

Once Again 341

Chapter 341

A lady wearing a red qipao smiled and moved to the side. Maru smiled back before walking past.

"I see you know that director," he spoke in a low voice.

He heard the answer from behind him.

"I do," Suyeon replied as she walked.

They seemed to be frying some chili oil as there was a spicy smell in the air. They walked past the oily smell unique to Chinese-style restaurants and went to the hall. There were families who came to eat.

Maru nodded towards the employee in charge of the door before leaving. There was a queue outside the restaurant. He saw a man sigh and turn around since the queue wasn't decreasing that much.

"Rooftops are the best to have a talk," Suyeon spoke.

She then turned to the left of the building and climbed up some stairs. There was an electronic door lock on the rooftop, but Suyeon proficiently typed in the passcode and entered. Maru then remembered that the store owner had greeted her warmly when they came here.

There was artificial grass laid out on the rooftop. They seemed to be planted on polyurethane boards. Other than that, there were foldable camping chairs, camping tables as well as a barbecue grill. It seemed that this place was used to hold small parties between acquaintances.

"I heard you're appearing in it as a minor role."

"Yeah, well," Maru replied as he looked at Suyeon.

How did this woman know Joongjin? Why was she aware of his recent activities?

"No need to stare at me. We're going to have to act together again."

"Don't tell me you were cast in the movie too?"

"That's probably how I know about you being in it, don't you think? I heard from the director a few days ago. He was writing down the participating actors and I saw your name, so I asked."

"I see."

"You and I seem deeply connected. This is already our second piece together."

"But we never met during shoots. We're too far apart to be 'deeply connected'."

"Is that so?"

Suyeon sat down and offered him to sit as well. Maru shook his head. He wasn't planning to stay here for long, so he didn't plan to sit.

"You don't like me, do you?"

"As I said before, I neither like nor hate you."

“It’d be nice if you were a little kinder.”

“If you don’t have anything else to say to me, I’ll get going. The gyoza I didn’t eat is appearing in front of my eyes.”

Suyeon shrugged.

“I can’t help that you don’t like to communicate. Alright, alright. I’ll get straight to the point.”

Suyeon stared at him as she crossed her legs.

“Help me out a little.”

* * *

Pilhyun nibbled on his ballpoint pen. The pure white manuscript paper made him frustrated. Even though he was staring holes into the squares, nothing came up in his head. The squares were like a fine mesh, and he was like a fish struggling to survive in that net.

He looked at the tip of the ballpoint pen he was nibbling on. The plastic tip had been deformed by his teeth marks and it was shiny with his saliva. Pilhyun put down the pen and stood up from his seat. There was no paradise in the place he ran away to. He returned to the keyboard and stared at the monitor.

He didn’t know how much time had passed when he suddenly thought of the smell of doenjang-guk. He raised his head to look at the clock. It was 5:32 p.m. It was about time for dinner.

He just turned off his monitor before standing up. The reason he didn’t turn off his PC entirely was because of his meager conviction to start writing again after eating. Of course, Pilhyun was well aware of what was going to happen. He would drown in his incompetence and solitude and turn off the noisy PC and decide to leave it for tomorrow.

He turned on the TV and ate ramyun in front of it. The savory taste of doenjang-guk from his imagination was forgotten behind the stimulative taste of the ramyun. He had been eating ramyun for all of his meals for the past few days. He was more than capable of eating proper food, whether he ordered it or went out to eat, but he did not do so. He locked himself up. He wondered what the difference was between prison food and ramyun, but he stopped thinking about it after seeing that the noodles had gotten all soggy.

On TV, a group named ‘The Five’ was talking about their love for the fans with a serious expression. After watching their figures for a while, Pilhyun switched the channel.

His fingers stopped pressing on his remote on a movie channel. The movie ‘Chinatown’, a masterpiece by Roman Polanski, was airing right now. What made it a masterpiece was the scenario created by Robert Towne. That scenario was evaluated as one of the greatest scenarios of all time. The movie was also one that Pilhyun had played back dozens of times to study. Well, someone who studies screenplays wouldn’t have watched that movie just once.

After watching the movie for a while, Pilhyun made a bitter smile and turned off the TV. Guilt overwhelmed him. The movie Chinatown slowly left his body without a sound after slapping every last bit of his self-confidence, the last line of his defense. The taste of ramyun in his mouth was bothersome now.

He rinsed his mouth with some water and washed the dishes. He was forty-five this year. Ever since his mother, who screamed at him to get married, passed away last year, he was living a lonely life. He had become used to doing the dishes, laundry, cleaning, as well as everything else. It hadn't been that long since he last had eczema from all the housework. He remembered being somewhat proud seeing his ruined hands. That was because he felt that he was capable of living by himself.

However, recently, he started becoming frustrated about this space where he opened his eyes. It wasn't that he longed for human presence. If he wanted that, then he could just phone his friends and tell them to come over. There was a whole list of people who were living or used to live off of writing on his phone. As all of them knew the pain of writing, he could call them anytime and have fun with them.

He wasn't frustrated because of the lack of human presence. He was frustrated because of his work. He had hit a block, and his income was decreasing. Although he was earning his living expenses by writing newspaper columns and some things on the internet, it was unknown how long that would last. His sufficient bank balance had thinned to the point that it was hard to pay for his savings every month.

"Vitamins, vitamins."

He opened the bottle of vitamins on the table. All he saw inside was the desiccant. He scraped the white powder with his finger and licked it. It tasted sour.

He sighed and looked at the door. He wondered if he should go outside and have some beer or something. He opened his wallet and checked inside. He took out the receipt he shoved in a slot for his credit card before checking if he had any bills. There were a few ten thousand won bills. It was 7 p.m. now. He wondered if his head would clear a little if he ate some fried chicken and a 500cc glass of beer.

After hesitating for a long time, Pilhyun clicked his tongue and threw his wallet on the sofa. If Muse came just because he felt full, the pigs inside everyone would've become Shakespeares already.

He had to face the white-colored devil again. His weapons were his keyboard, a cup of coffee, and some energy drinks. He sat down on the chair he didn't want to sit on. Why were chairs designed for people to sit? He spent the next ten minutes wondering about something useless, but he didn't feel like it was a pity. It wasn't like he could write something anyway.

Just as he erased his writing because he felt like he had seen it somewhere before, he heard his phone ringing from the living room. He remembered throwing his phone on the sofa. Thanking that he had an excuse to run away from the white devil again, he stood up from his chair.

"Oh. It's you, Joon."

Pilhyun spoke as he saw the name on his phone screen. Gwak Joon. Although he was at the young age of 32, his writing was incredible. He was someone that wrote novels, and recently, the publication rights to his first novel were sold and received a movie adaptation. The novel depicted the problems of the aging society, lonely deaths, and the society that was gradually losing emotions. When he first received the book as a gift, he predicted that it would become a bestseller in a short time since the writing was incredibly good for a piece written by a thirty-two-year-old, but the market reaction was rather quiet. This could be said to be one of the pieces that received the spotlight later in its life. Like its title, it became successful in its 'twilight struggles'.

-I'm in front of your house.

"...You should really get rid of that habit."

Actually, Gwak Joon wasn't seen in good light amongst writers. Even the journalists that worked in the publication field did not like him. The reason was simple: he gave off a vicious impression and he didn't speak a lot. He was like a hermit master who broke his china every day in the mountains just because he didn't like it. He was a cold man who couldn't stand eating together with people he didn't like, so it was hard to get close to him.

Pilhyun opened his door. Gwak Joon, wearing black glasses, a black hoodie, and black shoes, was standing in front of him. In one hand, he was holding a bottle of beer while in the other hand, he was holding a paper bag. The smell from that bag was quite savory. It seemed to be fried chicken.

"Have you had dinner yet?"

"I just finished eating. But there's still enough space for some booze. Come in."

Gwak Joon entered as he nodded. Although he was a picky man, he was a great fellow to drink together with. Pilhyun took out some Chinese-made kkakdugi from his fridge, which he bought from the market.

Meanwhile, Gwak Joon had brought a table from the veranda, laid it out in the living room, and laid out the food as well. Pilhyun grinned and put down two beer glasses on the table.

"What brought you all the way here?"

"I made a visit since I was visiting Seoul."

"Seoul? Is it a publication contract?"

Pilhyun wasn't a man that would be jealous of another's success. Also, Gwak Joon was someone he cared about. He felt good when he did well.

"No, I visited someone in the hospital."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that. Is it a member of your family?"

"He's someone I got to know during work. I was thankful towards him because he always told me good things, but I heard that he collapsed a while back, so I made a visit."

"Tsk, it looks like he must be quite old."

"Yes. He looked lively, but he seemed to have pushed himself recently. Fortunately, there weren't any big problems."

"That's good. Perhaps I'm getting old, but it doesn't feel like it's someone else's problem when I hear stories like that," saying that, Pilhyun grabbed a chicken leg.

"But I can't quit this and alcohol."

"You should exercise."

"I'm doing it every day, you know. Ever heard of mental exercise? Hey did you know that the brain spends the most calories?"

"You should move around your body. You'll have it harder later on in your life."

"Hey, quit nagging and start eating. You're making me lose my appetite in front of this sacred food."

The taste of the fried batter that broke down with a crunch in his mouth was blissful. It was worlds different from the cheap oily taste of ramyun. Gwak Joon started eating as well.

"How is your writing going?"

"Don't even talk about it. I can't think of anything."

"It's because of all the oil."

"Are you trying to kill me here?"

Pilhyun poured beer into Joon's glass to make him stop nagging. Gwak Joon emptied the glass in one go before continuing.

"Hyung-nim."

"Yeah?"

"I'll be staying at your place for a while."

"Well, go ahead."

"I'll go down and get my luggage then."

Gwak Joon then stood up and left through the door. After a brief moment, he came back through the door again, carrying a travel case.

"What about your house?"

"I couldn't write anything so I decided to switch places. I thought it'd be good to talk to you as well."

"Do you think my house is some temple in the mountains?"

"Going by quietness, it's better than most temples."

"Fine. I'm a single man just about to die of loneliness."

Pilhyun giggled as he drank. He had two empty rooms. He would gladly give his juniors those rooms if they were stuck when in writing.

"But you should give me some inspiration as well. Let me get some talented man's energy through my stiff head."

He ripped off the other chicken leg and gave it to Gwak Joon. He needed to change things up as well. Perhaps he would make progress on his writing if he talked to this guy who had a great mind for writing. Both of them would profit off of this.

"Can I call someone I know over tomorrow?"

“Sure. A writer?”

“No, an aspiring director. But that person is talented at writing so I’m kinda learning myself as I’m teaching.”

“If it’s like that, then you can call anyone you want. It’d be great if it was a woman, but it’s not, is it?”

“It’s a guy.”

“What did I expect. Is he around the same age as you?”

“He’s a high school student.”

“Oh?”

Pilhyun wondered what kind of high school student managed to get close to a desolate guy like this as he drank the last sip of his beer.

‘He’s probably someone similar to him right?’

Scary eyes, skinny body, and words like knives. He could paint the picture in his mind. He would probably bring a doppelgänger over.

Kimchi made with cubed radish

Chapter 342

“What should we watch?”

She hesitated while looking at the pamphlets in each hand. The one in *her* right hand was about a former CIA agent’s revenge, and the one in her left was about an ex-agent’s romance. It seemed like the trend was secret agents this year.

“Which do you think is better?”

She held up the pamphlets in his face as she asked. Honestly speaking, Maru didn’t want to watch either one. He actually wanted to watch a suspense movie that was released just a few days ago. That one was about a man who was stuck in a closed space, and while the scenario wasn’t that new, many people judged that the actor’s expression of the character was so good that there was no time to be bored.

“How about that one?”

Maru pointed at the pamphlet with the despairing man’s face on it.

“...You want to watch that?” *She* hesitantly asked.

She put back the pamphlets into the holder and walked towards the ticketing office with a dejected face.

“Should we watch a romance then?”

“Can we?”

Her face brightened as though a ray of sunlight shone through the dark clouds. *She* really didn’t like scary things. *She* was someone that was bolder than anyone when it came to problems in reality, yet she

despised ghosts and murderers in fiction. What was interesting was that despite hating it that much, *she* occasionally became adamant about watching them. *She* was very cute with her twitching all the time while watching such a movie, and quite funny at the same time. Perhaps it was similar to fighting fire with fire.

Maru picked up the pamphlet of the movie he wanted to watch. If the actor didn't have such a scared expression in the picture, he would've been able to gloss it over and persuade *her* to watch it. He decided to watch it next time by himself and put it inside his bag.

"Here."

She had returned with two tickets. It seemed that *she* hurriedly got the tickets in fear that Maru might decide to watch something else. *She* was even panting.

"What popcorn do you want to eat?"

"Caramel for me."

"Drink?"

"Sprite!"

"Anything else?"

"No, I'm good."

She added 'I'll gain weight if I eat too much' in a small voice.

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"The acting was decent, right?"

"You mean the female lead?"

"Yeah. I especially liked the last scene where she looked at the picture warmly."

"I liked it when she lied down on the bed wearing just a white shirt."

"Urgh, pervert. That's the only thing you see, isn't it?"

"My eyes were made to see that kind of thing."

While they were talking, the omelette they ordered came out. They were in a restaurant in front of the cinema, and *she* brought him here saying that this place was well-known. Maru scooped a spoonful and put it in his mouth. The thick demi-glaze sauce stimulated his tongue.

"It's good."

"Right? Do you want to try mine as well?" *She* pushed her plate forward a little as she spoke.

Maru put his spoon sideways on top of the soft egg and pushed it down. He smoothly rotated his spoon to scoop a mouthful out. He brought it to his mouth and ate it.

What kind of taste was this? He focused on the taste that tickled his tongue under that softness of the egg. Just then, the spiciness became strong and a fire burned in his mouth. He could see that *she* had an evil smile on. *Her* cheeks were bright red.

"It's spicy."

She grinned cheerfully before starting to eat her omelette.

"Oh yeah, what happened to the 2nd audition for the sitcom you talked about last time?"

