soon shook her head. It's not a date. Yes, that's right. It's not a date at all. Jiyoona closed her phone. It was obvious that Aram would tease her no matter what she did.

As the tests were over, the independent studies classroom on the 5th floor was empty. It had become the acting club's clubroom again. She sat by the window and looked down on the school field. Many people were playing with balls as though to celebrate that the tests were over.

"You're here."

Jiyoong was slightly startled to hear those words and turned her head around. She saw Daemyung at the back door of the classroom. When she overheard that Daemyung was going to buy props, Jiyoong squeezed out all the courage in her life and asked if she could go as well. Daemyung accepted it without hesitation. Jiyoong's heart fluttered when he did. That was because she thought that her seonbae was glad to go with her.

However, that hope soon shattered.

"You're going as well?"

Bangjoo was here as well. This fellow had a bright smile on his face as he kicked the soccer ball in his hands inside the classroom. The usually cheerful and passionate fella couldn't be more hateful today.

"Thanks, both of you, when you should want to play around for today."

"What are you saying? Of course we should help. Should I call Aram as well?"

"No, don't do that. It was originally something I had to do alone."

Daemyung smiled as he spoke. Jiyoong stiffly approached the two. She found it embarrassing that she was fantasizing just until a moment ago. At the same time, she found Daemyung a little hateful. Even though she was well aware that he did nothing wrong, she found him hateful because he was smiling without a care in the world.

"We're going to buy some accessories, some materials for the props and some pins. We'll first visit the local supermarket and go to a specialized store. For things like these, we'll have to move around busily to buy them cheap."

"Leave it to me! I'm confident in my walking," Bangjoo spoke as he tapped his chest. Jiyoong nodded her head as well. She felt powerless for some reason.

"Are you ill?"

"Eh? N-no."

Daemyung immediately realized the change in her. This seonbae was really kind after all. Jiyoong thought that it couldn't be helped.

At that moment,

"Are you going now?"

Maru had arrived as well.

"Yes."

"Sorry for not being able to go with you. I have a prior engagement."

"It's fine. This isn't anything much."

"You're going with the two behind you?"

"Yeah. I'm going to look around and see if some places sell them for cheap."

Maru groaned in a low voice before putting his hand on Bangjoo's shoulder.

"I'll borrow him then."

"Bangjoo?"

"Yeah. It's not like you're buying anything heavy, so you can do it with just the two of you, right?"

"It doesn't matter, but...."

Daemyung didn't finish his words and looked at Jiyeon. Jiyeon stood there blankly for a second but shouted when she realized that this was an opportunity.

"It's fine!"

Only after she shouted did she realize how loud her voice was. She bit her lips and looked down. She felt very embarrassed.

"Then off you go. Bangjoo, come down to the container with me."

"Yes!"

Jiyeon inwardly thanked Maru. Of course, he wouldn't have done that because he knew how she felt. It must have been a coincidence.

"Uhm... should I just go by myself then?"

"Eh? Why do you say that?"

That was rather unexpected of Daemyung, so Jiyeon took a step forward. Daemyung flinched and took a step back.

"Uhm, the thing is, it might be tiring for you since we'll have to walk around a lot."

"I'm fine with it."

"R-really?"

"Yes."

Jiyeon was surprised that she was speaking so clearly. Perhaps that was how badly she wanted to go with him?

"Then let's visit the closer places first."

Daemyung smiled faintly as they walked down the stairs. Jiyeon followed suit. Although they soon became silent because neither of them were good at talking, Jiyeon was fine with that. She was fine with just watching Daemyung smile.

“Uhm, seonbae.”

On their way to the bus stop, Jiyoong spoke.

“Yeah?”

“D-do-do you have a girlfriend?”

Hearing that question, Daemyung stopped in his tracks. Jiyoong was puzzled and looked next to her, and found that Daemyung’s eyes were wandering all over the place.

‘His face is really red.’

Jiyoong smiled in relief. His facial expression was enough of an answer. Daemyung replied after being at a loss for a few moments.

“H-how about you?”

Hearing that question, Jiyoong had to look away as well. At the same time, she thought that he might be the same as her.

“L-let’s get going.”

“Y-yeah.”

Jiyoong thought that both of their faces should be red as they started walking again.

* * *

“Is that it?”

“Yup, that’s it.”

Maru waved goodbye to Bangjoo who seemed like he was at a loss. Bangjoo scratched his head, said goodbye and left.

“It’s hard being the wingman.”

They should have left the school premises by now. Maru stretched his arms out and picked up his bag that he put next to the container.

Now that the exams were over, the school became bustling again with students. Especially the school sports field. The students showed what burning youth was like. After watching soccer for a bit, he left the school. As he walked towards the bus stop, he took out his phone. His favorite ringtone could be heard.

“Hello?”

-I finished.

“Really? Then I’ll go over.”

-You’re coming?

“Yeah. I can’t tell someone with a heavy ass to come to me.”

-Do you really want a beating?

“Uhm, is it me or are you getting really violent these days?”

-Urgh, just come and wait for your punishment.

“Yes, yes, I’m going. Think about what you want to eat. I’ll buy it for you.”

-I have my own money too!

Maru hung up as he chuckled.

It had been some time, so he was going to see her.

Chapter 267

Exams were over. She had revised a lot, but as for the result? She didn’t know. She didn’t grade her tests. That was because she felt that she would be too happy and ruin the next exams if the scores were good, and because she felt that her concentration would waver if the scores were bad. The last exam was Korean and she had some time left, so she drew a picture on the blank portions of the test paper. She drew a rabbit, and the end result was quite cute. She felt good about it.

As soon as she folded the test papers and put it inside her bag, the homeroom teacher came in. The homeroom ended with the teacher saying ‘well done’ and ‘have a good rest’. The students then started rushing out while cheering.

She called Maru. As both of them finished their exams today, they decided to hang out. The two decided on a place to meet, and Maru decided to come here.

