

Once Again 431

Chapter 431

"I'll definitely go to your next performance."

"Me too!"

Gyunglim and Gwangseok left the lecture room after saying their goodbyes. As for Sungjae, he exchanged a few words with Sooil before quietly leaving through the door.

"Thank you for the meal," Maru said as he put the last piece of sushi in his mouth.

"You can take this one as well."

Sooil pointed at the remaining crêpe as he spoke.

"What happened to you? Yielding food to someone else like that."

"I ate quite a lot of it during the past few days, so I'm a bit fed up with it."

"Wait, you had these for days?"

"Yeah. It's hard to get your hands on if you don't get them now."

"Do you think crêpes are some seasonal fruits or something?"

"The one that makes them is quite busy. It's hard to get your hands on them."

"Really?"

"He's a famous patissier. He came to the country for just a while, so you can't get them otherwise. If you want them, you'd have to travel all the way to France."

"You're quite capable, having connections like that."

"Well, I do know a lot of people."

Sooil spoke in a joking tone as he cleaned up the trash. He gathered the plastics on one side, divided paper with food on it and paper without food, and put them in separate bags.

"Your future wife will love you if you do that."

"That's precisely why I'm doing this."

"Do you act like this at home as well?"

"That depends on the case."

Seeing the neatly cleaned trash made Maru want to clap. He might as well receive the recycling award of the year.

"Since I'm full, I'll feel awesome if I just went straight to bed like this."

Miso kicked Ganghwan, who was about to lie down on the floor.

“Why is a soon-to-be-newlywed so violent.”

“Shut up, and we need to empty this place, so be quick if you want to say anything. I’m going to visit the principal before going home. Maru, don’t forget to turn the lights off. The principal is sensitive to things like that even though he earns a lot of money. See you next time, Sooil.”

Miso waved her hand and left. As soon as Miso left, Ganghwan laid down on the floor. His ability to lie down regardless of the time, place, or occasion had to be acquired from when he was living as a homeless man. Maru asked Ganghwan who just blankly stared at the ceiling.

“You shouldn’t be here just to bring the sushi. What is it?”

“I’m just here to see my disciple’s face though.”

“Then I’m leaving.”

Just as he was about to get his bag and leave, Ganghwan quickly changed his words.

“I heard that your movie was over.”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any fixed schedule other than Miso’s classes?”

“Not immediately, no.”

“That’s good. I’m going to ask senior Junmin to pull you out.”

“Eh?”

Ganghwan pointed at Maru’s face and spoke.

“I think I’ll have you do some plays.”

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“Then see you in Anyang. How about you, Sooil?”

“I’ll go home after hanging out with him for a while.”

Maru shook off Sooil’s hand that was placed on his shoulder.

“What do you mean hang out? It’s nearly ten.”

“Just hang out with me for a while. I don’t have a place I can spend time in. Senior, be careful on your way home!”

Ganghwan waved from inside the car before driving off. After watching the car turn on the left blinkers and disappear to the other side of the road, he looked at Sooil.

“Go home now. It’s way past sunset.”

“Hang out with me for a while here. Just until 11.”

“Did you cause an accident?”

“What makes you say that all of a sudden?”

“It’s because you don’t want to go home.”

“The atmosphere at home right now is a little... you know. If I go back now, I’ll have to put myself in a corner of my room and act like I don’t exist, but I don’t really want to do that.”

Sooil answered with a depressed face. Maru sighed.

“Do you want to go to a PC-bang or something?”

“Sounds good. But don’t we have to leave after 10?”

“Ah, right.”

There was no suitable place they could go to as high school students. This was why some high school students gathered in the neighborhood playgrounds with some soju they bought in secret. Maru clicked his tongue as he looked around. There wasn’t a suitable place they could go to.

“Maru, you good at billiards?”

On the 2nd floor of the building Sooil was pointing at, there was a billiard hall. Billiards, huh. It was one of the places he practically lived in when ‘Maru’ was young, along with the PC-bang.

“Do you know how to play?”

“Me? Of course I do.”

“Then let’s go. It should be better than standing outside like this.”

They entered the billiard hall. Near the counter, girls who seemed to be students like them were playing pocket ball. Maru expected this place to be filled with smoke from cigarettes, but it was actually quite clean. The part timer even brought them drinks.