"It's next Monday. It's an interview-slash-audition."

"If it's an interview, aren't you practically in it? I wonder if you'll pass and somehow rise into a star. You know, a rising star."

"No way."

She shook her head, saying that such a thing wouldn't happen. Maru held his spoon up like a microphone and put it in front of *her*.

"You won the popularity award thanks to the drama. How do you feel right now?"

"Hm, first, I want to say thanks to the unni at the barbershop."

"Isn't that what a Miss Korea says?"

"Who cares?"

She giggled.

It would be good if *she* passed the audition. Maru wanted to see *her* figure on TV. It would feel quite new to see *her* as a member of the main cast rather than as a replacement.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"I am."

Maru picked up his spoon again and scooped his omelette.

* * *

She stared into the crane machine. At the end of her gaze was a phone strap with a plastic rabbit at the end.

"Should I get it for you?"

"No, it's fine."

She said that it was fine with a smile and took out her phone. It seemed that *she* got a phone call. *She* told him to wait before picking it up.

While *she* took her call, Maru inserted some coins into the machine. He moved the crane to the top of the phone strap with the joystick and pressed the button. The phone strap was hung on the tip of the mechanical claw.

"I told you it was fine."

It seemed that *she* finished the call. Even though *she* was saying that there was a bright smile on her face as she looked at the machine. When the phone strap fell into the exit, *she* cheered.

"Good things happened in a row," *she* put the phone strap on her phone as she spoke.

"In a row?"

"Yeah. I just got a call. Our school passed the preliminaries."

"Oh, it's 8 o'clock now. I guess the results should be out. What about Woosung High?"

"I don't know, but I think you probably passed."

At the same time, a message arrived on his phone. It was from Taesik. The contents were simple. Woosung High was advancing into the second round.

"We passed as well."

"That's good."

She sighed in relief as though it was related to her.

"So I guess all that's left now is for Woosung High to get the grand prize, and Myunghwa High to get the Gold prize and go to nationals?"

"What are you saying? Myunghwa High will get the grand prize, and Woosung High will get gold."

She immediately changed her attitude. *Her* confidence in winning was in her eyes. *She* really didn't take things easy. Maru walked the streets while holding *her* hand. They left the complex market street and entered a rather empty park. The heat from the day was still remaining, and the night air was still warm and stuffy.

He chuckled as he watched her run towards a large Siberian Husky which was coming their way. *She* asked the owner for permission to touch it and the owner gladly gave her permission. *She* smiled in joy as she put her fingers between the soft fur. *Her* expression was just like the dog that was wagging its tail.

While *she* played with the dog, Maru thought about what happened during the day.

"Help me out a little."

Suyeon said those words. She didn't seem to be in a hurry though.

"With what?"

"Can't you accept it first?"

Hearing those words, Maru nodded once before turning around. He didn't want to play with words with her. It was much more worth it to go down and eat more food.

"Okay, okay, I'll say it. You really have a cold temper."

Standing up, Suyeon dusted off her butt.

“But you’ll have no choice but to help me anyway. You don’t have a choice. I’ll have you help me in the drama shoot that’s happening next Tuesday.”

“A drama shoot?”

“Yeah, my drama that will start airing this week. There’s a retrospect scene and we need a young boy to act as a student. It’s nothing difficult. You just need to play a good-for-nothing student.”

“When you say I don’t have a choice, it means that it will still come to me through the president even if I refuse, right?”

“So you know. So you actually remembered that we belong to the same company?”

Suyeon grinned.

There was no reason to refuse since it was just a short shoot, so he accepted it on the spot. When he looked into it, his manager knew about it already.

“But why are you asking me to do it? There should be many others.”

“Is it strange for me to be considerate of my own family?”

“It is very strange.”

“Don’t be so wary. Actually, the one that recommended you is someone else. Do you know camera director Kim Jangsoo?”

He was the camera director for Youth Generation as well. When he affirmed it, Suyeon nodded once.

“We need a child actor since a retrospective scene was added, and most of the time, it’s usually handled by the writers or the directors. But I heard the camera director mentioning your name. The name Han Maru isn’t that common, so I soon found out that it was you. That’s why I recommended you to the director as well.”

“That was unexpected of you.”

“What’s so unexpected?”

“That you recommended me.”

“Consider it me paying you back for consulting me while I was drunk.”

“That doesn’t add up.”

“Emotional favors are supposed to be paid back in a vague fashion.”

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The moment Maru’s consciousness returned to the park was when she waved goodbye to the dog she was playing with.

“I wish I could raise a dog like that once I live in a big house.”

“You’ll probably forget about that once you see them shedding their fur.”

“Why?”

“Because they will shed fur the size of their body. You’ll have to brush them often as well.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable.”

“Well, that’s because....”

You used to raise one before. Maru smiled instead of saying what he could not say. *She* looked back at him with a pouty expression.

“Let’s get going.”

“Yeah. It’s already 9.”

“I’ll bring you home.”

Maru grabbed *her* hand and started walking. Just then, he felt a vibration from his pocket. When he took out his phone, he saw that there was an incoming call from Gwak Joon.

“Yes, hyung-nim.”

-Are you together with Daemyung right now?

“No, he’s not here.”

-Why is he not picking up his phone?

“Did something happen?”

-I wanted to see him tomorrow, and there’s something I need to talk to him about as well.

“Wait a moment, I’ll try calling him.”

He hung up and called Daemyung. The signal dragged out before eventually reaching voice mail. It was too early to sleep now since it was still 9. At that moment, a bad premonition flashed in his head. During lunch, he left first because he had an appointment, but the rest of the members went to a noraebang with Suyeon. He did not hear what happened after that.

He called Suyeon. After about three signal sounds, Suyeon picked up.

-What is it?

“I’m just asking this in case, but is everyone there?”

-Fufu, wait a moment.

There was a noise from the phone for a moment before he heard laughs. It was from the members.

-Yes, Maru!

Daemyung picked up the call. His pronunciation was smudged, and he was giggling nonstop. Maru sighed.

“Did you drink alcohol?”

-Yeah!

He was overly cheerful.

“Hey, get yourself together and check your phone. You should’ve gotten missed calls from Gwak Joon-hyungnim.”

-Who?

“Gwak Joon?”

-Whooo?

Maru pressed the end call button right there. There was nothing more time-wasting than talking to a drunkard. He called Gwak Joon again. When he explained the circumstances, he heard a short sigh.

-I really don’t like that woman after all. I should tell her something when I see her next time.

“I left a message, so he’ll probably give you a call if he gets himself together tomorrow morning.”

-Yeah, okay then.

“Yes.”

Gwak Joon, who sounded like he was about to hang up, spoke again.

-But hey, have you been to the hospital?

“The hospital?”

-Yes.

“What hospital?”

-Haven’t you heard? Sir Yoon collapsed.

“Sir Yoon? You mean elder Moonjoong?”

-Yes.

“Did he get injured? Or did he get into an accident? Nothing big happened, right?”

He hurriedly asked, hearing that Moonjoong had collapsed.

-He told me that it was simple overexhaustion, but he never told me the details. He’s much better now, and he’s allowed visitors. I’ve been there today myself as well.

“Can you text me the address?”

-Okay. If you’re going to visit him, go around lunchtime tomorrow.

“Understood.”

Maru remembered the call with Geunsoo he had a few days ago. That was the day he met Joongjin for the first time. He called Geunsoo to ask about Joongjin, and Geunsoo sounded like he was about to say something, but did not do so. Perhaps that was about the elder?

“What happened?”

She looked at him worriedly. Maru was about to say nothing but decided to tell *her* the truth.

“Is he ill?”

“I heard that he’s much better now.”

“That’s good. You should make a visit then.”

“I will. He’s practically a savior of mine.”

“I hope he’s healthy.”

Seeing *her* so worried, Maru told her that everything would be okay.

The elder had collapsed - if the reason was due to overexhaustion like what Gwak Joon had said, it was probably due to the movie shoot. He researched and studied from early dawn to late night in order to perfect his character. Perhaps the fatigue had piled up since then and burst out in one go after the shoot finished.

He hoped that it was nothing bad. Maru reminded himself of the elder’s kind smile and sighed worriedly.

Chapter 343

A large truck sounded its horn and quickly drove past the bus. She, who was leaning against the window, flinched and had a look at the truck that was distancing itself. The truck was carrying a lot of construction materials. The lump of metal that was tied to the body seemed very dangerous.

She could hear the bus driver swear in a small voice. Why was the driver driving so dangerously? *She* frowned slightly. *She* felt displeased.

The bus arrived at the bus stop in front of her apartment. *She* glanced at the apartment in the distance before going into the nearby supermarket. One of the staff was shouting ‘closing sale’ on the mic. *She* picked up a basket and walked towards the meat corner.

“Give me six hundred grams of pork back leg.”

“What are you going to use it for?”

“Jjigae.”

While the meat was being cut, *she* took out the memo that her mom wrote in the morning. Pork back leg, two pieces of soft tofu, grapeseed oil, and milk. After receiving the meat which was wrapped in a plastic bag, *she* made rounds throughout the supermarket. After putting the items mentioned in the memo in the basket, *she* went to the bread corner. After contemplating for a while, *she* picked up a box of strawberry roll cake.

After purchasing the items, *she* left the supermarket. The wind blew against *her* face, and it was quite warm. *She* remembered seeing the news last night that the tropical nights were starting. *She* didn't like being hot. *She* walked towards the apartment complex. Thanks to the weather, there were a lot of ladies and children in the playground. *She* saw someone she knew and approached and greeted them. At that moment, one of the kids looked into *her* plastic bag and started nagging her after seeing the strawberry roll cake.

Sorry, but I can't give that to you.

After thanking the lady for stopping her child, *she* immediately walked away and went to her apartment.

"I'm home," *she* said to her mom who was sitting in the living room.

Her mom was wrestling with the laptop on a low-rise desk.

"Have you had dinner?"

Her mom looked away from the monitor and asked. *She* replied that she ate.

"How about you, mom?"

"I did as well. With some cheonggukjang."

Now that *she* thought about it, there was a slight smell of cheonggukjang in the air. *She* went into her room and changed her clothes before coming out.

"What are you looking at?"

On her mom's laptop was a photo of a scenery rather than the usual word processor. The photo was of a street with autumn leaves, and there was a little child wearing a yellow hat and overalls.

She sat next to her mom and asked,

"Is this me?"

"Yeah. It's from when you were four. You were really cute back then."

"Sorry for not being cute right now."

She brought some chocolate snacks from the kitchen. When *she* gave a packet to her mom, her mom thanked *her* as she received it. The photo changed. This time, the photo was of *her* riding the swing. *She* looked at her mom's expression. There was a longing smile on her face.

"It was quite chaotic back then. Do you still remember that you went around beating up all the boys in the neighborhood?"

"Me? No way."

"You were the queen of the neighborhood. Why is a four-year-old so strong? Your mom's daily work was to follow you around the whole day."

"Looks like I was healthy."

Crunch - the chocolate snack that entered *her* mouth broke down into pieces. Her mom also munched on the snack as she pressed the right arrow key to go to the next photo. The scenery changed along with the photo, but there was one thing that didn't.

"There are no photos of you or dad?"

"There are almost none. Your dad really hated taking photos. He would cover his face with a jacket and run away the moment he heard photos being taken."

"It was that bad?"

"Don't even talk about it. Should I show you our wedding photo?"

"Yeah, I want to see."

Her mom smiled and opened up another folder.

"But when did you have the time to transfer all the photos from the album?"

"It was when we just moved. I opened the album and saw that all the photos were discoloring. I thought that I should preserve them before it was too late, so I scanned them all."

"Oh, so you did use the scanner."

"We received it, so it's a waste to throw it away."

After opening up a folder titled 'me', her mom scrolled the mouse wheel a few times before opening a photo. It was taken from the right, and in the center was her mom wearing a white wedding dress, and on the left of her was her father with his face bright red. Just from the photo, it was obvious how flustered he was.

"This man, he was like that on the day of the wedding as well. Seriously, right? What's so hard about getting a picture taken? Isn't it supposed to be the other way round?"

"Dad is really red. He looks drunk."

"My mom said something about him as well."

"Grandma did?"

Her mom nodded and spoke.

"That Mr. Han is like a tomato. Your father became even redder after hearing that."

Her mom chuckled.

Grandma. In her memories, her grandma was a kind person. *She* went down to her grandma's house in Gwangju every summer during the school holidays when she was in elementary school. When *she* dozed off in the car, she would start smelling the smell of cow dung, and when the car door opened, her grandma always hugged her tightly. Her grandma always smelled of pleasant grass. The barley rice that she gave *her* every morning was good, and the watermelon she fed *her* after dipping it in some salt was also good. Every evening, *she* would eat some roasted sweet potatoes and play around with the dog that her grandma raised. That place was the greatest playground during the summer for *her*. Whenever

the insects cried, her grandma always lit up some insect-repellent incense that looked like a snail, and even that smelled good. *She* liked everything about her grandma.

Once, *she* had the opportunity to live with her for a while. It was when *she* was in her first year of middle school, just after her father passed away. It was the day his remains were carried out of the house. Her grandma came to *her* house with her luggage. She sold the cows she was raising and put out her house for sale before coming to *her* house by herself. She talked with her mother for quite a while. She, vaguely feeling the weight of that conversation, ran away and spent time in the playground. When the sun started setting and the shadows dragged out, *she* could see one shadow. It was her grandma who came to the playground.

She could still vividly remember that moment. Her grandma hugged *her* and patted *her* back and told *her* in a crying - no, in a way that sounded like she suppressed her crying - voice that it was time for dinner.

After that, *she* lived half a year with her grandma. *She* felt very emotionally stabilized just by the fact that there was someone to greet her when she came back from school. At night, they enjoyed dinner with the three of them. She still longed for her father, but she was no longer hurt because of that longing. It was thanks to her grandma.

Her grandma always had a blue candy container nearby. That candy container, on which it was written 'guest gift', always had caramel instead of candy. She liked eating those caramels while watching TV with her. Her grandma always told *her* to stop eating and that it would rot her teeth, but she always left the container open.