“Hm.”

She wondered where they should go. Although both of them lived in Suwon, they lived on opposite ends, so it would take some time for Maru to come. As such, waiting for him outside was not really an option. As she was tapping on her desk with her fingers, something popped up in her mind and she put her hands inside the desk drawers. She found a small book at the very rear. It was palm-sized and very thin. This was a book she bought in a second-hand store at the subway station. She liked the size, which made her pick it up, and she decided to buy it after reading the title.

A Christmas Carol.

This was a famous book loved by many and it was written by Charles Dickens. This was her favorite story among the stories her father used to tell her while she sat on his lap. When she was young, she thought that Scrooge was just a foolish and a bad guy. If you have the money, you should share with others - that was what she thought at the time. However, after growing up a little, she thought differently. She was able to understand where Scrooge was coming from. He might be depicted as a miser and as someone without love, but he wasn’t someone that should be criticized.

“What are you doing?”

Someone asked as she was reading. Three of her close friends were getting ready to go home.

“Aren’t you going home?”

"I have an engagement, so I'm going to wait in the classroom for a bit. There's air conditioning here, too."

"An engagement?" Her friend tilted her head and asked.

She smiled faintly and said that it was a secret. When she did, the three friends whispered amongst themselves for a bit before asking 'is it your boyfriend?' She was a little embarrassed but she nodded her head.

"Is he the one that gave you your ring?"

One of them asked again. Wearing accessories was forbidden within school premises, so she didn't put it on her finger inside school grounds, but she sometimes wore them when she met her friends outside. Although she told Maru that she found it embarrassing, she wanted to boast about it since it suited her tastes perfectly.

"Yeah."

"Is he coming here?"

"Yes."

"Does he go to a school nearby? Central? Anji?"

"No, it's much further than that. He goes to a place called Woosung Engineering."

"Really?"

Then, her three friends brought chairs and surrounded her before sitting down. She panicked slightly as she looked at her friends.

"We were too ignorant about you until now, weren't we? Okay then, let's start investigating."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Tell us everything; when you two met; what you like about him; if he's handsome or not; his height and the like. We, your unnis, will evaluate him for you."

The three of them grinned. She had told her friends that she had a boyfriend, but she never went into detail. She hesitated to look at her three friends in the eyes.

"Tests are over too, we have a lo~t of time."

"That's right."

"So be obedient and spit it out."

She ended up raising the white flag due to her friends' persistence.

"...I first met him in Daehak-ro."

"Oho, you're in the acting club alright. Does he act as well?"

"Yeah."

“That makes sense. Did you two meet while preparing for a play?”

“No, that’s not what happened.”

She started stating things about Maru who she chanced upon. At first, she found it embarrassing talking about her boyfriend, but when she got into it, she found it actually quite enjoyable. When she came to, she found herself deeply enjoying talking about Maru.

“That guy’s quite something. He’s quite the man?”

“He’s all bulky, isn’t he?”

“Well, from how he didn’t utter a word despite getting burns, he does know his stuff.”

Her friends gave their own evaluations of Maru from what they heard about him from her. They were mostly positive. She felt good as well when she heard Maru being praised. When she continued talking about Maru in high spirits, her friends teased her saying that she was lovestruck.

“So, how about progress?”

“.....”

Even she, who had been talking gleefully until now, had to stay silent at that question. She knew that silence would mean admitting everything, but the word ‘progress’ made her unable to open her mouth. She gave a glimpse at her friends, and saw that they all had lewd smirks on their faces. Although these three liked talking about lewd things, they somewhat overdid it this time. If she told them that they kissed... she didn’t even want to imagine it. After hesitating for a long time, she ended up telling them that they only held hands. Fortunately, they seemed to believe her, albeit with disappointment.

“But that’s interesting. So the first person to comment on your blog posts ended up being your boyfriend?”

“Yeah... I guess.”

She smiled as she spoke. She came across blogs in her first year of high school. There were no customizable spaces and avatars like Cyland, but she found blogs, where she could calmly narrate her stories, better. Blogs were like an evolved version of books to her. People well-versed in many different fields had summed up their experiences in their unique words. Each post, and each page would pile up and eventually become a long series of stories.

In that space, she mostly talked about things related to acting. She summarized not only the plays happening within South Korea, but by other famous acting troupes overseas. At the same time, she created a category where she could exchange opinions with people of her age who were also in the acting club of their respective high schools.

She met Maru there. Maru was also running a blog related to acting. Thinking about it now, it was a tremendous coincidence. After all, back then, the two didn’t even know each other.

“I asked you several times to make a Cyland account, and you rejected me. And now, you’re telling me the reason is actually because of your boyfriend?”

Her friend poked her cheeks. She smiled awkwardly.

“Oh yeah, if I remember correctly, your ID was Black Swan, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she nodded her head.

“What are swans again?”

“You idiot, they’re birds. Though, they’re mostly white.”

“So Black swans are black white birds?”

“I guess that’s it,” the three talked amongst themselves. The girl that first brought up the ID asked again.

“Isn’t ‘Swan’ prettier? Black Swan sounds weird to me. It’s a black bird after all. Isn’t it ominous like a crow?”

While she understood where that girl was coming from, she shook her head and explained.

“Everyone once thought that all swans were white. After all, they’ve only ever seen white swans. Then, they discovered black swans. Everyone was shocked. Since then, people began to use the phrase ‘black swan’ to refer to something precious.”

“Oh, precious? That’s what you consider yourself as, huh?” One of her friends joked.

She smiled faintly before speaking,

“No. Black swan has a different meaning as well. The impossible becoming the possible; the unexisting become the existing.”

“So, a miracle?”

Her friend, who always ranked first in the school in terms of scores, replied immediately. She nodded her head.

“It’s not specifically used to refer to miracles, but I created my ID based on that meaning. It felt nice. The impossible becoming the possible.”

