

Once Again 561

Chapter 561

Sora bit on her thumb as she looked at the screen.

A whistleblower-style movie. This movie handled the bullying problem which was present throughout all of society. It was a problem where everyone kept shifting the blame onto others without any proper countermeasures. The objective of this film was to throw a question to the audience who turned a blind eye to such events. It was a common topic, but she thought that it wasn't good to be greedy so she wasn't dissatisfied.

Since she decided on a topic, the next course of action was to decide how to play this out. A character-centric film or a story-centric film? Show the entire story or hide some bits of it? As she came to decisions regarding those things, she was set on one rule which had to be prioritized above all else.

It had to be not boring.

Even the best quotes would fall on deaf ears if it was boring. The reason the line 'slow and steady wins the race' was formulated into the story of the tortoise and the hare was because a line would never reach other people's ears no matter how good it was if it was not interesting. The numerous masterpieces that existed in this world could be summed up into a few lines. Love is mighty. Greed calls for misfortune. Effort is the greatest talent. They were words that would be very useful to keep in mind, but those lines were not interesting at all. Without interest, it wouldn't be eye-catching, and it would not get the chance to leave its mark behind in the heart.

Film was the same. In order to transmit the message that the film was trying to say, it had to be 'shown' first. To be shown, it had to attract interest, and interest came from something that wasn't boring. In the end, even film, which was considered a composite art, had to be 'interesting' at the bottom level.

'This... this is not boring.'

Sora's eyes followed the video. Maru was sighing as he ate breakfast. This was the beginning of the stage. The audience would get to see Maru waking up and eating at the table without any prior information. There was no background music, nor any loud events. She allocated two minutes to portray Maru before he commuted to school. In a short film that was about 20 to 30 minutes long, 2 minutes was an incredibly long time. No, even in full commercial movies, 2 minutes was long enough to finish a whole action scene or to reveal a plot twist beyond imagination.

She decided to spend such precious two minutes as a long take. There were no gimmicks in the direction, and there was no dramatic plot progress. It could be considered a boring part, but Sora was confident that the people who watched this would never think that it was boring.

After finishing breakfast, Maru put the plates in the kitchen sink and started walking towards the camera. The distance became smaller while Maru's face became bigger. It was eventually big enough to fit the whole screen. Then, those two eyes that looked like they were looking beyond the screen. Sora could not stop biting the fingernail on her thumb despite the fact that she should stop. She could feel the tension. The quiet swear word uttered at the table inserted a sense of tension in the simple series of

actions. Why did he swear? Was there a problem? Why are his eyes like that? It threw such questions, and those curiosities would steal the audience's attention.

"I'll watch it just one more time."

Sora rewinded the video with the mouse and watched it again. The cut that was edited crudely on the spot and the long take were played back in series.

Splitting up cuts and connecting them required editing. A complete piece would only be made after collecting the best cuts for each scene among the hundreds of takes. This was why the skills of the video editor could be considered important.

In that sense, a long take removed any room for interference from editing. Of course, a long take was in itself, just a cut with a long duration, and were targets of editing in the sense that they had to be joined with other cuts, but it was definitely different from the short, chopped-up cuts. Perhaps it would be fitting to call it a 'lump'. If a scene with a series of short cuts felt light, long takes felt much heavier. A long cut without any switches in the scene. It would feel like the scene was drawing the viewer in.

As such, the actor's skill was very important when it came to long takes.

Actors had to show flawless acting in front of the camera that kept rolling without end. It might not sound so difficult when considering that it was simply just a longer take than usual, but that extra time became an incredible pressure for the actors. Shooting short cuts were very lenient when it came to NGs. It was a short scene that was about a few seconds long anyway. They just had to keep taking the shots and then try to pick a good one out of many. The overall shooting time wouldn't be that long after all. This long take was 2 minutes and 36 seconds in its entirety. A small mistake in the middle of the shoot would mean that they had to start over from the beginning.

Sora found out what an incredible pressure that was to the actors as she studied directing. Long takes were about the tension that grabbed and drew the viewers in. A scene that continued without any switch in the perspective gave the sense that the viewers were spending the exact same amount of time as the character in the film. For that scene, one second in the film would mean one second in reality. The tension that came from that part was what would catch the audience's eyes. In other words, not being able to grab the audience's interest with that tension would mean that the audience's expectations would plummet.

Footage that kept going on without any edits had to be 'crazily' reliant on the actor's acting. The skills of the actor would solely decide the quality of the final product.

Actually, Sora was worried a lot before the shoot. It wasn't a scene where Maru kept sitting down but one where he had to constantly move. Moreover, there were no lines or any other actors in the scene.

One actor had to fill the screen for two minutes without a voice and had to make it not look boring. She started off the shoot thinking that the whole premise was a joke. She originally planned to take a shot at it a few times and then split up the scenes if the progress was too slow. Time was one thing, but she had to keep the actor from getting exhausted.

Contrary to her expectations though, a single take was all that was needed. It wasn't a scene that just scraped by without making mistakes. It was the ideal picture. Honestly, she didn't expect Maru to do so

well. She did have expectations, and although trivial mistakes were unacceptable in long takes, she decided to make compromises and go to the next.

“Here.”

Sora pressed the spacebar. This part was when Maru was quietly eating, taken diagonally from the back. Sora almost cheered out loud when she saw this part, where she could see a part of Maru’s face from the side.

Sora requested one thing from Maru: to express the main character who doesn’t want to go to school with his whole body. It was easy to say, but expressing that with just a single swear word and a few actions was definitely not simple. Even someone clueless about film would know that. She asked him to do that because she had a lot of expectations of him, despite knowing the fact that it might be impossible. Yet Maru answered her with the greatest result possible.

Maru’s gaze into the lens at the last part of the long take was good, but she could say with confidence that the part where he quietly chewed and swallowed food was clearly the best. It portrayed the depressing current state of the main character. Once the audience sees the bullying at the school, the audience would see an overlap with Maru who was eating very unpleasantly. This was the ideal prelude that planted a mysterious unease in the viewer.

“Now we just have to shoot you changing clothes and leaving the house.”

“Is that it for today?”

Sora nodded at Maru’s question. She originally expected several hours for the shoot, but it ended just 30 minutes after they came to her house. If the end result was not up to par, she would retake it over and over again, but since the first shoot was this good, she did not get the desire to shoot it again. But even so, she did ask just in case.

“Maru-seonbae. What do you think about doing it again? Do you think you can do better?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I have perfect control over myself. I think that one just now was pretty good though. I was pretty absorbed in it.”

“Then that’s fine.”

“Are you really fine with just one take?”

“Yes. Retaking doesn’t necessarily guarantee that I’ll get something good, and I really like this cut. I can feel your breath from the screen.”

“Don’t put me on a pedestal. You won’t get anything.”

“I really don’t do things like that. However, I do have to say what’s good is good. Don’t you think so too, Ando-seonbae?” Sora asked as she looked at Ando.

Ando would probably agree since he got to watch Maru from up close through the camera.

“It might be somewhat off for me to say this, but I don’t think we’ll get anything better than it. I just feel like that. When I was shooting you from the front, I felt stifled, and that was the first time I felt

something like that. It felt like everything just fell into place. Anyway, I'm not Maru, so I can't say anything about the acting, but I think this is the best we can do. If you tell me to do that again, I don't think we'll get the same thing."

Sora was slightly surprised by Ando saying something so serious. The seonbae that was so opposed to shooting a film at first was talking about the shoot with such a serious face. She felt proud and touched. At that moment, she saw Ando-seonbae massaging his left arm.

"Ah! Wait. I'll give you some plasters. Let's take a 10-minute break! Maru-seonbae are you okay with that?"

"I don't mind. Rather than that, look after his wrist. It'd be a big problem if the camera director is ill," Maru said.

Sora agreed with him and went to the bedroom to find a plaster.

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The shoot was very short, but the immersion was definitely different; Maru thought that as he looked at the script.

Dramas required long shoots. The shortest was around three hours, and sometimes a shoot would take a whole day. However, to be specific, the combined time of the shoots wasn't that long. That was because he didn't appear that much since he was a supporting character. He spent most of his time waiting. A short burst of a shoot followed by a long blank. The time he was absorbed into his character was extremely short. Also, the duration of that immersion was short as well. There were many cases where he just had one line or a short exclamation.

However, the film was different. He was the main character. The camera solely focused on him. That tension and pressure; as well as the black body of the camera and the transparent lens made him feel like he was on stage. It felt like the atmospheric pressure increased, his five senses became more sensitive. During Twilight Struggles, he got absorbed to the point that he lost himself, but back then, it felt more like he was being dragged along. He couldn't fully control his acting back then and had to have Jiseok step in and help him out.

It wasn't that he was perfect now. However, he definitely had a better and more precise understanding of how a shoot progressed. He now had the room to think about the camera, the director, the staff, as well as the position of the props naturally on top of being absorbed in acting. It seemed that shooting with other people around his physical age did give him some mental stability. Above all, this shoot didn't have money on the stakes. This allowed him to focus on acting more than he expected.

"Maru-seonbae. I'm thinking that you should walk out like this. What do you think?"

Sora asked for his opinion as she walked out the door. Being able to consult and tune the film with the director. It was a different experience, and also a good opportunity to learn about how a director sees the film. He realized just how much it helped him study directing when he directly interfered with the directing of the film itself. Miso probably had him help out the film production club for this experience.

Of course, everyone here was an amateur so there was a tendency for everyone to get stuck on the same, unfamiliar problem, but discussing with the others in order to solve that problem helped him expand his thought processes as well.

Actors had to get absorbed in acting and portray someone else through acting, but a director would have to think about how to portray that acting. It seemed that it was good to consider the perspective of the director for a more varied style of acting.

“Why don’t I crumple the back of my shoes?”

“Let’s try both. One where you are wearing them properly and the other with the heels crumpled. I feel that crumpling it might feel better, but you never know without seeing it for yourself.”

Maru nodded. You never know without seeing it for yourself - she was right about that.

“Once we do this, we’ll be done with the beginning parts! Let’s go get something nice to eat after this,” Sora said with a smile.

Chapter 562

“What do you think a good film is about?”

“A good film is a good film.”

“That’s too generic.”

“The question is too abstract, so I can’t help it.”

“That’s why you’re no fun, Maru-seonbae. What do you think, Ando-seonbae? What do you think a good film is?”

“A good film? I guess it is something that a lot of people watch, I guess? If many people watch it that would mean there’s a good message and is entertaining, so that would mean that a good film is something that is watched a lot?”

“No way. Then are all the films in this world that aren’t ‘major’ bad films? Because no one watches them?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“If you ask that specifically, I guess I have nothing to say.”

“What the heck.”

Maru quietly ate the fried dumplings during Sora and Ando’s discussion. Sora praised this place for its dumplings in this neighborhood, and indeed, they were really good. It lived up to its reputation. The other members of the film production club, who sat around the table in the living room, didn’t care whether or not their club president and this rookie director were discussing or not and just kept eating. Thinking that they were wise to do so, Maru also moved his hand.

“Maru-seonbae, don’t just keep eating and tell me something.”

“Now what?”

“A good film. Who else would discuss film philosophy in depth if we don’t when we’re the ones making one? All of you, please stop eating and participate in the discussion. The dumplings won’t run away.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. I think they will run away.”

Maru looked at Sora’s face and put some dumplings in his mouth. Crunch - just as he was feeling bliss from the sound of crumbs breaking apart in his mouth, he saw Sora bring the tablecloth. It was placed on top of the fried dumplings which were still giving off some steam.

“Eat after we talk.”

“Aren’t you overusing your authority?”

“I’m worried because you’re all eating like you’re possessed.”

“Let’s rest when we can. Looking after the health of the staff is one of the director’s jobs. Isn’t that true?”

Maru looked at everyone else in the film club. Everyone nodded as though they were waiting. Sora twitched her cheeks before removing the tablecloth again. The 9 seconds of the forced barrier was over.

“Why don’t you talk about it first? About what a good film is,” Maru said to Sora.

“I asked because I’m not sure.”

“You’re saying that you are not sure, so you must be thinking about something, right? Tell us about that. A film follows the ideals of the director, not the actors or the staff. Tell us what you think a good film is. We’ll come up with something after we hear from you.”

“Maru’s really good at talking.”

Ando gave a thumbs up to Maru. Maru did the same back. A treaty made under the shade of the fried dumplings was formed. While Sora organized her words, the men reached out to the fried dumplings in a busy fashion. Eating was the best course of action here.

“To me, I think a good film is... something that makes you watch twice.”

She made a proud smile after saying those words. It seemed that she quite liked her own answer. Maru briefly counted the number of remaining dumplings. There were still quite a lot left. If he wanted to eat in peace, he had to seal this little director’s mouth shut.

“What if the film is not kind to the audience? What if it’s riddled with trivial foreshadows and tricks that only the director can see, making the audience unable to understand if they don’t watch it two or more times?”

“Hm, I guess you can’t call that a good film.”

Sora licked her lips and fell into thought again. Meanwhile, Maru reached out to the kimchi dumplings. The fried dumplings were good, but the moderately sour kimchi dumplings were incredible as well.

“A film with a lesson... is too obvious. Maybe a good movie is a fun movie after all?”

“We want answers, not questions. Also, pass me that pickled radish over there.”

“Hey, everyone’s thinking about this right? You’re going to have to talk after I finish my part; about what makes a good film.”

Sora passed over the pickled radish with a suspicious gaze.

The members of the film production club started looking at each other worriedly.