"Oh yeah."

She stood up. Her mom looked at *her* questioningly, but she just smiled back before entering the small room. That room was being used as storage right now. Standing in front of the closet, *she* opened the drawer beneath it. Inside was the blue candy container.

She returned to the living room with that candy container. Her mom also seemed happy to see the container.

"I suddenly thought of this. Grandma always had this next to her."

"That was her treasure box. It's been a long time since I saw it."

"You're right."

She opened the container and looked at what was inside with her mom. Of course, there weren't any caramels. Inside, there was a pair of sewing nippers, a thimble, and a lump of string. Below them were a bunch of yellow memo pads. *She* carefully took those memos out.

"...She was practicing how to write."

She could see words written in an awkward fashion. It started off with the words 'father' and 'mother' to common everyday items. Her mom, who was reading those memos, suddenly touched the tip of her nose. Her eyes had reddened.

She remembered the letter that her grandma gave her before she left the house. The letter ended with the words wishing *her* to stay healthy. The handwriting on that letter was the same as the one on the memos. Her grandma left half a year after living together, and not long after that, the news of her passing away entered *her* ears. Her grandma was in the last stage of cancer. Even back then, as a middle school student, *she* knew what it meant for her grandma to invest her last half a year for *her*. During the funeral, *she* cried a lot.

"I told you it's grandma and not gramma... geez, mom," her mom said as she picked out a memo.

She laid out the numerous memo papers on the floor. Each one of them had grandma's breath.

After looking at them for a while, her mom chuckled as she spoke.

"Mom at least wrote her name prettily."

Her mom picked up the memo that said 'Yoo Bokja' while she picked up the memo that said 'Tagsi'. Her grandma always called taxi 'tagsi'.

"I want to see grandma. Do you have a photo of her?"

"I do."

A photo of her soon appeared on the screen. In the photo, her grandma was wearing a hanbok and was smiling as though she was embarrassed.

"She's so pretty."

"She is. Other people would call her 'mistress' if not for the fact that my dad made her suffer."

"That's true."

There weren't that many photos of her grandma. *She* felt that it was such a pity. Just as *she* looked at herself sitting on her grandma's lap in the photo, she thought of Maru.

"Oh yeah, a person Maru knows is in the hospital right now."

"Oh no. Is it a big disease?"

"No. Maru said that he's okay now, but he didn't have a good expression. He must be someone precious."

She remembered that Maru's expression stiffened as he took the call. That was the first time *she* saw Maru with a dark expression, so she felt worried.

"Maru has it good. He has a girl that worries about him so much," her mom spoke as she stroked her hair.

She glared at her mom a little before cleaning up the memos on the floor.

"Mom."

"Yes."

"I want to eat roasted sweet potatoes."

“Me too.”

She picked up the candy container and went to the small room again. Then, *she* crouched in front of the closet and looked into the drawer. The t-shirt and pants that her grandma always wore were inside. Next to it was a worn-out Bible. There was also a Buddhist rosary and a talisman. When her dad was in the hospital, her grandma prayed to the gods of all religions. It tingled *her* heart to look at the traces that her grandma left behind.

After putting back the candy container where it was, *she* closed the drawer. *She* would probably open the drawer once again once she wanted to reminisce about her grandma again.

When *she* went back out to the living room, her mom had put on a pair of glasses and was focusing on the monitor. It seemed that her rest was over. *She* quietly went to the kitchen and brewed some green tea before leaving it next to her laptop. Her mom, who was typing away at the keyboard, smiled at *her* before starting to focus again.

She went to her room and closed the door. Then, *she* took out a small album from her bookshelf. When *she* opened it in the middle, there were a lot of sticker photos that she had taken with her friends. *She* smiled and flipped to the very front. There, *she* saw a few photos that she took with her father. Her father was smiling brightly towards the camera while he carried *her* on his shoulders. Now that *she* looked carefully, his face did seem a little red. He must have been extremely embarrassed to have his photos taken.

After looking at the photos for a while, *she* heaved out a deep breath before closing the album.

Chapter 344

“Give me the book.”

He looked at his daughter’s hand. She flicked her hand once in an urging gesture. Just when did her smooth hands become so wrinkly? He discovered the flow of time not through the mirror but through his daughter’s hands.

“It’s not like something will happen to me just by reading.”

“I’m saying it because something happened to you already. Give it to me.”

His daughter raised her voice like she was about to fight. His second daughter was a girl who got easily frightened when she was young. She cried when she saw a shadow, cried when she saw a ball rolling towards her, and even cried when her uncles peek-a-booed her. Not a single day went by without her crying, so he once wondered how such a feeble girl would live in this world. Yet right now, the same daughter was forcing him to hand over the book.

“Geez, I said I’m fine.”

“Dad.”

His daughter frowned. The gaze of his daughter, who was past forty now, was quite scary and Moonjoong had no choice but to hand over the book.

“Please lie down. And stop watching the TV as well. Listen to the doctor when he says you need some rest.”

“I know my body the best.”

“And yet you still collapsed?”

His daughter pulled the blanket up to his chest. The hospital blankets had a cold smell. He had intentionally not pulled it up because the smell made him feel like he'd become ill instead. He pulled down the blanket secretly so that his daughter wouldn't notice, but she noticed it immediately and pulled it up again. Her stubbornness was just like that of his wife's.

“Should I peel some pears for you?”

“No, I'm fine.”

“You're leaving behind most of your meals as well. Is there anything you want to eat?”

“It's not that I don't have the appetite, I just don't eat a lot in general. Don't worry about me and get going. You should look after your children. Also, healthy people shouldn't come to the hospital. A sick ghost will possess you.”

“Don't worry about me and worry about yourself instead. The kids aren't at home, they've gone to cram schools. Also, what era do you think it is? Even ghosts can be cured with medicine now.”

He refused, but his daughter ended up stuffing a slice of pear into his mouth. Curiously, he didn't want to eat anything at all before he ate it, but after the cool, sweet juice spread out in his mouth, his stomach started accepting food. It seemed that listening to his daughter was the best choice.

“Is Mr. Park's business going well?”

“He earns enough to not let the kids starve. I'm also doing some work on the side as well. We're not as bad off as we were before, so you don't have to worry about us. Here, eat this as well.”

Moonjoong gave his daughter power over his mouth. Since his refusal was no good, it would be better for him to just give up. Munching on the crunchy pear, he turned on the TV. Fortunately, she didn't turn off the TV this time. Maybe it was because he obediently ate the pear. He was reminded of when he told her that he'd buy her snacks if she ate the eggplants. His second daughter was very picky with food when she was young.

-The actor, Lee Hyuk, known for the movies 'Comet', 'Man of Six O'Clock', and the 'South of North' has found a new home, namely 'Soul'. Many of you should be aware of this name. It's the company that accepted three of the members of the boy band 'The Five' after they split up. We have news that actor Lee Hyuk has signed an exclusive contract with that agency.

A woman who seemed to be the reporter was speaking as though she was very interested. Moonjoong watched the entertainment industry news for a while before changing channels.

“Dad, do you have anything to watch?”

“No.”

Moonjoong gave his second daughter the remote. She switched the channel to a cable channel.

“This drama is quite interesting.”

That drama started off with the daughter-in-law slapping the cheeks of the mother-in-law. His daughter was cheering for the daughter-in-law. It was quite a chaotic drama, but it was definitely fun in its own way. This girl is the bad girl, that girl is the good girl. His daughter was earnestly explaining from the side. Actually, the drama didn't need a lot of explanation at all. The one with the thick makeup and looked evil was the bad girl, and the one that looked innocent was the good girl.

Just as the drama was at a point where someone said ‘she's not your real daughter’, the door to the ward opened. The one that entered was Geunsoo.

“Sir, I'm here.”

“I told you that you don't have to come.”

It had been ten days since he was hospitalized. Geunsoo had come to visit him four times during that while. He was young and had work to do, so Moonjoong felt both thankful and sorry that he came to visit despite the fact that he must be busy.

“Welcome.”

His second daughter had gotten close and welcomed him as well. She left after saying that she wanted some fresh air.

“How are you doing?”

“Didn't I tell you three days ago that I'm fine? Everyone's making a big deal out of it. It's not like I'm going to die.”

“Everyone's worried because you suddenly collapsed at your own house. If senior Junmin wasn't there.... It's horrific just thinking about it.”

“I was just a bit anemic. I'm fine right now.”

“If you're really fine, then the doctor will have you leave the hospital. You should get some rest until then.”

Geunsoo took out a book from his bag.

“This is the book you told me to bring last time.”

Moonjoong received the book and immediately hid it under the blanket. His second daughter would take it away the moment she sees it.

“I heard that you were shooting a movie.”

“It was cancelled.”

“Cancelled?”

“Yes. The president of the CEO company went missing. Everything is stopped now. There’s a possibility that the project will be cancelled entirely. I heard that they’re looking for new investors, but I don’t know how that will go.”

“Junmin should do it then.”

“The thing is, he has a clear philosophy for investments. He also told me not to have any regrets and look for something else.”

“Looks like that movie was destined to fail from the start.”

“Maybe. Actually, I disagreed with him before it started. We had a look at the script together and he recommended that I don’t do it. I should’ve listened to him back then. It seems that not anyone can be the president of a company. You need good foresight to be one.”

“If you liked the work, you should’ve done it with all your body. You can’t help if it fails, that’s what the agencies are there to do. You should use Junmin to your heart’s content.”

“I’ll tell him exactly what you said later. I’m going to use it when I defend myself.”

“Sure. Oh, you should eat some pear. There’s too much for me to eat by myself.”

Geunsoo then talked about the post-production part of the movie.

“I think we need to post-record the market scene. The sound is too smudged and they said they’ll have to record the voice of the actors again.”

“It’s usually like that.”

“Oh, the poster for the movie that we shot last time is almost finished. Do you want to have a look?”

Geunsoo took out a laptop before putting a photo up on the screen. The photos they shot for the poster after they shot the movie scenes had been edited and changed to look very cool.

“I liked this monochrome one the best. I like how it emphasizes the hammer you’re holding. It probably won’t be used, though, right?”

“It probably won’t get past the regulations. I once shot a poster holding a knife, but it was changed to a fruit just before it was printed. I don’t know what kind of relation those two have though.”

“South Korea is strict when it comes to things like that. This one, the one where you’re smoking. This is good as well, but this probably won’t get through either. Either they’ll erase the cigarette, or they’ll use the poster that looks like a family photo.”

It was a bitter reality that the ones they liked were the ones that probably won’t get through the regulations. Too much skin wasn’t good, no cigarettes were allowed, no weapons were allowed. The poster also couldn’t exclude the actor’s face, and no short skirts were allowed either. It was strange. Practically half-naked youngsters appeared on TV all the time, but posters were no good. It was ironic that a media that was much more accessible was more liberal. Even calling it a ‘strict rule for art’, did not change the fact that it was funny.

Geunsoo suddenly picked up his phone before looking at the clock.

"If you're busy, then you should get going. Also, stop coming here," Moonjoong spoke with a smile.

Geunsoo stood up saying that he will visit again. The ward finally became a little quiet. Moonjoong turned off the TV and opened the book. He was planning to read the book that Geunsoo brought when his daughter went home.

At that moment, the door opened again. He wondered if it was his daughter that returned, but someone unexpected was standing there instead.

"I'm here, elder."

It was Maru, holding a book in hand.

"Who did you hear it from? I told Geunsoo not to tell you about it."

Maru just smiled and said that he got to know of it by chance.

"I'm disappointed. Did you dislike me that much?"

"It just felt didn't feel right making people come all the way here for something so trivial. I'm going to be leaving soon, so why would I want everyone I know to come?"

Moonjoong pointed at the seat that Geunsoo was sitting on. Although he said those words, he was happy to see him here. He kept it a secret because he might induce a young boy to worry about him too much, but he found out and came anyway.

"How's your body?"

"As you can see, I'm healthy. Give me the knife and apple over there. I'll peel it for you."

"I'll do it. Oh, and I brought this because you must be feeling bored. Though, I don't know if you'll like it or not."

Moonjoong received the book that Maru handed him. It was Moby Dick.

"Looks like I'll have to settle it with the big whale."

He laughed before hiding the book under the blanket. Maru was confused when he saw that, but he could not tell him that he hid it because of his daughter.

Maru proficiently started peeling the apple with the fruit knife.

"Looks like you're quite skilled."

"I'm very good at things like this. Here, eat some."

Moonjoong ate the apple that Maru cut for him. If his daughter saw this, she would nag him for not eating obediently when she gave some to him.

"How are you doing these days? Is everything going well?"

"Yes. I'm learning a lot. Luckily, I have a lot of opportunities to learn."

“Experiences in youth will become a fortune when you grow old. It’s good to do them well, but think about what remains.”

“I will.”

Moonjoong always felt joy when he looked at Maru. The moments he had when he drank alcohol with this young fellow were quite strange. Even children with the deepest hearts had some kind of childishness when pried deep enough, but Maru had nothing like that. That allowed him to talk to the young boy without holding back. He could tell what he couldn’t to others of his age.

“Is acting fun?”

“Honestly speaking, the acting I’m doing recently is not that fun. Should I call it just doing business? There are a lot of times when I feel like I’m just doing homework.”

Maru put down the apple and the fruit knife.

“Back when I had to shoot with you, elder, my head turned white from all the pressure, but it was definitely fun. But the acting I’ve been doing recently, while I’m doing my best, has no fierce spirit, and it drains my energy. Even if I tell myself that I shouldn’t be like this, when I finish the shoot, I become absent-minded, not due to the satisfaction, but because it was too bland. I’m just holding on because it’s fun to create a stage with my peers,” Maru calmly told his story.

Moonjoong liked this side of him. He wasn’t filled with falseness. He didn’t use any roundabout expressions either. Since he was honest, he himself could reply honestly as well.

“That’s proof that you’re adapting well. People can’t be working filled with expectations the whole time. The fact that you’ve become bored means that you’ve become used to it, so it’s not entirely bad. But listening to your words, I think you do need a trigger. Did Junmin not tell you anything?”