“Now that you say it, a surprising black swan sounds better than a noble white swan.” They all started giggling.

“In that sense, isn’t Pwincess Yoonjoo too childish?”

“Your ID is Squishy Apple. You’re no better.”

“At least I have my name on it. Don’t put me together with you.”

Her three friends started mentioning each other’s Cyland IDs and argued with them. They were trivial conversations, but perhaps that was the proof that they were close friends.

“Oh yeah, what were you reading?”

“Oh, this? A Christmas Carol. It’s the one with Scrooge.”

“Ah, the one where he turns a new leaf thanks to ghosts?”

“Yeah.”

“I really hate that story.”

“Why?”

“It’s like forcing you to be a good kid. I have my own path, you know? Moreover, a ghost appears and shows him the past, the present, and the future, to induce him to change his decisions? Doesn’t a ghost have something better to do?”

Hearing the cynical answer from the top student of the year, the other two friends told her that she lacked dreams and hopes.

“It’s not about dreams and hopes. Look at Scrooge. He worked so hard to earn that much money. The story doesn’t say that he stole that money, does it? In my opinion, forcing people to donate the money they gained through rightful business is a form of violence.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“And also, ghosts. That’s so oldschool. They’re completely unrelated to Scrooge. Of course, it’s an old book, so using Deus Ex Machina was the norm back then, but if you’re gonna use ghosts, at least use scary ones! The ghosts in that book are all depicted to be some kind of gentlemen.”

“Geez.”

The girl shook her head. At the same time, her friends started tickling the complaining girl’s waist. The girl surrendered immediately and admitted that ‘Scrooge is the bad guy!’ unwillingly.

“Oh wait.”

She picked up her phone that was vibrating. The caller was Maru. He told her that he’d be here in 20 minutes.

“Your boyfriend?”

“Yeah, he’ll be here soon.”

“Haa, you’ll get mad at us if we follow you, right?”

“Probably?”

“It’ll be quite disappointing if we decided to butt in when you two are meeting after tests, huh.”

The three friends left the class after saying that they should hang out later. She smiled and looked at the class clock. Thanks to her friends, she wasn’t bored as she waited for Maru.

She closed the book ‘A Christmas Carol’, that she had read several times and put it back inside her drawers.

‘The ghosts, huh.’

She rested her chin on her hands and looked outside the window. She had a different opinion. She thought that perhaps the three ghosts were actually Scrooge himself; that the Scrooges from the past,

the present, and the future were trying to save him. Of course, this shouldn't be the case, but she thought that it might have been better if it was actually written that way.

"And also, Scrooge really isn't that bad of a guy."

She smiled faintly as she thought about the friend that stood on Scrooge's side. The reason Scrooge was able to meet the three ghosts was because of his dead friend Marley, who had warned Scrooge that he shouldn't turn out like he did.

'Perhaps Scrooge's life wasn't that bad after all if you think about how he had a friend who came to help him even after his death.'

The book mentioned that Scrooge was a kind man in the past.

She hummed to herself as she fell into contemplation. Then, she stood up after realizing that it was time.

Chapter 268

Green leaves started sprouting on the thin trees that the faculty planted last year for landscaping the school premises. She stood next to the tree that was next to the school gates. The rays of the sun hit the leaves swaying in the wind, and the bits and pieces of the rays hit her face. Although the weather was hot, she hummed according to the rhythm of the rustle of the leaves. Why was it that she had fun while doing nothing? Was it because of Han Maru?

When she checked the time on her watch, she found that it was nearly one o'clock. As she didn't have a lot for breakfast, she was very hungry. She decided that they should first go out to eat. She started walking towards the bus stop under the shade of the school walls.

'He should be here soon, right?'

He had called a few moments ago that he was almost here. She tiptoed near the bus stop before going to the convenience store right behind it. After smiling at the lady that greeted her, she bought a can of milk tea. Did Maru like this though? After hesitating for a moment, she bought two. She decided to drink them both if he didn't like them.

Just as she wiped off the droplets of water on the surface of the can, she saw the 82 bus approaching from afar. It slowed down as it approached the bus stop before spitting out some people. Maru was among them.

She waved her hand while holding the can in her hand. Maru crossed the road and came towards her.

"It's hot. Why are you outside?"

"It's not that hot," saying that, she offered one of the cans to Maru.

Maru thanked her before drinking it.

"Do you like milk tea?"

"No," he replied without hesitation.

She frowned.

“Then why are you drinking it?”

“Because you gave it to me.”

She made a hollow smile when she heard Maru replying so nonchalantly.

“Have you had lunch?”

“Not yet. What do you want to eat?”

“Let’s see....”

Was there anything more important than deciding on a menu for lunch? She thought deeply as though she was solving the last question of the English exam. Maybe some light bunsik? Or should they look around some more on high street? Did the others say that the newly opened store was good?

After thinking for a while, she asked Maru, who was just watching her without saying anything.

“Where do you think we should go?”

“I’m fine with anything. Don’t you have a place you want to go? I thought you wanted to eat pizza last time.”

“Ah!”

She clapped and nodded her head. She was reminded of the newly open pizza store on high street. According to her friends that had already visited that place, their pizza dough was thin and crusty. Since they said that the salad was good as well, there was no reason to hesitate.

She grabbed Maru’s hand and walked forward. Since they decided, they had to be quick. She led Maru through the streets and over a pedestrian crossing. The streets were no longer filled with houses and they changed into shopping blocks. Although it was only one in the afternoon, students wearing uniforms filled the streets. They were all students going to schools around this area that had finished their exams.

‘There might not be any seats if we’re late.’

Her friends that visited that place after school told her that they were only able to go in after 30 minutes of waiting. She grabbed onto Maru’s hands as she walked. Although she felt nervous holding his hand just until a few months ago, it was natural to her now.

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

“It’s a popular place, so we might have to wait outside if we don’t go in time.”

