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Chapter 554: Ep. 1 - The World After the Completion, I

「This is a story about unread despair.」

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After receiving that intriguing message yesterday, something amazing happened to me. I was able to write the first sentence of the side stories.

I couldn't tell you what the first sentence was. It was a spoiler and not a particularly amazing sentence, either.

But perhaps someday, it would come to have a decent meaning. That was how it went when I wrote the first sentence of ORV, after all.

This whole story started when Ji Eunyuu came for an unexpected visit around lunchtime today.

"Writer, let's go somewhere together."

With me getting grabbed by the scruff of the neck and stuffed into a taxi, it took us less than an hour to reach our destination.

We had finally arrived in front of a theater in Chungmuro, a location that had once been used as a backdrop for 'ORV'.

<Kim Dokja Banquet>

I glared at the placard at the entrance of the theater. It was clear from the name that the event was related to 'ORV'.

Suddenly, I remembered the message I received from 'CEOKimDokja'!

—There is a small fan event going on tomorrow at 7PM. If you're free, I'd be honored if you would come and enjoy it yourself.

Was this the thing they mentioned yesterday?
I asked Ji Eunyu.

"How did you know about this place?"

"The organizer of the event contacted us, saying he planned to hold a paid event and wanted our permission. He did say he'd donate all the proceeds to an orphanage in Kim Dokja's name in return. I'm here to keep an eye on things just in case."

I guess that's what he meant by paid admission.

With an exaggerated nod, I spoke.

"That's great, but why am I—"

"The readers, you asked where they were, did you not?"

Looking back, I did remember my phone call with Ji Eunyu yesterday. She had told me that there were readers waiting for my novel, and I had asked her where they were. I turned my head again and gazed back at the theater.

Inside were the readers Ji Eunyu had told me about.

All of a sudden, I felt blood rush straight into my head and my heart start pounding.

"But is it really okay if I join them?"

At my hesitation, Ji Eunyu tilted her head.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because I'm the writer."

"It's okay. That was written by Han Sooyoung, anyway."

Watching her playfully retort, I smiled bitterly.

"Yeah, that's true."

Indeed, a writer who hadn't put words to a page in three years could hardly be called a writer.

Just for today, I wanted to put all the blame on Han Sooyoung, whom I'd never met. To say that I wasn't able to write the side stories because, in that faraway universe, Han Sooyoung hadn't written the manuscript and Yoo Joonghyuk hadn't then delivered it to me.

That's what I wanted to believe.

At the entrance of the theater, there were life-size cutouts of the characters from ORV. Judging by their designs, they were drawn in the style of the webtoon adaptation that had once been serialized. The quality was awe-inspiring.

I admired the art while recalling the names of each character one by one.

Kim Dokja the Demon King of Salvation, Yoo Joonghyuk the Supreme King, Han Sooyoung the Black Flames Demon Ruler, Yoo Sangah the Moonlit Empress¹, Jung Heewon the Judge of the Apocalypse, Lee Hyunsung the Emperor of Steelsword, Shin Yoosung the Beast Lord, Lee Gilyoung the Insect Lord, and Kim Namwoon the Otaku... Even the supporting cast who'd gotten less word count like Gong Pildu the Bald, Lee Seolhwa the Saint of Healing, and Jang Hayoung the Fake Protagonist...

"Honestly, it's better than the ones we made."

Even Ji Eunyu said so.

The quality was one thing, but the fact that they put this much effort into it was impressive. I smiled bitterly and added,

"I'd believe you if you said they were drawn by real webtoon artists."

"Were they not?"

"Couldn't be. They all left after the incident."

At one point, 'Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint' was made into a webtoon.

It started off well because amazing writers and artists were handling the art and organizing the adaptation.

Unfortunately, before episode 10 was released, the studio was struck by lightning and a huge fire broke out. Unable to cope with the aftermath, the company went out of business.

¹ Sangah's name is a reference to the Chinese Goddess of the Moon, Cheng'e, pronounced as "Sangah" or "Hangah" in Korean. Her original titles of Moonlight Goddess to Moonlight Empress use the specific hanja 월하/月下 ("under the moon" or "moonlit") instead of 월광/月光 ("moonlight"). Thus, Moonlight would be more aptly translated as Moonlit, as it implies that she is "under" or "derived" from the "Moon".