Maru also sped up his thought process. This picky director probably won’t let everyone off easy. She indirectly mentioned this topic back when they were buying the dumplings from the restaurant. It was as though she was declaring that these dumplings were the fuel for the discussion. If he actually didn’t say anything after eating the dumplings, she might actually start pecking him like a bird. Maru could always run away with the excuse of going to the acting club, but the next shoot was a problem, so he had to end this somehow.

“I’ll be off to the toilet. It’s a small one.”

Maru looked at Sora, who stood up with a smile on her face just as he was about to put a piece of pickled radish in his mouth. Everyone else looked at her like they chewed on something bitter as well.

“Did she really have to say that?”

“I’m sure she was born as a girl because of a mistake when she was supposed to be born as a boy. Minji, do something about your friend.”

Minji, who was in charge of writing everything down, nodded her head without saying anything. This girl was really shy and did not speak a lot. She was the polar opposite of Sora.

“Maru-seonbae, Ando-seonbae, what are you going to do? From the way she’s talking, it looks like she’s going to talk about it for the whole day.”

“True. She held me back for three hours during editing last time. It still gives me the chills when I think about it.”

The members of the film production club, including Ando, all frowned. Maru did not ask what that was about. He could imagine from just their expressions.

“Should we just decide on an answer ourselves and put an end to the conversation?” One of the juniors from the film production club said.

It was a nice idea. Since this was a discussion, Sora should probably stay quiet if the majority of people said the same thing. She might not like that answer and would keep asking more questions about it, but that shouldn’t last that long.

“So, what is a good film in the end?”

And now, the topic, without its owner, was thrown onto the table again. The only thing left now was to come up with an answer that could satisfy Sora.

“Hm.”

“A good film, huh.”

While Maru washed his mouth with some water, the film production club did not say anything. Somehow, the atmosphere turned strange.

“A good film is an interesting film.”

Maru quickly suggested something since he felt that a whole other discussion was about to take place. According to their original plan, everyone had to accept this answer, but everyone tilted their heads in a serious fashion.

“Then what makes something interesting?”

“Interesting is about being interesting, isn’t it? Like laughing. You don’t say it’s interesting when it’s sad.”

“Does that mean that sad films aren’t good films then?”

“Hm, that’s not right. What do you think, Ando-seonbae?”

“Isn’t ‘being interesting’ a combination of many things? You can say that the four major emotions: happiness, wrath, sadness, and pleasure are all interesting things.”

“Then is a good film something that contains a variety of different emotions?”

“If you think of it like that, every film in this world becomes a good one, you know? There aren’t movies that have no emotions in them. There’s no way there’s a movie about a rock as a protagonist or something.”

“That’s true.”

“What do you think, Maru-seonbae?”

The gazes gathered on him. Maru stroked down his face and sighed in a small voice. They had forgotten about their original objective and walked right into the swamp of discussion.

“Hello, people? If we keep doing this, we might have to do this the whole d...”

“What’s this? You’re talking about something interesting while I wasn’t here?”

Sora’s voice could be heard from behind him. Only then did the film production club widened their eyes in surprise, realizing the seriousness of the situation. Maru shook his head in resignation. Sora sat back down.

“I thought about it in the bathroom.... Oh, the bathroom is a really good place to think of ideas. If you can’t think of anything, try going to the bathroom. Anyway, I had an idea about what makes a good film the moment I sat down on the toilet.”

Toilet - Maru scratched his eyebrows as he looked at Sora and Minji who sat next to her. Sora was the one who said those words, but it was Minji whose face turned red. He was reminded of Aram and Jiyeon. Perhaps there were a lot of cases where friends had opposite personalities? Though, compared

to these two, Aram and Jiyeon could be considered to have similar personalities. Sora and Minji were actually polar opposites.

“Ehem, listen carefully. A good film is a touching one. It’s a bit obvious, but don’t you think this is the definition of a good movie?”

“That’s right. It’s a clear answer without a better alternative. Our director is really amazing.”

Maru struck first. At the same time, he signalled everyone else with his eyes. Everyone started agreeing and said that Sora was right.

“Right? A good film has to be a touching one, right?”

“Of course. Well, then. We now know what a good film is about. Let’s strive to produce a touching film in the future.” Maru said as he cleaned up.

Since the shoot was over, he just had to go home now. By agreeing with Sora’s conclusion, the discussion came to an end.

“Do you think that way too, Ando-seonbae? That a good film is a touching one?”

“Well, I do.”

“That’s a rather lukewarm answer.”

Maru signalled Ando. This was a trap. An endless, inescapable battlefield of discussion lay ahead of this road. Treading lightly would delay his golden time to go home. He wanted to prevent that at all costs. Of course, he was all for getting inspiration about the film with constructive discussions. That is, under the condition that he wasn’t here.

“It’s just that it’s not like the film we’re shooting is touching.”

“Hm, isn’t it rather dramatic and touching when the main character stops being bullied?”

“For the main character, probably. But at that point, the audience would probably be focusing their attention on the transfer student. A character they were sympathizing with is getting abandoned by the main character, so getting touched from that is a little....”

Ando just had to tread on the taboo area. Sora’s eyes shone. They shone to the point that it was unpleasant and it seemed that Maru wasn’t going home during sunset.

What a group of inconsiderate young people. Maru looked towards the other members of the film production for help, but they had joined the discussion instead. Having finished preparations for battle, the film production started the unending war.

Maru scratched his eyebrows and looked at the others who were gaining energy. He had forgotten for just a moment. These people refused to shoot a film but did not hate film at all. In fact, their main activities before the shoot began were to watch movies and discuss them. They were given a splendid topic of ‘what makes a film good’, so it was obvious that they fell for the trap.

They were all talking about it with joy. Was this youth? It was so brilliant that it was hard to look at. This old man, who was nearing fifty, felt faint because of their clear eyes. His heart was too weak to endure the heat of youth.

“Then I’ll just take my leave...”

He tried to stand up and leave but was immediately caught. It seemed that they didn’t have any intentions of letting him go. A warm shower, a light dinner with some cold beer, and a soft sofa to finish it off. Wasn’t the best rest for a modern man tapping buttons on the remote control before eventually falling asleep? That dream was being blocked by these passionate youths. Maru felt like his soul was escaping his body.

“A good film is a good film.”

“That’s too abstract!”

“There’s no sincerity in that!”

“That’s right, Maru-seonbae. You are an actor, so you have to give me something better than that!”

Urgh, he felt his head aching. He wanted to run away to the acting club. He wanted to run to the boring shooting location.

“Everyone, a good film is one that makes a lot of profit,” Maru said in a small voice.

“What the heck? I will not accept an answer that’s too tainted by money,” Sora remarked.

“She’s right, that’s going a bit too far. Art isn’t about money.”

Ando shook his head.

“Right. Art is truly art when it’s independent of money. Oh! What about this? A good film is something that’s independent of capital. In that sense, independent movies are good films.”

“No way. There are lots of good commercial films as well. Does that mean that The Godfather is a bad movie? No, right?”

The members of the club spoke one after another.

After listening to the film theory coming out of everyone’s mouths, Maru quietly spoke,

“Uhm, got some soju??”

Everyone looked at him once before continuing their discussion as though nothing had happened.

Maru lied on his side like a pill bug and curled his body.

Man in his forties, dried out by the heat of youth, sleeps here.

“Seonbae! Say something for our film.”

“I think this is an important problem.”

Maru blocked his ears and shook his head.

These were scary people.

Chapter 563

Geunsoo opened the door to the shabby-looking Soondae-gukbap restaurant, the place of his appointment. Two flies buzzed past his ears. The electric fans installed on the two walls of the restaurant made pitiful noises as the fans rotated around. There didn't seem to be any air conditioning. An alleyway split this part of the area into a forest of buildings and a shanty town. Perhaps Seoul was built to show what the gap between the rich and poor was like?

"Over here!"

He saw someone wave from one of the seats inside. Geunsoo smiled and walked over.

"I'm honored that journalist Kim Dongwook has called for me, but isn't this too shabby for an interview?"

"Should we meet in a high-class restaurant next time then?"

"I was just joking, hyung. So this is the restaurant you come to a lot, huh."

"You won't know when this place will disappear."

The lady chopping up spring onions at the table in front of the TV said 'bullshit' in a loud voice as though she had heard what Dongwook just said.

"See that? I'm one of the main sources of income here, and yet that's the treatment I get."

"Your job is to get sworn at though."

"Right. Journalists get sworn at by others. Only then can they live a plentiful life. Journalist Awards and things like that aren't that good since most people that get them are probably injured. Receiving back-hand money and treats to meals while writing is the splendid standard of a journalist. Oh, you haven't eaten yet, have you?"

Dongwook shouted 'one gukbap please!' in a loud voice. A reply came from the kitchen, saying 'shur'. It seemed that the owner here was quite old.

"I heard you're doing a movie?"

"There was no official announcement, so I'm surprised that you know about it already."

"Of course I do. Your president told me everything so that I can release articles at the right time."

"Oh, my president? What does your president do?"

"My boss? I'm guessing he must be looking at some papers while drinking some tea for his health?"

"What a coincidence. My president should be doing business while drinking tea now too. Is that tea perhaps red ginseng tea?"

“What a coincidence indeed. My boss likes red ginseng tea too. He likes to smoke and drink but drinks red ginseng tea for his health. How romantic is that? Moreover, he is so patriotic that he likes to buy alcohol and cigarettes, the two most taxed items in the country. He’s the taxpayer of the year.”

Geunsoo laughed silently. Junmin did say things like that from time to time; that he looked after his health in order to drink and smoke.

“I haven’t seen you lately at the company. Where have you been?”

“Our president Lee Junmin is quite picky, you know? He instructed me to do so many things that I haven’t had time to come to the company. I wonder why I joined JA in the first place. I should’ve just stuck to internet writing.”

“Who was it that liked it when he got a fat paycheck and even an office-tel to live in?”

“That, I must agree. Though, I don’t like how I have to leave the house to smoke.”

“Why don’t you take this opportunity to quit?”

“Why don’t you tell me to die instead? It’s too cruel to tell me to quit smoking when even the strong president Lee can’t do that.”

Just as Dongwook grabbed the cigarette he placed on his ear, the soondae-gukbap came out. Just looking at that steaming food made Geunsoo sweat.

“Try eating it without the additional condiments. It’s really good. Even Maru, who has childish tastes, emptied it in one go, so don’t worry about the smell.”

“Maru might be a kid, but I’m not sure about him having childish tastes.”

“Is that so? Well, I guess that’s true. I subconsciously end up ordering a bottle of rice wine if I eat gukbap with him. If I do, he puts out his glass so boldly. It’s flabbergasting. But what’s even more absurd is that I end up pouring one for him. I want to see him drunk once, but I’ve never gotten the chance.”

“Now that I think about it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Maru drunk. I had a chance to drink with him a few days ago, but his facial color didn’t change at all.”

“Hey, you leaving me out like that? Are actors bullying journalists or what?”

“Suyeon was there too. Should I have called you?”

“She was there too? Then forget it. I’m a bit scared of her.”

“Isn’t ‘scared’ going a little too far even though we belong to the same company?”

“Like you haven’t said the same thing until a while ago. How’s it these days?”

“How’s what these days?”

“What do you mean what? I’m talking about your progress. If you’re going to date someone in the company, then tell me beforehand. Oh, also the marriage announcement.”

“If you keep doing this, I’ll just leave, okay?”

“There you go again. It’s not like you are completely opposed to it.”

“Family members shouldn’t do that.”

“Tell me honestly. Do you really have no thoughts about it at all?”

“At this current state, well, I just got an uncute little sister.”

“You never know what might happen between a man and a woman. Little sister this, little sister that might eventually become honey this, honey that.”

“Why are you doing this to me? Hey, you seemed to be meeting that other journalist frequently these days.”

“That other journalist? Who?”

“Miss Choi Miyeon from Sharon, was it? The pretty journalist who’s wasted on you.”

“Her? Don’t make me laugh. She’s a junior of mine, and I’m hanging out with her only because of some headaching matters. After that’s done, I’m not going to meet her again.”

“A certain someone said that junior this, junior that will become honey this, honey that.”

“Sheesh. Do the people at JA drink olive oil for breakfast? Why are they so good with their tongues?”

“You aren’t better off. I mean, you belong to JA too.”

They stopped talking and Geunsoo focused on eating for a while. He didn’t add any additional condiments, but the savory taste filled his mouth.

“How about some drinks to go with it?”

“I brought my car, so I can’t. Didn’t you bring your car as well?”

“I’ll be the only one drinking then, so take me home later.”

“What about the opposite?”

“What a cruel guy.”

“I can say the same thing to you. Also, drinking when the sun is still high up in the sky is a bit, you know. Plus, looking for alcohol when you aren’t supposed to be drinking is negligence of duty.”

“It’s already well-known in the industry that drinking one glass increases business efficiency. Even a renowned medical journal talked about it.”

“Which medical journal?”

“Kim Dongwook medical journal.”

“What a quack medical journal.”

After finishing off the food, Geunsoo made two cups of stick coffee before coming back to the table. After giving one to Dongwook, he drank a sip.

“But hey, what are you really doing these days? I feel like it’s even harder to see you than when you weren’t in JA.”

“I told you. The president has me do a lot of things.”

“Junmin-seonbae told me the opposite though.”

“What did he say?”

“That he’s not telling you to do anything because you look busy. Apparently, he’s not interfering with your work because of the freelancer-like contract. What do you think about that?”

Dongwook drank the coffee without saying a word. Geunsoo noticed that something was going on.

“Are you still chasing that president of the production company?”

“That’s my normal schedule. It’s still one of the big topics for journalists who have set foot into the film industry.”