She struggled through the students that packed the streets and entered rodeo street. Clothes stores filled this street. She entered a small alley between the clothes stores. The alley was filled with dirt, trash and air conditioner outdoor units. Although this was a shortcut she would never use, she had no choice for today.

“This is where you wanna go?”

Hearing Maru's question, she nodded vigorously. She dragged the hesitant Maru and ran across the alley.

"Is it worth all this effort to eat it?"

"My friend told me it was good."

Maru smiled as he followed.

After exiting the alleyway, the first thing she saw was the pizza store sign that was colorful compared to the stores on either side. In front of the store was a menu board. The menu board seemed to be hand written by the owner with pastel-tone chalk. She inwardly approved of the exterior of the shop in her mind as she walked towards it.

"Welcome."

As she entered the shop, the door made a jingle sound due to the bell and a lady wearing an apron greeted the two. The counter was right next to the entrance. In front of her, she could see people at their tables eating their meal as well as the kitchen that was open for all to see. The cook that was cooking something in front of the burning oven could be seen.

"Is there an empty table?" Maru asked.

The lady tiptoed to see inside the table area before going through the memo papers on the counter.

"There's one empty table. This way."

The table area was quite wide with 20 or so tables and only three were empty. As two of the empty tables had the 'reserved' plate on it, there was only one empty table. She stroked her chest in relief after seeing some students that entered right after her. Had she not taken that shortcut, they would have had to wait.

"See that? We were almost too late."

She felt a little proud. Taking his seat, Maru replied to her with 'you're the best'. She opened the menu which was on one side of the table and decided on a pizza to eat. As for spaghetti, she decided on a basic tomato spaghetti. For her drink, she chose a cup of strawberry smoothie.

She smiled when she smelled food. She could hear faint chatting noises as well as cutlery noises.

"Nice smell."

"Right?"

She smiled as she drank the smoothie that came out first. It had just the right sweetness. She spoke as she fiddled with the straw.

"How did you do on the read-through?"

"So-so. I was a little nervous, but I think I did fine."

"You sound confident. Oh, have you seen sir Park Taeho?"

"I did."

"Did you get to talk to him?"

"We exchanged a few words during the audition."

"How was he up close? Was he cool like he is in the movies?"

"He's just a chubby middle-aged man."

"No way."

"He's like that for now. He gained weight for the role."

"...I wonder if he looks cute or not."

"I don't know what you're imagining, but he should not look as good as you think he is. If you're so curious, go watch the movie once it's out."

She pictured a chubby Taeho in her mind. Taeho played a lone prosecutor that fought against crime in a movie that was released last year. The lone wolf-like figure couldn't look cooler. Although he was past 40, his handsome looks didn't deteriorate but matured even further and he looked incredible. Such a person had gained weight, huh.

'He's a cool actor, so he must look cute.'

"Please be careful, it's hot."

The pizza they ordered came out. Just as she had heard, the dough was really thin.

"Give me your plate."

Maru cut a slice of pizza and put it on her plate. Although he was quite mean at times, he was really caring when it came to things like these. There was a slice of pizza on her plate. Although there was a fork and a knife, she grabbed the end of the dough with her hands. Pizza was best when it was eaten with hands.

The crusty dough and the soft cheese on top. She made a happy expression as she bit into it.

'It's good.'

She understood why her friends had praised it so much. Although the cheese was a little salty, the button mushroom neutralized that and the taste was deepened even more. Although it seemed like a bland pizza on the surface as it didn't have that much topping, the combination of the sauce, the cheese and the mushroom were really good and she felt that any other topping would have broken that ensemble.

"This is decent."

Maru seemed satisfied as well. If the picky Maru acknowledged this, then it must be a really good pizza. While at it, she ate a portion of the spaghetti as well. The semi-crushed cherry tomatoes added just the right bit of sourness and she didn't get bored of it.

'I'm happy.'

Food was the best form of happiness. Just as she drew some more of the spaghetti to her plate, a hand appeared in front of her eyes. The hand, holding a tissue, slowly approached her face before wiping off her mouth.

She raised her head a little. She saw Maru putting down the tissue he was holding. Usually, Maru would tell her that she was acting like a child, but today, he just looked at her without saying anything. She looked at Maru who acted as though nothing happened.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

She smiled and shook her head. So he could be caring at times, huh?

After eating all the food, they stood up from their seats. As it was a satisfactory meal, they thought that they should visit again.

In front of the counter, she took out her wallet. As she had been saving up all this time, she was fine with paying.

"I'll pay."

However, before she could even take out any money, Maru held out the card first. She took out some bills saying that 'please take this not that,' but Maru stopped her.

The employee took the card and did the transaction. As she couldn't pay she decided to give the money to Maru instead.

"Here."

"It's fine."

"I'm not fine with it though."

After signalling the employee that she was sorry, she took Maru outside. Even outside, Maru put his hands behind his back so that she couldn't give the money to him.

"Are you really going to do this?"

She looked at Maru with dissatisfaction.

"I feel sorry now."

"What do you feel sorry about?"

"You're the one spending money all the time. And this is how you act all the time as well. How many times do I have to tell you that I don't like being treated?"

They were both students without much money. She wanted to split the dating costs half-half. Some of her classmates said that the boy obviously has to pay all of it, but she didn't agree with that. She

thought that if both parties liked each other, they should split the cost and the burden as well. How was it love if only one side took losses?

After scratching his brows for a while, Maru took a step towards her.

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“I feel sorry though.”

“What do you feel sorry about?”

“That you’re the one taking care of all the costs.”

“If it’s like that, you don’t need to be sorry.”

Hearing his words, she frowned. Just as she was about to say something to him for making her repeat herself, Maru closed in on her before hugging her. At that moment, her head turned blank. She forgot what she was going to say and became absent-minded. Then, she realized that they were in the middle of the street and that there were others who were looking at them. She screamed in her mind and was about to push Maru away when a low voice entered her ears.