“He didn’t tell me anything specific.”

“Then keep working for a while, even if it looks boring to you. Junmin is quite a meticulous guy, so he’ll tell you when the time comes.”

“How did you enjoy yourself at times like these?”

“Me? I drank.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Haha.”

Moonjoong patted Maru on the shoulders. Shooting something as the bottom of the rung was no fun, just like what Maru had said. They’d have to wait several hours to shoot a couple of minutes, and that was it. It would be very strange to find any fun in such a simple scene without any ups and downs of emotions. An actor only realizes the joy of acting after encountering a good role. What Maru was doing now was paving a path to meet that good role, so there was no choice for him but to endure. While it might sound foolish, that was the right way to go.

“Elder, you should get better quickly and drink with some pork like last time.”

“Yeah, I should.”

Moonjoong nodded and smiled faintly.

Chapter 345

Was there any news more joyous than the news that one’s former company went out of business? He pushed the cigarette filter with his tongue to the edge of his mouth before puffing once. He saw the cigarette turning red in the corner of his vision.

“I knew he’d run one day.”

The internet news company, Mint News went out of business. He got this news through a junior that he used to work with. He tried visiting their website just in case, but only a ‘404 Not Found’ error greeted him. That was yesterday. His junior insulted his now-ex-president for not paying him for his manuscript over some booze. That was his junior’s way of asking Dongwook to pay for the booze. Although Dongwook was never close to this junior, he sympathized with him since he was suddenly thrown out onto the streets, so he paid for the alcohol and paid for the taxi as well. He was worried if that junior went home safely, yet his ego also wished for that junior to never contact him again.

Dongwook put out the cigarette that he had only puffed by about a half before standing up.

“Auntie, bill please.”

“I’m busy, so leave it over there! Also, you aren’t allowed to smoke anymore in the shop, so keep that in mind.”

“I can’t even have one after my meal?”

“I’m not the one making decisions. What am I supposed to do?”

Dongwook took a piece of crispy rice candy which was placed under the counter, before leaving the restaurant. In front of the restaurant, which looked like it would disappear into nothingness after a typhoon, was a tall building covered in glass. This place was where the slums and the city met.

“Looks like single-story buildings will disappear in a few years in Seoul.”

By that time, this restaurant, as well as the stores nearby will probably disappear. It was good to eat meals in sparkly and shiny restaurants without a single bug in sight, but Dongwook was more comfortable with eating in a restaurant like this one where it was filled with the auntie’s shouts and the smell of oil. It was more of an emotional thing rather than a hygiene thing. He bought a 200-won milk coffee from the shabby vending machine with its acrylic window broken. Whenever he bought coffee from machines like this, he wondered what the difference was between ‘high-class coffee’ and ‘normal coffee’ which was on different levels, even though they both cost 200 won. He tried both of them before, but there was no difference in taste. Perhaps it was a matter of feeling?

The ‘hot’ sign did not go off yet, but Dongwook opened the cover and put his hand inside. This was like a ritual every Korean had to do. He pulled out the cup immediately after the last droplet dropped into the cup.

“Uh, hot.”

Just as he licked a drop that fell on his fingers, his phone, which was in his left pocket, started ringing loudly. He put the coffee in his hand on a table in front of the restaurant before picking up the call.

"Yes, president. Have you had lunch yet?"

-I just did. Rather than that, about the advertising news article for the movie.

"I'll have that done by today. I'll upload it after getting some information. Some of my former juniors said they'd write the article as well, so it'd go into the search term rankings the moment I upload it."

-Then I'll go through it once you're done. Didn't you say you were going to visit Soul today?

"Yes. The appointment is at two, so I should get going. Rather than that, have you seen the news yesterday? That Lee Hyuk fella seems to have joined Soul as well."

-I did. It seems like they're on the offense. They're reaching out to many people under the rug.

"I found out through a junior of mine that someone huge from the entertainer section will move to Soul as well. They just started off, but their power is not ordinary."

Dongwook held his phone between his head and his shoulder and took out a notepad from his back pocket.

"Also, the CEO of Soul has quite an interesting background. I did some investigation beforehand, but he actually turned out to be an executive of a big company, not someone who used to work in this industry. I heard he was quite capable in YM Logistics."

-And yet he's suddenly charged into the entertainment business?

"I'll have to probe him out through the interview today, but Hong Janghae, this man is not ordinary. The fact that YM, Soul's parent company, is marketing the company heavily should mean that he has gained a lot of trust. I'll try to find some things out through some friends of mine that work in the financial section. Well, this isn't the first time that the financial world had connections with the entertainment world, so I might get something interesting if I look into it."

-Hong Janghae?

"Yes. Someone you know?"

-I do know someone with the same name, but they're probably two different people with the same name. He despises the entertainment industry. Anyway, try to look into it moderately. Don't go in too deep. Also, can you investigate the cancellation of Geunsoo's movie?

Junmin asked in a small voice. Dongwook groaned.

"I'll see what I can do."

After finishing the call, he wrote down 'Geunsoo movie investigation' on his notepad.

"Let's get going, then, shall I?"

Dongwook finished the cooled coffee in one go before moving.

* * *

“Whew.”

He scanned Soul’s company building located in Mapo-gu. The building was right in the middle of the golden land. He became curious and looked into the land prices from nearby estate agents, and just the land price was 40 million won per pyeong. If he lied down, the amount of land beneath his body was worth 40 million won. It was mind-boggling.

“Oh, senior.”

He turned his head when he heard a woman’s voice. There, he saw a female journalist that he got to know while he was still a journalist at a TV station. Her name should be Choi Miyeon. They were close enough to greet each other without being awkward when they came across each other on the streets.

“It’s been a long time. The news company I was supposed to do the interview with was yours?”

“Yes. Oh, but I don’t work for a news company anymore. I quit.”

“Why did you quit such a good place?”

“Then why did you quit the TV station, senior?”

“Because I was crazy.”

“I’m a similar case. I felt stuffy. Now, I work for a women’s magazine.”

She rummaged through her wallet before giving him a business card. The name ‘Sharon’ was written on it. It was a place Dongwook knew of. That magazine company had released quite a few volumes of magazines.

“Where do you work right now, senior?”

“Me? I’m a freelancer.”

“Wow, a freelancer. You must be skilled.”

He shrugged and walked towards Soul’s company building. On the outer wall of the building, the photos of the three that exited ‘The Five’ were hung up. There was also a truck with a lift on the back, and it seemed that Lee Hyuk’s photo was going to be hung up as well.

Like a newly-constructed building, the insides were very clean. There were lights embedded on the walls, and they emitted light faintly. There were also red stones embedded on the ground like a red carpet. Just as he looked around at the eye-stimulating things,

“Journalists Kim Dongwook and Choi Miyeon, am I right?”

“Ah, yes.”

A lady with a bob cut turned around with a faint smile on her face. She seemed to be just an ordinary employee staff, yet she was very pretty. Even her back figure was pretty. He would believe it if she said she was an aspiring celebrity. The two followed her up to the fourth floor. The buildings in Mapo-gu

could be seen beyond the huge glass windows. The lady turned left and continued to guide them. The people they saw on the way were all wrestling with their computers.

“Please wait a moment.”

The lady entered after knocking on the door. After a while, she opened the door again and told them to come in. Dongwook felt a strange sense of pressure. He buttoned his shirt up fully as he entered.

“Welcome.”

The one that greeted him was a healthy-looking middle-aged man. From what Dongwook knew, he had to be in his mid-fifties, but now that he saw him in person, he would believe it even if he told him that he was in his early forties. The neatly combed hair, and the purple shirt that was tailored to his body. He was in good shape as well. Dongwook was thinking of a chubby middle-aged man writing away at a document since he heard that the other party used to be an executive at a company, but his predictions were completely off. Even the stylish shoes attracted his eyes. His watch was also a brand-name expensive one, yet it gave off a youthful tyranny rather than a pressure stemming from age. He was someone who knew how to look good.

“I’ve never done things like interviews before, so I don’t know if I can do this well. Please tell me if you find anything lacking,” Hong Janghae spoke as he sat down.

He faintly smiled and pointed at the sofa, and just his actions exuded pressure. He gave off a heavy pressure despite being kind. He really was someone who was very high up.

When the two sat down, Janghae told them that they should start off with some tea. The lady that led them here gave them some tea. It was a green tea latte. It was a drink that he enjoyed a lot frequently. He looked next to him to look at Miyeon’s expression. Her expression also told him that the drink in front of him was a drink she liked.

‘Looks like I might not be able to get any info if I don’t stay on guard.’

There was no way this was a coincidence, meaning that he looked into their preferences beforehand. It was nothing much, but he felt like he was investigated so he didn’t feel that good.

“Is it to your tastes?”

“Yes. I like green tea latte.”

“I like kiwi as well, haha.”

“That’s good.”

Janghae locked his fingers and crossed his legs. Dongwook smirked a little. So the opponent may not have had any interview experience, but he knew how to handle people very well.

“Please drink at your leisure. Let’s continue the interview after you finish them,” Janghae lifted his coffee mug as he spoke.

* * *

Senior, we should drink together since we met after such a long time - the drinking occasion triggered by those words continued into the second round. The moment he tipped the soju glass over his mouth, he remembered how well this woman drank, but he couldn't turn back now. He tried to escape after they finished drinking at the barbecue restaurant, but he was dragged by his junior to a nearby pojang-macha. They then had some mussel stew and more soju. They finished their work, so they could drink without restraints, but he found his junior a little scary after she finished two bottles of soju by herself without any changes to her face.

"Haah, if I give this to my editor, she'll probably slap my head for the pointless interview," Miyeon sighed as she spoke.

Dongwook agreed with her.

There were generally two types of interviews.

One to announce, and one to pry.

The public that watches the stars on media become curious about their everyday life: what they do when they rest; what food they eat; what kind of pets they raise at home. They even become curious about trivial things. This was why journalists asked questions that would indirectly induce the star to bring out something special other than the information that's already available to the public when they did an interview. In contrast, interviews of the people that are close to the entertainment industry, but are outside of people's interests, for example, the CEO of agencies, producers, and scriptwriters, were considered successful if it just talked about the stuff they wanted to talk about.

In the case of Janghae, he was a person who belonged to the latter, but the case this time was rather special. He was the CEO of 'Soul' that was at the center of controversy. He brought the slave contract of 'The Five' to the surface and brought a huge storm to the entertainment industry. Due to news about sexual services, slave contracts, and huge superstars switching companies, the public's interest in the CEO of Soul was rather low right now, but they would soon become very curious. Just what kind of person is he? - they would ask.

That was why he asked to do an interview ahead of most people and tried to probe into the reason why they decided to reveal the contracts, which was considered taboo in the industry, and proactively tried to recruit celebrities, but Hong Janghae, with his leisurely smiles and jokes, avoided all those questions.

He left no leeway at all. Even when he asked about the recently controversial 'The Five' matter, he just replied 'why is there a need to question to fairly receive compensation for labor?', leaving no further room for more questions. It was very hard to counter 'right' answers after all.

In the end, there was only a bland interview. He would first have to document it and get Janghae's approval, but he probably wouldn't have any requests for edits. It was just that clean of an interview. He seemed to be the model case for how to react when problems occurred in public relations. From his wits and attitude, it was clear that YM Corp didn't just send him to that place to spend his time in leisure until retirement.

"You know that Soul has released a music program, right?"

"I do."

“The public reaction is quite good.”

“Really? Don’t you have to pay to listen to music? Would people really pay to listen to music? It’s not like they’re getting CDs either.”

“The sites they’ve been downloading free music from all went out of business after all. On top of that, they’re using cinema ad times to air public service ads about their ‘Good Downloader’. And that’s led by Soul as well. Many idols and actors are all saying ‘Please protect the rights and profit of the producer and the consumer’ on screen, and it seems to be poking at people’s conscience. I also paid some money and listened to some music with streaming? Or whatever it was, and it wasn’t that bad. You can listen to most things as long as you pay a little money.”

“Then they settled the problem with copyrights?”

“It seems like they already finished talks with KOMCA. Physical logistics has changed to digital logistics. You can take it that way.”

“So it’s logistics after all. Did YM predict this? But it won’t work if people won’t pay for the music, right?”

“But YM has a firm grasp on telecommunication. I saw that they’re giving away a free month of service, and I think they’re using that as marketing. The internet is in the same position.”

She talked very smoothly. Dongwook looked at Miyeon. Was she drunk?

“Are there any useful stories these days?”

“Useful stories? Hehe.”

Miyeon chuckled. She took the bait. It seemed like she would talk about everything she knew when she was drunk. He felt sorry, but he had to make a living as well.

Dongwook perked up his ears. Magazines were sensitive to trends. Substantial rumors circulated around the magazine field almost just as quickly as the financial district.

“Senior.”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s go for a third round!”

“A-a third round?”

“Yes.”

“Before that, talk about that interesting...”

“Nah, let’s change places. How about some fried chicken? You know? I really had it hard recently because there was no one to drink with me.”

Miyeon shouted ‘bill please!’ before leaving the pojang-macha. Dongwook blinked several times before handing the owner some cash.

‘I feel like I was schemed against instead.’

“Senior! Let’s go! I’ll give you a big one over some beer.”

Her pronunciation was slurry, but she was walking straight. Dongwook was reminded of a movie he watched before. He had a look at his slightly thinned wallet before chasing Miyeon. She’d probably spit something out if he talked to her.

Chapter 346

She was a crazy woman who soothed her drunkenness and washed her mouth with beer. It didn’t seem to be a joke when she said she needed vodka if she wanted to get drunk.

“Drink some more.”

“I’d collapse if I want to drink as much as you do.”

“You’re so weak with alcohol despite being a man.”

It’s not that I’m weak, but you’re hella strong. - thought Dongwook to himself.

Something sour came up to his throat. Dongwook tried to soothe his stomach with some cold water. Just then, Miyeon abruptly raised her hand. It looked like she was about to order another bottle of soju. Dongwook quickly talked to her.