“The police still haven't announced anything, have they?”

“There are a few, but they’re all useless. The individual investors who got ripped off by that company have been nagging the involved department for nearly a year now, so the police must be having a hard time too.”

“Maybe he fled the country?”

“That’s a big possibility, but one of the rumors floating around says that it’s likely that he’s still in the country. That he’s not getting caught because some bigshot is looking after him.”

“Looking after a scammer like that?”

“The investment funds from the forgone movie are mostly from individual investors, right? It’s almost 10 billion won too. 10 billion isn’t a small amount to hide a criminal. We live in a world where murders happen because of a million won.”

“The people that shot like mad didn’t get anything out of it too. How sad.”

“You and Sooil were just unlucky. But at least you got a commercial movie again, right? Ahn Sungjae from TTO will mean that it’ll go past the break-even point at least. Just take the number of his fans and multiply it by two. How many views is that?”

“That’s why I’m going to rely on Sungjae this time.”

“Yeah right. You and Yang Ganghwan are both lunatics crazy for acting, aren’t you?”

“Journalist, your selection of words is too beautiful.”

“I know a lunatic when I see one. Are you surprised by my precise choice of words?”

“Fine, I lost. I shouldn’t have tried.”

Geunsoo smiled and put down the paper cup.

“But that’s not what you’re busy with. The journalist from Sharon shouldn’t be chasing the 10 billion won scam incident, so, what are you two up to?”

“All I can say is that I’m trying to help out a junior with a just mindset. That girl is reducing my lifespan by the second. It’s a vague problem to release to the public, but she keeps going at it like mad. Thanks to her, only I’m having a hard time.”

“Is it something I shouldn’t know about?”

“It’s not like that, but it’s not something good to hear as you’re working in the same pool.”

“So it’s about actors, huh? Some scandal?”

“Scandals look cute in comparison. Once dear journalist Choi Miyeon procures evidence and witnesses, it’ll become really noisy. Well, actually, it’s likely that it’ll be put under the bus like before. Some actors will have to leave the industry for good.”

“Sounds like a problem with sexual service?”

“Good intuition.”

“The only things of issue in this field are either sex tapes or sexual services. A female journalist is digging into this?”

“She’s a fearless kid, that’s for sure. She doesn’t get at all that things will go really bad if she takes the wrong step. You should know that many actor agencies also have ties with mafia groups. There was one a while ago right? An actor who was threatened regarding switching agencies.”

“There was.”

“The world sure has gotten scary. Before, when you talked about the mafia, they were mostly just big burly guys who let their fists do the talking. Of course, there were some who went around swinging sashimi knives. Anyway, it was visible violence, right? Usually, there was no need to go as far as swinging around sharp objects. That was why it was usually a matter of getting beaten up a couple of times. If you get beaten, you can go to the police. Of course, there would be a few problems after that, but at least it didn’t threaten your life.”

Dongwook smiled bitterly.

“But what about now? The thing in the mafia’s hands is not a sashimi knife but money. You are at least better off if they have sashimi knives. At least you can try to dodge it if you see it coming. With money, you can’t do that. You can’t see it, yet it strangles your neck. Legally, too.”

“Do you think that actor can return to the TV media?”

“Probably not. The opposing agency is pretty big. If that agency declares that programs would not have access to the actors in their agency if that actor showed up on TV, who would the producer of that program listen to? People use money fairly, as well as underhandedly. How can an individual win against that? Anyone other than a top star wouldn’t last.”

“I’m not sure about the TV media, but it’s quite a dirty place, isn’t it?”

"It is. Advertisers are businesses while the mafia are the ones who decide which actors go where. Actors are powerless to do anything about it. In that sense, perhaps people like Suyeon are wise instead. At least she's created her own net of safety."

"Maybe. But is this different to the sexual service accident from before?"

"Take what I'm going to tell you from now on as all lies. Don't talk about it anywhere either."

Geunsoo nodded.

"You know Lee Miyoon right?"

"Of course I do."

"We're acting under the assumption that that woman is the broker. There's nothing I can say for sure since all I have is circumstantial evidence, but if the things we found out until now turn out to be true, it'll become interesting."

"Doesn't sound that interesting to me."

Geunsoo finished the remaining coffee in one go before standing up.

"Where are you going?"

"To pick up my uncute junior."

"Junior who?"

"Maru. The director wanted to meet him."

"The director of the film you're about to shoot?"

"Yes."

"Maru was cast in it as well?"

"No. He just wants to see the boy personally. Are you going to stay here longer?"

"I also have an appointment in a while. I'm going to loiter around here before I go there though."

"Then I'll take my leave first. Also, if it's dangerous, be careful out there."

"Don't worry about that. Unlike missy junior with a just mindset, I'm very worried about myself. I'll go find you for an interview not too long from now, so try to come up with some things to talk about. I'll write you up a good one."

"Isn't that supposed to be the interviewer's job?"

"Let's not mind that when we're the same family. Oh yeah. What's your relationship with Mr. Hong Janghae?"

"Legally, I'm his son."

"I see."

“If that dude went around doing something, please tell me about it. I’ll tell you all I know.”

“That escalated quickly. I’m asking because I was reminded of an interview I did with him. You have a splendid father, eh?”

“He’s splendid, in many ways. Let me take my leave now.”

Geunsoo made a bitter smile before leaving the restaurant.

It was 2 p.m. on a Sunday. According to the schedule, Maru’s shoot should have finished by now. Geunsoo got in his car and started it up. It should take around 30 minutes to get to the middle school where the shoot takes place.

Chapter 564

“Are you a person from the school?”

“No. I’m here to meet producer Park Hoon who’s shooting here.”

“Ah, I see.”

The youth nodded before making way while gesturing to someone. Geunsoo parked his car before getting off. The school parking lot had a few vans, presumably belonging to some of the actors.

There was no one on the school field, so they were probably all shooting inside. He walked inside the school building through the right entrance. The 1st floor was very quiet, so he took the stairs to the 2nd floor. He started hearing voices halfway up the stairs. It was someone’s bold voice. It seemed that the shoot was still going on. Geunsoo walked close to the wall worried that he might interrupt them. He saw some staff members surrounding the monitor in the corridor and in the middle of them was producer Park Hoon. He got to know Park Hoon through director Choi Joonggeun not too long ago. The guy who lives a tiring life and refuses all ‘requests’ from agencies - that was Joonggeun’s introduction of Park Hoon. After that, they rarely met because they worked in different parts of the industry, but still maintained contact.

He leaned against the wall and watched the shoot for a long time. He saw some students absorbed in acting through the classroom window. He also saw Maru, sitting in the corner of the classroom. It was actually quite weird to see him in glasses.

“Okay, let’s take a break,” Park Hoon said.

The quiet corridor became noisy in an instant. The staff, who were crammed in the narrow corridor, sighed in relief and scattered around. Geunsoo smiled at the staff members who glanced at him as they walked past before approaching Park Hoon.

“Director.”

“Oh, you’re here. Looks like you have lost some weight since the last time I saw you.”

“I have to reduce my weight.”

“Working on something?”

“Just one.”

“A film?”

“Yes.”

“Joonggeun, that fella, always said that you’d become big one day. Do you think this will be the piece that will make it happen?”

“Actually, I’m not that interested in popularity. If it goes well, it’s good, and if it doesn’t, I’ll be satisfied as long as I can enjoy acting.”

“Investors wouldn’t want to hear that.”

“That’s why I’m telling you about it in a small voice.”

Park Hoon laughed in a small voice as well.

“So? What brings you here? Doesn’t look like you’re here to see me.”

“I am here to see you, on the side anyway.”

“Well, thanks for that. Coming here to see me on the side. So, why are you here?”

“To take him.”

Geunsoo pointed at Maru, who was looking at the script in his seat.

“Han Maru, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“You two know each other?”

“We belong to the same agency. He’s a junior at school before that though.”

“Gimme a sec. Where did Maru belong again?”

“JA. Of course, that makes me a JA person too.”

“Right. The kid under Lee Junmin. Is the president doing well?”

“He’s doing a little too well that it’s making us tired.”

“The people who live busily are mostly healthy. Folks like me, who move busily once in a blue moon due to work usually die from over exhaustion. Is the president still finding new talent?”

“I’m not so sure. He likes working by himself, but I think he meets them at least once or twice a year. He met Maru like that too.”

“His eyes for actors are incredible. He keeps picking up gems in this vast land like picking up rocks. If he sets his mind to it, he’ll probably take all the gems for himself.”

Geunsoo stayed quiet while Park Hoon gave out orders and just looked around. The shooting location was filled with vitality. Lots of equipment and even more numerous people. This was hard to see at indie movie shoots where they had a limited budget.

Young people, who seemed to be actors, walked in front of the director. They glanced at him, curious about who the new guy next to the director was. Geunsoo smiled and looked at them. The people that met eyes with him greeted him awkwardly before walking away.

“Looks like you aren’t popular at all.”

“I have no ties with dramas after all.”

“Why don’t you ask the president to get you one? With his connections, you’ll be cast in a mini-series from the three main stations in an instant.”

“I like films for now. Before, I was a die-hard fan of plays, but ever since I shot a movie, I fell in love with it.”

“You’re in a different league, you’re saying?”

“Don’t people value drama actors more highly these days?”

“If it is about the money, it does look like dramas will surpass film soon, but there’s a difference in mindset that will never be overcome. Especially among actors.”

“Fortunately, I don’t have anything like that.”

“That, I know. If you were that kind of person, you’d have probably splashed drinks at me on the day you met me with Joongjin.”

“Looks like I’ll have to be careful with my words in front of you next time. When’s Maru’s scene going to finish?”

“I think it’ll take about an hour, give or take. Since you’re here, why don’t you take a look around? Even if you decided to rot in the film industry for life, you won’t know what will happen. You might end up working with me.”

“If that happens, please take care of me.”

“If it’s JA Production, I’m the one who’s thankful.”

Geunsoo accepted a cold drink from Park Hoon.

“How’s Maru?”

“He’s good. He’s a pro.”

“In what sense?”

“In the sense that he does just enough for the money he gets.”

“Hahaha.”

“I’m not saying it in a bad sense. He knows what kind of role he has. It’s not like he doesn’t have any desires, but he doesn’t think about overdoing things so that he can rise up. Also, it’s quite fun to see him from time to time. He’s the boss at acting.”

“Boss? What do you mean?”

Park Hoon pointed at the three people in the corner of the classroom. Maru, a boy with a sharp-looking face, and a girl in her early twenties were sitting in a group. Maru seemed to be at the center.

“If you keep watching them, Maru really knows how to match the others. At first, I thought that was just his personality, but whaddya know? I found out that he’s acting excited on purpose after I talked to him.”

Just then, laughter could be heard from the three of them. The boy with the sharp-looking face grabbed Maru by the collar and shook him. Maru, who was grabbed, laughed like a little prankster.

“He knows that that’s what’s good for him. To be precise, he knows that it benefits him,” Geunsoo said.

Two years ago, Miso called him excitedly about being an acting instructor at Woosung High and then one day called him again in an angry voice. The situation was quite simple. A conflict occurred in the acting club, and Maru just solved it in one go. Geunsoo asked her why it wasn’t a good thing since it was solved. When he heard his method though, it wasn’t something to laugh about.

Maru’s ways were quite extreme. There was a quite commonly used expression that went ‘you need an external enemy to put down internal conflict’. Maru literally became that external enemy to extinguish the conflict within the acting club. The people that growled at each other became of one mind and turned their hostility to him. A boy in his 1st year of high school did not hesitate at all when breaking apart his own personal relationships. Even adults had a hard time making right of wrong relationships. His lack of hesitation, his choice, and his actions - Maru decided to be the devil’s advocate, and as a result of that, the relationship between everyone else, except him, became sturdier.

When he heard that, Geunsoo thought that it was quite like him. On the day he first met Maru, on that rooftop, and during that get-together, he had a brief glimpse at what was inside him. A kid who was realistically worried about an unrealistically far future. Someone who was strangely fixed on efficiency. The fighting spirit or recklessness usually possessed by boys around his age did not exist inside him, and he was only thinking about how to stably gather income.

He had definitely changed a lot now compared to two years ago, but he still did not hesitate to put himself down for the environment. Some might call it a sacrifice, but in Geunsoo’s mind, that was definitely not it. During the acting club incident two years ago, if Maru received practical damages as a result of his actions, Maru would not have played the devil’s advocate. It might be a cold evaluation of him, but back then, the acting club was perhaps just one of the ants on the road, which he could give up at any moment without any consequences to his feelings. Of course, while the individuals that were a part of that club might be important, the frame that was known as the acting club was probably useless to him.

“He’s an interesting kid. He doesn’t try to look cool. He’s not doing that in order to look good. Should I call him a natural? He’s just naturally used to doing things like that. It’s like how I smile at my president even if I don’t want to.”

“He’s a realistic kid after all. Wasn’t there a problem at the beginning of the shoot?”

“There was. The boy next to Maru is called Dongho. He has decent skills, but we couldn’t make progress with the shoot because he froze up. I watched him and thought about calling him out separately to talk to him about it, but Maru struck first.”

“What did he do?”

“He shouted a bunch of swear words out the window, saying that it was vocal exercise.”

“Oh my lord.”

“Back then, I thought he was a little weird in the head. But when I watched him, it turned out that he’s really smart, eh? Should I say that he thinks deeply? Or that he uses his brain in a sneaky way. Thanks to that, I grab him from time to time to talk.”

“You found a good conversation partner huh.”