“It’s fine since I’ll have the money be our shared asset once we get married.”

She couldn’t exert any strength into her hands anymore. His words were just absurd. M-married? Shared assets? Those words filled her mind, and at the same time, her face felt hot as though it was about to burst.

She saw that Maru was smiling at her right in front of her. Then, that guy continued.

“Oh my, how bold.”

At the same time, Maru took a step back and hugged himself as though he was some embarrassed girl. She felt her last strand of reason popping and swung her arms.

Go die!

* * *

“Seriously?”

Maru held out the contract form he received to her as she clearly looked like she didn’t believe it. She started reading the contract with a sour face. It seemed that she was still angry because of the hug from before.

“So it was real.”

She blinked several times as she gave the contract back. Maru shrugged.

“So you’ll be working for JA Production in the future?”

“If there aren’t any hiccups, then yes. I heard that I’ll have things to do once the movie is over.”

“That’s kinda neat. A company, huh.”

She looked at the contract form with complex feelings. As Maru was well aware of the fact that becoming successful as an actress was her dream, he could guess how she felt.

"I'll pave the way for you so do your best to follow me."

"I'm not going to walk on a path that somebody else set for me."

She smiled again. Maru put the contract back inside his bag.

"Then I guess you'll be busy once work starts coming your way?"

"I'm not so sure about that. I guess it depends on how well I do."

"So we won't get to meet once you become a popular star, huh?" She pouted.

"I'll just date you publicly."

"Easy for you to say."

"Actually, it might be better to just broadcast our engagement ceremony to the public. If I become famous enough, the journalists will come flocking, right? I guess I won't need to prepare anything."

"Keep dreaming."

"Just get ready for it."

"For what?"

"The engagement ceremony."

"You must be out of your mind."

After chuckling to herself, she looked away and asked in a tiny voice.

"...Are you serious?"

"When was I ever not serious?"

"Hey, we're only in our 2nd year of high school. Engagement and marriage and things like that are just..."

"It might be unexpectedly soon, you know? If it was the old days, we would have gotten married already and have two kids..."

"S-stop! Don't go any further than that."

She had turned beet red. Maru felt like teasing her more and did his best to hold them in. If he went any further, he might actually get a slap on the face.

"So for the time being, I'll take care of the expenses. It's natural for the one earning money to pay. If I become penniless later, you can just take care of me at that time. Simple, isn't it?"

"When did I ever say that I'll be taking care of you?"

"Then I guess I'll have to be careful not to run out. I have to keep taking care of you in the future."

Maru tilted his head to avoid the napkin that was flung at him. These napkins were getting faster and faster every time, and she might as well join the girl's baseball club.

"Geez."

Maru stared at her who was avoiding his gaze, drinking coffee.

If there was a face that he would never get tired of seeing, it would be hers.

Tteokbokki, kimbap, ramyun, and the like. Here's a for more details.

Chapter 269

"We need to wait 30 minutes."

She spoke as she checked the screen time on the movie tickets. They were going to watch a family movie that was released ten days ago. The story was about a man who passed away protecting his family even after his death. Although it sounded like a heavy topic, it was said that the director pulled it off in a comedic way. Although the scores of that movie weren't that good online, she always took her time to watch movies that were related to familial love. Although she preferred crime thrillers over comedies and plays over movies, she always fell apart in front of 'familiar love'. She thought that it must be because of her longing for her father.

"Let's go down and look at some clothes."

"...Can't I wait here?"

"Probably not?"

She dragged Maru by the arm. Maru, who was sitting on the sofa in front of the ticketing counter, had to stand up against his will.

"We have to wait 30 minutes anyway. It's better to look around rather than staying here."

Dragging Maru who was even groaning to protest that he didn't want to go, she went downstairs on the escalator. The fourth floor was filled with clothing stores. There were many bright-colored clothes for the coming summer. Just as she looked around amidst the clothes that gave off a new smell, she turned around her head. She saw Maru intently watching something a few steps away from her. She wondered what he was looking at and walked to where he was. She then saw that Maru was looking at a mannequin, to be exact, the swimsuit that the mannequin was wearing which made her frown.

"I think this will look good on you."

"You pervert."

She pinched Maru's arm and immediately left that place. She didn't realize he would just stare at a woman's swimsuit. She remembered seeing that the employee was giving him strange glances so her face became hot.

"I think a bikini is good."

"What the heck are you saying?"

“We should go to the beach this summer. We couldn’t go last year because we were too busy, but we should be able to go this year. Two days and one night. How about it?”

“I’m not going.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’?”

As they walked around on the 4th floor, Maru stopped whenever he saw a mannequin wearing a swimsuit and started evaluating it, while she had to work hard stopping him from doing so. After a few rounds, it dawned on her. Maybe he was doing this on purpose?

“You’re protesting because I dragged you here, aren’t you?”

“You just realized?” Maru smirked.

She shook her head.

“But when I said it will look good on you, I meant it.”

She had to admit that she couldn’t win against him with words. He always attacked her soft spot, and when she tried to fight back, she would find herself talking about embarrassing things. There was only one way to win - to not say anything.

She locked her hand with Maru’s right hand. Then she dragged him so that he couldn’t stray away from her. She thought that he shouldn’t be able to say strange words if she was right next to him.

However, Maru was much more evil than she had expected. For one, he blatantly asked the store employees ‘doesn’t this look like it will look good on my girlfriend?’ and the like, and he even stared at clothes in the underwear store.

She had lost. There was no way she could win against this huge pervert. She rotated her arm to see her watch. It was about time the movie began.

“Fine, let’s go.”

She dragged Maru and went upstairs. She showed the tickets to the employee in charge of checking tickets before being guided by him. They followed the dimly-lit corridor until they reached screen 5.

“There aren’t that many people.”