Coupled with the management's financial difficulties, the webtoon of 'Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint' reached the completion of its 11th episode then disappeared from the world.

"It's not over yet, writer. If the side stories do well, there might be a webtoon reboot."

As expected of Ji Eunyu, still so optimistic.

"I gave up hoping for that a long time ago."

After the webtoon's demise, strange happenings seemed to plague any kind of secondary work related to 'Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint'. If a movie deal was made, the production company went out of business; if figurines or merch were produced, the factory went bankrupt.

Things of that sort happened on loop, and now there weren't any places making offers. I paused for a moment, then spoke.

"Somewhere out there, there might be a worldline where ORV didn't completely flop."

In that worldline, the webtoon would have been a hit, and even a movie, a drama, and then maybe even an anime would have been made for it. That worldline wasn't this one, but I still dreamed about it from time to time.

"I said it's not over for us yet."

Along with a grumbling Ji Eunyu, I looked back at the rest of the displays. The line of them was quite long, with everyone from Uriel and The Great Sage, Heaven's Equal to the more obscure figures like Han Myungoh.

But at the end of the line stood an unfamiliar figure.

Who was this?

It was a man with narrowed eyes, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out who he was.

Was there a narrow-eyed character in ORV?

If his name was listed by the cut-out, I would know who he was...

I thought about asking Ji Eunyu, but then stopped.

I still had my pride as a writer.

"Two people."

"Please write your nickname on this name tag here and attach it to the left side of your chest."

After receiving our name tags from the receptionist, we entered the theater. Fortunately, no one recognized that I was the writer of ORV. It was a given. It wasn't like my name tag said that I was. I looked at Ji Eunnyu's name tag.

[Genius Editor].

"Ji Eunnyu-ssi."

Pretending she hadn't heard me, Ji Eunnyu took a seat with me at the back of the theater. I could see the tiny heads of each sparse cluster of fans from behind.

I was struck by surprise. To think all of them were our readers. I wondered if they were actually all bought off by Ji Eunnyu. I looked over to see a wide-eyed Ji Eunnyu.

"Even with a rough estimate, aren't there more than thirty people?"

Thirty people. It may have seemed like a small number, but it meant that there were thirty dedicated fans who had taken the time to come here.

I nodded, fighting back a sudden surge of emotion.

Well done, Kim Dokja.

The event hadn't even started yet, so I could hear the readers chatting quietly amongst themselves up front.

"Do you have the 'KDC pack'? It's hard to get your hands on it now."

"Ah, I do have one."

"Sweet. What about the 'Black Ed'?"

"I bought that as soon as it came out."

"Then do you also happen to have that 'squid'?"

"I do, but... Weirdly enough, the head of my 'squid' keeps turning."²

I couldn't understand what they were talking about. It seemed like they were exchanging secret language only meant for experienced readers.

² The fans are discussing ORV exclusive merch. The official names of the terms in single quotes are the Kim Dokja Company New Employee Package, the ORV Black Edition, and the Kim Dokja Figurine.

We sat next to each other and listened in on the conversation between seasoned readers.

"We're already up to number twelve."

"The organizer said today would be the last, right?"

"Yeah."

"A lot of people used to come, but it's gotten so small now."

"I know, right? They've all disappeared one by one."

Apparently, this was the twelfth mysterious Kim Dokja Banquet. What's more, there were apparently more people who used to come.

And I'd thought there were more than enough of them even now...

"Excuse me, may I sit here?"

I span my head around at the sudden voice. A man as built as Lee Hyunsung stood there, shyly pointing at the seat next to me.

I nodded.

"Oh, sure. Please have a seat."

"Thank you."

As expected, there was a name tag pinned to the bowing man's chest.

[Judge Heewon]

He must have been a fan of the Judge of the Apocalypse, Jung Heewon.

I got nervous for some reason. This was the first time in a while that a stranger had sat next to me.

Sensing the awkwardness, Ji Eunyu spoke first.

"I see you're a fan of Jung Heewon."

Judge Heewon gave a slight nod.

"Yeah..."

And then, silence ensued.

Ji Eunyu poked my arm, as if trying to nudge me toward getting a conversation going. What topic did people usually bring up at a time like this? It had been so long since I'd last spoken to a stranger that I couldn't think of an opening line.

I tried to think of what Kim Dokja would say, then began.

"Heewon's great."

"Oh, yeah!"