“Why don’t we start now? I need to make a living too.”

“Start what?”

“That’s how you wanna do this? I’m leaving now.”

Miyeon then put her arm on the table and rested her chin against the back of her hand.

“My company decided to look into what actresses who are not active nowadays are doing and create a special edition. You know, it’s one of those ideas when you’re running out of content. It was supposed to be an easy piece of work where I had to just chat and ask about recent matters with the actresses that replied to us, but....”

She paused for a moment before making a bitter smile.

“While I was talking to one, something uninteresting came up. I just lightly asked what she was up to nowadays, but that had to come up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Senior. Have you seen the news on RBS a while ago about sexual service? That they’re bringing new actresses to hotels using debut as a lure?”

“I did. It became quite controversial back then.”

“It was noisy only back then. Nobody’s talking about it now.”

Dongwook crossed his arms. The reaction was definitely small compared to the seriousness of the situation. The press department that sounded like they would get to the roots of the sexual service problem had become silent as well. Some of the small to mid-sized media outlets seemed to be touching

on that topic as well for a while, but that didn't last long either. Although some articles were popping up in the news regarding sexual slavery, there was only a brief section. Nothing went into detail.

"So?"

"I talked to her over lunch and she talked about sexual service. She seemed incredibly troubled."

"You mean she received an offer as well?"

"Rather than being offered one, she was probably forced to. She told me that she still remembers that day even though it happened quite a long time ago. She told me a few things saying that she could only say them because she left that world, but those stories made me a little angry."

"What happened?"

Miyeon raised her hand and ordered more soju. Dongwook didn't stop her.

"I thought sexual service was a very special, rare case, right? But I was wrong. It's quite frequent. They just aren't visible on the surface. From what she said, the number of times she got 'gentle offers' is simply beyond imagination. She got tired of hearing 'let's just have a light drink together' from up there all the time."

"By up there, do you mean CEOs and people like that?"

"Well, yes, those kinds of people. The ones with the authority to decide the fates of rookies. Directors, scriptwriters, producers, CEOs, et cetera."

"The reason it never became public is because she was afraid of the consequences, right?"

Miyeon nodded. The store owner gave them some soju and some ppeongtwigi. Dongwook shook the soju bottle once to create a swirl before pouring a glass for Miyeon.

"That's unfortunate, but it isn't of interest to me."

Dongwook spoke as he drank a sip. Miyeon glared at him before chuckling and leaning back against her chair.

"Right. This is just an uninteresting fact, and not good enough to write articles about. But aren't they going too far? If they have any sense of journalism, they should get angry at things like this and make it public."

"I traded that for my rent. Talk more if you want, or let's end things here. I don't want to get burned by talking about something sensitive."

She quit her job at the TV station. There was no way the TV station was not aware of something that even a mere magazine journalist could find out with a brief interview. It was an issue that would attract huge attention if it was brought to the public. However, no one touched the topic. From this, it was clear that no one was willing to touch the goblet with poison in it.

The journalists that picked up their pens for the sake of justice and morals died lonely deaths on top of yellowed-out newspapers.

“I want to talk more about it though,” Miyeon spoke as she offered him to drink.

Dongwook tapped on the table for a while before receiving the glass.

“I’m listening and I’m only listening.”

“Yes. I’m also thinking that I’m shouting ‘the king has donkey ears!’ into the empty bamboo forest, so you don’t need to listen to me in such detail.”

Miyeon was smiling, but it looked somewhat in vain. When living as a journalist, there were multiple occasions where one’s own justice, the justice of society, and the justice of the company clashed with each other. There was only one realization after such a process: The pen is actually not mightier than the sword.

Dongwook understood why Miyeon asked him out for a drink, and why she wanted to talk about something on her mind to someone she wasn’t even that close to. There were secrets that could be revealed precisely because they weren’t close.

“So, what comes after that? I don’t think you’re here to just rant about the fact that there are a lot of women in sexual service.”

“When I heard up to that point, I just felt a little angry. But what can I do about it? There was nothing I could do for that actress. It’s not like my editor would like it even if I write about it. Yes, I know. If a willing spirit could solve all problems, why would we need to worry about anything? We all have to make compromises in life one way or the other. I also planned to just ignore it. But...”

“But?”

“You should know about it as well, senior. That there are times when you simply can’t ignore it; that you become absorbed in it knowing full well that it’s a stupid thing to do.”

She poured soju into a beer glass before putting it against her mouth. Dongwook reached out and grabbed her wrist.

“You should really drink moderately.”

“Let me drink this one.”

“Are you going to pass out after drinking, or are you going to pass out after telling your story?”

Miyeon bit her lower lip before putting down the glass. She turned around to the side and took out something from her bag. It was a piece of newspaper that was folded neatly. Dongwook received that newspaper and opened it. It was about a suicide case. The contents were simple. A woman in her forties committed suicide together with her 10 year-old daughter because of everyday struggles. It started off with ‘former actress A’.

“This woman is that actress?”

“Yes. I came across that news about a month after the interview. She wasn’t anyone famous, and we’re in a country where several people commit suicide because of the hardships of life, so that news never garnered a lot of attention. But when I read it, my heart...”

Her fists were clenched tight. Miyeon was looking down at her fists.

“I tried to ignore it, but I just couldn’t. It felt so stifling. What would have happened to her if I was just a little more willing to listen to her story? Wouldn’t something have changed if I consulted her afterwards?”

Miyeon made a self-loathing smile.

“I get that you feel a sense of responsibility, but don’t get yourself mixed up. Like it says in the article, she committed suicide because of her hardships in life. It was not a problem you could’ve done something about.”

“I know. I know that, but that’s just how people’s hearts work. They don’t follow reason. I felt sorry. I wanted to do something for her. That’s why I brought up my old habits again and hung around here and there.”

“That’s not the course of action I’d recommend.”

“That’s true.”

“So, did you find out that the king’s ears were donkey ears?”

He shouldn’t have asked that question. He should’ve ended the conversation by telling her that it was okay; that she should forget about it; that it was fine as long as she wished her well in the afterlife. The story that was about to follow was bound to be heavy, and his junior was clearly trying to share the burden by telling him the story. Call him cold-hearted, but he didn’t have any leisure to spend his passion on something tiring and non-profitable. He had to write more necessary and profitable articles if he had any time.

Yet, he ended up urging her to talk about it. It was just as she said. Journalists were innately adamant about digging into something pointless despite knowing full well that it was a stupid thing to do. Only such people could become journalists. If they could restrain those foolish actions, they’d get promoted, and if they could not, they would either be given the journalism award or give up being a journalist altogether.

Dongwook once thought that he was the former; that it was just a hasty mistake that he quit his job at the TV station. He resolved that he would not make the same mistake ever again. He swore to bury his sense of justice into his memories and write articles as a salaryman that needed to survive this industry.

However, they say old habits die hard. His sense of journalism that he supposedly threw away into the trash slowly poked its head up. He was making an excuse to himself thinking that he should just create the issue by saying just the generic things and pull out immediately, but he was well aware that he would hang onto it until the very end the moment he listened to her story.

“It was such an old story, so it was hard to get anything about it. In fact, I didn’t know how to go about it. Then, I saw the news about sexual service and decided to start from there.”

“Did you go and listen to her story?”

“Yes. That woman was tired. When I told her that I came to interview her, she said she didn’t need one. She seemed fed up with the media. Even I would be fed up if I was in her position. They all spoke like they would help her solve the problem, but they never did.”

“Her face became known, and her life in the industry was over. She should have been in a tough spot.”

“I barely got her to talk. But nothing too deep. She said that she was no longer in a position where she could talk about the incident.”

“So she negotiated.”

“Probably. But I was able to hear more than what was revealed to the media.”

Miyeon made a suspicious expression.

“Senior. Do you know the agency she belonged to?”

“No.”

“It’s MH. That rings a bell, doesn’t it?”

“It’s The Five’s former agency.”

“Yes. It’s the company that’s under hot fire due to unfair contracts.”

“So? How are those two related?”

“Senior. Do you know that The Five’s incident was being spread around on the internet the moment the sexual service news went live?”

“So, you mean that they brought The Five’s incident to the surface in order to put wraps around the sexual service incident? I don’t think that’s right. The unfair contract news is not big enough to put out the fire.”

“But what happened in reality? People switched interests immediately.”

“That’s true, but I think you’re still overthinking things. Also, the sexual service incident is one that’s bound to die down even without The Five’s incident. It never made it to mainstream news either. Don’t you think it’s just a coincidence?”

“I thought that too. But when I looked into it, I found out a few more things.”

Miyeon lowered her voice.

“What I’m about to say now is me talking about random stuff because I’m drunk, alright?”

“Random stuff because you’re drunk, huh.”

“Yes. So forget about it after you listen to it.”

“If I can, I will.”

Miyeon raised her head to scan the restaurant once before speaking in a careful manner.

“They can’t do anything about what’s already happened. They had the confidence to cover it up, but people will remember the things that already leaked. In the end, it means that they have to take care of it before it leaks out.”

“Take care of it?”

“I told you that there are numerous sexual service incidents, right?”

“Yes.”

Miyeon tightly grabbed the empty glass before speaking.

“What’s interesting is that when people hear ‘sexual service’, they always think about women giving service to men.”

* * *

He was on his way to the apartment that Gwak Joon had told him. Looking outside the bus window, Daemyung thought about what happened yesterday and sighed. They heard that they passed the preliminaries and went to instructor Suyeon’s house. They were originally planning to go home after visiting the noraebang, but Suyeon said that it was such a pity to go separate ways like that and said that they should continue the afterparty, and so everyone followed her willingly.

As soon as they arrived, booze poured out of the refrigerator. There were beer and soju. They ordered some gamja-tang and drank alcohol like they did once before. The alcohol was as bitter as ever, but when he drank a few cups in joy from passing the preliminaries, he felt that the drinks were a little sweet. That was when the games began. Everyone joyfully laughed and drank alcohol.

That was good and all. They were moderately refraining themselves from drinking too much. The problem began when Jiyeon lost all the games. He couldn’t bear to look at Jiyeon’s bright red face any longer and volunteered himself to drink instead and ended up drinking a few cups of mixed drinks.

Suyeon told him that he could stop drinking, but when he thought that Jiyeon was watching him from the side, he felt a strange sense of confidence. Like that, after around 40 minutes, Daemyung collapsed and spitted out everything that went in. On top of that, he was on the carpet.

What was fortunate was that everyone had passed out because they were drunk. It was mind-numbing to think about what would have happened if Jiyeon saw him. Like that, he woke up at noon the next day, which was today. They were going to begin practicing again starting Wednesday, so it didn’t matter even if he was in a horrible condition.

He woke up with a hangover wanting something to drink, but his phone started ringing, and only did he realize that he had missed calls. They were from Gwak Joon and Maru.

‘I’m soooo not drinking next time.’

Daemyung called Gwak Joon as he got off the bus. When he picked up, Gwak Joon told him to wait where he was. Just as he was waiting while looking around, he saw Gwak Joon waving at him from the other side of the road.

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Gwak Joon replaced his greeting with just a nod. He started walking without even telling Daemyung to follow him. Daemyung followed him without a word. They turned left after the hardware store. There was an apartment complex at the end of the residential area. Gwak Joon seemed to be heading there.

They didn't talk at all in the ten-or-so minutes they were walking. Daemyung just followed Gwak Joon. Fortunately, he was used to him being so quiet. At first, he was worried that he disliked him. After finding out that it was just Gwak Joon's personality, he no longer found it an inconvenience. It wasn't like he didn't talk at all. He was someone who talked more than anyone when it was necessary.

"Were your parents okay?"

He seemed to be asking about the fact that he was sleeping over.

"Yes."

"Then that's good."

Before they entered the apartment complex, they visited a fried chicken store. There, Daemyung saw a big pot with boiling oil. A kind-looking old man shook the oil off the fried chicken and droplets of oil fell into the pot. Daemyung gulped when he saw that. He suddenly remembered that he was hungry.

They bought three fried chickens before going. They entered an apartment that said '201'. They met a grandma holding a baby on the elevator. Daemyung smiled at the baby and the baby smiled back at him.

The elevator stopped on the third floor. Daemyung waved at the baby before following Gwak Joon out.

"Is this your house?" He asked Gwak Joon who proficiently opened the cover of the electronic door lock. Gwak Joon replied as he typed in the passcode.

"No."

The door opened. Daemyung blinked several times as he entered. If this wasn't his house, then whose was it? He could see a pair of worn-out slippers, a pair of shoes with a bent nose, and a pair of yellowed trainers in the shoe rack.

"Come in."

Daemyung took his shoes off and tidied them before going in. In the living room, there was a three-person sofa, a wall-mounted TV, and a row of bookshelves. In front of the shelf full of books was a tower of new books. While Gwak Joon went to the kitchen, Daemyung had a look at those books. Novels, poetry books, essays, travel journals, philosophy books, and even memoirs - books from a variety of fields boasted their thickness and weight like the walls of a castle.

The row of bookshelves continued into the veranda that was connected to the living room. Daemyung poked his head into the veranda to follow the books. Again, there was a tower made of books in front of those shelves.

"It looks like he's out right now."

"Who is?"

"The owner of the house. Do you want a drink?"

"I'm fine with water."

"You can sit over there."

Daemyung sat in front of the piles of books.

"Can I have a look at these?"

"Yeah. But watch out. They'll fall over if you take the lower ones."

Daemyung briefly imagined what would happen if the piles of books, which was taller than his sitting height, fell on him. Then, he grabbed the book on the top of the pile. It wasn't that he had a hobby of reading, but he did become interested after seeing books piled up like jenga. He wondered if the owner of the books finished them already. He carefully opened the book so that he didn't put any creases on the spine. The first page was very stiff. It looked as though it was never opened. Perhaps the owner was someone that sold books?

"Here."

A cup of water was suddenly pushed in front of his face. Daemyung put down the book and received the cup. The water was teeth-freezing cold. He felt that the heat from summer had subsided a little after drinking it.

"Do you drink beer?"

"A-a little."