“But it really feels quite weird to talk to him. Maybe I’m an idiot for complaining in front of a high school kid when I’m over forty.”

“He’s someone who even talks to sir Yoon Moonjoong over a drink.”

“Seriously?”

“He’s one of the drinking friends that he cherishes.”

“Now I feel even more that I should get closer to him. One of my wishes was to shoot a drama with senior Yoon too. Maybe I’ll get to talk to him if I ask him?”

“Sure, you can try. I’m not sure it’ll work on him though.”

Park Hoon laughed silently before waving his hand. Geunsoo also knew that he was joking. He was someone who detested ‘requests’. Of course, he’d probably welcome a light meeting to get close.

“Can I watch while you shoot?”

“Sure. It’d be even better if you can teach them. There are many cases where hidden experts teach young disciples.”

Geunsoo shrugged before stepping back. Park Hoon looked at his watch before telling everyone that they should start getting ready. When the staff members around him talked into the walkie-talkie a few times, the scattered staff members and actors all returned to the classroom.

Geunsoo found the face of someone who he wanted to avoid and quickly turned away. However, it seemed that he couldn’t escape that woman’s field of vision.

“Geunsoo-oppa. What brings you here?”

‘She was the teacher-in-training, right.’ Seeing Suyeon wearing formal attire, Geunsoo made an awkward smile.

“Are you here to see me?”

“You know that I’m not.”

“Acting embarrassed, are you? How cute.”

“Why don’t you trust me?”

Suyeon smiled before leaning forward towards his face. Geunsoo became slightly flustered and took a step back. He could get back at her if she used words, but he was defenseless if she attacked him physically like this.

“What a pity. If there weren’t any eyes around, I would’ve left a hickey.”

"Phew....."

"I'm happy that I'm getting to know your weaknesses, Geunsoo-oppa. But what really brings you here? Are you here for me? Or is it for him?"

Suyeon pointed at Maru. Geunsoo nodded.

"How cruel. You came to meet a boy instead of a cute girl like me."

"I get it so get going already. The shoot must be starting soon."

"They're still getting ready."

"Then go check your script or something."

"I can recite everything, including other people’s lines without a single mistake."

Geunsoo sighed in a small voice. It was easier to deal with her when he completely ignored her before, but now that they had gotten a little closer, he felt like she was leading him by the nose. Not to make excuses, but at times like these, he regretted not dating because he was busy. He honestly didn’t know how to deal with women like her.

“You’ll hate me if I tease you too much, so I’ll let you off here. Then, see you later.”

Suyeon waved her hand and walked into the classroom. Geunsoo tried to put on a poker face in order to endure the gazes of the staff who looked at him with weird gazes. He then met eyes with Maru inside the classroom, and Maru smiled as though he understood everything.

‘I suddenly feel exhausted.’

Geunsoo crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

It was time to remind himself of the scariness of creatures known as women.

Chapter 565

“Who’s the person next to the director? They seem close,” Joomin tilted her head as she said that.

“A person from the TV station, probably. Rather than that, noona, let’s try the lines over here,” Dongho said while picking up the script.

Joomin, who was looking at the director, turned her attention to the script.

“You two can do it by yourself for now. I need to send a text.”

Maru leaned back in the chair and started typing. After sending the text, he got a reply soon. It was from Geunsoo.

-Don't worry about me and just focus on the shoot.

Maru put his phone in his pocket and joined in the read-through. In the middle of their practice, Joomin suddenly interrupted.

“To think that the episode after the one about first love is about bullying, huh. That changed quickly.”

“Maybe it's to show that it's not a sweet youth love story. But noona, who's going to be the bullied kid?”

“I'm not sure. Apparently, they're a one-off character for episode 15.”

“I wonder who it is.”

“Don't you think it's likely that they're going to bring someone from an academy?”

Maru listened to the conversation between Dongho and Joomin as he scanned his script. As the scene wasn't that long, there was no room for mistakes. If the shoot progressed without a hitch, it would end in around 30 minutes.

“Maru, don't you know something?”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

Joomin looked at him expectantly. Dongho was the same.

“I don't know anything either.”

“Really? I thought you of all people would know something.”

“How would I know anything about the drama's production schedule?”

“You talk to the director from time to time, don't you? Weren't you talking about the drama?”

“No, it'd be tiring to talk about work during breaks. The director is human too.”

“Then what do you talk about? From what I saw last time, you talked for quite a long time over a cup of coffee.”

“Just about this and that. Fishing, real estate, hidden good restaurants, and stuff like that. We just talk about what's going on in the world.”

“Really?”

“Don't think that the director is hard to handle. He only acted scary in order to scold us a bit. He's a soft man at heart.”

At that moment, they saw director Park Hoon shout at the assistant director. Joomin and Dongho narrowed their eyes and looked at Maru.

“He’s only like that to the assistant director. You know the saying that goes: a lion pushes its cubs off the cliff to raise them strong.”

“I still find it hard to talk to him. Of course, I’m sure that he’s a good person since he listens to us a lot.”

“He’s a superior in terms of work after all. It can’t be helped. It’s not like he’s someone who would push you away just because you approach him though, so if you want to talk to him, try buying him a cup of coffee. He’ll ask what’s up.”

Maru looked at Joomin after saying those words. Joomin nodded in understanding.

“Hey, hey. There they are,” Dongho said as he tapped on Maru’s shoulder.

Maru turned his gaze to where Dongho was pointing. While the shoot was on a small break, some people came from YBS. It was the reporter and shooting team of the main program for YBS’s entertainment channel ‘The Entertainment Show.’

“It’s Nam Joongyeon,” Dongho said.

Maru remembered that man as well. When he was shooting ‘The Witness’ a while back, he came to the set. He found out then that he was one of the crucial reporters in ‘The Entertainment Show’. Joongyeon, wearing a casual suit, was interviewing the 3 main characters of New Semester.

To the left was Ahn Yeseul, the main-main character, and next to her was Kang Giwoo, followed by Park Jichan. The shooting staff for New Semester had left the scene temporarily so as to not disrupt them.

“I wonder what they’re talking about,” Joomin said, resting her chin on her hands.

“They’re probably being asked why the drama is performing well and stuff like that. Ah, I wonder why we don’t have any interviews. Those three look like they’re doing a lot,” Dongho complained.

It had been nearly two months since New Semester went on air. It showed a steady increase in viewing rate until the 4th episode, which was aired on the last week of March, and at the start of April, the viewing rate surpassed ‘Youth Generation’ which was aired by RBS. These two dramas were similar in the sense that they centered around a girl, but Youth Generation focused on looking into the girl’s heart, while New Semester focused on provoking sympathy by talking about many different topics.

To resolve the conflict between generations. These were the words from writer Lee Hanmi, who was in charge of the script for New Semester. Her starting point seemed to have been finding something the two generations could sympathize on. Perhaps thanks to that, New Semester received good reviews from both the student demographic as well as the parent demographic.

‘There are many people who state that they’re parents on the forums after all.’

It was natural for a TV company to promote their own drama when it was doing well. The fact that Nam Joongyeon was here proved that those three were popular.

“I want to do the interview too.”

“Go and ask if you can join,” Maru said.

Dongho snorted.

“Don’t you think they would call us?”

Joomin looked at the shooting team for The Entertainment Show, slightly expectant. Maru thought that there was a possibility. It wasn’t anything special, but they would definitely go on the program as a ‘no-name actor’ who shouts ‘Fighting!’ at the end with a group photo. Whether that could be called an interview was a different question.

“I think it’s almost over now.”

Maru saw Joongyeon stand next to the three actors. It seemed that he was about to finish the shoot with a closing comment. Some people from The Entertainment Show team talked with Park Hoon. Something along the lines of a ‘thank you for your cooperation’ conversation was probably going on between them.

“Actors, please come here.”

A staff member from The Entertainment Show team called the rest of the actors. Joomin and Dongho stood up excitedly. Even Okseon, who had been sitting down quietly this whole time, combed her hair before walking over to the main actors. Maru put on the glasses that he had taken off. From the way they were called as a group, it was definitely not an interview.

“Stand here, here and here. Can you bend your knees just a little? Yes, yes. That looks good.”

The three main characters stood at the front while the four supporting characters stood behind them. Maru looked at Dongho and Joomin through the corner of his eyes. They looked slightly disappointed, but they soon smiled and raised their fists in the air.

“Well, then. Once I give you the signal, shout ‘New Semester, fighting!’ Follow that with ‘Give us lots of love!’ with Energy, okay?”

They shouted fighting at the cameraman’s signal.

“That was good. Thank you all.”

That was it. Maru yawned slightly before returning to the classroom.

“They should’ve let us talk a bit as well.”

“I looked forward to it too. What a pity.”

The two lied down on the desk as they spoke. Maru patted both of them on the back.

“Looks like Suyeon-seonbae gets an interview of her own.”

Maru saw the team from The Entertainment Show switch places, taking Suyeon with them since she didn’t appear in the next part. It seemed that her interview was going to be on the show to show a contrast between her and the child actors. The noisy shooting location became quiet again. The staff, who were resting, returned to their places and started preparing for the shoot.

“It would’ve been good if everyone could do it. Now, I’m feeling sorry.”

Giwoo said that as he approached. Joomin waved her hand and said that that wasn’t true.

“Noona, I’ll try telling them next time. That they should interview us together.”

“Don’t push it. They have their own circumstances. It’s only right that the main characters do the interview,” Joomin said as she looked at Giwoo.

Giwoo made an apologetic expression.

“Dongho, when they come for an interview next time, I’ll try to sneak you in there.”

“Hey, hey. You’ll get scolded.”

“You never know. They might let us go thinking that we’re cute. You have a good sense of humor after all. Once people find out, they would definitely approach you for an interview first.”

“Well, I do have a good sense of humor.”

“I hope that we can do the interview together next time.”

“True.”

Giwoo’s eyes headed towards Maru. Maru smiled and just looked back. Giwoo faintly smiled without saying anything before turning around.

“Giwoo has good eyes.”

Maru just smiled at Dongho, who shrugged. Just when they were planning to prepare for the shoot after talking, Maru met eyes with Okseon, who was sitting at a table far away. Okseon flinched before turning her head around.

“Did you two get into a fight?” Joomin asked worriedly.

It seemed that she saw that just now.

“I kinda let my tongue slip in front of her.”

“You should get that resolved quickly.”

“Yes, noona, I will do that. Okseon is a good girl so she should accept my apology.”

“Yeah, she probably would. Oh, yeah. I didn’t talk about it last time, right? I asked Okseon if she would eat dinner with us like you told me, and she accepted for the first time.”

“Thanks to that, I had an unpleasant time eating. Okseon, that kid doesn’t say a word, and Joomin-noona had to keep talking.”

Dongho sighed.

“But it was quite unexpected, you know?”

“What was?”

“Okseon didn’t say much back then, but everything she did talk about was related to you. I thought that she might be interested in you or something, but from the looks of it, that doesn’t seem to be the case. Maybe she has a hard time dealing with you.”

Maru nodded before giving Okseon a glance. He couldn't see her expression since she had her head turned away, but Maru could imagine what she felt. She probably asked how Maru acted normally. She probably tried to find out what kind of person Maru was, and the replies that Dongho and Joomin gave her probably made her feel even more chaotic.

"Actors, please get ready."

They returned to their seats when a staff member made the announcement. Maru put the script inside the desk drawers before walking over to Okseon.

"Let's not concern ourselves with each other so much. I didn't do anything wrong to you, did I?"

"Uh, yeah."

"So, did you decide to talk to Giwoo about it?"

"No, I thought it would be better if I improved myself."

"If you did, then I guess that's that taken care of. Let's get along together in the future, okay? As coworkers."

He lightly waved at Okseon before sitting down. He felt Okseon's gaze but did not bother looking back. She was a smart kid, so she should have understood the meaning behind his words. She probably wouldn't see him again with a stiff expression again.

"Did you apologize?" Joomin asked with a bright smile.

"Yes, noona," Maru replied.

* * *

"If it's about JA Production, I guess I can't leave out talking about president Lee Junmin."

"This is why being a part of JA is sometimes quite pressuring. They always talk about the president."

"Haha, we can't help it. He's one of the few agency CEOs who is getting a lot of attention from the public. Everyone that went through his hands became high class actors, so we can't help it."

"Hm, does that make me one of the high class actors as well?"

"You always were, Miss Suyeon."

"Really? Looks like I should thank the president."

Nam Joongyeon flipped over a page.

"Mr. Yoo Sooil, who's been getting a lot of attention recently, also belongs to JA, doesn't he?"

"Yes. You can look forward to his future."

"That same person recently revealed that you acted incredibly badly when drunk in an interview with another media. There's even a rumor that you cry in a cute way."

"I do? Oh, how embarrassing. I'm not good at drinking. I just drink to go with the flow, and I believed that I didn't have any bad drunk habits until now. I wonder why no one told me about it."

"Maybe it was because you were cute."

Suyeon covered her mouth and laughed before slapping Joongyeon's arm lightly.

"But that might be Sooil's lie. Sooil still can't drink because he's a minor."

"He testified that he heard about it from another senior actor."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Actually, we have a voice recording of Miss Suyoen's cute drunk speech. I will play this for a brief moment during the broadcast."

"Please don't. It's really embarrassing."

"Misters, pay attention. It will only last a brief moment."

Joongyeon flipped over the page after that. Suyeon raised her hand slightly.

"Please wait."

"Ah, yes. Miss Suyeon."

"I'm a bit thirsty."

Suyeon drank some water. Forcefully smiling was definitely taxing. She knew that only a few seconds of this long interview would show up in the actual program, but she had to act as a cheerful and bright actress since she wanted that brief moment to last as long as possible.