“This place is different from my area.”

“Looks like this is the trend these days. I see a lot of them pop up.”

“Seoul has it pretty good alright. What’s your score?”

“Fifty.”

“Dammit. Four-ball?”

“I can do three.”

The confidence of a kid who could only play 50. Maru released three balls onto the table.

“Let’s not do anything strange. The table is expensive.”

“I don’t do stuff like that.”

Maru was about to use the scoreboard but decided not to, thinking that they would only stay here for a short while. Sooil wandered around the table while holding the cue. He clearly looked like he hadn’t

played many times. Maru felt the smooth texture of the cue he hadn't held for a long time before speaking.

"What's your relationship with Gyunglim-noona?"

"Gyunglim-noona?"

Sooil smiled.

Gyunglim, who rejoiced so much when she saw Ganghwan, froze up after seeing Sooil. It was the same as the last time. As Gyunglim drove off with Sooil, she made a crying face as though she was a cow being dragged to a butchery. It didn't look like she didn't like it. She just looked to be at a loss on what to do.

"She's just a cute noona."

"Cute?"

"Yea? Gyunglim-noona's pretty cute. The way she says everything without filtering first is cute, and the way she instantly regrets it afterward is also cute."

"You got to know her through this work?"

"No, we've known each other since we were young. But why do you ask about her? Are you perhaps interested?"

"It's because she's interesting. That's why."

Sooil pushed the ball with the cue.

"She's a kind noona. She's the type of person who'd make a lot of losses because of her kindness. When I look at her, I want to do more for her."

"That sounds kinda suspicious."

"I'm talking about in a humanitarian way, so don't misunderstand. Rather than that, how many scores are you going to play?"

"Let's just play and chat about something."

Playing seriously was only done when there was a ten thousand won bill on the table, or when the number of the Chinese food delivery service was preset in the phone. He drank a little before speaking again.

"But I thought you don't have experience doing plays."

Sooil, who was estimating the distance with the cue, raised his head.

"Yeah, not on an official stage. You said you do, right?"

"Just a couple of times to help out. But are you okay with that? I mean, you have a busy schedule."

Maru looked at the counter as he spoke. The female part timer as well as the high school girls that showed no interest at the beginning thinking that they were just customers, were now stealing glances at them. They probably recognized who Sooil was.

"I wanted to learn what plays are like. They do say there's no better place than a stage to hone your acting skills. Dramas are good as well, but right now, I want to try out a lot of things."

"So a famous star is famous for a reason."

"Who's famous. Rather than that... I think there's a bigger reason than skill."

Sooil made a strange smile as he spoke.

"But what's senior Ganghwan's style like? I never acted with him before."

Hearing Sooil's question, he thought back to the days when he went to the practice room in Anyang. The atmosphere there could be summed up with the slogan on their wall. The quality of a line uttered a hundred times is different from the quality of a line uttered once. He told Sooil that line.

"Just hearing that makes me feel tired already."

"He's just an average neighborhood Joe usually, but he completely changes when it comes to things related to plays. It was hard practicing for a short skit before the preparations for the stage, and if you want to stand on the stage properly, I can't even imagine how far you'd have to go to do that."

"Ah, maybe I should've said no?"

"From his expression, it looked like he had already settled the deal with the president. At the bottom of the ladder, I do what I'm told. Ah, I guess you're higher up in the ranks?"

"I don't know either. Rather than that, I'll be playing first then."

"Alright. Go ahead."

"Oh, wait."

Sooil collected the trash gathered next to the billiard table as well as the empty cups before bringing them to the counter. There was a small commotion there. It seemed that they confirmed that he was the person they were thinking of.

After being held by the ladies for a few minutes, Sooil returned with some snacks in his hands. It seemed that the high school girls gave it to him.

"Is that your way of managing your image?"

"It is a habit of sorts, but you're not wrong. I can't let people find faults with me."

"It's hard being a celebrity."

"It's not entirely because I'm a celebrity, you know?"

Sooil chuckled before standing next to the billiard table with the cue.

"Maru."

"Yeah?"

"It's a bit boring to play just like this. So let's make a bet."

