

Once Again 351

Chapter 351

"We're starting. Everyone, please come out," a staff member peeked inside and spoke. Maru had waited an hour and twenty minutes by that point.

"Thanks. I calmed down a lot thanks to you," the girl said as she handed him the earbud.

She definitely looked a lot more stable than before. Maru put the earbuds into his bag before standing up. When he left the room, he saw the staff handing out toques and cooking uniforms. They weren't tailored, so they just had to find suitable sizes and adjust the shape using safety clips.

"Please check your clothes. The rehearsal is going to start immediately, so please get ready. Right now, the producers and the actors are not in a good mood so don't make a mistake. No one wants to get into a fight, right? Well then, good luck."

They followed the staff member onto the set.

"Please get out of the way!"

Someone shouted from a forklift. The staff that lead them told them to watch out for the cables beneath their feet and told them to move back. There was a wall on the forklift. It was literally a wall. The backside, which wouldn't be caught on camera, was made of lumber and fiberboard, while the front side had white tiles laid out. They followed the forklift to the right side of the set.

"Set up the ceiling lights and get a ceiling block over here. We need to cover this part."

The set, which seemed to be the cooking competition area, was there. Cooking facilities that could be seen in dramas were laid out in rows. On one of the walls were rows of double door refrigerators, and in front of them were piles of seasonal fruits. Maru found actors standing on one side of the set. Suyeon could be seen among them as well. She was wearing a black cooking uniform. She had thick makeup around her eyes, which made her look fierce. Even her lips were purple. It was stereotypical "bad girl" makeup.

"Get the minor roles into position!"

A loud voice could be heard from afar. A man wearing a hoodie was shouting with a paper cup in hand. It seemed that he was the producer.

"Come here."

The one that ran to them was a youth that stood next to the presumed producer. He seemed to be in his late twenties.

"I'm the assistant director that will be working with you today. I don't know if you've heard, but the atmosphere is really not good so don't make an NG if possible. I don't like getting angry, but I might shout at you today, so keep that in mind. Everyone saw the script, right?"

"Yes."

"Those with lines, come to this side."

Maru moved to the right as instructed. When he looked next to him, five others stood in line with him. The earphone girl and Mr. Number Four included.

“Wait for now. Those that don’t have lines, come here and stand in a line. I’m going to have to see how tall you are.”

The assistant director scanned the people once before assigning them a table.

“Over there, number three and number four switch places. And you at the back! Yes, the one that’s turning his head! Yes. You switch places with the one on your left. Let’s see. I think that should do.”

The assistant director quickly ran to the hooded man. The hooded man walked to them with slow steps.

“I think this should do.”

The assistant director, who could speak boldly in front of minor actors and background actors, very patiently waited for the hooded man’s words.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Do you think this looks good? Huh? Didn’t I tell you that your eyes weren’t a decoration? Do you think you can even graduate from me like this? Do you think you’ll be able to have your own program one day? You’re frustrating. Do it again!”

The hooded man became angry. His loud voice filled the set. The assistant director kept saying ‘sorry’ and bowed his head.

“Do I really have to tell you all this? Even a dog would do better than you if it studied under me for as long as you did....”

Just at that moment, a woman called out to the hooded man. The middle-aged woman, who just came to the set, was wearing a black cooking uniform just like Suyeon’s.

Lee Miyoon. She was an actress that Maru knew of. She was a veteran actress that could be seen quite frequently in weekend dramas. Her roles were mostly the ‘kind mother of the main character’ or the ‘affectionate president’s wife’, so ‘kind’ roles than ‘vile’ roles. Her kind-looking eyes and wrinkles around the nose gave off a ‘good’ impression.

“Producer Kim.”

“Y-yes.”

“When’s the standby?”

“We’ll be starting soon.”

“Producer Kim.”

“Yes.”

“Are you kidding me? I am here.”

It was a baton touch. The producer who was getting angry at the assistant director was now subservient in front of the actress. Noticing that there were many eyes around, the actress called the producer away. Being dragged away, the producer frowned as he glared at the assistant director.

“Ah, this is just fucked up.”

The director angrily uttered before proceeding to shout at the background actors standing behind the tables.

“Ah, dammit! Didn’t I tell you to switch, huh? So you’re fine as long as you get your pay for the day, huh? Are you kidding me? Is this a joke to you?”

The assistant producer reassigned the people while shouting. Seeing him so angry the background actors just moved according to his words without saying anything.

“We did just as he told us to. What the heck is his problem?”

The earphone girl asked. Maru replied to her since she seemed to be expecting an answer from him.

“The problem is that he was scolded.”

“He’s so cocky, don’t you think?”

“Maybe, but I think we should stay quiet for now.”

“Why?”

Maru pointed at the assistant director with his chin. He was glaring at the two for a while now. The earphone girl closed her mouth as though she swallowed something bitter. She clearly looked dissatisfied.

“You two, are you here to loiter around?”

And so, the assistant director found a target. Maru just inwardly sighed.

“Hey, don’t you hear me? I’m asking you if you’re here to loiter around. Does it look like a playground to you? Why do kids nowadays have no respect?”

The assistant director glared and spewed out all of his piled up anger. Maru looked down and started singing in his head. Talking back to him right now would be akin to pouring oil into a fire. He would calm down after making a fuss if he just left the guy alone.

However, the girl next to him clearly didn’t seem to have any intentions of staying silent. Her clenched hands indicated that she was about to erupt. Maru turned his head slightly and looked at the girl’s face. Her twitching lips made him feel uneasy. She looked like she was about to pick a fight.

Fortunately, she just seemed so and didn’t actually get into a fight. Reacting to every single thing like this was very tiring. Unless one was going to advertise him or herself as a hero of justice, it was better to just make compromises. It wasn’t about right and wrong. It was a problem of efficiency. There was no need to get angry because of something petty. Getting angry had to be reserved for something necessary.

The girl suppressed her anger. Just as things were about to get quiet again, the assistant director looked at the girl with a disdainful smile and continued the fight.

“What, you got something to say to me? Huh? Are you someone really great? You’re an aspiring celebrity, aren’t you? Do you think you’ll make it with your face? I mean, if your face is lacking, you should be able to smile at least. Do you think you can have a social life with that? This is the society, you know?”

The assistant director stroked his own hair upwards before sighing.

“The world has gotten pretty good, huh? When I was your age, I wasn’t even able to put my teeth out. The discipline at TV stations has hit rock bottom. Are you going to quit after this? If you are, then you can do whatever you want. If you plan to never see me again, then you can cut all the corners. But if you plan to stay, then look at the ground. I don’t treat men and women differently. I’m very equal when it comes to things like that. I’m going to treat you like hell if you don’t do well. If you can’t endure it, then just quietly raise your hand and leave, alright? Don’t cry.”

The man’s index finger pressed on the earphone girl’s forehead. The girl took steps back. The assistant director chuckled before making a refreshed expression. It seemed that he had vented his frustration somewhat.

“Well then, get into positions again. Let’s do things well this time. If you just follow my instructions, there won’t be any problems,” he spoke as he walked up to a cooking table.

Only chilly air remained when he left. Maru sighed as he stretched his neck from side to side. It was good that he didn’t speak for a long time. The atmosphere was getting better. It should be fine as long as the shoot went well.

“Phew.”

He heard a breath next to him. The girl was glaring at the assistant director’s back while biting her lips. If gazes could do harm, it would take eight weeks at the hospital for that man to recover.

The assistant director approached them again. It seemed that the camera would shoot where he was. He stood in the same spot as before and looked at the background actors before tilting his head.

“Is it done?”

After speaking to himself, the assistant director turned his head around. Maru was puzzled when he looked at him.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“How does it look to you? Does it look good now?”

“What do you mean?”

“The assignment of people. How is it, does it look good to you?”

“Well, I don’t know anything. If it’s to your liking, assistant director, then it must look good.”

“Can’t you even think for yourself?”

“I know nothing about scene composition or things like that.”

“Forget it. What am I expecting from a kid? Hey, how about you? Does it look good to you?” This time, the assistant director asked Mr. Number Four.

Mr. Number Four quickly nodded and replied that it looked perfect.

“Perfect? Good. You said it, okay? I think differently, but I’m going with this just because you said so, okay? If I get scolded again, you know what happens, don’t you?”

Mr. Number Four’s gulping sound could be heard from all the way where Maru was. That man really couldn’t read the mood. The assistant director was clearly the stereotypical ‘blame everything on his subordinates’ type. To work with such a man, neither agreeing nor disagreeing would do any good. Only by replying ‘I don’t know’ like a parrot would leave behind no bad results.

When the assistant director walked towards the refrigerators, the girl, who had been staying quiet this whole time, spoke.

“Aren’t you pissed?” She suddenly asked.

“Why would I be?”

“Aren’t you angry? You had to listen to such a thing from that son of a... *phew*, that person. Don’t you have any pride?”

Her eyes were red as though she was about to cry. Of course, she wouldn’t start crying. Her eyes were probably red due to anger.

“My pride isn’t that cheap.”

“What?”

“Uhm, just ignore a moderate amount of injustice. If you talk back to every single little thing, even an iron-willed man wouldn’t last, not to mention you.”

“You sound really pathetic, you know that?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Problems persist precisely because people like you stay silent at times like this. How could you stay silent? You’re just....”

The girl looked at him as though she couldn’t understand. It was a really tiring day today. First, there was a man who had to have others confirm to him that he was someone good, and then, there was a girl full of half-assed justice.

“Then say it to him.”

“Huh?”

“Should I call him here? If you can’t stand him, then I’ll call him here.”

Maru didn't wait for the girl to answer and took the first step. At the same time, the girl grabbed his shoulder while spitting out a short breath.

"What are you doing?"

"I thought you couldn't stand him."

"That's...."

Maru lowered his voice and replied.

"Hey, if justice is something you take out just when it's necessary, then don't force it upon others. How does that make you any different from that man? You can't say anything to people higher than you, so you start complaining to people around you. Does that make your life easier? Does that justify your actions? Is that what your conscience is about? Why don't you just blatantly talk bad about him? I can do that with you. I'll ask again. Do you have the confidence to say to that man to stop acting like that?"

When he asked, the girl became powerless. Her clenched fists became loose as well.

"Sorry, I wasn't supposed to get angry at you."

Since she accepted, he had nothing more to say. Maru also apologized.

"Yes, I should endure. That's right."

The girl spoke in a powerless voice. She didn't get what he meant at all. It wasn't about enduring. Enduring leaves residue inside people. The residue of emotions would eventually pile up and harm the mind. It wasn't about enduring. It was about ignoring it outright.

"Uhm, noona."

"What?"

"People don't understand dogspeak. How are you supposed to endure anything when you don't understand anything in the first place? If a ferocious dog is barking at you, do you go 'I should endure' right next to it? No. You either ignore it or take a detour."

Hearing that, the girl stared at him for a while before chuckling.

"Aha, dogspeak."

"You should talk to people that actually speak human words. If a human wants to face a dog, then that human would have to speak dogspeak as well, but that harms a person's dignity. Just ignore him. There's no harm in getting sworn at by a dog."

The girl nodded. Then, she seemed to have thought of something as she widened her eyes and asked,

"But what if the dog tries to bite?"

"If the dog is too big for you to face, then you should just get bitten obediently. What can you do about it? It wants to bite you, and you are helpless."

"Then people like us will have to get bitten all the time?"

“Yes. Get bitten all you want. Then, keep that wound and go to the dog owner. When there’s a dog that you can’t beat up, you should find the owner of that dog, who you can talk humanspeak to.”

“Haha. Then what if it’s a dog I can hit?”

“What’s there to hesitate? You should kick it hard and tell it who’s boss.”

“Then in your opinion, what about that guy? Is he a big dog or a small dog?”

“How does he look to you?”

“A very big dog.”

“Then a big dog he is.”

“Then what about you?”

“I don’t know. I won’t get bitten anyway, so it doesn’t matter if he’s big or small.”

“But what if that dog tries to bite you?”

“At that time...”

Maru looked at the producer and the actress standing at the entrance of the set.

“I’ll have to use the owner of the dog, a kennel man, or whatever it is I have to use.”

Chapter 352

Swearing makes others shrink back. The tension multiplies if the swearer is in a superior position to the one that was sworn at. If that superiority stemmed from authority, then talking back was just a dream.

One man standing behind one of the cooking tables paled. He looked at the assistant director with a stiff posture just like a puppet. The assistant director glared at that man.

“Is everything a joke to you?”

“I’m sorry.”

“This is the third time you said that. Hey, is this line so hard? You have a single line, and that’s too hard for you? What are you? A famous actor? Are you an actor that we have to understand even if you cause multiple NGs?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be. You’re making numerous people wait. You haven’t been to the military, have you?”

“I haven’t.”

“This is why people need to do their military service.”

The assistant director that was swearing at that man ran to the camera when the producer called him. The scolded man looked down. Maru clicked his tongue inwardly. He couldn’t tell the difference between this place and a nursery.

At the beginning of the shoot, the atmosphere wasn't that bad. The assistant director didn't use any emotion-provoking words after the camera started rolling. Cues and cuts continued to be spoken, and something erupted when the shoot made some progress.

It was the scene where Lee Miyoan went around the competition area and evaluated the contestant's food. Just when she was about to say her line, she choked on the food and started coughing. Rice grains scattered from her mouth and went all over a minor actor's face. The staff quickly came and handed him some tissues, and the minor actor just calmly wiped them off his face. It was a simple accident, and nothing was strange about it until Miyoan had something to say.

"What's up with your expression? So anything that comes out of my mouth is dirty, huh?"

An actress over fifty years old suddenly started picking on a man who looked like he seemed to have entered society. The producer, assistant director, and the other staff members didn't even think about stopping her. They didn't dare. It was obvious from their face.

In Maru's perspective, the man reacted really well. He did not become angry, and he did not frown either. He just calmly wiped the food off his face. It wasn't like he could say 'that must have been refreshing for you!' or something like that. The silence was his way of being considerate, and as the elder, she could've just apologized and be done with it, yet she decided to pick on him and made everything worse.

Five minutes - that was the amount of time that the man had to listen to all sorts of curses from the actress because of his 'crime' of having 'rice grains scattered on his face'. In Maru's opinion, the man was just unlucky. It was too unfair to ask for any responsibility from the man. It's just that bird poop fell from the sky, a very runny one too. It would be much easier for the man to treat the event that way. If he thought that he was just unlucky, he could smile at least.

However, what happened after that couldn't be just described as 'having no luck'. Miyoan frowned whenever she went in front of the man's table. She raised her hand and stopped the shoot and requested for a retake, saying that she didn't like the man's expression. Being pointed out, the man showed his emotion for the first time in front of Miyoan. He made a panicked face. That became the trigger. Miyoan snorted before returning to her place. She didn't say anything. However, it was clear to everyone, especially the person in question, that it was a threat.