"Sorry about that. Please continue."

"Okay, then I'll start where we left off."

Obvious questions came after that. She barely held herself back from yawning, and the interview eventually ended. It was an interview in name only. Since they interviewed a bunch of kids who weren't good with words, they probably lacked content for editing and seemed to have decided to fill up the rest with this interview.

"Thank you for the interview."

"Thank you too."

She felt tired. Suyeon stood up before walking over to the classroom next door, where the shoot was in progress. It was a short scene, so it should have finished by now. Just as she had expected, they were cleaning up and getting ready to move.

"I wonder where my darling Mr. Geunsoo has gone."

He was definitely someone who would leave without saying his goodbyes. She yawned slightly and leaned against the wall. Just then, Nam Joongyeon, who followed her out of the classroom, looked inside before walking in. She wondered who he was going to. Breaking her expectation that he would go

to one of the main actors, the person Joongyeon stopped in front of was Maru, who was getting ready to go home after the shoot. With her curiosity piqued, Suyeon quietly walked inside the classroom.

“I was right. I was a little confused because you were wearing glasses, but you saw me in *The Witness*, didn't you?”

Those were Nam Joongyeon's words.

Chapter 566

Nam Joongyeon had a good memory. His colleagues even called him the memorization king. There were a lot of cases where he benefited from his good memory, and many of the people around him said that they were envious of his innate talent, but in actuality, this memory wasn't something he was born with. When he was young, he was very forgetful to the point that he was nicknamed a traffic light.

The event that triggered his memory to become good was when he started his work as a reporter. He worked in a limited ecosystem known as the entertainment industry, but there were still an uncountable amount of people who worked in that industry. After trial and error, Joongyeon realized that a good memory was the most important thing when it came to living as a reporter.

There wasn't a more incompetent interview than one where the same question was repeated. The important questions had to be repeated, but the interviewer's job was to include other questions so that the interviewee stayed interested in the interview.

Joongyeon studied other people when he started working at this job. At the same time, he always looked at the previous interviews of the person he was about to interview and summarized them. He memorized the things he summarized in the car so that he wouldn't have to look at the interview sheet during the interview as much as possible, and after repeatedly doing that, he reached a level where he could clearly remember things with a single glance.

As a result of his efforts, he became the main reporter for 'The Entertainment Show', one of the most popular programs on YBS, for 13 years.

However, he started losing passion for his work and fell into mannerism lately. The entertainment industry, which he thought to be a wide world, felt like a cramped aquarium after spending 13 years in it. The faces he saw did not change. His corner of the program 'Star On The Field', was about showing the figure of professional actors during work, so he rarely had any opportunities to meet a new face. He regained some of his energy when the industry was swept by a 'wave of change' and a bunch of child actors became popular, but most of the time, he was talking to close acquaintances about obvious things, so he didn't feel energetic at all.

He could go about interviewing new actors when they were just gaining popularity with pleasure, but once that repeated itself, the new actors would avoid interviews as well. Interviews did take place during programs so the actors could promote their work, but otherwise, interviews did not happen that much.

Of course, 'Star On The Field' was one of the main sub-programs of a program that was really popular, and thanks to that, Joongyeon was able to meet with many of the popular actors and actresses in the country.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons he lost interest.

The so-called 'high-class actors' would become experts at interviews whether they liked it or not. When they were asked difficult questions, they would pause the interview on the spot and openly ask that it be edited out. To prevent such events, the interviewer would tell the interviewee beforehand about the questions being asked, and as a result of that, the interview would become bland. Obvious questions and obvious answers. As a reporter, he would try all sorts of things to make the atmosphere more friendly, but the interview itself would feel dry since the questions had zero nutrition. The memorization skills he had painstakingly acquired had recently become useless as well. What good was extra information when the interview questions were known beforehand? He actually had more fun working with fresh actors who made all sorts of mistakes during the interview. Back then, he had a reason to put an effort in, as well as an objective he wanted to achieve, but none of that existed nowadays.

Moreover, actors had gained a lot of power lately, surpassing industry people. This was thanks to the internet. Before, it would mean the end for an actor's life if an industry personnel cut them off. As the entire TV industry was in cahoots with each other, being abandoned by one place meant being abandoned by all. The TV stations ruled with supreme power over actors and agencies with their right to cast, but the game had changed recently. The moment they tried to control an actor to make them abide by their will, the mass media would rise up. This could be seen from the slave contract incident that happened not too long ago. The celebrity had gained power from the masses through the internet and won against his agency, which was considered impossible until now. We want to watch this person, who are you to stop them? - That was what the masses said.

Actors were the same. On top of that, a whole new market, known as Japan, had appeared, further solidifying the position of the actors. Now, it had become commonplace to delay the entire schedule for a drama in order to scout one actor. There were actors that the director and the writer would have to look good in front of. That was enough to see how high actors' statuses have become.

He had to do interviews with such actors. If he was acquainted with the interviewee, it would be a lot easier, but in the case of actors who couldn't be bothered with interviews, his whole day would become a nightmare. The more arrogant actors would sometimes overhaul the whole question sheet before the interview. At first, his pride fell rock bottom when such a thing happened, but now, he felt nothing. This was why mannerism was scary. It made his emotions dull.

His interview with Suyeon was like that as well. Since he worked at his job for a long time, he could faintly tell what the actor was thinking about. He had gotten tired of imbuing vitality into actors who just did the interview out of duty. If the opponent was smiling out of formality, Joongyeon did not ask sudden unexpected questions. He just did the interview like a play with a plot that was already set in stone.

However, he sometimes met actors who reminded him of his old days when he just joined the industry. The interesting people who gave interesting, and sometimes unexpected, answers to his questions.

Joongyeon looked at Han Maru, who sat in front of him. He remembered the conversation he had with this boy when they first met. It was on the shooting set for the drama 'The Witness', and back then, Joongyeon was exhausted thanks to Joohyun, who acted cold throughout the whole interview. When he heard the production team suggest that they should take an interview from another person to finish

things off, Joongyeon held up the microphone to one of the waiting minor actors who happened to be Maru. The question he asked back then was still vivid in his mind. Why are you trying to become an actor? Without hesitation, Maru replied 'to earn money' to that question.

It was incredibly fresh. New actors these days made their debuts after undergoing meticulous teaching. It had become incredibly rare to be casted from the streets, debut through some magazine and somehow end up on TV.

The new people that entered the industry after being taught everything had terrible answers. Their answers were so boring that it made him wonder if they were new to the industry or veterans of several wars. This was thanks to the education on how to act during an interview, taught by many academies and agencies. Joongyeon felt bitter whenever he heard answers that talked about half-assed acting theories, and answers that started with 'I respect this person and that person'. He reached a point where he could discern the agency of the actor he was interviewing based on the answers. Each agency had fixed answers to fixed questions.

He admitted that it was hard for half-assed new people to survive since the eyes of the masses had become much more picky. He understood that agencies prepared their actors meticulously before their debut for the purpose of stability. However, since 'ordinariness' was everywhere, the fun disappeared. The unease and nervousness that new people showed in interviews, as well as some smart answers and fresh ideas had become a thing of the past.

In such a situation, a simple answer like 'to earn money' had the power to make him laugh. Yes. Rather than boring, being blatant was much better. He finished the interview thinking that the boy was an interesting fellow.

Of course, if Maru's impression on him was just that, even his good memory would not remember the three syllables Han Maru. What engraved that name into his memory was when he watched the shoot after the interview.

Even until the moment the boy who did the interesting interview with him sat in front of Joohyun, all Joongyeon was thinking about was to go home and rest after the shoot. However, the acting that unfolded after the director's cue sign was enough to stop his thoughts there.

Ahn Joohyun. Her acting skills were well-known, along with her cold - or perhaps even offensive - attitude towards the people from the media. An actress who did short plays, films, and even mini-series dramas. Another step forward, and she would join the ranks of top-tier actresses. Her acting skills didn't need mentioning. A detective act that made his heart race despite knowing that she was acting. The reason she was loved by the media despite her hatred for it, was probably thanks to her fantastic acting skills.

Now that was understandable. After all, her acting was being praised to the point that she was solely responsible for the drama's popularity.

What surprised him was Han Maru's acting. Maybe that's what it would look like to set free a wild dog that had been starving for days. When he heard from the director that Maru's role was a young assassin raised solely to kill, Joongyeon subconsciously nodded. It was just as he said. The Maru inside that interrogation room looked like a beast who had nothing left but primal instincts. It even made him

worried that he was being epileptic when the boy kept convulsing while growling. The shooting location fell into deep silence. Many of the staff members watched the two acting to the point that they looked like they forgot to breathe.

A wild, violent act.

It eventually reached the peak, and chaos ensued. Maru treated his body roughly to the point that it made Joongyeon worry that Maru might get a cerebral hemorrhage. The fact that his two arms were tied didn't look like it was for show; it looked like it was truly there to restrain a lunatic. Joohyun was incredible as well. She treated Maru like how a hunter would treat prey.

If either one of them was awkward, that kind of act would not have formed. A rampaging beast without a hunter, and a hunter without a prey. Both scenarios would look awkward after all. It was an act that charmed him. Seeing the incredible act from the two, Joongyeon almost forgot that they were in a shoot and almost ended up clapping.

A rather crazy child actor who does not treat his body with care.

The fresh new actor gave him such an impression.

"Do you remember me?"

"Yes, I do," Maru replied, standing in front of him.

"I don't remember you wearing glasses."

"These don't have any strength."

"Are you wearing it because of your role?"

"Yes."

"Wow, still, I never knew I'd see you like this. A lot of people end up quitting early, so it's hard to see new people more than once."

"I haven't earned enough money to be satisfied yet. I will cling to it like my life depends on it until my wallet becomes thick enough."

"Haha, yes. You should. Cling to it like your life depends on it."

Joongyeon reached out to Maru.

"I hope we meet as interview partners next time. I feel like I will get a lot of interesting answers from you."

"I don't mind even if you do it right now."

"Right now, you aren't at the right level."

"It's like that after all, huh."

"If your acting that I saw back then is truly your skill, I feel like I'd see you again quite soon, but I guess it'd be hard for you to display your skills in a drama like this."

Joongyeon grabbed Maru's hand tightly before letting go.

"See you next time. I hope all of you grow up quickly and get to do an interview with me."

Joongyeon waved at the child actors before turning around. He wondered how many of them would survive in this field and receive love from the masses. Actually, he wasn't that interested in who survived and who didn't, but if there was something he did want, it was that the ones that survived weren't the ones who feel 'mass-produced'. This was due to the fact that all the people he worked with had zero personality during his work.

"Hyung-nim, let's go to the next location."

Joongyeon went down the stairs while putting his arm over the producer's shoulders.

Chapter 567

"Are you sure you don't want to say goodbye to Suyeon-noona? She'll definitely put it in her heart, you know?"

Maru said that as he put his seatbelt on. Geunsoo replied that he said goodbye to her in his heart.

"I saw that you seemed to be acquainted with Mr. Nam Joongyeon."

"I was surprised as well. I only saw him once before, but he remembered me."

"It's a good thing that a reporter remembers you."

Geunsoo started driving. The pile of papers on top of the dashboard started shaking. It seemed to be a script.

"You can have a look. It won't be a problem as long as you don't talk about it elsewhere," Geunsoo said.

Maru nodded and opened the script. On the cover was the word 'Detective' in a simple font.

"The title of the movie is 'Detective'?"

"No, that's the project name. The title hasn't been decided yet."

"So sometimes you shoot before the title is even decided, huh."

"In the pre-production stage, usually a project name or a tentative title is used. It's mostly like that for security. That's why there are times when actors show up to an audition not knowing what the title is."

"Doesn't it help with promotion to reveal it early?"

"They're being cautious because the project might not see through to the end."

The car entered an 8 lane road. Considering that it was Sunday, there was little traffic. Getting caught by a single traffic light might make them as slow as a snail though.

Maru flipped over the cover and had a look at the contents. Traces of editing and some notes left by Geunsoo could be seen. The story was about corrupt policemen just like he heard at the restaurant last time. A policeman who was acknowledged for his skills at a young age and was promoted quickly, one day witnesses the corruption of his superior. A detective filled with righteousness would persuade his

superior or report the crime, but the character Geunsoo played used that event to threaten his superior to go up even further. Another policeman, played by Sungjae, also witnesses it and tries to get his respected senior back on the right path, but in the end, he too becomes a corrupt policeman and puts all the events under the rug.

“Hyung-nim, you die in the last part, huh?”

“It’s a simple case of evil being punished.”

“But the remaining Sungjae-hyung is also evil.”

“Without a witness, a villain is a hero.”

“I wonder what real policemen would think when they watch this movie. They must think that it’s absurd, right?”

“That’s actually based on a real event.”

“A real event?”

“There are some changes, but apparently, it’s almost all real. It should be interesting. I’ve always wanted to play a charming man with a hint of lunacy.”

“If you think about it, you died in Twilight Struggles as well so perhaps you are quite fated with dying characters.”

“Now that you mention it, it's true.”

Maru closed the script and put it back on top of the dashboard. The trend in film these days was plot twists. There probably wasn’t a movie pamphlet that did not include the word ‘twist’ among the ones displayed in cinemas. Even family movies contained plot twists these days. Perhaps thanks to that, plot twists, which were a sign of fresh things, had become rather old-fashioned recently. In that sense, he thought that this script was pretty interesting. The story progressed without any sudden reversals. The story ended with the smaller evil being engulfed by the bigger evil, and there wasn’t anything that was hidden in that process. He didn’t know how the director was going to play this out, but according to the script at least, it was a pretty simple movie where the audience could just follow the characters on the surface. He was reminded of director Park Joongjin’s ‘Those Guys’ that he watched before. Perhaps the film industry was moving on from the boring plot twists trend.