"Let's just drink one glass."

He flinched because he drank a lot yesterday, but also thought that just one glass of beer wouldn't do him harm. They drank beer with the chicken they brought. On TV, there was a drama airing. Daemyung looked at the electronic clock on one side of the living room. It was 10 p.m.

"Oh."

Suyeon appeared on the screen. Now that he thought about it, today was the day the first episode of the drama Suyeon was a part of, went live.

"Do you know her as well?"

"Yes. She's the instructor for our acting club."

"Is she well-behaved over there?"

"W-well behaved, you say?"

Gwak Joon shook his hand as though he didn't need the answer before drinking beer. Daemyung saw that he frowned a little. Perhaps he had a bad relationship with Suyeon?

Just as the Suyeon on TV was watching the car leaving with a yearning expression, Daemyung heard the door lock opening. When he had a look at the door, he saw a man with a stubble come in. He looked exhausted as though he had stayed up the whole night.

“Hyung-nim. Eat some chicken.”

“Chicken, huh. The magical food that you can never get tired of. Rather than that, the one next to you is the one you talked about?”

“Yes. Daemyung, introduce yourself. This is the hyung-nim I subserve.”

“Why don’t you say that after you actually do something for me?”

The man took off his shoes, came into the house, and scanned Daemyung from top to bottom. Daemyung looked back at him in nervousness. The man looked ill with a thin figure and a pale face, but his eyes looked like they were filled with more life than any ordinary person.

“Hello. M-my name is Park Daemyung.”

The man’s gaze pricked him. When he smiled awkwardly and waited, the man grinned.

“This was unexpected. I thought that a doppelg?nger would be visiting, but you’re the complete opposite. Ah, Daemyung, was it? Nice to meet you. I’m Ahn Pilhyun, and I’m the author of the books on the floor over there.”

Daemyung looked at the book that he picked up before. He saw that the author’s name was indeed Ahn Pilhyun.

“Urgh, why is it so hot still? Are you sure the sun has set?”

“I told you to stay at home.”

“Allow me to get some fresh air, will you? People need to go through photosynthesis to survive.”

“You aren’t going through any photosynthesis at night.”

“I can do it with moonlight. Inkslingers need moonlight rather than sunlight.”

Pilhyun sat down with a kind smile. Daemyung saw Gwak Joon relaxing his lips for the first time.

“You must be having a hard time, catching the eyes of someone like him. He’s quite a stifling fella, isn’t he?” Pilhyun asked as he gave him a chicken leg.

How was he supposed to answer? He couldn’t just reply yes, so was he supposed to laugh here?

“Why are you hesitating with something like that? You look very bold too.”

This was the first time someone called him ‘bold’. Daemyung smiled faintly before eating the chicken leg. It seemed that he needed more time to get adjusted.

“But why are you here?”

Hearing Pilhyun’s question, Daemyung blinked several times before looking at Gwak Joon. Gwak Joon was just watching TV with his usual slightly angry-looking face.

“I came because Joon-hyung told me to.”

“So you don’t know why you’re here?”

"I don't."

"Wow, how gullible. People will sell your organs you know? You just don't know how scary he is, huh? Just look at him. He looks like the type of person to stab someone else with a smile on his face."

"W-well, not...."

"From your tone of words, you agree with me to an extent?"

"Eh? N-no!"

"Then does he look kind to you? He doesn't, does he?"

"...."

He didn't say anything for a while and just sipped on some beer. He understood that the two were close. It was because they were close that they could make jokes like that. He glanced at Pilhyun. He was talking with Gwak Joon while drinking as though he never asked Daemyung the question.

They talked about the plot of the drama for a while before switching topics to discussing the difference between whole-fried chickens and batter-fried chickens. They switched topics so fast that he couldn't keep up with them. It made him confused just listening to them.

"Daemyung."

"Yes?"

"Why do chickens have two legs?"

"W-who knows?"

"Wouldn't the world be more peaceful if they had three legs? Likewise, if people had three hands, their work efficiency should rise dramatically. But why did everything evolve into having bilateral symmetry and the number two?"

After thinking about it for a while, Daemyung answered,

"Perhaps it's because two makes everything balanced?"

"You know about tripods right? The thing people use to put their cameras on."

"...Yes."

"Three makes things even more balanced. But why are there only two?"

Pilhyun seriously pondered about the rather random topic. Gwak Joon had crossed his arms and looked to be in thought as well. Daemyung couldn't get a grasp on things. The conversation between those two was a mixture of jokes and serious conversation so he didn't know which one to follow. He didn't say anything and just quietly waited for the two to switch topics again. However, the two discussed the reason why people had two arms and two legs for more than ten minutes.

"Daemyung. Have you thought about it?"

That question came to him suddenly. Fortunately, he wasn't sitting there absent-minded the whole time so he gave an answer.

"If people had three limbs...."

"If people had three limbs?"

"It'd be very inconvenient to sleep at night, so that's perhaps why they disappeared? I think it would be very annoying every time you roll around."

He felt embarrassed after saying a weak answer, but the two listeners nodded.

"That's plausible. If there's a man who had insomnia due to having three legs, where would he go to get treated? A mental counsellor? Or would he have to amputate one leg?"

Then, the reply came from Gwak Joon.

"Sleep is an important problem after all. I think amputation is a better option if the medicine doesn't work."

"But if having three legs is the norm, you'd become a cripple the moment you're left with two legs."

"Then you'd have to cut it off and get a prosthetic leg for outside activities."

"What if there's phantom pain?"

"Then you'd need to go to the mental counsellor."

"So having three legs and being insomniac at the same time is such a pitiful thing."

"It's a disability to not have something that you should have, but it's also a disability to have something that you aren't supposed to have. How about this? There's a man with two mouths. One does the eating, and one has to do the speaking, but one day, the eating mouth wants to do the speaking as well."

"Hm, I do need to write a one-shot sci-fi story, and that sounds decent."

"Why don't you treat me to a meal once you get paid then?"

"Hey, whose house do you think you're freeloading in?"

Gwak Joon shrugged his shoulders and watched the TV. Silence took over the heated discussion from before. Pilhyun was writing something down on his notepad seriously. Daemyung stayed as quiet as he could and watched him.

Eventually, Pilhyun put down the notepad as though he finished writing things down.

"The three-legged man and his insomnia is quite interesting, isn't it?"

"Eh? Ah, yes."

"I heard from Joon that your dream is to become a director."

"Yes."

"I don't know what kind of directing you're dreaming about, but if you really want to go that route, then you need to practice bringing out what's in your head properly. It will help out a lot."

"Bringing out, you say?"

"Yes. Whether it's a movie, music, or writing, people that want to create something need that ability. Even if you can think of hundreds of ideas, if you can't document them, then that's just useless fantasy. It's only when those ideas are put in a specific format that they gain value. It's all the more important for a director, who needs to give out orders. If the captain does not know what to do, the wheel would turn all by itself, and the ship would be sinking in no time. If you don't want to be third-rate like me, you should practice that starting now."

Pilhyun stood up as he lamented to himself that he was a sad third-rate writer. He went straight into the main bedroom and closed the door. Gwak Joon, who was drinking beer, spoke to him.

"Quite chaotic, isn't it?"

"Yes, a little."

"You'll get used to him once you talk to him a couple more times, so hold out until then. Also, he's not like that all the time, so you don't have to worry about that."

"Uhm... hyung."

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask why you invited me here today?"

"I wanted to talk."

"Talk? What kind of talk?"

"Anything, everything. When I see you fixing your scripts, I see talent in you. I don't know about directing, but you definitely have a talent for writing. That's why I called you here."

Gwak Joon wiped off his fingers with some tissue before continuing to speak.

"Learn writing from that hyung-nim and I during the summer holidays. I want to recommend that you just bring some luggage here and live here, but you're still a student, so let's think about that later."

"M-me? Writing?"

"I'm not telling you to become a novelist or something. I'm saying that you need to learn to write for the profession you want to become, so I'm telling you that you should learn it even if it's for a short time. To be exact, we're all learning together. I'm not that sociable, so I wrote everything by myself, but that's not a good way of going about it. Become close to people that write. That hyung-nim has connections both in the movie area and the novel area, so he should help a lot for your future."

Gwak Joon cleaned up the waste as he stood up. Daemyung quickly cleaned up as well.

"Edit your scripts like you always do and write a novel at the same time."

"I can't write things like novels."

“You already completed your scenario, didn’t you? Write one based on that.”

Daemyung was rather taken aback.

“I don’t even read that much though.”

“There’s a lot over there. Read a lot regardless of the genre during the holidays. Reading is a force of habit as well. Once you get into the habit of reading, you’ll have no problems with reading anything. It’d be even better if you become addicted.”

While Gwak Joon washed the dishes, Daemyung cleaned the table. His mind was in a mess. The only thing he was sure of in this storm was that this was an opportunity that many never come again.

Chapter 348

He had a dream, a very long dream. He didn’t remember what it was about, but he could remember that it was a very long one. He looked at his phone clock. It was 5:59. His alarm started ringing after 1 minute.

Listening to the beep of the alarm, he closed his eyes for a moment. What dream was it? The lingering imagery did not leave him. His body felt heavy. He felt like he could feel the weight of time pressing on him.

He barely turned around and managed to lift his torso upwards. His neck was full of sweat. He wondered if he wasn’t feeling good. The wind entered through the window he left open throughout the night. It brushed past his neck and disappeared into the gap between the door and the wall. It was rather chilly, something very unusual for August.

He closed the door and sat up. His head was still driving out the residue of his dream. Even as he washed his face and hair, his eyes were looking not at the mirror but somewhere extremely far. Just what could it be? He felt a little more clear-minded when he washed away the sweat he sweated throughout the night, but the traces of the dream turned blurry.

“You’re going out today as well?”

Bada came out of her room with a long yawn. Maru nodded.

“Why are you up so early?”

“Because I heard the water running. I’m going to go back to sleep.”

Bada drank a cup of water and told him to have a safe trip before going back to her room. The kitchen became quiet once again. He made toast and fried eggs and put them on a plate before going to the living room. He turned on the TV with the remote on the sofa before taking a bite out of his toast. The crunchy sound stimulated his ears. Maru thought about his dream even as he ate. Was it a nightmare? Or was he mistaken and didn’t dream at all? His dream became blurrier the more he thought about it.

After finishing his breakfast, he went to the kitchen to wash the dishes. Just as he looked at the dishes that were submerged in bubbles, he realized that he no longer remembered whether the child he had with her was a boy or a girl.

He turned on the tap and washed the bubbles away. The bubbles were sucked into the drain with a swirl. Amidst the disappearing bubbles, Maru saw his own memories. The plates were his present memories while the bubbles were his past memories. The clearer the present became, the quicker the past faded away. It was just like those bubbles.

“Was it a daughter or a son?”

His fingers skidded on top of the dishes as he washed them. Maru shook off the water before putting the dishes on display. The shiny surface faintly reflected his face. His eyes were stiff.

He sighed slightly and went to the bathroom. He picked up his toothbrush and had a look in the mirror. He could somewhat realize the point of the long dream. After brushing his teeth, he changed clothes. He saw a pair of pants that became too small to wear any longer. Looking at those pants, he thought of the question again. Was it a boy or a girl?

He felt like he had swallowed sand. He sat in front of his desk and picked up a marker. He opened up a notebook he saw and pressed the red marker against the white paper. Now, there was a dot on the paper. Maru looked into that dot. He knew too well what he had to write here. He had the confidence to fill this entire notebook.

The red dot became larger. The paper wrinkled after absorbing too much ink. His hands were shaking. Maru put the lid back on the marker along with a thick sigh.

If he wrote it down, would they become memories? Just because he wrote down his memories in words, could they still be called memories if he read them in the future? Rather than memories, it would be closer to knowledge by then. Understanding his unknown self through his memo. That was quite ironic.

At that moment, he felt a presence behind his back. When he turned around, he saw that woman. The angel, the grim reaper, the devil, or perhaps the envoy of God. The woman that didn't care what he called her. Oh, last time, she did tell him to call her an angel.

“I came just to check. Fortunately, there's nothing wrong.”

“So even moments like these were foreseen.”

“Yes, something like that.”

Maru nodded his head. She had told him about this beforehand so he wasn't that surprised, and nor was he going to complain about why such a thing happened. A dead man came back to life. He gained a golden opportunity. He felt thankful just for that, and he wasn't someone so disrespectful that would ask for more on top of that.

Just that, he found some things curious.

“You told me before, right? That my memories aren't disappearing, but that they're sinking below my subconscious.”

“Yes. Memories are fragments engraved in the soul. No one can erase that. They just cover it up so that there won't be any further problems. Though, there are cases where even that engraving can disappear if you cover it over and over again.”

Covering, she put it. Maru looked at her and asked.

“Then is there a chance that such memories can become vivid again? Not fragmented memories, but all of the things I’ve experienced.”

The woman shook her head. Her actions were slow, but her expressions were firm.

“That will not happen. Sadly, such miracles don’t occur.”

Sadly - she put it. Perhaps this woman had emotions as well? Or was she just saying that so he could understand it better? Perhaps she was mixing in suitable words just like when adults tried to console a crying child.

“I have a few things I want to ask, can you give me some time if you aren’t that busy?”

“Sure. We’ll be rarely meeting again in the future.”

The woman sat down on the bed. Curiously, the bedsheets creased and indicated that she sat there. Didn’t souls have no mass or something?

“Well, then. Ask away. I’ll answer the things I can tell you.”

“Then I’ll ask you a few things. Are there other people like me, who came back to life?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“What a vague answer.”

“Because I’m not a god. I don’t know everything.”

“I see. Then I wish to know where the grandma I used to call ‘mother’ is.”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“But that’s nothing serious, is it? I just want to see her. I want to talk to her like before. I’ve received a gift I can’t payback.”

“However, at this point in time, she hasn’t given you any kind of help.”

“You know well that it’s not a matter of order. I just want to go see her.”

“I cannot tell you.”