I boiled some eggplants and mixed it up with some doenjang. - that was the man's only line. The shoot began again. The man couldn't say that line until the end. Miyoan raised her hand and told him that he was awful.

"Is that all you can do? Have you not learned acting? What the hell is up with your pronunciation? Even a child in a nursery would do better than you. Do I really have to spell this out for you? Huh? Is that it?"

She was clearly picking on him. Maru saw her making a vile expression seeing that the man endured until the end. She seemed to be enjoying the situation. Let's see how long you last - her expression seemed to be saying those words.

That repeated until the assistant director stepped in. The assistant director chased Miyoan with his eyes even as he scolded the man. It was like he was telling her to recognize his loyalty to her. When Miyoan made a faint smile, the assistant director picked on the man even harder. Just like in the old military. If

there was a canteen lid, then the assistant director would probably have told him to smack his head against the lid.

Maru praised the man for his calmness. Pointing out non-existent mistakes to delay the shoot wouldn't be able to last forever. No matter how famous the actress was, there was no way she could delay the time of numerous actors and staff members here. She should probably have to make compromises at some point. He thought so.

"You really don't change at all. Do it again!"

A chopstick bounced off the table before falling on the ground. Miyoon scanned the man before turning around. The man was just looking at the chopstick on the ground. Just before, he picked up the chopstick, but now he was just looking at it like a statue.

It seemed that Maru was wrong. Maru frowned. Having returned to her standby position, Miyoon laughed with her manager. Her hands were pointing at the man.

Was that what a pro was? Miyoon seemed pretty satisfied with trampling on a junior and treating him like a plaything, as she waited for the cue. This was probably the last time. Just then, the man took off his toque as he left his position.

"Hey, you fucker! What are you doing! Go back to your position!" The assistant director took this opportunity to shout.

"I'm sorry, I can't do it anymore."

The man spoke as he lowered his head. His face looked like he was in the centrifuge. It was crumpled slightly. His unvent frustration exuded out of his entire body.

"Oh, my word. Is this what the younger generations are like these days? How scary. Are you going against me just because I admonished you just a tiny little bit? What is up with the entertainment industry these days? It's really desolate."

Miyoon spoke as she fanned herself as though she was the wronged instead. There was a faint disdainful smile as she defended herself and her 'teachings'. It was unsightly. She grew up twisted. Even if she could not help the younger generation on their path, she should at least not block them. Seeing people like her made Maru reflect on himself. He resolved not to become a twisted person like her.

The assistant director said some words out of formality. It was obvious from his tone. He spoke as though he had no intentions of banishing him. He just made excuses. Just a couple of lines saying 'I did this and this for you' just to put on a show.

The man left the set. The staff members that held their breath started breathing again and whispered among themselves. The producer declared a break. Miyoon went to a seat in one corner of the set and sat. They were reserved seats for the main actors. Suyeon was standing behind her. She was smiling kindly and was massaging Miyoon's shoulders. Miyoon's faint smile spread around the set.

"She ended up sending one away."

"This isn't the first time this happened. She's famous for it, that ahjumma."

“Phew, what a pity for that kid. He just had to catch that woman’s eye.”

“But I think we’ll end with just one person today.”

“That’s good then. But the more I look at her, the more I despise her.”

“What can you do about it? I thought the writer for the drama said that she’s the only candidate. It’s quite strange, you know? Why do people keep using that woman?”

“Because she’s good at acting. She’s quite well-known as well. My grandma really likes her, you know? She says that she’s so gentle and how women should all be like her.”

“She might faint if she found out the truth.”

“Do you think there will be any rumors about her? That kid must feel unjustified, but what can he do about it? If he wants to keep working in this industry, he has no choice but to endure. But man, she really picks out people that look like they can’t go against her.”

That was the conversation between two staff members who were cleaning up the cables. It seemed that this wasn’t the first time Miyoon bullied minor actors. Perhaps she found it fun. Playing around with an opponent that couldn’t strike back had to be a form of pleasure for her. She must think of herself as above everyone here. Maru had a look at Miyoon. That woman ruled over this castle that was the set. She was someone that even the producer was helpless against. She reigned supreme here.

“Let’s do this, everyone. You can do it, right?”

Acting was a scary profession. Miyoon, who had just banished a young fellow out of existence with her vile methods, was consoling the staff and the actors with a refreshing expression. If someone not in the know looked at her, they would think of her as a good senior.

The shoot resumed. There was no bullying this time. Everything went smoothly. One of the minor actors made a mistake, but this time, Miyoon covered up for her. Maru saw that the girl who received her grace was paling. She was probably thinking if the next target would be her.

Fortunately, no problems occurred. Cut, then okay. Those two words came out of the producer’s mouth repeatedly. It was as though he was aware that things would go bad the moment he stopped doing so.

Next was Maru’s turn. He watched as the camera moved in front of him and started chopping as soon as he received the producer’s signal. He chopped up some zucchini and mushrooms and put them on a plate. He turned on the fire and put a pot on top. He saw the camera turning slightly. It was probably shooting Miyoon and Suyeon walking together. Eventually, Miyoon arrived.

“Doenjang-guk, huh. It must be hard to bring out its unique taste, but the contestants this year have a challenging mindset. It’s a good thing.”

“Thank you.”

“But what’s this?”

“It’s ground shrimp. I’m planning to use it when I make a broth with anchovy.”

“Hmm, ground shrimp, huh. Now that I think about it, that boy is also doing a doenjang-guk, isn’t he?”

Miyoon and Suyeon spoke as they looked at the man standing behind the table next to him. He was the protagonist of this drama. Maru just looked at his chopping board and chopped his ingredients. It would be fine as long as the cut sign fell.

He waited for the producer's voice. Just then, Miyoon, who was talking to the protagonist, made a mistake, causing an NG cut.

Maru put down the knife he was holding and straightened his back. He took out a new set of zucchini and mushrooms below the cooking table for the new shoot. Miyoon had a very dissatisfied face.

Miyoon was approaching him. Maru turned around to look at her.

"Hey. Isn't your chopping sound a little too loud? I can't act because of it. I saw you look at me with a bad expression. Did you do that on purpose in order to distract me? Is that what it is?"

But I think we'll end with just one person today. - those words from a staff member came up in his mind. It seemed that it wouldn't end with one person. He felt a bad taste in his mouth. It seemed that he was this woman's next target.

"I made a mistake. I should've done it more softly."

"You get that you made a big noise?"

"Yes. Rather than that, I'm really sorry. It looks like I disturbed your great acting."

"So you know that at least."

"Actually, I wasn't able to control my grip because I was watching your acting."

"Watching my acting?"

He saw Miyoon's lips curve upwards.

"Yes. I got distracted because I wanted to learn the way you act so naturally. I should've focused on my own work."

"Well, trying to learn is not a crime."

"Thank you for putting it that way. Oh, I'll reduce the chopping noise as much as possible."

"Hm, no, you don't have to. I'm used to it now. An actress like me does not make the same mistake twice, so you can just do it as you did before. I should help out that much as a senior in acting."

"Thank you for being so considerate. I'll do my best not to make a mistake."

"Okay. You're quite polite unlike most kids these days. Geez, young ones these days live on their ego, and a feeble woman like me has a really hard time facing them."

Maru didn't say anything and nodded slowly.

"What's your name?"

"My name is Han Maru."

“Yes, Maru. What a good name. I’ll remember it so do your best. You look promising.”

Miyoon patted his shoulders with a pleasant smile. Maru maintained his calm expression until Miyoon and the staff members scattered. Then, he smiled disdainfully when attention was drawn away from him and the camera no longer shot him.

‘Yes, of course, I’ll do my best. I’m going to remember your name as well, woman.’

Maru sighed in relief as he picked up the knife. It seemed that he had dealt with the crisis. The attitude of a breadwinner that had to bow to contractors was quite useful. He could sell as many false smiles as he wanted to. His pride was quite cheap right now, after all.

“Stand by!”

The producer shouted.

(just refer to the photos). I don’t know what to call it...

Chapter 353

The shoot went smoothly. It was thanks to Miyoon who seemed to have regained her mood by trampling on a youth.

“That’s right. That’s how you’re supposed to do it. If you are too focused on your lines, you will forget about your breathing. If your breathing is a mess, no matter how good your pronunciation is, the audience won’t understand it. It’s fine even if your pronunciation is a little incorrect. The listener takes into account the context and the nuance of the situation rather than precise pronunciation. All of you, listen carefully. If you want to continue being an actor for a long time, you’ll have to keep this in mind. You won’t find a teacher like me anywhere, you know?”

The woman that slashed a person with her sharp and vile tongue had disappeared and she started teaching all the minor actors as though she had a great personality. Listening to her words, the minor actors nodded their heads quickly and accurately as though they were a nodding machine. They were well aware of what would happen to them if she, for some reason, found them annoying.

“Director. Why don’t we rest a little bit?”

“Okay, we can do that. If we finish the reminiscence scene, we won’t need to use this set anymore.”

“How many people are here right now?”

“There should be around 80 people.”

“Sweetie.”

When Miyoon twitched her finger, her manager ran towards her.

“Some snacks will be perfect for a break. I’ll treat everyone.”

“Oh, thank you very much.”

“Can I take a couple of people with me? I think my manager won’t be enough to bring 80 people’s worth.”

“Oh, the thing is, we need to hurry up the cleaning of the set. We can’t go overtime renting this place.”

“I guess I can’t help it then. Uhm, boy. I think you’ll have to help us out here.”

Maru, who was nearby, was appointed for the job. Maru left the set with the manager who received the credit card from her.

“Sorry. I know you aren’t here to do menial chores like this,” the manager spoke at the entrance.

“What can I do about it? I have no choice but to do it if I am told to.”

“Haha, I guess that’s true.”

When they left the studio, the sun greeted them. Maru followed the manager into the convenience store next to the studio.

“Should I pick tube popsicles for everyone?”

“Yeah. Just pick out some of them. Do add some variety. I need to buy some for the higher ups,” the manager muttered as he scanned the items with his eyes.

Maru bought a mix of popsicles and ice cream and put them on the counter. While the staff here was scanning them and putting them in plastic bags, the manager approached the counter.

“Uhm, excuse me, don’t you have milk tea from JC?”

“Probably not.”

“Can you have a look, like in the storage or something?”

“It’s probably not here.”

“I’m sorry but can you have a look anyway?”

The part time worker made an annoyed face but told the manager to wait. After going to the freezer in the storage room to have a look, the part time worker came back out while shaking his head.

“We don’t have any. Those don’t sell that well, so I don’t think the owner sent in any request for it.”

“Haa. alright.”

The manager looked flustered as though he was running out of time. It seemed that the milk tea was for Miyoon. They first bought the ice creams before leaving.

“Can you wait a minute?”

The manager started running towards the other convenience store which was located on the other side of the studio. Just from that, it could be seen just how badly that woman treated her manager. After around five minutes, he came back empty handed. He seemed extremely troubled.

“And here I thought everything would go without a hitch today.”

His eyes looked like that of a cow’s that was just about to be slaughtered. He was hesitating as he walked towards the studio.

“So you’ll have a bad time if you don’t buy that milk tea for her?”

“From her personality, probably. I was slapped the last time I told her that they don’t sell any around here.”

“Then why don’t we do this? You parked your car in the parking lot, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Let’s say that the employee at the car park told you that there was an accident and you need to move your car, and you gave me the credit card because of it.”

Maru checked the time on his phone before continuing,

“Come back in around 10 minutes. That’s enough, right?”

“Can you do that? I think that will be enough.”

“I’ll tell that to her, so make an excuse when you come back.”

The manager ran towards the parking lot while thanking him. Maru did not want to see that woman cause a mess again. He went back into the studio with the ice cream in hand. He first approached Miyoon, who was sitting with the rest of the actors.

“Here they are.”

“Oh, okay. Where’s my manager?”

“He went to the parking lot after getting a call. Apparently, there was an accident at the parking lot and he needs to pull his car out.”

“Really?”

Maru gave her the plastic bag. Miyoon had a look inside. Annoyance could clearly be seen on her face, but she picked a vanilla-flavored ice cream as though she had no choice. It was there instead of the milk tea.

“Come and take one everyone. You’re all having a hard time so you should quench your thirst at least.”

People came and took an item each. Miyoon made a satisfied smile after seeing people thanking her. It seemed that her annoyance from the lack of milk tea was gone.

“Sorry I’m late. There was an accident at the parking lot,” the manager returned and spoke in a stiff manner.

His back was drenched with sweat. It looked like it was because of the heat, but it was probably because of nervousness.

“I heard. Geez, look at all that sweat. Take one.”

“Yes.”

Maru nodded as he looked at the manager. The manager approached him and spoke in a small voice.

“Thanks. I’m able to have a breather thanks to you.”

“Well, we should help each other out.”

“Then I’ll help you once if something happens. I have a lot of writers I know.”

“I’ll be thankful if you do.”

This was how relationships were supposed to be built. A manager for a superstar wouldn’t be just anyone. Moreover, if it was the manager of a woman with a bad personality like Miyoon, it meant that the manager had to be very capable. There was no way Miyoon would be okay with an incompetent manager. It would be for the best if Maru could get close to someone who had been a manager for a long time since he would be able to get his hands on a lot of information.

Maru scanned the people as he put the popsicle in his mouth. Just then, Suyeon approached him.

“You endured that well. I was actually looking forward to you talking back to her.”

“Unless I’m crazy, I am not going to fight her. I won’t get anything from it, so there’s no reason to.”

“Then try posting what you saw on the internet. I want to see that woman upset.”

“The entertainment industry is a place where such posts are created by the truckloads every single day, isn’t it? No one takes them seriously either. Even if it does become an issue, I would have to stand in front of her in order to prove it, and from there, it’s obvious where things will lead to. It’s not like she’s the first rude celebrity out there. I’ll become an issue for a brief time before being covered up by something else. However, I would be stamped as the ‘rude high school kid’ and will forever be unable to step into the industry again. I don’t want to end my entertainment industry life when I just started.”

Proving included taking risks. Take risks against that woman? That wasn’t even funny. If it was just an ordinary person, they would be able to post such a thing, but it was impossible for a person in the industry.

He couldn’t just consider that woman right now. He had to think about what kinds of things she experienced in order to reach such a spot. She lived out her career for over 3 decades. More than 30 years in a society where 10 was enough to think about retirement. It was clear just from this. Old giant trees weren’t meant to be chopped down. It was likely that the axe would be ruined before the tree fell.