“I’ll say this beforehand, the director for this film is quite peculiar.”

“I kinda noticed when he wanted to see a badass delinquent.”

Geunsoo then said that he wasn’t as peculiar as Maru. Maru stared at Geunsoo.

“What?”

“I believed myself to be an extremely normal person living a normal life.”

“What you believe and what actually is might be different.”

“I’m not peculiar.”

“Sure you aren’t.”

Geunsoo turned the wheel. The car entered a residential area. Going past the dominos of buildings on either side, they were met by a rather weak-looking bridge, as well as a 3-story building that towered above the others. Geunsoo stopped the car in front of that building.

Getting out of the car, the first thing Maru saw was a standing sign that said ‘Coffee of the day’. A pastel drawing of coffee, bread, and cats looked quite cute. He raised his head to look at the signboard above the sunshade. ‘Cat & Coffee’. It couldn’t be simpler.

He saw some people sitting down with laptops through the glass window. Next to them were some cats. Tired-looking cats and coffee-drinking people. It was literally just ‘cat & coffee’.

He followed Geunsoo inside. A woman in her thirties faintly smiled and welcomed them.

“You’re here.”

“Ah, ma’am. Where’s hyung-nim?”

Geunsoo seemed to know her. The lady, who was reading a book behind the counter, pointed above. Geunsoo nodded and walked towards the stairs.

“She’s the wife of the director you’re about to see.”

“Ah, I see.”

There were photo frames along the wall of the staircase. They were small - about two hand-widths wide - and they were all focused on cats. There were standalone photos of cats and some photos where a person was hugging them. Just as he thought that this was a café where cats were the alpha and the omega, there was one photo that caught his eyes.

A lady was hugging three puppies. Maru wasn’t knowledgeable about breeds of dogs, but he did know the breed of those dogs with vicious-looking faces - bulldogs. The lady, who was hugging three little bulldogs in her arms, had the happiest smile in the world. Perhaps because he saw some dogs in a world of cats, Maru stood there and appreciated that photo for a while.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Going past the photo with the lady, Maru arrived on the 2nd floor and could see a cat that had come right by his feet. It was a spotty one and it didn’t seem to be wary around strangers. Although he didn’t have any experience raising pets before, he wanted to touch this docile-looking cat.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Just then, he heard a voice. It was from the table by the window. At the same time, he felt something prick his hand. The spotty cat scratched him with its claws. He looked at the cat which turned around in a haughty manner. It seemed that he wouldn’t be able to get close to that one.

“That one’s pretty sensitive. He always attacks when a stranger reaches out to him. So you need to suck up to him a little.”

The man that approached him gave him a square object. It was some kind of item packed in a plastic bag with a picture of a cat on it.

“If you give it that snack, you can touch it once.”

Maru followed the man’s words. He ripped open the packaging and took out the snack. It was some kind of squishy jelly, and it smelled pretty good. It was similar to a strawberry smell. He put it on his palm and approached the spotty cat. The one that peeked out from the corner raised its tail and ran towards him. Maru flinched at first since he thought he was going to get attacked again, but the cat just quickly snatched away the snack from his hand.

“Now you can touch it.”

Hearing the man’s words, Maru reached out. He couldn’t believe that this was the same cat as the one that scratched him.

“They’re pretty sneaky.”

“It won’t attack me again, right?”

“It’s fine while he’s still eating. Well, after that, you’ll become a stranger to him again, so watch out.”

Maru stroked the cat’s hair and turned around to see the man. The round silver glasses entered his eyes first, and after that, he saw the rough-looking beard. As for his age, he seemed to be in his late thirties. Unlike his messy beard, his hair was quite neat. As for his stature, he was neither big nor small. He seemed to be around the Korean average.

“Han Maru, right? I told Geunsoo to bring you here because I wanted to see you once.”

The man reached out to him. Maru shook hands with him.

“Han Maru, sir.”

“Have you heard about my name?”

“I heard that you were director Lee Jincheol.”

Geunsoo, who was listening from the side, blinked his eyes in confusion.

“Did I tell you that?”

“Sungjae-hyung did.”

Geunsoo smiled in understanding.

“Now that I look at you like this, you look like a normal man. I thought you’d have some more... mad elements in you.”

“I’m an ordinary student.”

He sat down when Lee Jincheol offered him a seat. Just then, Jincheol’s wife, who was watching the counter on the first floor, came up with some drinks.

“Thanks.”

“The three of you aren’t going out or anything, right?”

“My wife, I’ll obediently stay at home today so don’t worry.”

“You always say that.”

The married couple lightly kissed after that. Maru was rather taken aback by the events that unfolded out in front of him as he was drinking.

“We’re still newlyweds,” Jincheol said.

“Hyung-nim. I never knew you could be a newlywed when you have three kids.”

Geunsoo shook his head in resignation.

He was definitely peculiar, alright. Maru put down his cup on the table.

“Well then. Shall I hear your opinion about this store?”

“It’s an interesting store.”

“In what sense?”

“That there are cats mixed amongst the people.”

“Looks like this is your first time at a cat café, huh.”

“Yes. It is.”

“Good, then one more thing. Do you like cats or dogs better?”

“I don’t particularly like either of them.”

“Then try to like cats. Cats are definitely better than dogs.”

Just then, he was reminded of Junmin, who was a dog-lover. He thought about what would happen if he put those two together.

“The president of your company would be a better man if he raised some cats.”

Maru felt like this man knew what he was thinking. Maru smiled awkwardly before drinking a sip.

“Honey, come here for a moment.”

He heard a voice from downstairs. Jincheol told them to wait before going down the stairs.

“Is he acquainted with the president?”

“Yeah. Though, Junmin-seonbae is trying to avoid him since he tells him to raise cats every time they meet.”

“So even the almighty president has someone who he has a hard time dealing with.”

“I told you he was peculiar.”

“Does he direct films on top of managing this store?”

Hearing that question, Geunsoo shook his head.

“He doesn’t manage the store. This building belongs to him. So ‘manage’ doesn’t really fit the situation. He doesn’t care whether it’s profitable or not.”

“...The building belongs to the director?”

“Why? You thought the director of an indie movie would be poor?”

Maru subconsciously nodded. A director of an indie film that Geunsoo had known for a long time. Since indie movies were called such because of their independence from capital, the profits would be low, so he thought that the director wouldn’t be that wealthy. But it turned out that he owned a building.

“Director Lee... sorry, I’m kinda used to calling him that. Anyway, that hyung-nim’s passion for film is not ordinary. He never took it as a hobby. He’s always serious as though his life is on the line. It’s just that his wallet is pretty thick.”

“I’m starting to get confused by the definition of indie films.”

“It can be called an indie film in the sense that one hundred percent of the creator’s wishes are reflected in it. Also, that hyung-nim always uses the budget tightly. Just because he has a lot of money doesn’t mean that the shooting environment is good. He’s quite meticulous when it comes to things like that.”

“For now, I get that he’s not shooting a film because he’s short on money. Oh, but I heard that this film was a commercial one.”

“Because we got investors. Both that hyung-nim and I are charmed by indie films, but that doesn’t mean we despise commercial movies. Who would hate movies with lots of airing cinemas?”

Geunsoo smiled and picked up his cup.

Maru turned around to look at the café. Arts activities when he was well-off, huh. Considering that art historically used to be something unique to the high-class, it wasn’t so strange that the director was wealthy. Perhaps he had a bias towards indie films for being ‘minor’.

“Why would he want to see me?”

“I don’t know. There might not be a big reason for it, so don’t think about it so deeply.”

Just then, the spotty cat walked over from the corner and sat down on Maru’s thighs. Maru laughed in vain when he saw the cat boldly claim his thighs as his.

“Ooh, Picky approached you first, how rare. Looks like he’s taken a liking to you.”

Jincheol said those words when he returned.

“So his name is Picky, huh.”

Maru reached out and tried to touch the cat. However, just as his hand was about to touch its head, Maru had to pull his hand back quickly. The cat was glaring at him and was clearly telling him that it would scratch him if he tried to do what he was about to do.

“Congratulations on becoming his exclusive chair,” Jincheol said while laughing.

“Have you two eaten yet? I haven’t had my lunch yet. Why don’t we eat some lunch/dinner?”

“I’m good with that.”

“I’m hungry, so let’s eat.”

Jincheol made a circle with his fingers.

“Good. I’ll go buy some things to eat, so play around with the others here.”

Maru looked at Jincheol who went off before looking at the cat on his thighs while sighing. The cat was yawning.

“You have it good.”

Meow - the cat meowed in a low voice.

Chapter 568

“It has only been two years since you started acting?”

“It’s my third year, but if you only count the time I’ve properly gotten into acting, I don’t think it has even been a year.”

“Yet you can put on a delinquent act of that level. Are you good at punching at school or something? Did it feel that realistic because it was based on reality?”

“I’m on the side of getting hit, not the one doing the hitting.”

“Hey, hey. Guys like that scare me the most. You know, in movies, they’re always the ones that stab you in the back in the end.”

“No way.”

Jincheol giggled.

Maru took a bite out of the sandwich. Jincheol had brought back some sandwiches when he went to get some food. He made a joke that went like ‘I bought it from my wife’ or something, but Maru stayed expressionless thinking that there wouldn’t be an end to his jokes if he reacted. Of course, it was completely ineffective. Jincheol’s awful jokes continued regardless.

“Did you know? Cats live in cat-hedrals.”

The pun came out of nowhere, but Maru did not bat an eyelid. Jincheol kept signalling him to laugh.

“The sandwich is good.”

“And a cat’s favorite movie is The Sound of Mew-sic.”

“The madam’s cooking skills are really good. I would come here more often if this place wasn’t so far from where I live. What a pity.”

“Plus, looking at a cat makes you feel purr-fect.”

"I should buy some for myself when I leave. This bread with the black sesame seeds especially. I have similar tastes as my family, so I'm sure everyone will like it if I take some home. It's really a pity that it's so far away."

He munched on the sandwich as he looked at Jincheol. After groaning while stroking his beard, he took off his glasses and stroked his face.

"Geunsoo. This guy is way too dry. He could laugh at least once."

"Don't you like him because he's the lunatic you thought he is?"

"There are different levels to lunatics, and this one is on the higher side. Normally, people would laugh out of courtesy at least, but this kid is way too cold even though it hasn't even been an hour since we have met."

"Rather than cold, it looks like he understood how he should handle you."

"He won't talk about cats with me. What a disappointment."

After grumbling, Jincheol picked up a cat that was rolling around on the floor. The cat purred for a while before falling asleep.

How interesting - Maru thought as he wiped his hands with some napkins. The cat in Jincheol's arms looked extremely sensitive. It acted even more violently than the spotty one, so he didn't even think about touching it, but that cat was sleeping like a baby in Jincheol's arms. Do cats know their owners as well?

"It's because cats are territorial animals. They are pretty generous to the things they got used to seeing in their territory. To this guy, I'm probably something like 'human 1 that feeds me'. That's why it doesn't put up its guard around me. It doesn't act cute, but that's one of a cat's charms. Bad kitty."

After tickling the sleeping cat's head, Jincheol said ouch before grimacing. The cat had woke up and bit him. The cat then jumped down from his arms before walking around the 2nd floor. Maru was reminded of a stereotypical businesswoman from how it acted.

Maru looked down at his knees. The spotty cat was sleeping in a weird posture. At first, he was sleeping docilely with his front paws together, but after twisting around for a while, he was now sleeping in a weird position that made Maru wonder if such a posture was possible. He wanted to tickle the cat's belly since it was widely exposed, but he held back since it might cause some bad things to happen.

"Why don't you take this opportunity to raise a companion cat?"

Companion cat. Maru thought that he should not use the word pet in front of this person.

"I don't think I can."

"Why?"

"I don't like them to the point that I want to take responsibility for one."

"Just take it easy and raise one. A lot of people raise one these days."

Maru raised his head when he heard Jincheol's words. Was he serious? Maru looked around at the cats walking around the 2nd floor before speaking,

"I don't think you can take anything easy when it comes to taking responsibility and raising something. Even raising a plant requires you to change out the soil and even the vase sometimes. On top of that, there is watering them and cutting off dead leaves. There's no need to talk about animals like cats when they need so much freedom on top of that. They say babies grow up by themselves, but you know it isn't like that. Seeing them born is a miracle, and it's wonderful when they start talking. But it all ends there, doesn't it? After that, you're filled with worries. A little creature, who can't even walk, crawls around everywhere, including dangerous places, and puts sharp objects near their mouth all the time. The day they have diarrhea or something, you won't be getting any sleep. Furthermore, even when they fall asleep, you feel like your world is collapsing if you hear their breaths going faint."

Maru subconsciously stroked the spotty cat's chin.

"When they reach an age where they can bow to others, that's when the real troubles start. Even if you tell them not to run, they will never listen to you, and even if you tell them not to go to high places because it's dangerous, they always end up there, making you feel worried sick. If you want to feed them a carrot, you gotta suck up to them with all sorts of actions. And once they get sick or something, you hope that you were the one sick instead."

The spotty cat turned around. Maru smiled bitterly. There was no memory of anything. He just 'knew' that 'something' had happened, but anything other than that was pitch black. There was definitely something between him and her, which he poured all of his love into, and sometimes treated more precious than his own life, but he couldn't remember what that was. It was probably a child. Maru could only guess. Perhaps there was never a baby between him and her. Perhaps they lived with some cute dogs or some cats.