Her lips were sealed tight. Maru stroked his own hair upwards. He was at a stage where his memories were not just becoming blurry, but disappearing outright. He wanted to visit the person that gave him his second chance at life before he stopped remembering altogether. He also had the intention to help her if she lived a hard life. That was like his duty.

After not saying anything for a while, the woman spoke.

“She’s living a good life right now so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“I just wanted to say hello. That’s no good?”

“You really are stubborn. Wait a minute.”

The woman extended out her hand. Maru stared at her hand. What was she up to?

“Don’t you know what a handshake is?”

“Oh.”

He didn’t imagine that it was a handshake. Maru grabbed the woman’s hand. Warmth spread around in his hand. He thought that her hands would be cold, so this was rather unexpected. Maru stared at the woman. She was really beautiful. Perhaps she could be called the essence of beauty? Even her shaking eyes provoked his curiosity. Looking at her like this, she looked just like any ordinary person. At that moment, he could see a trace of her from the woman’s face. Do they look similar? When he analyzed in depth, the two didn’t really look that similar. He couldn’t help but laugh. It looked like he was too deeply in love with her.

“Why are you laughing?”

The woman noticed it immediately. Perhaps she was able to see it with her eyes closed? Maru told her that she looked like someone he knew. The woman opened her eyes. The black pupils that looked out of this world stared at him. At that moment, a different scenery unfolded in front of his eyes.

It was the rooftop of a building. A lady who was piggy-backing a baby was hanging the laundry out to dry. He could realize just by looking at her back figure. It was that person. At that moment, he realized that he couldn’t remember her name.

“Where is this place?”

“Just keep watching. I’m just confirming for you that she’s leading a good life. Don’t try to interfere too much. I told you that you should stop being altruistic and try to enjoy your life, didn’t I?”

The lady turned around. She looked like a kind person. The moment he saw her face, he felt relieved. He wanted to approach her and talk to her, but he could not move his body. Well, there was no way he could talk to her. He moved his gaze. The baby dozing off in the baby blanket on her back was a girl.

Maru stared at that girl for a long while. For some reason, it was hard to take his eyes off her. Was it because he thought about his own child that he could no longer remember? Was his own child a girl like that? Or perhaps a healthy boy? The baby girl with puffed cheeks frowned a little before starting to cry. At that moment, the scenery changed once again. He had returned to his room.

“Can you do anything?”

“No, I can just see things,” the woman told him calmly.

Maru thought about the lady. She didn’t look like she was well-off. He wanted to help her out if he could find her. Just as he was thinking about that, his eye took note of the hand he was still holding on to. The woman hadn’t let go of his hand. Maru didn’t feel awkward with this situation either. In fact, it felt too natural that he almost forgot the fact that he was grabbing her hand.

It was funny. Was she so pretty that he wanted her? He thought that his hands were true to his desires. He thought that he should let go. He tried to straighten his fingers to signal her. It was a little embarrassing to say it. He saw that the woman was slowly letting go as well. For some reason, she was

rather slow at taking her hands off. Did she push herself by using that magic-like thing just now? He felt rather sorry.

He sighed as he pulled his hand back. He wasn't able to repay anything to the one that saved his life. Even if he wanted to find her, it would be very hard to find her without knowing her name. No, even if he did know her name, it wouldn't change the situation. He had moved houses several times after his marriage, but he couldn't remember the precise locations. The old lady used to live right next to him. He couldn't resent his vague memories more than today.

'It seemed to be in a residential area without any apartments.'

He thought back to what he saw just now. Just then, he noticed that the woman was tapping on her white suit with her index finger. She was tapping according to a certain rhythm? What could that possibly mean? - he wondered.

Maru looked at the woman's face. She had a faint smile right now. The lady's kind smile overlapped on top of hers. For a moment, the two smiles looked very similar.

"I guess it's finished."

"What is?"

"The time."

"The time?"

Maru tilted his head. Now that he looked at her, she wasn't tapping anymore. Was she measuring time?

"You told me you wanted to ask me some things, right?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead."

"What?"

"I'll answer them so go ahead and ask."

She was a strange woman. She was not okay for one moment and okay in the other. Maru decided to ask the things he wanted to before she changed her mind again.

"You told me before that... uh...."

Maru frowned. He couldn't remember. He wanted to ask something important, but he couldn't remember what it was. It was definitely related to what triggered him to reincarnate, but the important bits had disappeared. He died, met this woman, some things happened, and he came back to life.

"You have nothing to ask anymore?"

"...I don't feel that pleasant. You waited for the moment my memories disappeared?"

"Please consider my circumstances. It's very hard to answer the hard questions that you keep asking all the time."

“Phew, alright. You can go. It doesn’t seem like I can find out anything. I don’t need to see you off, do I?”

“Of course not.”

The woman smiled as she stood up. Maru looked at her for a while before sighing as well.

“I wasn’t trying to vent my frustration on you. Please understand. I’m a mere mortal. You guys don’t have emotions like this, right?”

“Who knows? I feel like I had them, or maybe I didn’t have them.”

Or I forgot about them. Her last words were very small.

“Mr. Han Maru. Live your present life. Live a life where you can be the happiest. Not for someone else, but for yourself.”

As soon as she said those words, she disappeared from his sight. She didn’t scatter light and ascend into the skies, nor disappear into a portal like in the movies. She vaporized into nothingness as though she was never there in the first place.

Maru spat out a breath as he picked up his phone. He felt like he had a long conversation, but the clock said that it was 6:28. The last time he checked, it was 6:27.

He looked at his hand. The warmth still remained there. It was the sole proof that that time wasn’t a lie. Maru bitterly smiled and packed his bag. Today was the day he had a drama shoot as a minor role in the drama that Suyeon was shooting. He still had some time until the appointment, but he didn’t want to stay in his room.

“I guess I’ll take my time.”

He hung his bag on one shoulder before leaving the house.

The air was rather stuffy.

Chapter 349

The roads were surrounded by mountains. The bus was heavily climbing the hills of the mountain filled with greenery. Maru opened the window slightly. The wind that contained the freshness of the forest rushed in through the gap. The refreshing wind made him smile subconsciously.

‘I didn’t expect it to be in the middle of the mountains like this.’

When Suyeon told him to come to the shooting location in Namyangju, he thought of flat land that was unlike the city. He imagined that there would be a moderate amount of people passing by, and a container in the middle of nowhere, but what he encountered was something completely different.

When he got off the train at Ungilsan station, the first thing he saw was the North Han River located to his right. The rays of the sun reflected on the surface of the river and scattered into bits and pieces. It looked like golden powder was floating on top of the water. In front of that were fields, greenhouses, and a factory that was spewing out white smoke. There were only some buildings around the train station, and the only thing that he could see when he turned his eyes elsewhere were the mountains.

Maru predicted that the shooting location would be nearby, but when he asked a passerby, he heard that he was still far away.

He got on the shuttle bus to the shooting location in Namyangju that the passerby told him about. The bus only started going after around 5 couples got on board. The bus took the road on the left of the North Han River and passed several tunnels before turning towards the mountains. Concrete buildings disappeared from sight, and the only thing that could be seen were trees.

Maru stopped contemplating and turned his head forward. He could see some buildings. The bus started slowing down before eventually stopping. Maru felt it was a pity because the wind didn't blow anymore and closed the window. The driver told him that they were at the ticket office. He got off the bus and walked a little when he saw the shooting location. Namyangju General Shooting Location. A large slate sculpture created a long shadow. There were some kids crouched in a circle in the shadow. He wondered if they were here for a tour or something.

Maru followed the couples that he took the bus with to the ticket office. There were still around two hours to go, so he was planning to take his time looking around.

"How many persons?"

"Just one highschool student."

"That will be 1,500 won."

He paid for the ticket.

"Is there something like a guidebook?"

"There's one on the left."

There were guidebooks below the guidepost on the left of the ticket office. He picked a booklet before starting to walk. This seemed to be quite a hotspot for tourists as there were a lot of people. Maru watched a child walking hand-in-hand with his parents. The bright smile of the child stole his eyes. Only after that family disappeared from his sight could he start walking again. The first thing he saw after he switched places was a theater. The booklet said that it was a place that showed the visitors movies free of charge.

When he moved some more along the hill, he saw a row of four buildings. This was the shooting location. The booklet introduced those places as buildings for shooting various movies, dramas, and other TV programs. Of course, it wasn't open to the public. After all, someone must be shooting something inside.

He walked around the four studios. Just then, he could see a person hurriedly running inside the first building. That person was carrying a roll of cables on one shoulder. He wondered what work was being shot inside. Since the first studio was the biggest one, he predicted that it must be a movie.

"Two, huh."

The appointment was originally at 1, but Suyeon messaged him that he should be here by two. It seemed that the shoot was delayed for some reason. He wasn't that surprised since he experienced it a lot when he was a background actor.

He bought a cup of coffee from the lounge building before leaving. He moved to the Panmunjom set while drinking the bitter coffee. Many people were recreating scenes from a popular movie. Maru also got in the line and shot a photo of the set. Although that movie stopped airing a long time ago, the emotions left behind by that movie had remained in this place and was touching the hearts of the visitors. Such was the greatness of art.

The next place he went to was the Film Support Building. That was a place that displayed various equipment and props necessary to create movies, as well as various shooting sets, costumes and art rooms.

There, Maru met a familiar face. He found Moonjoong's face among the row of monochrome posters displayed in the Korean Movie History Hall. He could see just how much the elder contributed to the movie industry of this country just from the posters.

"He's handsome."

He crossed his arms and scanned all the movie posters displayed according to a timeline. Even as the years changed, Moonjoong's face could be found in the posters. There was a brief introduction of movies at the end of the history hall, and Moonjoong's face could be seen there as well, along with the introduction that he was one of the greatest actors of his era. There was also the story that many popular actresses wanted to shoot movies with him. At the end, it said that he had retired as an actor and was doing his best to popularize acting. Maru felt just how great of an actor the elder was. He got to be in the same shooting set with such an actor, albeit for a brief moment. Wasn't that something to be proud of?

After making rounds, he visited the historical film set. When he did, the hour hand was nearing two. It was about time he went to the studio. He fanned himself with the booklet as he headed to the second studio. He saw a 'staff only' sign as he went in. He went past the glass doors and stood in the lounge with clean marble floors. There was an open door on the right, and people were busily moving items inside.

Some people gave him a glance as though they were bothered by the presence of a high school student, but no one talked to him.

He wondered where he had to go, so he called Suyeon.

-Oh, you're here?

"Yes. I'm here, but where do I go? I'm in the lounge right now."

-You see the door to the right?

"Yes."

-You can come in through that door. You'll see a staff room as soon as you turn at the corner.

He hung up and started moving. He entered the room with doors that seemed like thick soundproofing doors. The first thing he saw were cables hanging from the ceiling. When he had a closer look, he noticed that they were all lights. Beneath that was a wall made of wood. It looked very poorly made from the outside, but perhaps the inside looked like a luxurious apartment.

“Put down the cables and reinforce the set floors!”

The shooting set that was about 300 pyeong was busy with people and equipment. Maru did not go towards the set and walked along the corridor until he met a corner just like what Suyeon said. There were a lot of rooms on the right of the corridor, and there were various signs on top of the door. Staff room, makeup room, support role makeup room. The one at the very end of the corridor was the support role makeup room. Maru knocked on the staff room before entering.

“You’re here.”

Suyeon was inside. She was talking to people with a coffee in hand. There was another familiar face. It was camera director Kim Jangsoo.

“Hello.”

“Oh, you’re here.”

He saw Jangsoo stand up and say ‘he’s the one I talked about’. He wondered what he told them. From how the others didn’t have a bad expression, there didn’t seem to be any problems.

“I didn’t know you two belonged to the same company.”

“He’s a cute junior I dote on. He’s hard-working, polite, and good at acting too,” Suyeon put her arm on his shoulders as she spoke.

Maru raised his right hand to get her hand off him. Suyeon chuckled and continued talking to the staff.

“But he’s quite shy. Just look at this. You wouldn’t know how much effort I put in in order to get close to him, you know?”

Her arm wrapped around his neck again. The staff smiled when they saw Suyeon’s easy going actions. He wanted to pull away again but he decided not to. He decided to play along with the devious nine-tailed fox’s schemes for now.

“I heard from Choongho that you’re doing a movie with him,” Jangsoo said as he threw a drink to him.

Maru caught the bottle and replied.

“Yes, I was lucky enough to work with him.”

“Action, was it? From what I saw last time, you should be good with using your body. Do your best. Choongho is the type of person to give his whole-hearted support.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You really are a smart kid. See? I told you that he has the potential. Oh, you can introduce yourself to these guys here. From the left, it’s director Cha, director Lee, and director Choi. They’re quite big figures in the industry, so you’ll benefit a lot if you manage to impress them.”

The directors were in their late forties to mid fifties. He originally had the impression that they were veterans, and it turned out that they all worked at the scene. They exchanged brief greetings. They were

the type of people he might meet quite frequently if he decided to continue his career. Like what Jangsoo said, he might benefit a lot if he managed to leave an impression on them.

“Then let’s get going, shall we?”

The three directors said that they were in charge of the movie that was being shot at the building over, the first studio. They came here to hang out as it was lunchtime. When the directors left, Suyeon followed them as well. She looked quite natural as she talked to them. She even looked quite close.

“Have you been here before?”

“No, this is my first time.”

“Any first thoughts after looking at the set?”

“I was surprised because it’s much bigger than I expected. I was thinking of a bland shipping container, but it was also quite curious that it was made to look like a theme park.”

“That’s just business. It’s a waste of money to tear everything down after shooting just once. They’d at least get ticket money if they leave it as an attraction. Oh, this is your role for the day.”

Jangsoo gave him a script.

“Are you good at using a knife?”

“Knife?”

“You haven’t watched the drama?”

“I haven’t.”

“Hah, geez. That saddens me slightly. And here I was getting praised for my shots too.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Nah, it’s nothing to be sorry about. But you don’t monitor the works of other members of your company?”

“She’ll do well by herself.”