Seeing the man brightly smiling at me for such a passing comment, I felt like I had already made an important connection with him. We nodded in unison multiple times, just like brothers sworn under the Oath of the Peach Garden³, and thought about Jung Heewon together.

Jung Heewon. She was a good character. I created her.

After staring at the nickname on my name tag for a good while, Judge Heewon asked me a question.

"Y-you have an interesting nickname."

"Thank you."

"Do you happen to have a favorite...?"

"Well, I..."

I considered it for a moment, but it was hard to choose just one.

As the silence extended, Judge Heewon assumed he had made a social faux pas and quickly added,

"Oh, you might be an all-loving fan, that's my mistake..."

I didn't know what exactly he meant by all-loving, but I had a rough idea.

I bobbed my head and replied.

"I like them all, except for guys like Cheon Inho."

In case you all forgot, Cheon Inho was the name of a villainous extra who dies early on in the opening arc of ORV.

³ The Oath of the Peach Garden is a major event in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms where the characters Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei took an oath to become sworn brothers who would bring peace to China. It's typically depicted as symbolism for undying loyalty and familial love, or a shorthand for everyone just agreeing with each other.

Judge Heewon seemed to remember him as well, his expression darkening as he spoke in a low voice.

"Cheon Inho, that horrific bastard."

"He really was, wasn't he?"

"A prick who ought to be torn to shreds and die."

"Uh... I suppose?"

"A scumbag who should have died by Hellflame Blaze."

Our conversation ended there.

The moderator appeared on the theater's stage, dressed in a black suit beneath a white coat.

"Hello, my name is Kim Dokja, and I'm your MC for the day."

There was a light cheer from the audience. Aside from the addition of sunglasses, the outfit was pretty similar to that of Kim Dokja.

Was that handmade? That was some quality stuff.

The theater screen lit up shortly after, and the event began.

Soft music played in the background as the font of the [Fourth Wall] appeared on screen.

「And on the Fourth Wall, everything was recorded.」

Slowly, comments from readers began to float up on screen.

They were comments that the readers had personally left, from the prologue to chapter 551.

"Wow, that's the one I wrote!"

A young fan in the front row spoke, her voice quiet. Everyone in the theater was watching the comments together.

Some comments received many likes, and others were funny or novel. Others still were sentimental.

"Wasn't that the first time Kim Dokja died?"

"Ew, don't show my comment! Please take it down!"

"Lampshading everyone's dark past, huh?"

As I read through the old comments, my heart fluttered.

From the two years ORV was serialized to the three years after its completion.

Five years of history, accumulated by readers around the world.
I watched the story unfold, speechless for a good long while.

It sounded like a long-lost myth told by someone else.

Photos of exhibitions organized by fans and subway advertisements commemorating the characters' birthdays popped up on screen one after another.
Looking at an illustration of Kim Dokja under the snow, someone muttered softly.

"That was on Kim Dokja's birthday."
"It actually snowed in Seoul that day, too."

On the white screen, the readers' words piled up like snow. Between the lines were footprints left by me and others who had tread there together.

"Good thing we came, right?"

I subconsciously nodded at Ji Eunnyu's words.

「Perhaps I'd been writing all those sentences just to see this view.」

I could feel my heart racing once again.
If I was worthy, I wanted to say something to these people. I wanted to write a sentence for them without running away or giving up.
I wanted to tackle this story again.

「But would I be capable of it?」

That was when I heard the moderator's voice.

"Without further ado, here is a word from the writer who did us the honor of joining us for this event!"

The readers in the audience looked at each other as murmurs buzzed through the room.
I was dumbfounded for a moment, then snapped out of it.

"The writer?"

Ji Eunnyu whispered to me, surprised.
In an instant, my mind was racing.

Could she have secretly organized this fan meetup?
But the look in Ji Eunyu's seemed to be one of complete cluelessness.
I looked up at the stage and saw the moderator staring back at me with a smile.

I should get up.

As I cleared my throat and stood, figuring that I had no other choice, a face suddenly appeared on the screen.

—Aah, aah.

Porcelain skin adorned with a beauty mark near the eye. Short, pitch-black hair roughly tied back.

Even without explaining who she was, there was not one person here who didn't recognize her.

There up on screen was the real writer of 『Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint』.

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Authors' Note

Hello, this is SingShong.

It's a pleasure to be able to greet you again.