However, that small voice which was his motivation in life, as well as the reason he appreciated life, was definitely similar to his. That, no, that child's trace definitely remained inside him despite his memories becoming fuzzy like a burned up ash. Was it a boy? Or was it a girl? Perhaps he had twins.

He tried not to forget. He thought that there was no way he would be able to forget. He thought that it would be engraved in his soul as something eternal and that he would be able to see that child's smile in the flashbacks even if he died once again. However, the pitch black memories cruelly painted over the figure of his child as well. His own figure, uneasily trembling outside the delivery room, no longer felt realistic as it felt like it was a scene from a movie. What happened after that? What was the child's face like? What was his or her favorite clothes? Or food? Or name, even?

"Raising a baby requires an unspeakable amount of responsibility."

Meow - the spotty cat cried. Maru looked down at his hand. His hand was shaking endlessly as though he was someone who drenched his life with alcohol. That trembling seemed to have affected the cat. He tensed his hand before sighing.

"...is what I heard from my mom before. Looks like I caused her a lot of trouble. I went to places she precisely told me not to, I was picky with food, I had a weak body, and... you know. Things like that."

Maru said that as he looked at the two men who were staring holes into him.

“That’s why I don’t think I can raise something like this one. Moreover, these ones can’t even talk. It means that I would have to pay that much more attention to them, and for now, at least, I’m not prepared to do such a thing.”

The spotty one stretched its front paws out and did a body stretch. Maru looked into the cat’s two eyes. When he focused, some speech bubbles appeared on top of the cat. Meow, meow, meow. It was filled with incomprehensible cries. After stretching, the spotty cat jumped down. He licked his paws as he looked at him, and he seemed to be saying ‘you did well for looking after me’, or something. He felt proud because he felt like he fulfilled his role as a chair(?). Leaving aside the dignity of humans or the superiority between species, Maru decided to obediently get praised by the spotty cat. Maru smiled as he looked at the cat that rubbed his legs.

“Geunsoo, what do I do?”

“What?”

“I think I really like this guy?”

Geunsoo laughed. Maru looked at Jincheol.

“Do you know what one of the best ways to find out what people are thinking is?”

Maru replied that he didn’t. Jincheol pointed at the cats.

“You just have to see how that person treats animals. It’s been proven many times that there aren’t bad people among the ones that like cats.”

He told his bad jokes about cats whenever he had the opportunity. Jincheol took a breath before continuing to speak. It looked like he felt quite depressed because Maru didn’t laugh.

“There are a lot of people who want to raise dogs or cats. That’s especially the case when I ask people around your age. Animals are cute and adorable. Even on TV, they’re described as creatures that only look at you.”

When Jincheol tapped on the table, some cats approached him.

“But when they’re given the opportunity to, most of them refuse. The reason is simple. It’s because they treated animals as accessories. Looking at them through pictures or videos makes them look endlessly adorable. They speak as though they are ready to do anything if they could raise one. However, when dreams become a reality, people start seeing what they couldn’t see before. They make noise, bite, scratch... and there’s the matter with fur too. Plus, once you mistrain them when potty training, there’s nothing worse than that. You have to feed them, play with them, take them to the hospital if they become sick, and... that’s when they find out. Oh hey, this is actually much more bothersome than I expected. And boom.”

When Jincheol shouted, the cats jumped before running away.

“They end up abandoning them. Of course, they might feel sorry. I don’t think humans are that evil. There shouldn’t be anyone who abandons animals with a smile on their face.”

For a while after that, Jincheol was unable to speak because all the cats tried to bite him. Maru thought that he was really a peculiar person after all. After begging for forgiveness from them, Jincheol spoke again.

“In that sense, I’ve taken a liking to you. People like you, who are much more cautious towards them from the beginning, end up loving animals to the end. They aren’t like the ones that say they love animals and start raising them recklessly. They start things knowing the difficulties, so they take responsibility and look after them until the end. In that sense....”

Jincheol picked up a small cat before pushing it onto him.

“You need to raise a cat. If you don’t become a cat lover now, your president might come up to you one day giving you a puppy to raise. I can’t miss such a talented candidate like you. Here, take it. That one’s called Han Maru II from now on.”

Meow - the little kitten cried sadly. It definitely did not like the name. Maru shook his head and refused.

“Are you telling me that you’re going to pick dogs over c....”

“Animals are forbidden where I live.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes.”

“What a pity. If you ever have the opportunity to raise one, definitely come to me. I’ll make you a cat person.”

This person, if he didn’t become a film director, might have become a cat’s rights activist instead of a human rights activist. Just then, Maru was reminded of the only dogs in this store.

“It looks like you like bulldogs though.”

“Bulldogs? Why do you say that?”

“Because I saw a photo with three bulldogs on my way up. Some lady was holding three bulldog pups.”

“Oh, that photo. That’s not there because of the dogs. It’s there because of the fella that’s smiling like an idiot.”

Jincheol’s smile disappeared. The cats in his arms looked at him.

“She was someone who really liked dogs. She always tried to spread her love for dogs to other people. It was pretty much a religion for her at that point.”

“Sounds like she’s similar to you.”

Jincheol faintly smiled. Only then did the cats become calm.

“Your president was one of them.”

“What?”

“He’s one of the people who the dog evangelist managed to persuade. I’m pretty sure your president still raises them now. Those ugly bulldogs in the photos. Their names should match their faces too.”

Jincheol had a rather vague expression as he said those words. Maru didn’t know whether he was feeling happy or sad.

Chapter 569

“Was she, perhaps, an actress?”

For some reason, he had a feeling that that might be the case. The lady with the three puppies. The time her figure was reflected in his eyes was a brief moment at best, but he had gotten a deep impression. It wasn’t just because she was holding dogs, which didn’t suit this place. If he had to give a reason, it had to be her smile. Her smile was so fresh that it felt like it was going to poke out of the frame.

“She was. She was our Madonna, and she was really pretty. There probably wasn’t a single one of us there that didn’t get their heart stolen by her.”

Of course, you need to keep this a secret from my honey - Jincheol added as he pointed downwards.

“Regardless of male or female, everyone loved her. She was someone who you couldn’t help but love.”

“I see, but by ‘there’ you mean....”

“Yecheon. It was the small theater that she belonged to. I worked there for a while too.”

Yecheon, he had never heard that name before. Jineheol spoke as though he read Maru’s mind.

“It’s not there anymore. They went out of business and had to hand over their spot to someone else.”

“Small theaters go out of business quite frequently after all,” Geunsoo added from the side.

“Hey, I feel rather sad to hear you say that. It’s your juniors who are working in that small theater right now.”

“My juniors?”

Geunsoo looked at Jincheol in confusion.

“Blue Sky. Daehak-ro, Aram Building. Isn’t Blue Sky on the 2nd floor of that building?” Jincheol asked.

“Yes, we are there. It’s the place Junmin-seonbae prepared to train some of his talent pool. Wait, that place used to belong to Yecheon?”

“Looks like your president didn’t tell you anything, huh. Well, I guess it’s not surprising since he’s not the type of person who would talk about old events. Then I guess you don’t know about the person named Jung Haejoo either, huh?”

An unexpected name came out of Jincheol’s mouth. Maru definitely had heard that name somewhere before. It was when he talked to Junmin about working with director Park Joongjin. Back then, Junmin said this:

-Also, one last question.

-Yes.

-...Have you heard him mentioning the name Jung Haejoo?

-Jung Haejoo? No, this is the first time I've heard of that name.

-I see, I see. Alright.

-Is she someone you know?

-She was one of the geniuses I knew of.

Back then, he also felt a sense of déjà vu when he heard that name. It was a name that he felt like he had heard in passing somewhere before. He combed through his memories and searched for past events. He then remembered the name of the person who mentioned that name to him.

-Hey, do you know who Jung Haejoo is?

-Who's that?

-It's fine if you don't know.

Ahn Joohyun. That name was mentioned when he talked to her regarding Bangjoo's matters. A woman mentioned by both Lee Junmin and Ahn Joohyun. Not only that, Junmin had described her as a genius. Junmin was a very picky person when it came to judging people. He definitely wasn't someone who would let his personal emotions like sympathy or friendship interfere with his judgement of other people's acting skills. If he of all people said someone was a genius, then that person had to be a genius.

"But he seems like he knows?"

Maru looked at Jincheol who was staring at him before faintly nodding.

"I heard the name from the president."

"The president mentioned that name to you?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

Had his wound healed now? - Jincheol said in a small voice as he stroked his chin.

"What did he say when he talked about her?"

"He said she was a genius."

"Ah, a genius. I guess that's one way of putting it. Nothing else?"

"Yes. That was it."

"Well, I'm not surprised since going into any more than that will make things complicated. That was unexpected though. Why would he mention that name to you when he hasn't even mentioned it to Geunsoo?"

"We were talking about how I met director Park Joongjin, and somehow that came up."

“Aha! So Joongjin-hyun was involved. If that guy was the middleman, I guess it’s not that surprising that Haejoo’s name was mentioned. How was the mood back then? Did your president look like he was going to cry?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m completely serious.”

Jincheol laughed as he tickled a cat’s chin. Geunsoo, who had been listening this whole time, sighed because he didn’t understand a thing before making a phone call.

“Hey, Ganghwan. Do you know someone called Jung Haejoo? You do? Now I feel like I’m being bullied. Okay, have a good rest. Actually no, you should stop resting. How long are you going to rest?”

Ganghwan’s angry voice could be heard through the closing phone. Tap - Geunsoo closed his phone and put it in his pocket. The phone started ringing again soon, but Geunsoo smiled and gestured at them to continue talking.

“Even if I want to talk about it some more, I think I should stop here in order to keep a man’s privacy. He might end up calling for me if I tell you everything.”

Jincheol stood up from his seat.

“Let’s go down and drink some coffee. My wife’s coffee is the best in the world after all.”

Maru waved at the cats that stared at him before walking towards the stairs. He looked at Jincheol who walked downstairs with large strides before looking at the photo on the wall. A lady was smiling happily while holding puppies inside the frame.

‘This lady is Jung Haejoo.’

From the way things looked, it seemed like this person was no longer working as an actress. Perhaps she looked for a new job when the theater went out of business. Maru looked at the corner of the photo. 19th February 1989. Now that he knew that the photo was from 16 years ago, the colors did seem to be a little washed out.

“She’s an attractive person,” Geunsoo said.

Maru faintly replied ‘for sure’.

“Junmin-seonbae is raising three bulldogs. Mint, Pansy, and Rose.”

“They’re all names of flowers, huh.”

“They sure suit those vicious-looking dogs for sure.”

What was Junmin’s relationship with the person in the photo? That day, Junmin’s expression when he mentioned Jung Haejoo looked considerably complicated. A Madonna that everyone couldn’t help but love. Perhaps the two were lovers. Or perhaps Junmin had a one-sided crush.

“She must be working on something else now, right?”

“Well, I get the feeling that she passed away.”

“You mean this person?”

Maru looked at the Jung Haejoo in the photo as he spoke.

“Junmin-seonbae described her as a genius, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Would he have missed a person like that? There’s no way. He’s someone who definitely gets what he desires, yet all he does now is reminisce about her. I might be wrong, but my senses are telling me that she has passed away.”

“I guess that might be true.”

“If she’s completely fine, I’ll apologize to her later for having her funeral without knowing.”

At that moment, they heard a call for them to come down quickly. Maru moved away from the photo and climbed down the stairs. He saw some cats running around among some people on their laptops. Jincheol was waving at them from the bar. On the bar were three mugs.

“Were you looking at the photo?”

“Yes. Uhm, excuse me for asking this, but did the person called Jung Haejoo pass away?” Maru asked cautiously.

“She did. 16 years ago.”

“16 years ago.”

Maru was reminded of the date in the photo. So Haejoo died the year she took that photo, huh.

“I wonder what you’re talking about?” Jincheol’s wife leaned against the bar and asked.

Maru greeted her once again. He realized that he hadn’t given her a proper greeting.

“Han Maru.”

“Hello. I guess I showed you us kissing before we even said hi. The beautiful noona in front of you is called Yoo Jinjoo. You can call me Pretty Jinjoo-noona.”

Jinjoo reached out to him first. Maru grabbed that hand. She laughed as she shook his hand, and her gripping strength was quite considerable. Whether it was her personality or actions, these two seemed to be a match made in heaven.

“You mean a beautiful ahjumma.”

“My dear Geunsoo. Just because you have a mouth doesn’t mean you can say anything you want. I might sew it up.”

Geunsoo covered his mouth in a prankful manner.

“Where are the kids?”

“Two of them are at nursery, and the other one should be coming soon,” Jincheol said as he looked at the clock.

Just then, the door opened with the jingle of a bell. A small child wearing a yellow backpack had opened the door.

“I’m home!”

She was a girl around 10, who put her hands around her belly button and did a 90-degree bow. The people at the store waved at the child as though they were used to seeing this scene. After greeting all the customers, the girl arrived at the bar with light steps. Maru looked down at the child grinning in front of him.

“Hello!”

“Oh, hello?”

“Hello, Geunsoo-ahjussi.”

“Please call me uncle Geunsoo. That sounds younger than ahjussi.”

“Yes, ahjussi!”

She was a stubborn kid. Maru didn’t know who did it, but she had a hairstyle that looked like it would take ages to do. The girl approached Jincheol and jumped into his arms.

“My girl, you’re good at greeting.”

Jincheol raised the girl into the air. When he tried to rub his face against the girl with an unshaven beard, the girl firmly rejected him.