“Then I’ll give you a deep kiss so can you go slap her for me? She’s too cocky.”

“While I agree she’s cocky, it’s too hard for me to slap her. If you want to slap her so much, why don’t you do it yourself?” He spoke as he squeezed the bottom of the popsicle tube. He felt very refreshed when the soda-flavored popsicle entered his mouth.

“I would if there weren’t any eyes around, but there are too many here.”

“Why don’t you just slap her and cause an issue that way? That sounds good. Why did the girl slap her senior? I think journalist Dongwook would write you a good one.”

“I might if I win the lottery.”

"I saw you massaging her shoulders before. Since you decided to put on a thick face, you should get closer to her. Who knows? She might get you a good role."

"I can get my own good roles. Why don't you try spending some time with that woman? You'll have the urge to kill her after just an hour, you know?"

"I'm surprised you haven't killed her yet."

"In my mind, I have killed her several times over."

Suyeon bit on her ice cream with her molars. Then, she smiled as she had met eyes with Miyoon.

"You have it hard, managing your image and sucking up to people like her."

"I feel like I'm melting."

"Wouldn't it be better to just retire and grab a wealthy man and live an easy life?"

"No. It's Mr. Geunsoo all the way for me."

"But the other party doesn't look at you at all though."

"If things don't work out, then I'll just get him drunk and give it to him. Though, he's quite strong with alcohol. Even though I'm not that weak either."

"What a splendid plan."

"I'm surprised you're replying to me so calmly. You don't think anything about that?"

"What does your life have to do with me? As long as you don't bring me harm, I'm not interested whether you sleep with a hundred men or something."

"I think a hundred is stretching it a little," Suyeon giggled.

Maru saw the minor actors all look his way, especially number four and the earphone girl.

"If you don't have anything to say to me, you can go."

"Hell no. If I go now, I'll have to face that woman again."

"Then I'm going."

"Why? Just stay with me. I don't like anyone else here, so I'm bored."

"Why don't you try seducing the producer or something?"

"Hey, there are levels to prey, you know? Even if you give him to me, I won't have him. Also, I'm trying to refrain these days. It will be dangerous for me if things get out of hand, you know?"

"Oh, I've been wanting to ask. Wouldn't people usually be afraid of sex if they receive a trauma because of something like that?"

"And how does that help? I'm sick and tired of running away. For an experience like being thrown away after being eaten, just twice is enough."

“Sure, if you say so. But can you talk about such a topic with a high school kid like me? You’d get detained for sexual harassment, you know?”

“What sexual harassment. It’s you who’s unlike a high school kid. How could you say the word sex directly to a girl’s face?”

“Sex is called sex, how else would you call it? Does the scientific term make it any better? Sexual intercourse? Copulation?”

He drank the popsicle since it melted. Suyeon was holding the wooden stick with her mouth as well.

“I wonder if your girlfriend knows that Han Maru is such an indecent kid.”

“This is nothing. Rather than that, are you really not going? I think she’s about to become bored.”

Miyoon, who was talking to the other actors, crossed her arms and looked at the ceiling in boredom. It seemed that her good mood was starting to climb down. Suyeon sighed as she stood up. Just then, she turned around and looked at him.

“Should I tell you something interesting?”

“What is it?”

“A rumor about that woman.”

“A rumor?”

“It’s quite famous around here. That she’s a madam.”

“A madam?”

“There’s a rumor that she likes young kids. The ones that look pretty. They say that she has touched on idols.”

“She’s not married?”

“She’s single. I think she’s had two divorces or something. Rumor has it that she divorced in order to sleep with young kids.”

“Why are rumors in this industry so disgusting?”

“That’s what makes a rumor. Who likes good deeds as rumors?”

She winked before walking towards Miyoon and sucked up to her.

“Do you know Suyeon unni?”

“What did you talk about with her?”

As soon as Suyeon left, the minor actors and background actors approached him. Maru saw that number four, who was at the center of attention in the waiting room, was looking at him with an awkward smile.

“Over there! Get ready!”

It was the producer who saved him from the bombardment of questions. The people around him quickly went to their positions. The main actors all went to their respective starting positions as well.

“Let’s do this in one go, yeah? This is the last one here so don’t get nervous.”

Then, the cue sign fell.

* * *

“Thank you for your work everyone.”

The shoot at the set finished. The staff members started moving around busily. The competition area started being split up into pieces before being loaded onto forklifts. At the same time, a different set was being created on the other side.

“Hey, Maru.”

The one that talked to him was the camera director, Kim Jangsoo.

“Yes, director.”

“Are you going to Choongho’s action school tomorrow?”

“Yes. I need to attend practice.”

“Then let’s cancel our appointment today and eat with Choongho tomorrow. Do you drink?”

“I drink moderately.”

“That’s good. You need to start drinking in high school so that you won’t have any trouble in university. Anyway, see you tomorrow. We’ll have some pork belly and soju.”

Jangsoo walked to the camera after sending him off. This week was busy. After the action school practice, there was acting club practice on the day after that. If they ranked within the top two in the regionals, they would then go to Seoul Arts Hall.

He packed his bag as he organized the events in his mind when,

“Uhm, hey.”

Number four, who came to the waiting room, stopped him.

“Do you have anything after this?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then do you want to have dinner together? The people we met today are all going together, so if you don’t have anything urgent, I think you should participate. I mean, it’s good to become close with each other, you know?”

There were four minor actors standing behind number four, the earphone girl included. It seemed that they were all aspiring actors. He had nothing special, and it was nearing dinner time, so he nodded for now. Nothing bad would come out of becoming close with people working for the same objective.

“Good! Let’s get our fill first,” number four spoke as though he was the captain.

Chapter 354

He saw his phone ringing and left for a moment. The smell of burnt charcoal, which he couldn’t smell inside the restaurant, became vivid again. He took the call next to the vending machine right outside the restaurant.

-Seonbae-nim.

“Oh, it’s you, Bangjoo.”

-Yes. I have something to ask. We need to be in Seoul by 9 tomorrow, right?

“Yes, by 9.”

-You’re taking the train, right?

“Probably.”

-My sister says she’ll take me there by car. Do you want to come with me as well?

“Senior Joohyun said that?”

-Yeah. She’s taking a break tomorrow, that’s why.

“That’s good for me.”

-Then why don’t we meet at 7 at Suwon station?

“I’m okay with that. Then see you at 7 tomorrow.”

-Yes.

Bangjoo replied vigorously. After hanging up, Maru sighed. It was a tiring day. He turned around his head to have a look inside the restaurant. The minor actors were laughing and talking to each other. When they just arrived at the restaurant, they all asked him what his relationship was with Suyeon, but they soon lost interest when he said that he just met her once before during a shoot. The one that led the conversation after that was number four, Moon Gwangseok.

His phone was indicating that it was 6 o’clock. It had been a whole hour already since they arrived at the restaurant. They had talked enough as well and it was about time they separated. He went back to the restaurant and sat back down. They finished up all the meat, and they were eating fried rice and doenjang-guk.

“This is just between us, but the actors we saw at the set today, don’t you think they are bad at acting?” Gwangseok spoke as he looked around the table.

“Bluntly put, even we can do that much, right? But they look down on us too much, especially that Lee Miyeon. I don’t know what the heck is wrong with her. I almost stepped in and shouted at her to stop.”

“She did take it too far.”

“Yeah.”

The others agreed with him.

“Apparently, she’s well known for bullying minor actors. I also heard this from someone else, but there should be a lot of people who gave up being an actor because of her,” a woman wearing horn-rimmed glasses spoke.

“Oh really?”

“Yes. If she doesn’t like someone, she just blatantly picks on them like she did today and makes them leave by themselves. Also, this is just a rumor, but apparently, she sleeps with men that are a lot younger than her.”

“How evil.”

“But there’s actually quite a lot of people like that. Human trash, I mean,” the woman with the glasses sighed faintly. Everyone paid attention to her.

“I went to a commercial high school and didn’t go to university. I was an accountant for a small company before I decided that I want to become an actress. I guess I’ve been working there for a year. During that year, I experienced a lot of things. I’ve met people that couldn’t be described with the word ‘trash’, and had a really hard time until I was eventually driven out by them. At that time, I thought that it was just this place that had some really weird people. But I found out that I was wrong. In the entertainment industry, there are even worse people and more of them.”

“There are always evil people that leech off others.”

Gwangseok consoled the woman. He patted her shoulders and even grabbed her hand. He was hitting on her even at a time like this.

Maru didn’t say anything and just scraped the fried rice off the pan with his spoon. He did not want to hear rants from people that just entered society, nor did he plan to tell them about it. In the end, they had to experience it for themselves. The dirtiness and vileness of society could only be understood after seeing it for oneself.

What was supposed to be a place to get close became a place for ranting. Of course, their target was Miyoon. No, it wasn’t just Miyoon, but everyone at that place. Someone’s bad at acting, someone’s picking on them too much, and someone is too talkative.

From how they were getting more heated up due to the conversation, it seemed that they were going to continue this topic for quite a while. He ate the slightly burnt rice. For a brief moment, people looked at him, but when he smiled back, they just nodded and went back to their conversation. They were probably thinking that he was too young for all of this.

“Aren’t you going to eat more?”

“So you were hungry. You can eat a lot. You still have it good. Once you graduate high school, it will be hell,” Gwangseok spoke.

“Yeah. You should play around while you’re still in school. You don’t get why we’re so angry right now, do you? You’ll understand a little once you graduate and enter college, that adults are scary.”

The woman with the pink lipstick, who sat next to the woman with the glasses, spoke. She scattered some crushed laver.

“Should I order some more meat?”

“No, this is fine for me.”

“Hey, you should eat a lot while this hyung buys it for you. Once you grow up, you won’t get any of this treatment.”

Those words came from a man sitting opposite Gwangseok.

The flow of the conversation naturally went towards talking about their middle and high school days. Maru inwardly smiled as he watched them. Those were the good days - such words were said even when he was forty-five. He would reminisce about when he was still thirty, and treat his thirties as the golden years. However, when he was thirty, he reminisced about when he just finished mandatory military service and thought about how good it was back then. During the military, about university, and in university, about high school days.

In the end, if people could not be satisfied with the reality they’re living in right now, they would not be able to look at the future. Even though time came from the past and was going towards the future, people’s minds always thought about the past and longed for the past. He knew this because he experienced it himself.

It wasn’t that retrospects were bad. Sometimes, it could be a form of motivation for living. Thinking about how reckless one was in the past, and how stable they are currently. However, talking about such things while drinking like this was meaningless. Even more meaningless than the fried rice in front of his eyes. Fried rice had some nutritional value, but reminiscing about the past had none of that at all.

It only pained the mouth.

That was why he just moved his spoon.

“But we came all the way here. Many people quit before they even become a minor actor. But we are getting screen time even though we’re young. It means that we’re doing well. As long as we don’t encounter people like that woman who finds joy in blocking other people’s ways, we’ll be able to become good actors. Here, raise your glasses. Maru, you can toast with coke.”

Gwangseok poured soju for everyone. Maru raised his cup with coke in it and toasted. Clang, his cup clanged with the soju glasses. Everyone started drinking soju, but one person stopped halfway. It was the earphone girl, named Choi Gyunglim. She participated in the conversation once in a while, but she stayed silent most of the time. She smiled when she checked her texts on her phone, but she stayed expressionless when she talked with the other minor actors. People seemed to have noticed her attitude and did not talk to her at all. They only asked her ‘don’t you agree?’ from time to time when they needed to lead the conversation in a specific direction.

With more alcohol in their bodies, they started talking bad about Miyoon and the other actors even more fiercely. The conversation looped again and again. This meant that it was about time they stood up. Since some of them looked drunk, now was the perfect time to finish things up.

“Actually, I was planning to say something to that woman!” Gwangseok pointed at the empty air as he spoke.

“She has no skill, who’s she to bully someone else? I was really going to talk to her about it, but she stopped as soon as she saw me look at her, right? You know, I do look a bit fierce.”

“Right, right,” the woman in glasses spoke.

The two seemed to get along well. If they finished things up right now, they might hold hands and walk straight into a motel. As Gwangseok looked brave and had decent looks, he looked quite likeable. That is, he looked likeable. Anyone who paid attention to the way he spoke would have their affection graph towards him fall rapidly like the stock market graph during an economic crisis. The woman in glasses seemed drunk and didn’t seem to have enough reason to notice that.

The others also told Gwangseok that he did well to hold it in.

It was funny at this moment. Maru had the urge to shoot everything that was going on right now with a camera and show it to them the next day. At this point, it was a black comedy.

“Not like you would be able to say anything to her when you’re actually in front of her.”

A small voice could be heard. Fortunately, thanks to Gwangseok’s noisy chatter, the others didn’t seem to have heard it. Maru looked at Gyunglim who sat opposite him. Her face was bright red. It seemed that she was really weak with alcohol.

“Such a showoff,” she spoke again.

Maru scraped his spoon on the pan in hopes that her voice would be covered by the noise. Please, let’s part ways nicely. His wish seemed to come true, only to be destroyed by Gwangseok turning his head around.

“What was that?”

Gwangseok’s face became rigid as he looked at Gyunglim. Being glared at, Gyunglim didn’t say anything. She looked very flustered. She spoke all that because of the alcohol getting the better of her, and it seemed that she was panicking slightly now that he actually heard her.

“Hey, you’re funny. I’m a showoff? I’m just saying the truth.”

“Hey, Gyunglim. You have really bad manners. You don’t like us, do you?” The woman in glasses fixed her glasses as she spoke.

Everyone’s attention was now on Gyunglim. Gyunglim said that that wasn’t what she meant, albeit just barely. At that moment, she looked at Maru.

Maru simply ignored her and focused on putting the rest of the fried rice onto his plate. The minor actors all spoke out to her.

“Hey, why are you so uncooperative when we have to stick together? You really aren’t likeable.”

“You aren’t planning to tell that woman what we said, are you?”

“No way, that’s just harsh. We just talked bad about her together, she’s not human if she tells that woman on us.”

Gyunglim kept defending herself by saying that she misspoke. However, it seemed that the others didn’t plan to see her in a good light since she hadn’t been participating in the conversation since the beginning.

“Let’s go for a 2nd round. Gyunglim, you’re going home, right? From looking at your face, you need to stop drinking.”

“Yeah, you should go home and get some rest.”

“What about you Maru?”

“I can’t drink, so there’s no reason for me to tag along. I should go home as well. I live in Suwon so I’ll be home late even if I go now.”

“Then you should get going quickly.”

While Gwangseok paid the bill with his card, the others went to the bathroom. It seemed that factions had formed already as the woman with the glasses and the woman with the pink lipstick were hooking arms, giving a glance at Gyunglim before they stood up. The only ones left at the table were Maru and Gyunglim.