“A blockbuster movie was just released so people should be flocking to that,” Maru spoke as he sat down.

A movie that aired at the same time was a huge action movie with dozens of billions of won of investment, so it wasn’t that surprising.

“I wonder why American movies require so much budget.”

“I think the casting of the actors accounts for more than half of it.”

“Really?”

She hadn't heard about this before as she knew nothing regarding the movie industry. When she looked at him, Maru continued explaining.

"Shooting for special effects, blocking roads, and casting extras might require some money, but if you don't account for the Hollywood star actors, you'll be left with less than half the budget."

"Then casting them cost billions?"

"No, you need to add one more zero."

"You're talking about all the actors combined, right?"

"No, casting a single named actor costs more than ten billion. The movie airing on the screen next to us is a sequel. I believe casting the main actor for it cost 20 billion won."

"No way."

A small-scale play could be created under 10 million won if it didn't cost that much. Of course, that did not account for renting the theaters.

In any case, ten million won seemed like a lot of money, yet Hollywood actors received several times, no, several hundred times that much, so she couldn't believe it.

"If it costs that much, is there really a reason to cast those actors? If it was me, I would have invested more in something else. I would have cast other actors and have created a better stage."

She was slightly angry even. As she prepared for plays and studied them, she knew how hard the lives of those in the industry were. However, although this was another country, casting an actor could cost dozens of billions?

Maru faintly smiled at her words. His smile wasn't that of sympathy.

"What you said definitely makes sense. If casting the actors didn't cost that much, they would be able to support other areas better, and would be able to create better-quality movies. However, a movie is not just art, it is business. In business, you invest a lot of money to use something or someone that has proved their worth. That is because they're sure to return the investment in the form of profit. Above all, there's the fact that you can't really put a price tag on people. For us, 10 million dollars sounds like a lot, but the producers of the movie might think that it's actually quite cheap. The movie airing on the screen next to us is like that as well. The prequel was a huge hit in the world, wasn't it? Of course, the producers would want to use that popularity to create a sequel. To do that, you would need to cast the main character from the prequel, and the actor, who knows that the producers want him or her, can ask for a high price. How much do you think they spent to cast the main character in the prequel?"

Hearing Maru's question, she thought about it for a while. Since it was 20 billion in the sequel, the prequel must be similar, right?

"Perhaps around 17 billion, considering that it rose a little in the sequel?"

"No, it was only 2 billion."

"Then it became ten times larger in the sequel?"

“Indeed.”

“But they still cast that person? Even when they had to pay ten times as much?”

“It’s because they can’t do without that actor for that specific movie. There is also the fact that other actors do not want to take the role of a character with a fixed identity. I would be the same, you know? If the director told me ‘you play that role because we failed to negotiate with the previous actor’, I would refuse on the spot. The risk is just too big. Moreover, that movie is also a Hollywood movie which is aired across the entire globe.”

“...So that’s how it is.”

“The role is unique to that specific actor now. I guess that’s what people mean when they say someone is irreplaceable.”

She was shocked by the astronomical sum for a brief moment before turning her head around to Maru.

“You’re quite knowledgeable on this stuff.”

“I have to. That’s the industry I’m striving for in the future.”

She gave a glance at Maru who was leaning back on his chair.

Although he was very sneaky and played pranks a lot at times, he was very mature when it came to matters related to her. It wasn’t that he was trying to look good in front of her. His words had conviction, so she fell for his words when she listened to them.

So Maru was seriously considering his future career. She, too, had the dream that she wanted to be in the acting industry in the future. She was making her own efforts into striving for it as well. However, she felt uneasy because she felt like she was too behind when compared to Maru.

As the eras changed, the debut age in the entertainment industry kept decreasing. For idols, they say that becoming trainees at middle school age was too late. Actors were not that much different. It was an era where people started acting from childhood, became better during their youth, and become acknowledged when they mature.

She thought about the actors she liked as well as their age when they debuted. Although there were people that became successful after debuting late, most of them started their career at a young age.

She suddenly had the thought that perhaps it was too late for her. Maru, who was sitting next to her, had already entered a contract with a company already. Not just any company, but JA Production, which was led by a master in the acting industry, Lee Junmin.

She didn’t feel that much of a gap when they were preparing for a play together in Myeongdong, but right now, Maru felt like he was far ahead of her, which made her feel strange. He was so close, yet he felt so distant.

At that moment, Maru softly grabbed her hand. It was as though he had read her mind; as though there was no need for her to be that worried.

“Just because you’re slow doesn’t mean you’re late. And you’re not slow right now either. There’s no need to be in a hurry. I was just a little luckier than you.”

His caring words comforted her. She smiled and leaned on Maru’s shoulder. She wanted to stay like this for the time being.

Just in time, the commercials ended and the cinema darkened. The curtains fell a little with a machine noise. Feeling comfortable, she decided to lean on Maru’s shoulder for a little more. Her hand, held by Maru, felt warm.

‘Maybe I’m relying on him?’

Although she asked herself that question, she was already aware of the answer. Maru was definitely different compared to the others of his age. To compare him to something, he was analogous to a streetlamp that stood there throughout the ages. People would walk under that streetlamp all the time without noticing it, yet when it became dark, the streetlamp couldn’t be any more reassuring. She smiled when she thought that he was a man that would scatter light on her no matter how stormy the weather was.

After the movie started, she focused on the movie. There was a warm family. They couldn’t look happier. However, as the music heightened, the uneasy face of the husband foreshadowed that an unfortunate event was about to happen, and soon, the husband died due to an accident. The depressing monotone funeral passed by in a flash. As this was supposed to be a romantic comedy movie, the sad part wasn’t that long.

Despite that though, she felt a tingle on her nose and felt like crying. She suddenly wanted to have a look at Maru’s expression. Would he be making a sad face right now? From what she knew of him, she thought that he would be analyzing the movie.

She turned around slightly and looked at Maru.