“I like how you don’t pull your punches. Anyway, this drama is a cooking drama. Well, considering the trend of dramas in the country, it’s obvious that it’ll end up as a romance, but the beginning parts are focused on a cooking competition. It’s easy to think of it as a story happening in a top-class restaurant.”

“So that’s what you mean by using a knife....”

“We’re not expecting you to be as proficient as a first-rate chef or anything. We just need you to not look awkward when captured by the camera. How about it, can you do it?”

“Yes. I make the side dishes at home, so I should be fine with using a knife. Though, I’m not that good.”

“That’s enough. Look at your script. A company is gathering young people and putting on a competition in order to hire talents. You’ll see once you go to the set, but there will be cooking tables in rows. Your role is to chop up zucchinis and say a couple of lines. You see Dropout 1 in there?”

Maru found his role in the script and nodded. He was one of the aspiring young chefs in the arena. He was just one of the side characters that were there to make the main character's talent look good.

"We'll start the rehearsal once the producer comes back from lunch. You can greet him then. At the end of the corridor is the waiting room for background roles. Don't even look at the other rooms. People will swear at you if you hang around the makeup rooms for the lead and support roles. There are a lot of actors who are headstrong, so fix your gaze forward, okay?"

"I will do that."

"Do you have anything after the shoot today?"

"I don't."

"Then let's eat together. I'm not a petty man that doesn't treat someone after I say that I'll treat them."

Maru remembered what Jangsoo said at his last drama shoot. He told him that he'd treat him to a meal. It seemed that he remembered. Maru smiled and nodded. It was an opportunity for him to get close to someone, so there was no way he would miss the opportunity.

"I'll get going then."

"Alright, see you later."

He said goodbye before leaving. He looked at the entrance to the set once before walking towards the end of the corridor. There were makeup rooms spaced out evenly to his right, and on the door was a sign that said 'Leading actor waiting room'. There was a headstrong actor inside? He looked at the name, but he didn't recognize it.

Maru stood in front of the 'actor waiting room' at the end of the corridor. He entered through the door since it was slightly open. Inside, there were a lot of men and women that seemed to be in their early twenties. He attracted attention, but it soon disappeared. Everyone was reading the script or were reciting their lines in a small voice. Not many people had any interest in the others.

As there were more than ten people in a small space, some were leaning against the wall. Maru also took a place next to a cabinet. He opened the script and read everything from the beginning. From what he read, it seemed that he might meet Suyeon on the set as well. Though, he wouldn't have any lines then. They'll just appear in the same scene a couple of times.

As it didn't seem like there was any deep acting required, he closed the script quite early. The other people seemed to be bored of the waiting time becoming too long as they started talking to each other. The faint tension in the air disappeared at that moment. Relaxing smiles and each person's stories replaced it.

At that moment, Maru looked at the man that approached him. The man made a rather perplexed expression and changed it to an awkward smile.

"Uhm, didn't we meet at an audition before?"

"An audition?"

“Yeah. For Twilight Struggles....”

“Ah.”

Maru remembered as well.

“Number four?”

“I am! You’re number 27 aren’t you?”

“Yes. I am number 27,” Maru nodded as he spoke.

Referring to , the film

Chapter 350

He was the man that he saw back then during the camera test for Twilight Struggles. He was number four. He didn’t know the man’s name though. He tested first and was notified of his failure first as well. The reason he remembered him was because this man sighed his way until the end of the test. He sighed so much that it almost disturbed him. He couldn’t just tell him not to sigh since he was so depressed and tried to ignore him as much as possible, but that didn’t mean that the man left a good impression on him.

“Did you pass the audition back then?”

“Yes.”

“I knew it. I knew you’d pass. The judges all seemed bored when the other applicants acted, but they were busy talking to each other and looking at the monitor when you were the one acting.”

“I was lucky.”

“Luck, huh. Luck is definitely a big factor. It would’ve been good if I was a little lucky back then too.”

He spoke in a self-loathing tone before becoming quiet with an awkward smile. Although the conversation ended, Maru did not see the need to continue the conversation so he stayed still. The man’s greeting was neither welcome nor distasteful. He just replied because the other party acted like he knew him.

He scratched his head.

“Sorry, I acted too familiar, didn’t I?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Really? That’s good. Haa, I feel frustrated just thinking about what happened back then. I can’t understand why I wasn’t able to show everything I got. I mean, I showed them less than half of what I had.”

“People just have their bad days. On bad days, you won’t be able to do anything no matter what you want to do.”

“Right? Oh yeah, did you shoot after that?”

“Yes.”

“Then did you watch senior Park Taeho’s acting?”

“I haven’t seen him acting. I was only a minor role, so I only shot for one day.”

“I see, that’s such a pity. I wanted to see him in action too. I got into acting after seeing him in a movie while I was in middle school.”

“It’s set to be released at the end of the year, so you’ll be able to watch it soon.”

“Watching it at a cinema and seeing him in real life is different, you know? I want to watch how he gets into acting. Oh, how was the shoot? I’ve never been to a movie shooting set before. I’ve always been a background role in dramas.”

“It’s not that different from drama sets. There are just more lights and cameras compared to dramas.”

“But there’s the atmosphere. Or should I call it pressure? I feel like there are things like that.”

After talking for a while, the man made an expression as though he made a mistake.

“I acted too familiar because it was too nice to see you. I’m twenty-one. I’m older, right?”

“Yes, you are.”

“Can I drop the honorifics?”

“Go ahead.”

“Then I will. Actually, I had a hard time after I dropped out of the audition. My acting skills are quite good, so my academy and my parents support me a lot, but I felt too embarrassed when I failed that audition even though I assured them that I’d pass. That’s why I started taking background role part time jobs. But curiously, I didn’t become nervous at all when I stood in front of the camera. The producer complimented me for my acting as well. Fortunately, there was someone who saw me in a good light, and I was able to get a minor role quite frequently in dramas. Last time, I took a role as a reenactment actor. You know about ‘Surprises in the World’ that airs on HBC, right?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Did you see the episode last week?”

“I don’t watch TV that much.”

“That’s a pity. Try watching it next time. It feels somewhat wrong for me to say this, but I think I did better than the young actor that came out before me.”

The man grinned. Maru just said some words to fit the situation.

“That’s good, you caught someone’s eyes. Now all that’s left is to climb your way up.”

“Haha, you flatter me. This is just my prediction, but I might get a support role in the near future. A producer I know said that he’ll contact me if he remembers to.”

Maru wordlessly smiled at the excited man. Contact him if the producer remembers, huh. That just sounds like 'let's hang out one time'. Nothing good would come out of popping his big dream, so he just congratulated the man. Also, Maru thought that if he was the producer, he'd never contact him. It was better to distance people that blabbed about things that they shouldn't talk about.

"Ah, I might have passed if I was in good condition back then. I was really confident, you know? What role were you applying for?"

"The delinquent."

"Me too. It's such a pity. The academy had high hopes for me but I just had to go and make a mistake. Haa, like what you said, I wasn't lucky. I would've passed if I was lucky too. Of course, I don't mean that you would've failed instead. Since you did well too. I'm just saying that it's just a little bit of a pity."

The man seemed to want to defend his mistakes that day. He kept saying that he would be able to do well if he was given another opportunity. There were many people in the world like this: ones that still give meaning to what happened in the past and could not get over past events. While he understood their feelings, there was no benefit from doing so. The only thing that remained was tragic self-consolation and meaningless fantasy.

When the conversation halted, Maru looked at the script again. He was pretty much signalling the other party that they should just mind their own businesses, but this man didn't seem to be any good at reading the mood. He started talking again. Maru just stared at that man. The man seemed to have felt that Maru's gaze wasn't normal and stopped speaking.

"You'll do well. If you do become famous, don't forget about me. Now then, if you would please excuse me, I have to look at the script. I don't have a good brain so I have to keep reading the script."

It had been quite a long time since he felt tired just by listening to someone else. He remembered that one of his superiors in his previous life was like that. That superior always complained about his life whenever he ate with someone. When that superior wanted to eat dinner together, at least one of the members always killed off a distant relative and excused himself so that he could go to an imaginary funeral. It was quite funny, but it wasn't something to laugh about.

He completely memorized the script after reading it about two times. He could even remember the directions. He took out a pen and wrote down his own interpretations on the side. Based on those interpretations, he created a general outline for his acting. This kind of work was necessary in order to provide the kind of acting requested by the producer immediately.

It would be good if he could mesmerize the producer with his own acting, but in the case of minor roles, most of the time, they had to act as requested by the producer. If he just acted as he wished to, the producer would just shake his head and say one thing: 'get him out'.

Maru closed the script. He had no intentions of investing more energy than necessary. The man that talked to him non-stop had gone to someone else and started talking to them. A group had formed in this short time. Three men and two women. They formed a harmonious atmosphere. The others also started approaching the group. Since a pivot had formed in the group of scattered people, it was natural that people were gathering. Moreover, their waiting time was getting dragged out, so they needed someone to talk to in order to relieve their boredom.

“I’ll talk to him for you. It’ll probably work you know? Oh, you too, noona? Yes, of course. Trust me.”

The man gave out blank cheques and people gathered around him. It was just like he was the Pied Piper of Hameln. That was much better than just awkward silence. While the man boasted of his glib tongue to everyone else, Maru looked for an empty seat. Just then, he saw that a seat next to the window was vacant. He was about to go and sit down when a girl that stood in front of the seat caught his eyes. When he stared at her, the girl pointed at the door. When Maru followed her finger and looked at the door, the girl sat down. Then she grinned. It was the smile of the victor.

He chuckled in vain. Just then, the man sitting next to her stood up and entered the group. The girl kindly pointed at the empty seat.

“There’s a seat.”

He could see that. He sat down for now. The girl took out an MP3 player and put earphones on. Maru also took out his MP3 player and started listening to some music. He was listening to TTO’s music per his sister’s recommendation. Just then, someone tapped on his shoulder. When he opened his eyes. The girl gestured to him to take out his earbuds.

“Uhm, excuse me, do you have any spare batteries?”

“I don’t.”

He ignored her and was about to put the earbuds back in.

“Then can we listen together?”

“No, we can’t.”

“Don’t be like that.”

The girl seemed to be around his age, or perhaps in her early twenties. She asked in a pleading tone. If he was listening to music with speakers, he would’ve just said ‘go ahead’, but earphones were another matter altogether. He said ‘sorry’ before he closed his eyes again, but before he did that, he saw that the girl’s hands were shaking. Noticing that, the girl tried to stop her shaking with the other hand, but even the other hand was shaking.

It was quite a contrast with her leisurely expression.

“No, it’s fine. You can listen to it by yourself. I’m fine, I’m fine.”

The girl opened the script with a smile.

Maru watched her for a moment before putting his earbuds back in and closing his eyes. Just as another song was nearing its end, he heard a tapping sound. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the girl was tapping on the floor with her heels. She clearly looked flustered as she was biting on her fingernails as well. When he met eyes with her, the girl smiled, stopped tapping on the floor, and took her hand out of her mouth as well. She was looking at the script as though nothing was happening, but her eyes were shaking nonstop. She was clearly not able to focus.

He sighed slightly. She wasn't in a state he could ignore. She looked like she was about to start tap dancing so he pulled out his earbud from one ear and offered it to her.

"Listen to this and calm down."

"I'm fine."

"Then stop shaking your legs."

"It doesn't act like how I want it to."

"Then listen. Don't you calm down when you listen to music?"

"Yes, but..."

After hesitating, the girl received the earbud with a bold expression. After seeing that the girl put the earbud in, he closed his eyes again. The song changed and it was another song by TTO. He wondered just how many TTO songs his sister put in here.

"You like TTO?" The girl asked.

Maru opened his eyes and shook his head. However, the follow-up 'why?' didn't come. She nodded as though she accepted it.

Now that she had some music, the girl neither shook nor tapped on the floor. She just read the script and said a few of her lines. To describe the fierceness of the competition, each minor role had a line or two. They were mostly 'sorry', 'give me another chance' or 'I'll do it again'.

"Please give me another chance. I'm really confident in this dish."

The girl spoke her line in a desperate tone. Although she was shaking before, she was actually quite good at acting. After repeating the same line a few times with pleading eyes, the girl sighed in exhaustion.

"It's strange, isn't it?"

"No, you're good."

"Really? Phew."

The girl closed her script and closed her eyes. Maru also crossed his arms and closed his eyes. He found a small silence amidst the group of chatting people. He hummed to himself the melody of the song as he spent his time.

"It's real. Hey, didn't I fail Twilight Struggle's audition by just a small margin?"

Mr. Number Four smiled and asked him a question. Maru raised his head and looked at the group of people. They were all waiting for an answer. It seemed that Mr. Number Four had gotten a good position in the group. Maru scratched his brows and spoke.

"Yes, you did fail by just a small margin. You were just unlucky."

“See? If I was just a little bit luckier back then, I would be on the shooting set right now. Though I did get acknowledged in dramas, so there isn’t a big problem. So don’t be down everyone and cheer up. I also didn’t get a lot of trust at first, but when I continued doing it, people started to take care of me.”

The man had him affirm that it was due to luck that he didn’t pass, not skill. Maru could say that as many times as necessary if he could get consolation from it. After all, it wasn’t like it would do him any bad. He just wanted the man to stop bothering him. If he asked the same question next time, Maru just might end up replying cynically. He didn’t have a big heart after all.

“Luck is also a skill.”

When the man led everyone away, the girl, who had been staying still the whole time, spoke.

“Don’t you think so?”

“Probably.”

“Why didn’t you tell him then? That he failed because of his skills.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Why? Doesn’t it make you feel better?”

“I don’t know. We’re not that close for me to be so kind to him. I’ll just gloss over it.”

“Kind?”

Maru smiled and spoke in a small voice as he looked at Mr. Number Four.

“If I tell him right now, he might realize his mistake. If I stay still at times like this, he’ll make the same mistake in other places as well. And that might end up costing him something important.”

“...You, you are a bad one.”

“Can I have my earbud back then?”

“No, I was wrong. Sorry.”

Then she closed her eyes.

Maru sighed and took out his phone. His waiting time was nearing an hour at this point.