“You could’ve helped me out a little,” Gyunglim spoke as though she was wronged.

It seemed that she didn’t like how he ignored her when she looked at him for help.

“Why would I?”

When he asked back, she bit her lips, having nothing to retort.

Like what happened during the day, she really lived without thinking. Her personality was decent and bright enough to make jokes, but she was too light-mouthed. She was the type of person that would run into big trouble because of blurting out something unnecessary.

“Didn’t I tell you that you shouldn’t say things you can’t take responsibility for? If you said all that because of alcohol, then you should really stop drinking in the future. A grown-up should be responsible.”

“But he’s acting all cocky and it’s unsightly.”

“How ironic. You told Gwangseok-hyung about how he wouldn’t be able to say anything in front of that woman, but I see you’re doing the exact same thing.”

“That’s....”

Gyunglim stuttered. Maru clicked his tongue as he stood up. Gwangseok was a tiresome person, but this woman was even worse.

“I’m going then. We’ll meet again if chance allows it. The people we met today, you might meet them again if you continue doing actor work, so be close with them.”

“...Okay.”

Gyunglim spoke as she looked somewhere else. He tried to meet her eyes, but she kept looking somewhere else awkwardly. She was someone that brought out her pride during unnecessary occasions, but couldn't say anything when it was truly important. She was neither smart nor capable. If she was kind, then at least that would be a good part about her, but she wasn't that either.

Gyunglim suddenly put on her earphones. Then, she stood up, picked up her bag, and left. The other minor actors, who were talking outside, just laughed in vain when they saw Gyunglim walk by.

Maru shook his head and left the restaurant.

“Then I'll take my leave.”

“Alright, be careful on your way home, and see you next time.”

“Yes.”

Separating from the rest of the minor actors, Maru started walking towards the train station.

Chapter 355

Until a while ago, the first thing she thought when she woke up in the morning was this: how should I endure through the day? She didn't know this before she achieved her dream, but when her dream became true and her dream became everyday life, dreams were no longer emotionally touching but had become somewhat of a task she had to do every day. Her smile was a decoration, and her tears were just a skill. There was only one motivation that made her move, and that was the envy of the people that looked at her. Attention - she kept telling herself that she wouldn't be able to endure if she didn't have any to feed on.

But it was a little different now.

“Unni, can you really walk around like this?”

“I told you already. I won't get caught like this. Just look. If I don't have eyeliner on and no blush makeup on my cheeks, I look really different.”

“You still look similar though.”

“It's only you who think that way.”

Chaerim took her cute junior to a clothes store. It wasn't a brand-name store, but a small store on the street. The name of the store was Cinderella. When they went in, they were greeted by a lady playing with a kitten.

“Can we take a look around?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Chaerim grabbed her hesitant junior's hand and had *her* stand in front of the clothes hanger.

“The clothes here are pretty.”

Her junior also hesitated for a moment before starting to look through the clothes. Despite it being a small store, the clothes had decent style. That could be seen just from the clothes displayed. It was different from other clothes stores where they just put everything on display without considering the style.

“Can I try this blouse on?”

The lady nodded. Chaerim walked to the changing room at the corner of the store and tried on the blouse. The shoulder lines looked very good on her. She felt as though she found a treasure. When she walked out, she saw her junior fiddling with a shirt. It was a shirt with a checkered pattern, and the loose fit-style shirt looked like it would look good on her junior.

“Try it on.”

“It’s fine.”

“Just try it on.”

She pushed her junior’s back into the changing room. A while later, *she* came back out with a faint smile, wearing the shirt. It also matched well with the jeans *she* was wearing.

“Excuse me, we’ll buy these two.”

She firmly refused her junior who said *she* would buy *hers* and gave the lady her credit card. While the lady took her card and did the transaction, she stroked the quiet kitten’s chin. The way it purred was quite cute. Her junior also reached out and stroked its head.

“Come back next time.”

“Okay.”

She came back out with a paper bag in one hand. This was a really satisfying shopping trip which she hadn’t had in a long time. She couldn’t even remember the last time she carefreely walked around the streets like this, visiting clothes shops and eating street food.

She grabbed her junior’s hand and walked towards a pojang-macha. She pointed at the menu and ordered assorted fries, tteokbokki, and soondae. Today was eat-everything-she-wanted day.

She dipped one of the fries into the tteokbokki sauce and ate it. The crunchy texture made her smile subconsciously.

“You should eat.”

Her junior was just looking at the food and not eating it.

“Uhm, unni.”

“Yeah?”

“Did something happen?”

Hearing those words, Chaerim put down the soondae she picked up. A helpless chuckle escaped her mouth.

“Was it obvious?”

“Just a little.”

“I thought I was fine, but it looks like I’m not. Hm, let’s eat for now. It will taste like crap once it becomes lukewarm.”

Chaerim pushed the plate with the fries in it to her junior’s side. Her junior started moving *her* chopsticks. They didn’t talk for a while.

She thought she was okay, but it seemed that her face gave it away. They were just about to stand up after finishing things up when her junior quickly gave the owner the money.

“I could have paid for it.”

“I don’t like being treated all the time.”

As she understood how her junior felt, Chaerim put back the 10,000 won bill inside her wallet. They left the pojang-macha and walked on the commercial street. As it was the school holidays, there were a lot of people around their age walking around.

“They’re probably going to see the movie that was just released today,” her junior spoke.

When she asked what the movie was, *she* replied that it was a romantic movie with a super popular actor. It was an actor Chaerim knew. That actor was known for being incredibly handsome. The two talked about that actor for a while. However, that conversation didn’t last long. It was not a boring topic and they liked talking about such things, but Chaerim cut it off mid-way.

“Can I talk to you about some troubles of mine?”

She didn’t want to say those words. She just wanted to meet her junior and play around to her heart’s content. It wasn’t a problem she could solve by telling her junior, so she thought that she should just enjoy this time to the fullest so that she could forget about the problem, but it was hard to hide it after seeing her junior’s worried eyes.

“I’m good at listening.”

Her junior smiled back with a flawless smile. She felt thankful just for those words alone. It had become customary for her to hide everything inside her because she had no one to talk to, but now she finally had someone she could talk to. After looking around, her junior hooked arms with her after pointing at a café on the 2nd floor of a building.

“Let’s go there.”

The café had some jazz music playing. Unlike the tattered sign, the interior was very clean, and thanks to that, the customers were mostly young.

“Latte please.”

“Strawberry smoothie for me.”

They put in an order before grabbing a table. They were by the window. When she looked down at the streets, she saw a clown on stilts handing out balloons. There were a lot of children around.

“What is it?”

She became dazed as she looked outside, but her junior’s words made her turn her head.

“Hm.”

How was she supposed to put this? She felt that talking about it from the beginning was like being whiny, but it wouldn’t relieve her to talk about just the main points. Her junior thankfully waited for her to speak without urging her on. *She* was a really good girl. For some reason, she felt that this girl was too good for Maru.

The things they ordered came out. Her junior stood up and brought the coffee and the smoothie.

“Thanks.”

When she grabbed the cup filled with warmth, she felt like her thoughts were getting cleared up.

“Don’t tell this to anyone.”

“Of course. My lips are sealed.”

Her junior zipped her lips.

“I think we’re going to disband.”

“What?”

“Blue. I think it’s over for us.”

“Why?”

“There are a lot of reasons, but the biggest one is that we aren’t as close as we were before. Of course, that’s not the only reason. There are more complex things than that. Everyone wants to go separate ways, and there’s an unni that already started doing that. There’s also the contract.”

“Is it... serious?”

“I’m not sure. Until just a while ago, I felt really uneasy. I even started taking stomach medicine again. Is Blue going to disappear forever? Can I continue living in the entertainment industry? What will happen to me? I felt like my head would burst from all the worries. But I’m not as uneasy as I was before. Though, I’m still worried.”

“Is everyone going separate ways then?”

“I think so. The president said that he’ll gather our opinions, but I think there’s practically zero probability that all five of us will want to remain in Blue. I talked to the unnis yesterday after a long time of not talking to them, but they don’t seem to have any attachments to the group. Perhaps I got infected with their attitude.”

Chaerim sighed. Actually, she wasn't okay at all. She almost told *her* that she was worried to death. She didn't want to cause *her* to worry. Despite that, it was too hard for her to handle this alone so she put it that way. She couldn't say these words to anyone, not even to her parents. If she told them, they'd probably just tell her to try convincing the unnis.

She looked down at the coffee mug without doing anything. Just then, her junior's hand's approached hers. *She* grabbed her hand.

"Don't worry, unni. Everything will go well."

Chaerim nodded.

"Let's stop the depressing talk here. Sorry, I told you something so unnecessary."

"Not at all. Call me anytime if you feel worried. I have a lot of free time."

"Can I call you even while you're on a date with Maru?"

"...Yeah, well."

"You really can't hide your emotions, huh."

"R-really?"

She smiled and was about to sip her coffee when a girl's voice from the next table over caught her ears. As they suddenly shouted after speaking in a small voice, she could hear them clearly.

"I told you it's real."

"Really? Did your friend really see her?"

"Yeah, she did. She acted so meekly on TV, but she's actually a slut?"

"My friend also didn't think that it was her at first, but she looked too alike."

"Hey, but still. A motel with a man in his fifties? Didn't she see wrong?"

"I said it's real. Just look at that Kwon Dayoon's face. She looks totally devious. The man must be a rich company president or something."

"No, I'm sure it's her sponsor. Didn't you see the news? It said that there are actresses and idols that receive money in compensation for their body."

"Do you think that's what's happening?"

"I'm sure of it. I mean, there are rumors about Blue's crisis these days. I knew this would happen someday. I was suspicious when there was news about them dating my oppas."

Who? For a moment, she thought that she heard wrong. However, there was only one Kwon Dayoon that belonged to Blue in this world. She couldn't believe it. Her relationship with Dayoon-unni had deteriorated as well and she didn't talk to her in depth anymore, but she wasn't the type of person to do that sort of thing. They had to be mistaken.

Although they were proceeding towards their disbandment, and they fought whenever they saw each other, they had still been together for several years. She couldn't forgive them for slandering that very effort.

She almost stood up. She wanted to go to those girls and shout at them that they shouldn't judge a person based on rumors. Just what did they know about her?

At that moment, she saw her junior standing up. *She* looked very upset. Her junior told her to stay still and walked to the students sitting at the table next to them. *Her* smiling eyes looked very upset right now. *Her* expression was very cold as well. It was surprising that a girl like *her* could make such an expression.

The chatting girls stopped talking and looked at her junior. They didn't say anything because of the pressure.

Her junior had gotten angry in her stead. When she looked at that, she felt thankful, while on the other hand, she felt funny. She wanted to scream at them just now out of anger, but now, after calming down, she only thought that she should stop her junior.

"Excuse me!"

Her junior went out strong. Chaerim quickly stood up and grabbed her junior's arm. She shook her head when her junior looked at her straight in the eyes.

"...Please be quiet."

Her junior changed *her* next words. The girls that were around their age just nodded. Everyone in the café was looking at them.

"Let's go."

She took her junior and left the café. As soon as they left, her junior sighed before shaking. It seemed that *she* was scared.

"Are you okay?"

"Ah, yes."

She faintly smiled.

"Are you good at fighting?"

"No."

"Then why did you do that?"

"Because they clearly went too far. No matter how much of a pushover they think celebrities are, talking like that is just...," her junior looked at the 2nd floor as *she* spoke.

"It's not like this happened just one or two days."

"You heard things like that as well?"

“It’s everywhere on the internet. Who slept with who, who was a delinquent in school, who’s scheming against who, and things like that.”

“I guess not anyone can become celebrities.”

“You get used to it after a while. Though... getting used to it doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt. But what can I do about it? I chose this path.”

Chaerim dragged her depressed-looking junior out to the street. She hadn’t enjoyed shopping like this in a long time, so she didn’t want to waste time talking about things like this. Although bad thoughts about Dayoon kept creeping up in her mind, she suppressed them as much as possible. Actually, they sometimes talked about such things when she fought with the unnis. Whether they got into the group because they poured booze for someone else. They usually quickly apologized thinking that they went too far, but Dayoon didn’t say anything every time they talked about that topic. Dayoon-unni’s style was to go through each and every point and retort, but only at that time, she maintained her silence.

“It shouldn’t be.”

“What?”

“Nothing, just talking to myself.”

They gained their positions and success through effort and practice. There was no room for deceit there. The rumors about Dayoon were just that - rumors. No, it was just nonsense. They had to be wrong. It had to be that way.

* * *

Although he had been running the action school for a long time, this was the first time he saw someone so good.

“Try twisting your waist a little more from there. Try to make the bottom of your shirt flutter.”

After nodding, Maru got into position. The ones that acted in tandem also took their positions as well. They were going around acting out the protagonist's role each and only Maru looked any decent. Since the movie had a high ratio of action scenes, they had to be able to use their bodies. In that sense, he could give Maru a pass.

They seemed to have finished their preparations as they exchanged glances. Everyone looked serious. The more serious the students were, the more motivated Choongho became to teach them.

“You bastard!”

Just like how he told him, Maru first ducked to avoid the first attacker’s right punch and did a forward roll. The others quickly charged towards him. One of them was too quick and the lineup became messy, but in that short moment, Maru adjusted his timing so that they didn’t screw up the action. The arms and legs all brushed past him. If the camera shot him from behind, he would look like he got a solid hit.

The short exchange ended. As they were still in the beginning stages, Choongho had no plans on teaching them to act together and just showed them an example since they looked a little bored. However, they were digesting it well. He thought about raising the intensity of the classes.

“That’s it for today. Do you think you can grasp what acting with others is like?”

“Yes.”

“Once you’re more comfortable with using your bodies, we’ll change courses and practice acting together. However, before that, you need to build your foundation. Even at the smallest heights, you’ll get injured if you fall the wrong way. Since we’re at it let’s go back to practicing falling techniques again,” Choongho pointed at the mat as he spoke.

Just then, someone entered the building. It was the man who always had a mysterious smile on his face, Joongjin.

Chapter 356

“Is everything going well?” Joongjin asked as he walked in.

He was wearing a short-sleeve t-shirt, shorts with a droplet pattern, and cheap slippers which made him look like he was some neighborhood unemployed person.

“Why do you go around looking like that? Where has the dignity of movie directors gone?”

“It’s tiring to consider every little thing like that. I’ve been wearing a suit all the time recently, so it’s been really hard on me,” Joongjin spoke as he rubbed his stubble.