“Daddy, I don’t like prickly.”

Maru laughed out loud. The girl’s expression when she crossed her arms and got angry at him was way too cute. With a daughter like that, any father would be lovestruck. Jincheol also didn’t let go of his daughter either.

“Honey, let go of her already. You see her every day yet you still act like that.”

“My wife, are you being jealous right now?”

“I am being jealous right now.”

“Popular men have it hard. Isn’t that right, Gaeul?”

Jincheol called the girl in his arms ‘Gaeul’.

The name ‘Gaeul’, the girl smiling brightly, then Jincheol.

Maru had a slight headache. It came from nowhere. He pressed firmly between his eyebrows. For some reason, he had a hard time looking straight at the father-and-daughter duo. Looking at them gave him a mysterious feeling aside from the pain. Whether it was happiness, sadness, or rage, he did not know, but a complex ball of emotions was thumping against his chest.

“What’s wrong?”

“I feel a little dizzy.”

“Did you not get enough sleep?” Geunsoo asked worriedly.

Maru tried to smile back and said that he was okay. The headache lasted for 10 seconds before going away. It didn’t leave any traces, which caused Maru to have a hard time believing that he had a headache at all.

‘Am I tired?’

Now that he thought about it, he never got to rest during rest days. He had his entire week jam packed with schedules, so he didn’t remember the last time he had a proper rest. Youth was nothing without energy, so perhaps taking breaks were necessary after all?

“Are you hurt?”

Gaeul had left Jincheol’s arms and was in front of him. Maru subconsciously reached out and patted her head.

“It’s fine. It doesn’t hurt. Thank you for worrying about me.”

“My daughter is such a kind girl, isn’t she?”

Jincheol said after he sat down.

“Gaeul, you can go home. Mom will be there soon.”

Gaeul cheerfully replied ‘yes’ before turning around. Maru couldn’t take his eyes off her. The small body, the chubby face, the cute bag, and the colorful shoes. He met eyes with Gaeul just as she was leaving through the door. Maru waved at her. Gaeul bowed to him before running off.

“Geunsoo.”

“Yes.”

“You should definitely get married.”

“I guess.”

“Also, give birth to a daughter. Daughters are the best. My sons treat me as nothing more than a toy.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Just as Maru was blankly staring outside while listening to the conversation between the other two, he saw a car slowly approaching the store. It slowed down before stopping in front of the store. It was a red sedan. The color was rather showy for the older generation to ride, so he thought that a younger person should be riding it.

“Oh, we have another guest,” Jincheol said as he looked outside at the car.

At that moment, the door of the car opened. The man that got out of the car was wearing a flower-patterned shirt, cotton pants, and slippers. Also, Maru knew this man very well.

“Director Park Joongjin?” He said to himself in confusion.

Geunsoo shouted ‘aha’ in realization while Jincheol stood up after dusting his knees and walked towards the door.

“Haven’t you been coming over too frequently these days?”

“If you don’t welcome me, I guess I can’t help it. But there are a few interesting guests with you today, huh?”

Joongjin smiled as he walked over. Maru stood up and stood in front of Joongjin.

“Long time no see, Mr. Han Maru.”

“Yes, director.”

“Why don’t we shake hands since it’s been a long time?”

Joongjin reached out to him. Maru grabbed his hand.

Chapter 570

“I told you to wait at home.”

“I’m going to stay here. Mom, should I wash the dishes?”

“Can you do it, Gaeul?”

“I can.”

“Then do you want to do it for mommy?”

Behind the bar, the mother and daughter were standing there, creating a warming scene. Gaeul, who was standing on a chair, was using her little twig-like hands to touch the cups. As the ones she was washing were plastic cups that could not shatter, her mother seems to be at ease letting her do it. It was a very heartwarming scene to see, but when Maru looked at them, or to be precise, at Gaeul, he could only smile dryly because of some mysterious longing in his heart.

“A wholesome mother and daughter, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they really are.”

Maru looked at director Park Joongjin, who sat next to him. In front of him was the espresso that Jinjoo had given him while saying that it was her best work. The bitter fragrance of coffee could be smelled from a small cup that looked like it was made for playing house.

“Gaeul. The ahjussi in the flowery shirt over there isn’t drinking mommy’s coffee which is making mommy feel sad. Go punish him for me.”

“Okay.”

Jinjoo made a prankful smile as she wiped her hands on a towel. With orders from her mother, Gaeul put her hands on top of the bar and stared at Joongjin.

“Director. I think you’ll have to drink that.”

“I really like how I’m welcomed every time I’m here. Why don’t you try some at this opportunity as well, Mr. Maru? I always feel like I’m stepping into heaven when I drink Mrs. Jinjoo’s coffee.”

“I happen to be allergic to coffee.”

“Yet you seem to be great with cappuccinos.”

“Milk just so happens to make the allergy bearable.”

Just looking at the espresso was enough to make him salivate. It would be very bitter. Just as Joongjin said, it might be sufficient to make him step into heaven. Joongjin, who had always maintained his composure, was looking at the coffee with nervousness. If Gaeul wasn’t in front of him, he might have left the coffee right there.

“Is mommy’s drink not good?”

Gaeul asked with her squirrel-like eyes. It was an irresistible attack. She looked like she was going to cry if he did not drink it. Maru looked at Jinjoo who was putting a suspicious smile on her face behind Gaeul. From the way she greeted Joongjin when he came to the store, they didn’t seem to be on bad terms. In fact, they seemed pretty close.

“Becoming close to someone is similar to stepping into an affectionate maliciousness.”

Joongjin picked up the small cup and drank it in one gulp. He made a fragile smile before handing the cup back to Gaeul.

“Can you give it back to mommy?”

“Yes!”

As soon as Gaeul turned around, Joongjin quickly opened up a sugar cube and put it in his mouth. Joongjin was unable to speak for a while. The coffee must have been that bitter.

“I’ve seen the movie.”

Maru spoke first. Joongjin spoke, as though he had been liberated from the bitter taste.

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes. I was absorbed in it. It really was eye catching.”

“That was my intention after all. Hm, there’s still the taste of coffee in my mouth.”

“Why don’t you ask for some milk?”

“If I did that, she’ll give me another one of those devilish black liquids. Mrs. Jinjoo is more than capable of doing that.”

“Hey, I can hear you.”

“Oops, she has good ears too.”

Jinjoo had replied while she made some sandwiches, Joongjin rolled his eyes. He was a really interesting person. He used his meticulous directions to pressure everyone during shoots, but he made the atmosphere soft with his words during private occasions. He sometimes made people flustered with his words, but that was also one of his charms if you got used to him.

“Did you always know director Lee Jincheol?”

Maru asked that as he looked at Jincheol and Geunsoo, who were talking by the window. They were looking at some documents on a laptop, and it seemed to be the scenario for the movie they were going to shoot.

“We’ve known each other for quite a long time. He’s one of the members of my short list of acquaintances. Mrs. Jinjoo over there is included as well.”

“Director Park. Going by year, it’s been seventeen years since we’ve known each other. Why don’t you stop using those awkward honorifics?” Jinjoo asked as she put down the sandwich in front of Joongjin.

“I don’t think I can do that. The only ones I don’t use honorifics for are very unique people.”

“I really want to see what’s inside your head, oppa. Just what’s in there?”

“Morals that ordinary people have?”

“Tsk. You really won’t get married at that rate.”

“I’ll take Gaeul once she grows up.”

“Oh my word. Would you like some more coffee?”

“I retract my words,” Joongjin said before he bit into the sandwich.

“What brings you here, then, Mr. Maru?”

“Director Jincheol wanted to see me.”

“Ooh, doing a shoot then?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“He really just called me because he wanted to see me.”

“If that is the case, get him to pay for your fares to go back home. That man’s rich.”

“I was planning to.”

“What a pity though. I think it would have been really interesting if you appeared in the movie that Jincheol directs. The way he directs has some interesting points. Do you know what kind of movie he’s shooting?”

“I had a look at the script before I came here. It was about some detectives.”

“It looked fun, didn’t it?”

“Yes. I liked how it didn’t have any plot twists. Actually, I was reminded of your work when I looked at it. I can’t comment anything about the directing methods, but the way you two unfold your stories is....”

After saying that, Maru stopped and did not finish his words. Telling a creator that he or she had a ‘similar’ style to someone was not that respectful. If a mere actor who had just started acting talked about things like that, he might touch Jincheol’s pride. He knew that Joongjin wasn’t someone who would talk about it anywhere, but it was better for him to be careful with his words considering the relationship between the two.

“Similar?”

Joongjin said that word. Maru took a deep breath before acknowledging it. He tried to be roundabout about it, but he could only admit it since the other party said it outright.

“Jincheol and I have some similarities. After Spring Calendar, I stopped doing commercial movies and dazed out, trying out many things with Jincheol. Those were probably the days where I was the most experimental. It was the first time I tried things that didn’t make money. It was fun. Though, the people around me were shocked.”

“Did you shoot indie movies?”

“A couple. There were times when Jincheol did the directing, while I did the script, and sometimes it would be the other way round. However, it didn’t last long as I got fed up with that quite quickly after all. Ever since my dreams had been deflated, nothing I did was fun.”

“Dream....”

The word Joongjin used was a little sad for some reason.

“Since we’re talking, shall we chat a little? What is your dream, Mr. Maru?”

“To live a long life without being sick with the people I love. A bit of money sounds good to me as well.”

“Sounds like a simple dream.”

“It might be simple, but it’s strangely really hard to achieve.”

“You’re right. I was like that too.”

“What was your dream?”

“My dream? When I was your age, it was to earn a lot of money. Money itself was my dream. Even when I think about it now, I lived a diligent life. I did my best in studies for money, went to a good university for money, and became successful in the end. Do you know what I used to do?”

“From what I heard, you ran a restaurant.”

“That happened after I lost my dream. Oh, the dream I’m talking about here is my second dream.”

“Your second dream?”

Joongjin faintly smiled.

“Let’s talk about that later. Anyway, I went to the financial district in order to realize my first dream. Do you know how high KOSPI is right now?”

“Around 900 as far as I know.”

“When I was working, it was around 100. It was back in 1984. Back then, everyone put their money in the bank. The interest rate wasn’t as hopeless as it is now. Moreover, it was prior to the Asian Games and the Olympics, so back then, people working in the financial district had very high expectations. I realized my first dream somewhat. After I got my hands on so much money, I had some cultural desires. Well, I call it desires, but I actually just wanted to show off. I wanted to take a beautiful girl to an opera.”

Joongjin smiled.

“But operas weren’t really to my tastes. That was how I stumbled on Daehak-ro. The place where people my age are burning with passions. It was really fun. I think it was called the Art Plaza. There were a huge number of people that gathered on that cramped road. That was when I found her.”

Joongjin rested his chin on his hands and tapped on his cheeks with his index fingers. That rhythmic tap was similar to that of a hand of a clock. The clock that was going to the past. He wondered what point in the past Joongjin was looking at. Just then, Maru uttered out a name that came to his mind.

“Are you perhaps talking about Miss Jung Haejoo?”

Joongjin looked at Maru without saying a word. After a long while, he started talking again.

“Have you seen the photo on the stairs?”

“Yes, not too long ago.”

“A charming girl, isn’t she?”

“I don’t know anything about her, but I did think that the smile in the photo looked very pretty. It looked like she had the power to make people around her look at her.”

“You’re right about that. That was her essence. The power that attracted people’s eyes. However, that wasn’t all. She had the ability to make the people around her smile. She was like the protagonist of a children’s movie. Do you know about Hani?”

“I do.”

“Her personality was different, but she was like that. Looking at her made you want to cheer her on, and the passion she gave off infected everyone around her. She was a little stubborn like Hani as well, but in her heart, she was a really gentle girl. Hm, now that I said those words, she’s not that similar to Hani. Hani is a scary tomboy after all. Anyway, she was a cool girl.”

“Someone you couldn’t help but like?”

Maru borrowed Jincheol’s words. Joongjin nodded.

“From that day onwards, I went to the place where she worked. It was a rather worn-out building. The theater didn’t have that many guests either. That girl was charming, but back then, she couldn’t be said to be good at acting. Customers pay money to consume an actor’s acting, but no matter how charming

she was, the theater troupe she belonged to lacked something to open the wallets of customers. That was when I had the thought. Ah! The reason I earned all this money is for this moment!”

“Did you support them?”

“Yes. That was the start of my second dream. Yecheon, the theater troupe. I wanted to see that troupe succeed. Unfortunately, I wasn’t as honest as I am now back then. I was focused on earning money, so I didn’t know what kind creatures women were nor did I know that the emotion I had back then was love. But isn’t it kind of boring to hear a middle aged man like me talk about love?”

“I think it’s suitable as a coffee time talk. Also, I have some personal curiosities about Miss Jung Haejoo.”

“Then I guess I can talk a little more about some old memories then.”

Joongjin looked around before putting three sugar cubes in front of him.

“This is me, and this is Haejoo. Lastly, I need to add this cocky-looking sugar cube in order to progress the story.”

“Is it president Lee Junmin?”

“It’s a bit scary to see you know so much. Did you investigate or something?”

Joongjin laughed and tapped on the sugar cubed he named Lee Junmin.

“One girl, two men. It’s a rather obvious love triangle. It’s too cliché these days but back then, it was good. Being cliché means that it was once loved by people.”

Joongjin put one sugar cube in his mouth.

“Hear me out while you eat.”

Maru picked up the sugar cube given to him. The name of that sugar cube was Lee Junmin.

Sorry, president - Maru put the sugar cube in his mouth.