The light reflecting off the screen was flickering faintly within Maru’s pupils. There was a reason why it was ‘faintly’ flickering. It was because Maru was crying. He was crying a lot. He just didn’t make any noise, but his cry looked like he was screaming his heart out, which made her look at him absent-mindedly.

The ever-sturdy boyfriend looked too feeble right now, and felt like he would shatter like glass with a single touch.

Subconsciously, she grabbed Maru’s hand with both of her hands. Then, she grabbed it tightly to the point that it might hurt a little. Maru flinched and looked back at her. He started wiping off his tears in a rush as though he didn’t even realize that he was crying.

Why did he cry?

She wanted to ask, but decided not to. Instead, she held his hand tighter, so that he could rely on her more when he felt weak and feeble. Whether he found her reliable, she didn’t know, but... she didn’t want to stay still.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

It was strange. She did not know why she said such words. However, there was one thing she was sure of. It was that those words didn't come from her head, nor her heart, but somewhere much more distant than that, yet it was herself. She smiled and wiped Maru's face.

Only then did Maru make a faint smile.

"I know."

That was his answer.

Chapter 270

After the movie ended and the ending credits started rolling, Maru kept watching the screen without saying a word. The story was very ordinary. It was an overdone 'communication between the dead and the living' plot. The acting of the actors were decent and the series of clichés made it so that the movie wasn't worth praising, but it was not a waste of time either. Simply put, it was just a 'decent' movie. It was a family comedy movie that aired every Christmas - everyone could have a laugh watching it. It was one of those movies that everyone would forget about after the movie finished and just grab something to eat afterwards.

"Should we stay a little more?"

She spoke. Maru nodded faintly.

Despite the common plot, the reason Maru couldn't escape the swamp of emotions should be because the situation didn't feel unfamiliar to him. He was well aware that a movie was just a movie and that fiction had nothing to do with reality, but his heart didn't act the way he wanted it to. His mind stayed silent, yet his heart was crying all by itself.

He focused on the movie and didn't even realize he was crying. The figure of the husband that passed away overlapped with his own figure at the last moments of his life, which made him gnash his teeth. After that, he felt a tragic sadness when he saw that the spirit of the husband tried to help his remaining family without making his presence known. Throughout the entire movie, he saw within the actors the figures of his wife in her forties as well as his daughter who might have been in middle school or high school. That suffocated him.

The woman that introduced herself as the angel or the grim reaper showed him that his wife and daughter were living safely in another world, but when he watched the movie, he started getting worried about the forces of society that might bring trouble upon them once more. What if something happened to them? Wouldn't they be in trouble like the characters in the movie? Perhaps they are resenting me? - He had many questions in his mind.

He thought that he was over that by now. He was confident that he could stay smiling and just go past it without getting sad. However, he was clearly wrong. Well, it would be a little surprising if he could erase 20 years of life with just two. He had the faint premonition that the fog of emotions in his heart would continue being there for eternity. Was he fated to forever keep the two of them in his mind? If it was true, then it would definitely feel like running amidst the darkness in search of the shadow of hope that could never come true. Was he supposed to live as the clown wearing a smile mask while crying underneath, singing requiem to a reality reflected on a mirror? Forever?

Just as he kept questioning himself, he heard her voice. The moment he heard the words 'I'm not going anywhere,' he fell into shock. He felt as though her eyes were looking at the depths of his heart. It was as though she would accept and understand everything about him. The thick fog in his heart cleared up in an instant and a ray of sunshine dawned on him. The perfect words came at just the perfect time, so Maru thought that he was hearing things for a brief moment.

He felt naked. Not in the sense that he was embarrassed, but that he had nothing in his hands just like the moment he was introduced to the world. All of his senses were pointed at her in front of him. Just like a newborn baby would cry in order to live, Maru couldn't help but keep looking at her to consolidate his soul that was almost collapsing. She was still a young girl who was just maturing, but for that moment, she felt too mature to him and he had the misconception that she, who was supposed to be together with their daughter in another world, had appeared in front of him.

He could smell the fragrance of skin from her hand that wiped his tears. It was the same warm smell that came from her neck and shoulders from when she was sleeping throughout the night. The two had the same smell. Maru could only start smiling then. Here, in this place, was the person he loved.

The guilt and the longing for the family living outside of his reach was something akin to a shadow - he thought. He couldn't remove those feelings even if he wanted to. That was because the proof of Han Maru's living was that shadow. It was unknown when and where he would remind himself of his wife and daughter again. However, Maru intuitively realized that he wouldn't be crying at that time; that he would be able to smile back at those memories.

After the ending credits finished, the faint lights in the theater brightened again. Maru slowly stood up after seeing staff come in and start cleaning the place. She should be confused right now, but she just held Maru's hand as they headed for the exit. As soon as they left, stuffy air attacked their faces. Maru felt as though he came back from dreamland.

He wiped his face. As he was a man, he felt somewhat embarrassed for showing tears. He shook off his emotions before looking at her.

"...Why are you like that?"

She had teary eyes and looked as though she was about to cry. Only then did he realize that the hand grabbing his hand was rather stiff.

"You cried first," she spoke.

She sniffed and wiped her eyes with her sleeves. She couldn't look more adorable. Aah, I cannot escape this woman - the words 'happy confinement' came to his mind.

"I'm sorry."

Maru patted her shoulders. She looked mature for a brief moment, but she was actually just a young girl. How confused must she be after receiving the grief of a 45-year old man? He felt very sorry.

He threw a few jokes thinking that he should make her smile again. Thankfully, she started smiling again.

"I feel tired all of a sudden," she said as they entered the lobby.

Maru understood where she was coming from. She suddenly had to deal with a crying man next to her. Receiving other's emotions was much harder than releasing one's own. Maru had her sit down on the sofa and went to a nearby cafe to buy a warm drink for her. When Maru came back with some drinks in his hands, he saw that she was dozing off. Maru sat down next to her and lent her his shoulder. Her round head fell on his shoulder.