He was really unpredictable. If he wore a suit, he would look like a corporate executive, and if he wore clothes that were in style, then he would look like a stylish young movie director, but he always wore casual clothes other than when it was really important.

“It must hurt to fall on their back like that.”

Joongjin frowned as he looked at the students that fell backwards.

“I thought you wanted a dynamic action scene. If you want dynamic, then they need to know how to protect their bodies at least.”

Choongho instructed the students to fall on their sides after that. Bangjoo, who learned Judo, did a demonstration for the students. It was really easy for Choongho since someone knew how to do it.

“Should I give you some tea?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“You guys can take a break after that.”

They went to the office and Choongho turned on the electric kettle.

“Do you still drink thick coffee these days?”

“Three at minimum.”

“Watch your blood sugar. You aren’t young anymore.”

“Forty-four is still young. Also, right back at you. You’ll become fifty soon so aren’t you at the age where you have to wrestle with pens and papers? If you break an arm or a leg doing what you did when you were young, it won’t heal as fast you know?”

“Should I experiment how long it takes to heal after I break it?”

When Choongho looked like he was about to give him a kick, Joongjin quickly shook his hands in the air and said that he was joking. Choongho then gave Joongjin, who was sitting cross-legged on the sofa, the coffee cup. It was some thick coffee with three sticks worth of coffee sticks.

While drinking, Choongho observed Joongjin. This peculiar fella was a rare creature that provokes one’s curiosity just by looking at him. Joongjin raised his pinky before dipping it in the coffee. He quickly stirred the coffee before pulling his finger out and putting it in his mouth.

“Isn’t it hot?”

“It is.”

“You really didn’t throw away any of your old habits. You just have to touch every food with your fingers, don’t you?”

“Isn’t that obvious? People these days are too focused on the visual aspect. When they look at pretty food, they just take a photo before starting to eat. Isn’t that such a pity? They should try touching it, smelling it, and if it’s something sizzling or boiling, they should try listening to it as well. Stimulus is everywhere in this world. Not being able to experience all of it is such a pitiful thing.”

Only after sucking on his pinky did he start drinking his coffee. He hadn’t changed from five years ago. The peculiar actions of this man flashed through Choongho’s head, but he did not put them to words. There were many events that would make him tired just by remembering them. Even three days and nights wouldn’t be enough to change those events into words.

“I was too busy last time to hear anything from you. What have you been doing for the last five years? I don’t think you were even in the country.”

Joongjin drank the coffee in one gulp before slamming down the empty paper cup on the table.

“How sweet. Oh, you asked what I was doing? I got bored of shooting movies, so I went travelling.”

“Travelling?”

“Yes. I’ve been to Europe, China, and even the pilgrimage. Man, the weather was insane over there. An old lady started off in the morning like it was a morning walk, so I followed her, but I almost fainted because of the heat. Some foreigner explained something in French the night before at the pilgrim’s house, and it turned out he was telling us to take extra underwear. My boxers were wet because of all the sweat. I swear I could get a bucket of water if I squeezed it.”

“You didn’t even look into it before going?”

“That’s not travelling. Travelling is about going and learning. If I research a lot of things before I go, I will be bound by that knowledge. Like that, there’s no point in travelling. I’d rather look at photos on the internet at home.”

"I'm surprised you haven't been to the hospital for anything serious at your age."

"Well, my body is sturdy. Oh, I took a photo in front of the Santiago De Compostela, do you wanna have a look? It's the cathedral at the end of the pilgrimage, and I ended up hugging the American that went with me and cried together."

"I'm okay."

Choongho crushed the empty paper cup he drank coffee from and threw it in the trash. It bounced off the wall and went straight into the trash can. Seeing that, Joongjin tried to do the same thing, but it didn't go in. Joongjin repeated his actions several times until the paper cup went in. When it eventually went in, he said 'now we're even'.

Looking at Joongjin reminded Choongho of Peter Pan. He was aging on the outside, but he was still a challenging youth that did not lose his adventurous spirit on the inside. Of course, that didn't mean that he was naive.

"Do you smoke?"

"I quit."

"What happened?"

"It was boring."

"Why are you looking for fun in smoking? People don't smoke for a reason."

The flintstones on the lighter made some sounds as it rotated.

"So you've been wandering all over the world before coming back to Korea?"

"I guess that sums it up. I've been away for too long, and I started becoming homesick."

"What homesick. You're probably bored of travelling."

Hearing those words, Joongjin just grinned.

"But I'm surprised you managed to get investors."

"I did some legwork and asked some people with money."

"Who does the distribution?"

"Lucky."

"That's a small company though. They shouldn't be able to distribute it to many cinemas."

"It'll be fine once rumors about the movie spread. The thirsty ones will probably dig the well for me."

"You sound confident."

"If that doesn't happen, well, I guess that's that."

"I'm sure your investors will love to hear that."

Choongho put out his half-burnt cigarette on the ashtray. Although he said those words, Choongho thought that this movie would definitely succeed. His reasoning? Because the director was Joongjin. This guy was different from the ordinary folk. He would probably cause a sensation like he did ten years ago.

"It's about time."

Joongjin looked at the clock as he spoke.

"Is someone coming?"

"Yes. Oh, you should know her as well."

Choongho told the questioning Joongjin to wait. Now that he became curious, Joongjin walked around nervously in the office. He really couldn't endure not knowing something.

After around five minutes, some noise could be heard outside. Choongho opened the door to the office.

"Oho."

Joongjin smiled and looked at Joohyun standing outside. Joohyun, who was handing out some snacks to the students that were resting, also discovered Joongjin and made a surprised face.

"Director."

"Wow, it's been a long time, Miss Joohyun."

"What brings you here?"

"I have my circumstances."

Choongho first told Joohyun to come inside. After entering the office, Joohyun took off the cap she was wearing.

"Want some coffee?" Choongho asked.

"No, I'm fine, thanks. Rather than that, director, when did you come back to Korea?"

"I think it's been three months."

"And you never contacted me?"

"Sorry about that. I was very busy."

"That's just an excuse. You actually didn't even think about contacting me, did you?"

"Not at all. How could I forget the almighty Ahn Joohyun? You're the supporting role that made my movie shine."

Joohyun brought a chair and sat next to the sofa. Joongjin and Joohyun. The one that brought Joohyun to the ranks of superstars ten years ago was Joongjin. Choongho thought about what happened back then. Joongjin looked the same as he was now, but back then, Joohyun was quite a meek lady. She was the type of person that would blush if a man talked to her, but she had changed now. He knew what kinds of things happened to her through the rumors. Choongho thought of her highly due to the fact that she did not leave the industry and forged her way through even after experiencing those things.

"I heard that you went overseas. I never thought I'd see you here."

"Me neither. So this was the reason Choongho hyung-nim brought me here. Anyway, nice to meet you again, Miss Joohyun."

Joohyun shook hands with Joongjin.

"Wow, your hands have become rough. Ten years ago, your hands were soft like a baby's. You're thirty now, aren't you?"

"I'm thirty-three. It's about time they become rough. I learned what the world is like. Rather than that, you haven't changed at all, director. From your clothes to the way you speak. Even your face hasn't gotten any older. Dang, looks like only Choongho-oppa and I aged. Just look at him. He's starting to get strands of white hair, he's getting wrinkly, and he's getting chubbier as well."

"That's because he went through too much physical ordeal. We're both in our forties, but this is where self-management shines."

Choongho smiled bitterly.

"So it's been ten years since we last got together like this, huh?"

"No. We did meet once around six years ago. During the film festival."

"Ah, that's right."

Now that he heard about it, he remembered. They met at Busan's international film festival and drank some alcohol with just the three of them at a pojang-macha.

"Miss Joohyun, how are you doing?"

"Well, I'm doing good."

Joohyun glanced outside the door that was slightly open before speaking.

"The movie Choongho-oppa talked about, it's yours, director?"

"Yes, it is."

"What made you come back? I thought you didn't find commercial movies any fun."

"I want to earn some money to prepare for my old age, and I learned a couple of things when I wandered around the world. Miss Joohyun, are you still taking work after that?"

"Yes."

"What are you shooting nowadays?"

"I'm taking a break right now. I just finished a drama, so I only have a radio program."

"Aha, radio, huh. I'll listen to it later."

They talked about their recent matters for quite a long time. Choongho left midway to tell the instructor to finish things off.

“Well then. Let’s clean things up after we do some stretching.”

After watching the instructor and the students do some stretching, he came back to the office.

“Is Bangjoo doing well?”

“You’re concerned about your brother?”

“Well, of course.”

“He’s doing well. I’m not sure about acting, but he really has good reflexes.”

Joongjin, who was listening, interjected.

“Miss Joohyun, your brother’s among them?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, Ahn Bangjoo, huh. I remember him. So I guess I should look after him?”

“Please don’t. If you don’t like him, then just use him like you would with anyone else. If you do like him, then you should teach him some things. He’s not the type of person who likes other people giving him special treatment.”

“Alright. Actually, I’m not kind enough to take interest in an uninteresting child.”

“I know that very well.”

Just then, Joongjin took out his mobile phone. Then, he started texting.

“Uhm, if the two of you don’t have any appointments tonight, should we have a light drink? I don’t want to miss this opportunity since I’ve been hanging out with boring people recently.”

It seemed that he was adjusting his schedule. He was putting something into action before other people agreed. Choongho thought that it was very like him.

“I’m good with that. I don’t have the radio tomorrow. What about you, Choongho-oppa?”

“Actually, I planned on eating dinner together with one more person.”

Joongjin raised his head and asked.

“Who?”

“Jangsoo hyung-nim.”

“Oh! I haven’t heard that name in a long time. Is he doing well?”

“He is. He’ll probably be glad to see you again.”

“Wow. The members from ten years ago are getting together again. Oh, are you keeping in touch with Gyungtaek as well?”

“Moon Gyungtaek? I see him from time to time when I’m working. Should I call him as well?”

“Hm, he’s fun, but he’s too crazed about sound. He never comes out when he’s working.”

“I don’t think you’re one who can say that.”

Choongho smiled and reminisced about what happened ten years ago. Thinking about how the main creators of ‘Spring Calendar’ were about to get together again, he smiled subconsciously.

“Hm, I want to see Haejoo as well.”

Joongjin’s eyes turned murky for a brief moment. Choongho also could not smile when he heard that name. Joohyun was probably the same.

“Let’s all make some time and go visit her.”

“Alright.”

“We should do that.”

The three fell silent for a moment when they mentioned the name that brought up a lot of memories for them. At that moment, the door to the office opened and the instructor peeked inside.

“Master. I’ll send them home now.”

“Oh, alright. Tell them that they did well and that they shouldn’t be late to the next practice.”

“Yes. Oh, and there seems to be a guest.”

“Looks like Jangsoo-hyunnim is here. I’ll go take a look.”

He opened the door and looked at the entrance of the training room. He saw Jangsoo waving his hand. One of the students who were leaving the training room stood next to Jangsoo. It was Maru.

“I’m going to have him tag along today. Is that okay?”

“Maru as well?”

“What? It’ll be too lonely with just the two of us.”

Choongho shrugged and pointed at the office. Jangsoo was surprised to see Joohyun and Joongjin inside.

“Hey hey, Park Joongjin!”

“Haha, Jangsoo hyung-nim. It’s been a while.”

“You damn little prick. You didn’t get in touch at all so I thought you were dead. When did you come back to Korea?”

Jangsoo ran and hugged Joongjin tightly.

“I don’t think I should tag along,” Maru spoke with a calm expression.

Choongho thought for a moment before telling him that he should tag along. If it was anyone else, he’d have told that person to go home, but he felt that it would be fine for Maru to come along.

“Let’s go! Since Joohyun is here as well, let’s get something good to eat.”

Jangsoo laughed as he took the lead. Choongho grabbed Maru by the shoulder and dragged him when Maru looked at him and asked if it was really okay for him to join.

Chapter 357

He received a call to come. There was no explanation. It wasn't that they made an appointment, nor was he told anything about this. If they were old friends, they might call each other all of a sudden like this, but considering the personality of the caller, that probably wasn't what was happening. Of course, it didn't mean that he wasn't close with the caller.

The place he arrived at in his car was a chicken feet restaurant near Daehak-ro. Although the restaurant was located on a rather old street, it was full almost all the time. He greeted the lady as he went inside. He went past the noisy first floor and climbed up to the 2nd floor. People were roasting chicken feet on charcoal underneath the low ceiling. Among the people, Ganghwan managed to find the person that called him here.

"What led you to drink over some chicken feet? Didn't you quit drinking because of your health?"

"It's fine to drink once in a while."

Ganghwan smiled and asked the waiter to bring them another soju glass and a bottle of soju.

"I thought something happened because you called me out all of a sudden."

He picked up the tongs and took out some chicken feet marinated in spicy sauce and put them on the grill. Along with a sizzling sound, smoke started rising up. He put down the soju glass that the waiter brought and shook the bottle of soju.

"Please, receive one from me."

Ganghwan poured soju into the other party's glass. The owner of the glass, Junmin, just looked as the glass became filled.

"Did something happen?"

"No, there are a few things that tick me off, but there aren't any problems."

"Then why do you look like that? If you're feeling bad, then I'll drink instead."

"It's nothing like that, so don't worry about it."

Junmin emptied the glass in one go. Ganghwan put his finger at the tip of the glass. Junmin poured one for him.

"Ganghwan."

"Yes."

"Did you come in your car?"

"I did."

"Then don't drink."

Junmin took away his glass before emptying it in one go.

“Hyung-nim, you should really eat some side dishes. You’ll ruin your stomach.”

He put a piece of chicken feet on some pickled radish slices and put it on Junmin’s plate. Junmin was just dazing out as he looked at the glass. He was in a strange state today. Was he drunk? Ganghwan had known Junmin for over ten years but never had he seen him drunk even once. Even when he used to enjoy alcohol, he always stopped drinking when the alcohol started to get the better of him.

Junmin held his chopstick in his fist and stabbed it into the chicken feet. It was clear that he was drunk. Perhaps he didn’t know he was drunk because he had never been drunk before.

Ganghwan called for a waiter. There was no bill on the table, so he decided to ask.

“Uhm, excuse me. Do you know how many bottles this table ordered?”

“Please wait a moment.”

The waiter went downstairs and came back to tell him that they ordered four bottles of soju. Ganghwan sighed. He wondered why there were chicken feet left even though the side dishes were empty, and it turned out that Junmin emptied three bottles of soju with just some garlic, chili pepper, and kimchi. He reached out and touched the ceramic pot. There were some steamed eggs inside and they had gotten cold.

“I’d like to order one more steamed egg. Don’t put too much salt in it.”

The waiter replied yes before going downstairs. In that short while, Junmin was pouring soju again into his glass. Ganghwan frowned and took the glass away from him.

“You drank three bottles. That’s more than enough.”

“I drank three bottles?”

“Yes. What’s happening? You’re scaring me especially since you don’t act like this usually.”

“I said it’s nothing.”

Junmin waved at him to give him the glass. This was the first time Ganghwan had seen Junmin like this. Junmin was like a pillar. He was the CEO of a huge company and a senior that received full trust from his juniors since he supported everyone without shaking. He always managed himself meticulously because he always said that if he wavered, then many people’s lives would become tough.

Just then, the steamed egg Ganghwan ordered came out. He took some steaming hot egg and put it on Junmin’s plate.

“You should eat something else. Spicy things might ruin your stomach even further.”

“I said I’m fine.”

“You’re the opposite of fine from what I see. Stop being stubborn and eat that first.”

Junmin then picked up his spoon. He spooned a bit of the steamed egg and put it in his mouth before shaking his head and putting the spoon back down.

"I should lie down a little."

Ganghwan supported Junmin and left the restaurant. He had Junmin sit in the passenger seat before pushing the backrest down. Junmin closed his eyes and heaved a deep breath.

"Please rest for a while."

He went to the convenience store in front of the chicken feet restaurant and bought a drink that would ease hangovers.

"Hyung-nim, please drink th... oh he's sleeping."

Ganghwan scratched his head. He closed the door to the passenger seat and got in the driver's seat. He started the car and drove off. While he drove, Junmin didn't wake up even once.

"Hyung-nim, please wake up."

After arriving at Junmin's house, he tried shaking Junmin so that he would wake up, but Junmin's eyelids did not even move. Having no choice, he opened the door to the passenger seat and supported him out. Junmin seemed to have come to himself and muttered something, but Ganghwan understood nothing since his pronunciation was all mumbled.

Ganghwan entered the door lock code before entering. The dogs that Junmin raised all barked and ran to the door.

"Your daddy's super drunk."

He laid Junmin on the sofa before going to the kitchen. The weather was hot as it was, and he had to exert his strength, so he was sweating like mad. He drank some cold water and went to the bathroom to wash his face. This place didn't feel that unfamiliar to him since he freeloaded here for around a year before. There were probably quite a few people that could 'make themselves home' here. Geunsoo was one of them.

Ganghwan picked up the chihuahua that was circling around his feet.

"Have you been doing well?"

When he tickled the dog's chin, the dog stuck out its tongue and wagged its tail. He played around with the dogs for a while. Just then, Junmin, who was lying on the sofa, fell on the floor with a thud. Looking at that, he just laughed in vain. Was the Earth going to end tomorrow? This was the first time Junmin looked so ruined.

Ganghwan took out his phone and started shooting a video. It would be quite a sight to see once he showed others Junmin acting like this.

"...Haejoo..." Junmin spoke as he clenched the carpet on the floor.

His voice was very sorrowful. Ganghwan stopped the video. Haejoo. He was probably referring to Jung Haejoo. Ganghwan had never seen her. After all, when he found out her name, she was already deceased. However, he did know that that name was definitely not light in Junmin's heart.

Ganghwan brought out some blankets from the bedroom and covered Junmin. Then, he lied down next to him as well. He was free since he wasn't doing any plays, so he decided to freeload at this place for a while like he did before.

Ganghwan closed his eyes as he hugged one of the dogs that kept panting.

* * *

"I've been near a volcano as well, and the smell was horrid. I wanted to go inside some more and see lava, but they prevented me from doing so saying that it was a danger zone. It was such a pity."

"Do you have two lives, director?"

"I only have one."

Maru watched Joongjin who giggled as he unfolded his story. His story bag had burst since before they arrived at the restaurant and he was telling new stories one after the other. The genres were diverse and never did they overlap. He was unlike a drunkard who talked about the same things over and over again.

"Mongolia was good as well."

This time it was Mongolia. Joongjin expressed the vast expansive plains with his entire body, and the others laughed. He found out while listening to their conversation that the four of them met during a movie shoot. That movie was none other than 'Spring Calendar'. Joohyun was the actress of a minor role, Choongho was the action advisor, Jangsoo was in charge of the camera for part B, and Joongjin was in charge of directing and scripting.

"Well then, let's drink!" Jangsoo raised his glass as he spoke.

Maru raised his cup which contained sprite. They were at a restaurant where the kitchen was right in front of them. A steak was being grilled on top of a steel pan. Joohyun had booked this place and it looked quite expensive.

"It looks like I talked about myself too much. Jangsoo hyung-nim, please talk about yourself as well. Tell us how you've been doing lately."

"Well, I'm the same. The only thing that's changed from ten years ago is that I have to send my kids to college, so I'm even more financially tight. In the old times, people used to sell their cows to send their kids to college, but cows aren't nearly enough anymore."

After emptying his glass, Jangsoo looked at Maru.

"Maru."

"Yes."

"Earn a lot of money and don't make your parents suffer. Kids these days think that money sprouts from the ground. My kids couldn't be purer when they were young, but ever since they entered college, they started splurging on some weird things. They tell me that everyone else does that as well."

"They'll probably mature soon."

"I don't expect that far. I just want them to know what money is. That kid has no intentions of taking on a part time job, nor studying seriously."

"Then just stop giving them pocket money. If it's a boy, then have him become independent. Get him a cheap one-room and support him for just half a year and cut off all financial support. He'll get by one way or the other."

"But the thing is, she's a girl. The world is a scary place, so I can't exactly have her leave home."

"Then just think of it as your karma and listen to her wishes," Maru faintly smiled as he spoke.

Jangsoo shook his head as though he had a headache.

Jangsoo's whining continued for a while. He preached that it was better to get married as late as possible and that it was better not to get married. While he was talking, he suddenly got a call and picked it up, and suddenly, his face became anxious and whispered to everyone to be quiet.

"Yes, honey. I'm talking with business partners because of equipment loans. Drinking? Of course, I'm not drinking. Yes, of course. But I'm going to be a little late tonight, so go to sleep without me. What? You won't open the door if I come back after drinking? But honey. Isn't it fine to drink over some business? I mean just a little. Alright, alright. What about the kids? They still haven't come home? Are you sure they aren't drinking somewhere? What? Just think about myself?"

Jangsoo made a bitter smile as he hung up. Joohyun, who was listening to the conversation, laughed, and Choongho did the same. Jangsoo kept drinking while complaining to them about how they did not know the sorrows of being a father.

Maru also smiled and enjoyed the atmosphere. Just then, a finger tapped on his shoulder. When he turned his head, he saw Joongjin smiling at him.

"Should we change seats and have a talk?"

"Oh, please, sit here."

"No, I don't mean that I want to sit there, but that I want to talk to you, Mr. Maru."

Joongjin put his arms below Jangsoo's armpits since Jangsoo sat next to Maru and raised him up. Jangsoo mumbled some things as he walked to where Joongjin sat.

"Phew, it must be boring for you amidst these boring adults, right?"

"No. It's very fun, actually. I actually sympathize with a lot of it too."

"You sympathize?"

"Yes."

"But you're still young."

"Just because I'm young doesn't mean I can't sympathize with adults."

"Hm, I guess that's true. Do you drink?"

“For now, I’m still a minor.”

“Minors can drink.”

Joongjin answered his own question. Maru received a glass from him. Choongho poured the soju into his glass.

“Rather than that, you work for Mr. Lee Junmin, huh. Looks like you’ll become big.”

“I’m still a trainee of sorts, so I don’t know if I can become big or not.”

“No, he’s the type of person to plan everything from beginning to end, so the fact that you’re under his wing means that your potential is very good. It’s a done deal if you signed an official contract with him.”

“Is that so?”

Seeing Joongjin gesture to him to drink, Maru bent back his head and drank the soju in one go.

“I’ve met a lot of people, and never had I seen anyone as scary as him. He knows how to handle people too well. On top of that, he can get extremely merciless if he has to be. Watch out. You won’t know what would happen to you.”

Joongjin spoke with a cold gaze that didn’t look like he was joking. Maru looked at his eyes for a while before speaking.

“If it’s that, I’m aware. In fact, that’s what reassures me.”

“It reassures you?”

“Yes. Rather than people that are swayed by ties and emotions, the ones that are calculative are in fact, safer. It just goes to show that as long as I prove my worth, I will not get stabbed in the back.”

“Oho, so you can think about it that way.”

“You don’t seem to like my president so much, director.”

Joongjin shook his head and made a strange smile. His inner thoughts couldn’t be made out from his expression. Even when Maru wanted to look into his heart, no speech bubble popped up. He was the type of person to solely think about himself.

“The relationship between me and president Lee Junmin couldn’t just be defined with either good or bad. However, I can tell you this for sure. I’m a very childish man and I don’t forget about bad memories.”

“I see.”

Joongjin put out his empty glass. Maru poured a glass for him.

“Why do you want to become an actor, Mr. Maru?”

“Well, I think I had a lot of reasons, but right now? I’m not so sure. For now, I just want to become one. Speaking of that, why did you become a director?”

“Me? Because I was bored. One day, the work I was doing just became boring. Like, everything about it. That’s when I thought about it. What should I do to have fun? At that moment, there was a movie on TV. That’s when I decided that that’s the one for me.”

“It’s incredible to think that you can become a director that way. From what I heard, you were the owner of a rather popular restaurant brand.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable about me.”

“I heard a few things here and there. Oh, weren’t you afraid at all when you put down your role as the president and switched to becoming a director? You had a lot of achievements yourself, and you shouldn’t have found anything lacking even when you continued living like that. I can’t understand why you became a director solely because you were bored.”

Hearing that question, Joongjin grinned and raised his glass. Then he spoke,

“The ship is the most stable at the port. However, that’s not why ships exist. Rather than a cruiser tied at the port looking at the horizon, I like being the Pequod more, being splashed around by the waves.”

The man full of adventurous spirit left those words before standing up. Then he held his spoon downside up and started singing trot that was rather old. The other three, as well as the chef that cooked the meat in front of them, started smiling.

Maru rested his chin on his hands and watched Joongjin. He felt like he got to know him a little better.

Chapter 358

“I think I still prefer being a cruiser rather than the Pequod.”

“Why is that?”

“Because Moby Dick is too big for me to handle. I prefer being a cruiser that waits at the port with shallow waves.”

“Well, the white whale is definitely big,” Joongjin said.

The chef put a bright red piece of meat on the steel pan. The web-like lines of fat were quite eye-catching. The chef said that it was perfectly aged wagyu.

“Have you met the Moby Dick of your life, Mr. Maru?”

“Well, I’m still young, so they can’t be compared to the hardships that you must have met throughout your life.”

“Please tell me anyway. I like talking about myself, but I also like listening to others.”

Joongjin’s eyes urged Maru to speak. Although he was over forty years old, his spirit was not one that sought stability, but freedom.

“If I have to come up with one, maybe my midterm results?”

“Is that it?”

“I told you that there’s nothing much, didn’t I? The degree of hardships that could be met by a high school student in this country just amounts to that.”

“Hm, since you’re bringing up that, I guess I don’t have anything to say. This country is definitely a little boring.”

Joongjin asked the chef for some toothpicks. Maru wondered what he was trying to do and watched him. He opened the lid of the toothpick container and poured all the toothpicks onto the table.

“This is actually quite fun.”

Joongjin started creating a tower with toothpicks.

“Do you want to have a go?”

“I’m fine thanks.”

Although he refused, Joongjin still forcefully tried to hand him a toothpick. He looked like he would stay frozen that way so Maru had no choice but to receive the toothpick.

“Here, put it here.”

He put the toothpick in the position that Joongjin was pointing at. He tried to put an end to things there, but Joongjin gave him another toothpick.

“This time, try putting it wherever you want.”

After thinking about it, he put the toothpick at a weird angle. He put it diagonally to the rest of the toothpicks which were arranged as a square tower.

“Looks like you want to end it early, but I can’t let you do that.”

Joongjin picked up two toothpicks and put them so that they were parallel to where Maru put his. With that, the tower regained its stability. This was like playing chess. One wanted to forfeit and quit, but the other side found it so much fun that they wanted to keep going.

“You can put two at once?”

“Who said you could only put one at a time?”

Maru couldn’t retort to that. Although his tone was light, there were no gaps in his words. Maru felt that he was very smart.

Just then, a sharp metal sliding sound could be heard from where the steel pan was. It was the sound of two metal pieces sliding against each other. The chef was slicing up the meat into even pieces with two knives. Joongjin took his eyes off the toothpicks for the first time to see the dual knives performance. Meanwhile, Maru pushed the tower with his finger. The 10 or so floors of toothpicks fell down.

After looking at the fallen tower for a while, Joongjin smacked on the table with his palm before laughing out loud. Hearing that, the other three looked at him, but didn’t seem to care. It seemed that they were used to his action patterns.

"I definitely didn't say that not toppling it was in the rules. But still, aren't you going too far? You just had to topple the tower I put so much effort into with a single finger."

Joongjin gathered the toothpicks and put them back in the container.

"Life is like this tower. No matter how stable one builds their foundation, it is bound to topple from strong external forces. Isn't that so unfair?"

"What can I do about it? I can only live with it."

"What do you think you will do when your tower is toppled like that? Are you going to gather the scraps and start over? Or are you going to give up?"

Joongjin gave him the toothpick container this time. Maru looked at the toothpicks before speaking.

"It's too much of a waste to give up, and too hard to start over, so I should probably sell these for cheap," Maru said as he pulled out one toothpick.

"If I get the raw materials cost back, wouldn't I be able to make a living at least?"

"So you're focused on making a living, Mr. Maru."

"Isn't everyone like that?"

"That's true, but still, you're rather peculiar. Normally, people of your age look forward to an objective they have to fulfill, not things they have to be responsible for."

"The world is a harsh place. These days, students worry about making a living starting at my age."

"That's very unfortunate to hear."

The chef put a piece of meat on a ceramic plate and gave each person a dish. He also put some salts on the dish for them to season, and there were several different colored salts. Maru seasoned his meat with the blue-colored one. Leaving aside the meat, the salt was just salty. Perhaps a gourmet might be able to figure out the taste.

Just as he was about to grab the napkin on his left, he saw Joongjin pressing down on the meat with his fingers. He looked at the meat with eyes full of curiosity as though he was the first man to receive fire from Prometheus.

"What are you doing?"

Seeing his peculiar actions, Maru couldn't help but ask.

"I am sensing the meat."

"What?"

"I treat all of my senses preciously. Look at this meat. Just looking at it is not enough to tell the texture. You can predict, but not actually tell if your predictions are true or not. That's why I have to touch it."

"You should be able to tell if you put it in your mouth though."