* * *

"You should've woken me up."

"You were sleeping too soundly, so I didn't dare to."

They were standing at the bus stop. Maru spoke as he looked at the coming bus,

"There it is."

The bus slowed down and stopped at the bus stop. She got onboard. Maru looked at her through the window. After sitting down on an empty seat, she smiled at him and waved her hand.

"Bye."

As soon as he waved back, the bus started speeding up again. After sending her off, Maru checked on the time. It was 6 in the evening. He wished he could stay with her longer, but let her go after hearing that she had to have dinner with her mother. He remembered that his mother-in-law put importance on having dinner together.

'Should I walk a bit then?'

The sun was setting so the air was getting chilly as well. The streets were more crowded than it was in the afternoon.

Maru looked at a standing bar among the large franchise bars. It was a small bar which no one gave a glance at, but somehow, he was drawn to it. It must be because of the memories of this 45 year-old self that came back to him at the cinema. It was obvious that those memories would fade out again by tomorrow, but for now, he could not leave this place due to the memories of his company days when he conversed with others about various things.

It was a shabby shelter he ran away to from the bomb known as superiors. It was his hideout where he could celebrate that he had survived yet another day through various insults and verbal violence. He visited these kinds of places with his colleagues, but as his company life dragged out, he eventually started going alone or with just one, very close, person.

'The owner there made really good golbaengi-muchim.'

The owner made the golbaengi-muchim right in front of the customers. It was just a mixture of cheap store-bought canned golbaengi, as well as another cheap store-bought chogochujang, and some boiled noodles, yet it tasted so good. Maru was reminded of the store that he visited once every two days until he left the company and turned around to get a bus that headed to Seoul.

When he arrived in Seoul, it was 8 in the evening. Maru kept grabbing onto that thin strand of memory as he walked around. Thankfully, the building hadn't changed, and the streets hadn't changed that

much, so he didn't have any difficulty finding the place. He bypassed the wide roads and skyscrapers and eventually entered a small road where shabby houses were built. If he walked up some more, he would enter a poor hillside village. There, Maru found a tattered signboard.

"It's here."

He smiled subconsciously.

He felt as though he found some cash in a pocket of a winter jacket that he hadn't worn for a year. The sliding wooden door was half rotten. It seemed that it had not undergone remodelling again. The menu was written with a permanent marker on a cardboard, and there was a white plastic bag filled with water under the eaves. The owner always said that it was there to chase out the flies.

He grabbed the rusted iron hook on the door and pulled it left. He could smell food inside. Wobbly metal tables were here and there. There were no customers.

When he entered, he found a familiar figure. There was a man sitting on a chair, with crossed legs, watching a small TV hanging on the ceiling. He looked like he was nearing his 40s. The owner from his memories was in front of him, just a bit younger.

'Yes. Owner, that's what I called him.'

The store owner had the surname Jang. Most customers called him manager, but the frequent visitors called him owner.

"What the heck? I'm not selling alcohol to a student."

The owner looked at him and spoke disgruntledly. Maru felt that he hadn't changed at all.

"How about udon?"

"Udon?"

The owner stood up and scanned Maru from top to bottom before going to the kitchen. Although there was a menu on the wall, the prices weren't on it. The price was up to the owner. The kitchen was open for Maru to see. As he had expected, the owner was just making ordinary store-bought udon. It was made in an instant. The owner then sat down again, crossed his legs and started watching TV.

"Kimchi and pickled radish are...."

"In the fridge, and I have to get them, right?"

"...Yeah. Have you been here before?"

"Probably."

"Probably? That's a vague answer."

The owner then started watching TV after losing interest. Maru smiled and took out some kimchi. There was a baseball match on TV, and it seemed that the team the owner was cheering for was losing as he sighed whenever there was a hit.

That familiar sigh made Maru smile. He felt as though he was grabbing a fragment of his memory in his hands.

* * *

After watching TV for a while, when he came to, Maru found himself surrounded by men in suits. His phone indicated that it was nearing 10 p.m. The owner was busy cooking food while the customers were eating as though they were familiar with the place. He could hear the clanging of glass from some places. This was a quiet bar without much laughter. As the popular menu item here, jeyuk-bokkeum, started filling the tables and a savory smell started filling this place.

A bowl of jeyuk-bokkeum and a bottle of soju was enough to console him back then. He inhaled a mouthful of jeyuk-bokkeum fried in briquette fire before standing up. It was about time he went back. At that moment, the owner brought a bowl of rice topped with jeyuk-bokkeum and put it on his table.

“Eat this and go back home. Leaving the house at your age is just suffering. This old man has done it like one or two times when I was your age, but it really isn’t something that humans should do. You’ll end up ringing doorbells selling cheap gum or something. Even the worst of parents are better than society. If the place you live in is really that unbearable, then just report to the police, not run away like you did. Get it? You will never find a place to call home one you run away from one at a young age.”

He somehow became a runaway boy. He was about to explain but he decided not to and just sat back down. He scooped a big spoonful of the rice and put it inside his mouth. At times like these, he understood why Koreans always had rice. After emptying the bowl, he stood up. He took out a ten thousand won bill and put it on his table.

“Thanks for the food.”

The owner did not reply. Maru smiled as he left.

‘Memories aren’t so bad.’

He engraved the shabby exterior as he turned around. If there weren’t any accidents, this store would keep its place here in the future as well. It would get remodeled, and the owner would start hiring young employees, but the owner’s unique personality and the smell of briquettes would not change. Maru decided that this would be his first favorite restaurant. He thought that he should bring his friends on the day they became adults. He would tell only his close friends this secret place.

“Oh no, I might be late.”

It was almost time for the last train. Maru hurried down the hill.

Spicy salad with moon snails. See for more info

A mixture of (red chilli paste) and vinegar.