“Do you think the sensitivity of your fingertips and your mouth is the same? Moreover, your mouth always contains saliva so it negates minute textures. To be entirely sure, it’s better to touch it with my fingertips like this.”

Ouch, hot - Joongjin, who was touching the meat, quickly grabbed his earlobes. Despite being burned, his fingers still reached out to the meat once again. Only after touching the rectangular meat over and over again did Joongjin pick up the meat with his bare hands and put it in his mouth. He looked like the happiest man on Earth. He exclaimed several times as he chewed on the meat. Maru momentarily felt guilty for chewing and swallowing the meat in one go.

“You should try as well.”

“Try what?”

“Sensing it.”

Maru looked at the meat. By common sense, grilled meat wasn’t something that was touched. Housewives would’ve scolded such people for playing around with food. If it was anyone else, Maru would have refused and just eaten it with a fork and knife like usual.

However, the one next to him right now was Joongjin. His eccentricity didn’t give him a feeling of rejection for some reason. It was probably because of his joyous expression. It felt like he would lose out if he didn’t try it out.

“I think it is necessary for people to expand their senses. Just following what other people have already done is, yes, it is very easy. There’s no risk in that. That is because numerous pioneers have experienced all the existing dangers and told their followers. Look, this is no longer dangerous - one would have said.”

While speaking, Joongjin tried rubbing some of the salts in his hand and tried smelling them before tasting them.

“The followers can be satisfied with that. After all, it was proven to be safe. However, I guarantee that such people will not be able to escape the conventions. Moreover, the ones that have faith in conventions start condemning people that try to escape such conventions. They criticise such people for doing unnecessary things. Why do people do that even though it does them no harm?”

Joongjin seemed to be expecting an answer from him. Maru looked at the meat that was being cooked as he spoke.

“Perhaps they were uneasy.”

“Why were they uneasy?”

“To be different from me, no, to be different from us is something foreign to them. Foreign things are prone to being ostracized. Like you said, conventions are agreements that have been proven over the course of time. Perhaps it’s natural for people to ostracize others that left that agreement.”

“Very good answer. However, the core of the problem that I’m thinking of goes a step further.”

“A step further?”

“Why do they feel uneasy? Why do they ostracize others? I came to one conclusion. I don’t want you, who’s different from me, to get ahead of me. People are all smart. They always strive towards the better. That’s why they can’t stand people that escape the conventions. They know that while people that walk a dangerous path might destroy themselves, they have the possibility to reach heights no one has reached ever before.”

Joongjin took out a toothpick before skewering the meat. The toothpick stood upright and pointed at the ceiling.

“People instinctively dislike other people being above them. However, the world will always divide people into those that are above and those that are below. That’s why people create idols. Someone that looks similar to me is above me. However, if you admit that, then you start to feel tragic about your own circumstances. Ah, that person was just born different from me - like that.”

Joongjin looked at him. Maru just shrugged.

“Have you heard of the word genius?”

“Yes, I have.”

“What do you feel when you hear that word? What kinds of feelings does it give you?”

“Amazing, incredible. Well, things like that.”

Joongjin nodded. He stared at the toothpick-skewered meat for a long time before pulling the toothpick back out and eating the meat with a fork and a knife like normal.

“The typical description of idols are ‘geniuses’. Geniuses always break convention. They walk a path that other people have not taken. No, to be exact, they walk a path that other people don’t think of going. It’s a word that people use with their admiration, but whenever I hear that word, I think of the pettiness of mankind. The word genius always leaves out the word effort.”

Maru looked at Joongjin’s fingers. Unexpectedly, they looked very worn out and it was pointing at the meat being grilled.

“The texture should feel very different. Try touching it.”

He grinned.

Maru tapped on the table with his finger for a while before placing his hand on top of the meat. He slowly lowered his fingertips and touched the meat. A sensation that was completely different from raw meat crept up his fingers. A feeling of softness and elasticity could be felt at the same time. The slightly burnt part was rather rough, while the parts that didn’t get directly sizzled were soft.

He was reminded of playing with clay when he was young.

“It’s like a ceremony. You received that eccentric man’s approval,” Jangsoo spoke. Maru picked up the meat and looked at Joongjin. He was smiling so brightly that his teeth were showing.

“Try eating it now. Trust me, it will taste different.”

Maru sighed before putting the meat in his mouth.

* * *

“Let’s go to the next restaurant!”

Joongjin raised his right hand and shouted. Choongho and Jangsoo chimed in. Perhaps it was because they hung out with Joongjin, but they looked like they returned to their youth.

“He’s a strange man, isn’t he?” Joohyun asked.

“Yes. He’s indeed strange.”

“When I look at him, I wonder how people like him can exist.”

She smiled softly.

“How was he during the shooting?”

“He’s the same. No, perhaps I should call it worse? That kind of atmosphere at the shoot could only be created by him. What should I call it... Even though we’re doing the same thing, it feels like we’re doing a completely new thing? It’s hard to describe with words.”

“I think I get what you mean.”

“Really?”

Maru nodded.

“But still, it’s good that the director seems to like you.”

“Really?”

Once he starts working, he will start dividing people up. Those that can judge for themselves, and those that have to follow his instructions to the tee. Anyone that does not sympathize with him is just a chess piece - he actually said those words during the shoot.

“Sounds like he must have gotten quite an eyeful from the actors.”

“At first, yeah. But as the shoot progressed, no one complained about him. He was too perfect.”

Too perfect. It was a rather strange combination of words.

“The two of you! Come quick!” Joongjin waved his hand as he shouted.

Maru looked at Joohyun once before smiling and walking forward.

Chapter 359

He hadn’t had a nightmare in a long time. The doctor was shaking, his family fainted, and he was powerless to do anything. Such a scene kept repeating. The smell of cresol, as well as the white lights from the ceiling, the noises from the hospital going in and out of his ears, and a scream, topped it all off.

Junmin stroked his hair upwards. His hands were full of sweat. He did not remember how he came back home yesterday. He remembered up to the point when he called Ganghwan, but anything after that was pitch black.

“You worried about me?”

He picked up the pomeranian that walked up to his feet. When he looked at the black eyes between the bushy fur, he started to feel a little better. Perhaps this was why people raised dogs. No words were necessary for consolation.

He put down the dog before standing up. It had been fifteen years since he had become drunk like this. Fifteen years ago, when he returned Haejoo to ashes, he drowned himself in alcohol.

Just as he opened the refrigerator to quench his thirst a little, he saw a plastic bottle on the table. The lid was still open. As he always cleaned up after himself, he couldn't have been the one to leave the bottle out like this. He wondered if he did that because he was drunk. He drank the lukewarm water in the bottle before walking to the living room. He just opened the door when he heard a loud noise. It was someone snoring.

“...Ah.”

Ganghwan was lying on the bed in just his underwear. He was even smiling as though he was having a nice dream. It seemed that he was the one that carried him all the way home and ended up falling asleep on the bed. Junmin felt that it was just like 10 years ago. He was reminded of when Ganghwan lived here.

He went back to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He took out some bean sprouts and green onions he put inside a container. He washed the bean sprouts and sliced up the green onions before putting them in a pot.

“Oh, you're up.”

Ganghwan came out of the room scratching his butt.

“You haven't changed since ten years ago, snoring like that.”

“I can say the same thing about you. Who in the world puts nameplates on containers like this these days? Bean sprouts, green onions, oh, and what's this, garlic? You should really get married quickly and learn the joys of living a messy life. Fifty-one is a lot, but it's not impossible to get married at your age. Oh wait, were you fifty-three?”

“If you have the time to say nonsense, then clean up the house.”

“Aren't you going too far? I'm the one that carried you all the way here last night when you blacked out. My shoulders are still sore.”

Junmin just watched as Ganghwan stretched his shoulders. Ganghwan pouted and said 'alright'. The dogs reacted to the sound of the vacuum cleaner and started barking in the living room. It was a very noisy morning. He put the bean sprout soup, some side dishes, and two bowls of rice on the table before calling Ganghwan. By then, Ganghwan was playing around with the dogs in the garden and returned while laughing.

“Where's that black one?”

“She died.”

“Really?”

“She was 10 years old, 10 years ago. She died at seventeen so she lived a long life.”

“How about its child? I think it had a pup.”

“There it is, right at your feet.”

“But this one’s yellow though.”

“Just because a dog is black doesn’t mean it will give birth to another black one.”

Ganghwan nodded and put the puppy that was running around below the table onto his lap. He tickled the puppy’s head before looking at Junmin. Junmin did not miss that.

“Looks like you have something to ask.”

“I’m wondering if it’s okay to ask like this. I am curious, but I don’t think I should ask.”

“So? Did you ever not ask after thinking that?”

“No.”

Ganghwan put the puppy down before speaking.

“What made you drink so much even though you’re someone who thinks getting drunk is a sin?”

“I think there’s more to it than just that.”

“...Is it because of the person named Jung Haejoo?”

“Look like I said that name yesterday.”

“Yeah, in your sleep.”

“I see, huh.”

Junmin put down his spoon. He started fidgeting. He got rid of his habit of fidgeting since he started his business since it looked messy, but it came back again now that he felt chaotic.

“Yesterday, I met Park Joongjin.”

“Park Joongjin? Who’s that?”

“I guess you’re not that interested in the movie side of things. He’s a director that was active ten years ago. Perhaps Spring Calendar should ring a bell.”

“I know that one. It was even on the news back then. Didn’t it break the record for the fastest to a million views? If I remember it, then it must have been amazing.”

“It was amazing. It was the work of someone who was absolutely clueless about it, holding the megaphone for the first time. It was praised immensely for expressing restrained sorrow rather than the soap opera-style unique to Korean films.”

“Someone absolutely clueless?”

“Someone that ran a BBQ restaurant created it.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. He must be a genius.”

“Genius. Yes. Many people called him that.”

A genius director. The media packaged him as a heaven-sent talent. It wasn’t that surprising to see why. An owner of a barbecue restaurant threw away his apron and shot a hugely successful movie in a flash.

“But what does he have to do with Miss Jung Haejoo?” Ganghwan asked as he put a spoonful of rice in his mouth.

Junmin fell silent for a second. Although it was an event that happened far in the past, it was still clear as day to him. He remembered it like it happened yesterday. The ones that were with him at that moment would all feel like that.

“Fifteen years ago, no, a little longer before than that, there was a small theater troupe in Daehak-ro. There weren’t that many members. It wasn’t like they were popular either, so it wouldn’t be strange even if they broke up. Haejoo, Jung Haejoo, was one of them. Director Park Joongjin was there as well.”

“Did that director used to act in plays then?”

“No, according to what I know, he was a stock trader.”

“First a stock trader, and then a barbeque restaurant huh. What a peculiar career he has. Why was there such a person in a theater troupe?”

“He was the one that supported that troupe financially so that they didn’t go out of business. And....”

Junmin put on a faint smile.

“Like me, he was someone enraptured by her.”

* * *

“I think this is fine.”

Maru nodded when Daemyung looked towards him. They had come back to the acting club’s practice room after four days for practice, and the practice went well without any mistakes.

“I was worried that we’ll make mistakes since we haven’t practiced for a few days, but I feel like it’s become easier.”

“It means that you’re just that used to it. Also, it’s not like you didn’t practice at all, right? Everyone should have read through the script several times at home.”

Hearing Daemyung’s words, the members nodded. They were all fired up when they heard that they would go to Seoul to hold their play if they managed to win the grand prize or the gold prize. Just because they didn’t have practice, didn’t mean that they would have just forgotten about it entirely.

“Should we finish things up after getting something to eat?”

“Yes!”

Maru threw his credit card to the first years. The first years immediately left.

“I’m going to lie down for a little while then.”

Dowook laid out a blanket before lying down. He said he was tired since morning since the part timer at the petrol station was absent without a word last night. It seemed that he had gotten closer to his father.

Maru pointed at Dowook, who fell asleep instantly, with his chin before leaving the classroom with Daemyung.

“How’s practice going with Bangjoo?” Daemyung asked as he rested his chin on the window sill in the corridor.

A cold wind blew through the open window. It was quite cool despite it being summer.

“He’s good. I can tell he’s done sports. He’s clearly good at using his body. The instructors even use him as an assistant.”

“That’s good. That means he might get a good role if he does well.”

“I’m not sure because I’m not entirely sure about what the director is intending for us to do, but I think that he’s putting weight on action scenes, so Bangjoo will have an important role. He did say that the main character’s youth days will occur quite frequently.”

“Have you seen the lead actors?”

“Yeah, two for now. Park Gwangsoo and Cha Taehoon, I think their names were. They are the same age as us.”

“Park Gwangsoo? Cha Taehoon? Hm, I don’t seem to know them.”

“You’ll recognize them if you look at their faces. They appeared quite often in dramas as child roles.”

“Really?”

Daemyung nodded.

“How about you? You’ve been to Seoul for the past few days.”

“Well... for now, I am kinda learning things.”

“Things?”

“The problem is I don’t know what those things are.”

Daemyung scratched his head while laughing. Maru wondered what it was about and asked him to elaborate.

“You do know that Gwak Joon-hyung called me back then, right?”

“He called me first after all.”

“After that, I followed him to an apartment in Seoul. At first, I thought it was his house, but it wasn’t.”

“Then whose was it?”

“Uncle’s?”

“Uncle?”

“Oh, I don’t mean my real uncle. Do you know a writer called Ahn Pilhyun?”

“Well, the name doesn’t ring any bells.”

“He writes movies, scenarios, books, and plays and that sort of thing, and I’m learning various things at his house. Uhm, but I can’t exactly pinpoint what I’m learning. Usually, we’re talking all the time, yeah? About the world, politics, society, and things like that. Sometimes we’d be talking about movies and then somehow stray off and start talking about drinking. What’s fixed is reading, reading regardless of genre. Right now, I’m reading a science book.”

“Really? Gwak Joon-hyung is there as well?”

“Yeah. He actually lives in uncle’s house. He’s writing his next work.”

“Two writers huh. Isn’t that quite, no, an incredibly good environment? The foundation of direction is writing, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Uncle said that as well. He said that people who want to produce something need to be able to write.”

“Learn well. I think he’s trying to teach you starting with the basics. If you don’t understand something, don’t hesitate to ask. You know how Gwak Joon-hyung never says anything first.”

“Yeah.”

Maru rested his hand on the window sill as well. The cherry trees outside were swaying along with the strong wind.

“So I guess you’re pausing on working on the play you’re writing?”

“He did tell me to halt for now. He told me that I can only tell whether a writing is good or not after it matures inside the drawer. He said that truly good writing looks good even when read later.”

“Sounds about right. But don’t trust those people too much. In the end, a method that suits you might exist elsewhere.”

“I know,” replied Daemyung with a chuckle.

“Ah, right. I got a text from Miso-seonbae-nim. She told us to come to Daehakro once the regionals are done.”

“Daehak-ro? To Blue Sky?”

“Yeah. The first years haven’t been there yet.”

“That’s true. We should make a visit.”

"Last year, the seniors were with us, but it looks like there's no one above us this year. I wonder if everyone's busy."

"They're all exam students. We should be thankful that they brought us snacks from time to time and helped us out with creating the set."

"I guess that's true. There's not that much time until the CSATs."

"We'll be taking one next year as well."

"Now that you put it that way, it sounds really close."

Daemyung crossed his arms and made a disturbed face.

"Maru, what are you going to do about college?"

"Me? I don't know. Looking at things now, I don't think there's a need for me to go. I did promise to major in theater, but the conditions of the contract have been changed after all. If I can keep on working as an actor, then I guess I wouldn't need a degree."

"From what I saw, celebrities just get special entry to college."

"That only applies to people who are famous. How about you? Did the president say anything?"

"Nothing changed from the fact that all of my tuition will be paid for if I decide to major in theater. But I want to go into directing rather than the acting side. Do you think I should still major in theater?"

"Do you have a department in mind?"

"Me? I guess I do."

"What is it?"

"Philosophy."

"...Oh, philosophy."

Maru scratched his eyebrows. Philosophy, huh. If he didn't know anything, he would have cheered Daemyung on, but the social bias towards that department made him unable to cheer Daemyung on.

"If you have a concrete objective, then I guess you should go."

"I'm planning to talk to him later."

"Alright. He's the type of person who would invest without hesitation if he sees potential, so try to persuade him well. Hm, but have you told your parents about this?"

"No, why?"

"Well, bring up the topic very carefully when your parents look like they're in a good mood."

"What's up with you all of a sudden?"

“Just trust me on this one. If things don’t look good, then don’t even mention it. Also, if it’s possible, tell them after you talk about tuition with the president. If you tell them that the tuition is free if you go to the philosophy department... you’ll probably be fine. Probably.”

Maru patted the confused Daemyung’s shoulder.

Just then, they heard some noise from the central staircase. It seemed that the first years had returned from buying food.

“Let’s eat for now.”

Mentioning the word made Daemyungs’ expression brighten up. May this innocent fellow not hit any blocks.

“Dwook! Get up! Let’s eat!”

Maru tapped Dwook, who was sleeping, with his foot and shouted.

Chapter 360

“Don’t get nervous.”

“Yeah.”

“Remember to answer any questions well. Have confidence in yourself. No one wants to see you flustered.”

“Okay.”

“Also....”

Just as Yoojin was about to say more things, a voice resounded out calling for the next interviewee.

“Good luck!”

Yoojin sighed as she watched her walking into the interview room. For some reason, she was nervous. Even though the one taking the audition was ‘Bunbun’.

“*She* said this is the 2nd so there should be no problems.”

Usually, any interviews after the first audition were just occasions to talk to the director and/or the writer. Most of the time, whether someone passed or not was decided after the first audition. In other words, the fact that she came here to have an interview meant that it was highly likely that *she* had passed already. Unless *she* decided to pick a fight with the director inside, she would pass safely.

Yoojin took out a bottle of water from her bag and took a sip. Ten minutes had passed since *she* went in. She wondered what they were talking about inside. She became thirsty. There was no way she would come back out crying, right?

She spent some time walking around the corridor. When the door to the interview room eventually opened, she saw her bowing towards the interviewers.

Yoojin looked at her who just walked up to her with *her* mouth shut. For some reason, her expression didn't look that good. Her hands were politely folded on top of her stomach, while her eyes were looking at the ground. Did *she* fail?

"What happened? Did it not go well?"

"Haa..."

She sighed. Yoojin did not know what to say. She thought that she would have naturally passed. She could even remember her jumping around in joy when *she* passed the first audition. *She* must be feeling very dejected right now.

"Let's go. You can't be depressed at a time like this. Let's get some shaved ice for now. After we eat something cold, we should... yes. Let's go to a noraebang and shout our lungs out. How about it?" Yoojin said as she grabbed her by the hand.

She wanted to do something for her disappointed friend. At that moment, she noticed that *her* shoulders shook slightly. *She* even chuckled once.

"Don't tell me you..."

"Yoojin! I passed! They said they'll contact me once the dates are set!"

She started hopping around like a rabbit while grabbing both of her hands. Yoojin smiled back and was about to congratulate her, but frowned and let go of her hands.

"And here I was worried sick about you. You dare to tease me?"

"Yoojin, sorry. I'll treat you to shaved ice!"

"Shaved ice? I don't think that's enough."

"Then I'll pay for the noraebang as well!"

She started running while screeching. Yoojin watched as *she* ran before smiling. She felt the others in the corridor staring at them because they caused a commotion, so she quickly apologized and followed suit. She found her jumping around in joy in front of the elevator.

"What did they say?"

"They told me that I have to act a character that's ditzzy, and I told them that it's my specialty. Then they told me to show them."

"And?"

"I was surprised at first, but I thought I could make use of that and I just blankly stared at the people in front of me. When I did, the writer smiled. The producer laughed as well. The writer said that I seem to suit the character I was originally intended for."

"Really? That's great."

The elevator arrived on the fifth floor and opened. She hopped inside with lighter steps than ever before. Yoojin thought that *she* would float into the sky if she gave *her* some helium balloons.

She pressed the button for the first floor before continuing the conversation,

“Were there actors inside as well?”

“No, I saw the producer, the writer, and a couple of people from the TV station.”

“Really? What about your senior? The one that told you about the audition.”

“She wasn’t there. Ah, I should call her now.”

“You said she was a graduate from your school right?”

“Yeah. She works in an entertainment agency. Wait a moment.”

She started the call with ‘seonbae-nim’ and told her senior that she passed. It was just as expected of Myunghwa High. There wasn’t a school that had better infrastructure for proceeding to the entertainment industry as Myunghwa High in the Gyeonggi province. The acting club was one thing, but there were quite a lot of celebrities commuting to Myunghwa High as well.

“Yes, seonbae-nim. I’ll make a visit next time.”

She hung up with a smile.

“Phew, it feels like a dream.”

“It’s not a dream. Wow, even I’ve never a shot sitcom before.”

“But you have experience shooting both a drama and a movie. For me, this is my first as a support role.”

“How do you feel?”

“I feel like I can fly! Oh, yeah.”

She started calling someone again. From *her* flushed cheeks, it was obvious who she was calling. Even when the elevator arrived on the first floor and they walked out to the lobby, *she* did not take her phone off her ears.

“Maru’s not picking up?” Yoojin asked.

She flinched before looking at her and shook *her* head.

“He is busy as well.”

“That’s true.”

“But still, I can’t forgive him. How dare he not accept a call from my lovely Bunbun.”

“I can’t do anything about him being busy.”

Yoojin pinched her waist when she saw *her* giggle.

“Ouch, that hurts.”

“Good, that was my intention.”

She stroked her waist as she texted. Yoojin pushed *her* back to lead her out of the TV station since she seemed to be absorbed in texting. They walked towards the rotating door. Since *she* passed the audition, all that was left to do was to play around to their heart's content.

"Let's leave through here."

She pointed at the rotating door as she spoke. Yoojin nodded. They walked into the rotating door and out of the building. Just then,

"Huh?"

A familiar face appeared on the other side of the door. It was Jiseok.

"Oh, Lee Yoojin."

Jiseok waved his hand cheerfully above his head. He was constantly excited just as always.

"Yoo Jiseok, what brings you here? Do you have business?"

"Yeah. I'm here for an interview."

"An interview?"

"Yeah. Rather than that, who's the cute girl next to you?"

Yoojin quickly hid her behind herself. She didn't want to reveal Bunbun to this overly-friendly fella. However, Jiseok had approached *her* anyway.

"Hi."

"...Hi?"

She accepted Jiseok's greeting, albeit a little flustered. Yoojin grabbed Jiseok by the back of his neck and pulled him back with all of her might.

"Ow, you're breaking my neck."

"It won't break from just that, you know?"

"Did I do something wrong? I just greeted *her* because I want to become close. Right?"

Jiseok spoke as he looked at her. Yoojin sighed. Jiseok's eyes were clearly saying that he wouldn't leave unless she told him who she was.

"This guy is called Yoo Jiseok, and he's a very tiresome guy."

"Hi. I'm Yoo Jiseok. Nice to meet you."

He extended his hand out asking for a handshake. *She* stared at his hand for a while before shaking it.

"Hello."

Yoojin just watched as the two exchanged greetings. When Jiseok heard her name, he widened his eyes and asked,

“You’re Maru’s girlfriend?”

“Huh? Yeah, I am.”

“So it’s you! Wow, I’m really glad to see you. I’m Maru’s best friend number three, so I hope I see you more in the future.”

“You’re friends with Maru?”

“I said we’re best friends. Probably.”

“Probably?”

Yoojin whispered into her ears.

“He’s a hectic guy so don’t take him seriously.”

“Hey, I can hear you.”

Jiseok gave *her* his phone and spoke.

“Give me your number.”

“My number?”

“Yeah.”

She typed her number into Jiseok’s phone without much hesitation. When Jiseok called *her*, her phone started ringing.

“That’s my number. Maru always avoids my calls. He always runs away when I ask him to hang out with me, saying that he can’t be bothered. So please help me out in the future. I know that he’s awfully considerate of his girlfriend.”

Hearing his words, *her* face became red. It was really easy to read *her*. Yoojin interrupted the two.

“Well then. We’re going on a date, so why don’t you go about your business as well?”

“Can’t you take me on that date as well?”

“I thought you had business here. Just get going already!”

She glared at him. Jiseok made a dejected expression.

“Fine, I’m going. But why are you two here? As an audience for a program? Or something else?”

“Because of this girl’s interview.”

Thinking back, Jiseok said that he was here for an interview as well. The same TV station and an interview on the same day. Was his interview for the sitcom as well?

“Are you also here because of the sitcom interview?”

Yoojin asked just to check. Jiseok smiled and nodded his head.

“Wait. So you two are going to appear in the same sitcom?”

Yoojin looked at her. *She* was looking at Jiseok with surprise.

“Please take care of me in the future. Oh, I should text that person as well.”

Jiseok laughed like a child that found an interesting toy as he walked to the elevator.

“My Bunbun, what do we do about you? You’ll be having a hard time for the entire shoot.”

“Why? He doesn’t seem like a bad kid to me.”

“That’s because you haven’t met him for long. That guy is really strange. He doesn’t have the slightest bit of embarrassment in him. If he approaches you later, act like you don’t know him. Otherwise, you’ll have to listen to him talking to you for the entire shoot.”

Yoojin shook her head and dragged her out of the station. Just then, her phone started ringing.

“Wait a sec. Yes, Maru. What?”

It seemed that *she* got a call from Maru. Yoojin watched *her* from the side. *She* talked with a smile on her face at first, but that smile turned into a prankful expression when she finished the call.

“What is it?”

“Maru said the same thing you did. He told me not to hang out with Jiseok, saying that he’s a very annoying guy.”

“Don’t ignore his advice. Your boyfriend is right for once.”

“Really? He looked normal to me.”

“That looked normal?”

It was no good. Yoojin had no choice but to tell *her* how much of a chatterbox Jiseok was and how he loved to stick his nose into other people’s business. She grabbed her by the arm and dragged *her* out of the TV station for now.

* * *

“Why don’t you get up already?”

Miso slapped Taesik’s back, who was lying on the bed. Taesik groaned before hiding inside a blanket.

“I’m commuting to an academy again starting today.”

“An academy?” Taesik sat up and asked. Miso smiled as she looked at Taesik’s chubby belly.

“Yes. Ganghwan’s play is over, so I was instructed to start working again by my great president.”

“Ah, that Mr. Lee Junmin?”

“Yes, that Mr. Lee Junmin.”

Miso took off her pajamas and hung them on a chair. At that moment, she saw Taesik looking away. He was so cute.

“What is it? It’s not like you haven’t seen me.”

“No, well. I’m not entirely used to it.”

“You were staring at me when we went to sleep yesterday though.”

“Ehem.”

Miso faintly smiled and put on a shirt and pants.

“Oppa.”

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t we go greet my parents this week?”

“This week?”

After thinking about it for a while, Taesik said okay. Miso, who had her back facing him, sighed slightly. She was worried that he would say no.

“But what if father-in-law hates me because we’re too far apart in age?”

“10 years is not that far apart.”

“To be exact, it’s not ten years but...”

“Same thing. Oppa, have confidence in yourself. You’re marrying me, not my parents,” Miso sat on the bed as she spoke.

As a teacher, he was so cool as someone who had faith in his job and was kind to students, but he was very awkward at times like these. Well, that was one of Taesik’s charms, so she couldn’t help it.

“But before we go, let’s get you a suit.”

“A suit? I already have one at...”

“Oppa, didn’t I tell you that you look ten years younger if you wear the proper clothes?”

“B-but I can’t exactly throw away the clothes that still fit me...”

Hearing that, she remembered what she told him last time. The checkered-patterned shirt that Taesik wore while she was still his student - she found that in his closet last time which surprised the heck out of her. She asked if he still wore that shirt to work, and Taesik replied yes as though it was natural. That shirt was over ten years old, and yet he was still wearing it frequently. She did tell him that they should clean up his old clothes, but they didn’t do it immediately since Taesik said that they should decide on a date to do it properly.

“Don’t tell me you still haven’t thrown away that tattered checkered-patterned shirt of yours?”

“I-I did throw it away.”

From how his eyes were looking elsewhere, he was obviously lying. And that was after she had told him multiple times to throw it away.

“Look at me in the eyes and speak. Did you really throw it away?”

“I did.”

“Oppa, you’re a teacher, aren’t you? Can a teacher lie to his students?”

“...Alright, I’ll throw it away. I promise.”

Taesik’s eyes looked very innocent when he said that. Miso couldn’t bear to say harsh words to his face. She lost to him once again today.

“Then I’ll be off to work, so throw it away before I come back. Also, even though it’s the holidays, don’t just stay at home and do some exercise. You’re gaining weight.”

“I’m not just playing around. I’m preparing for....”

“But you just rolled around in bed for the past few days, didn’t you?”

“...I’ll exercise.”

“Very good.”

Miso kissed Taesik on the forehead before putting her shoes on.

“I’m off then.”

She took the elevator down and loaded herself in her car. She was going to Film, the academy, after a long time today. She would be teaching actors and aspiring actors, not students.

‘Is he preparing to snag them one by one?’

Miso thought of Junmin’s face as she grabbed the driving wheel.