“Just play. You’ll be crying later.”

“Even a simple one is fine.”

Maru sighed with a smile.

“Fine, do whatever you want. What do you wanna bet? We have drinks already.”

“The winner can ask the loser to do one thing.”

“What? That’s such a grandiose condition.”

“Nothing hard though. Something that you can do.”

Maru stared at Sooil, who had a smile on his face, for a while before nodding.

“Fine, let’s do it. But since we’re betting, I’m playing this properly as well.”

“Please go easy on me.”

Sooil smiled and got into position.

* * *

“Damn him.”

When he looked at the symbol for the billiard hall outside the window, he thought back to what happened an hour ago. He had to notice it when he saw that guy push his butt right out and measure the angle. He didn’t realize that he’d be watching for the entirety of 30 minutes.

‘If that’s fifty, I’m just one, goddammit. Seoul players go too hard.’

Even on Jeju island, and in Incheon, where it was known to be hard to get scores, Sooil’s self-proclaimed ‘fifty points’ would be way understated.

-You’ll have to listen to a request from me in the future then.

He flicked away the words that echoed in his mind with a laugh. He was the first one to look down on him, so he couldn’t make any excuses either. Even if he did play first, he wouldn’t have been able to finish the game in one go, making it Sooil’s turn, and that would mean game over for him. It was impossible to win against him anyway.

Beep, the buzzer rang. Maru got off the bus and opened his phone. Ganghwan sent him the date and place of the appointment through text.

“Plays are good.”

He would have to see for himself what he was going to do and with what kind of people, but the fact that he was going to stand on stage made him feel excited already. Plays and dramas. The two were similar in the aspect that they both required acting, but they were two totally different things when you dug deep enough.

Acting was supposed to be done live. Just because they made a mistake, it wasn’t possible to shout cut and start over. Mistakes just happened and they would have to continue the play regardless. The actor

would grow amidst those big and small accidents. This was why he agreed with the words that actors had to try out plays in order to gain a variety of acting experiences.

'Sounds fun.'

His palms heated up. The nervousness he couldn't feel from dramas could be felt even now. Maru smiled as he started walking. The date was this Friday. He didn't have to wait long.

Chapter 432

It excited *her* every time. Although *she* was used to the set now, her heart jumped in excitement every time she came here. Looking at the vehicle with the logo of the TV station made *her* dazed at times. *She* would often think to herself that she was actually shooting a sitcom.

"Bunbun."

"Oh, you're here?"

She waved at Jiseok, who approached her. Bunbun. *She* got this nickname at school, but from some time onwards, everyone started calling her that. *She* was at a point now where hearing her own name felt more awkward.

"Looks like you won't be here after today for a while."

"I don't have a scene in the script. I wonder if I'm leaving entirely like this."

"Once the episodes get broadcasted, the viewers will all start asking who that cute girl is, so don't worry about that."

"No way."

"Hm, I think I find that absurd as well. I take it back."

They entered the set while laughing. To the left of the entrance was the living room of the main character and her family. The sofas placed in right angles and the sitting table in the middle were the start of the entire sitcom.

She sometimes watched the acting of the main characters from afar after her portion was finished. The far seat on the sofa was for sir Choi Taesik, the one next to that was for sir Ahn Jungho. Mrs Lee Haesook always sat down on the floor and poked other people with a back scratcher. Furthermore, an actor that was only three or four years older than *her* was acting amidst these people as well. The set was filled with laughter and really had funny events like a real sitcom, so *she* could keep watching them for hours on end. Whenever *she* did, she always prayed that she would one day act with those people. The admiration towards this field was a curious emotion that did not get absolved even while there.

Of course, there was a mountain *she* needed to overcome in order to sit with people like them.

"Geez, Taesik-oppa. Please stop making me laugh. You're making me cause an NG just because you caused one."

"Girl, I told you to not look at my face. Hahaha."

Looking at Miyoon who was exchanging words with Taesik, *she* made a resolution. *She* kept getting sworn at by her even now. There were times when it would end with just a few rebukes, and sometimes, *she* would hear harsh words. It was frustrating, and *she* sometimes wanted to cry, but she wasn't able to go against Miyoon. *She* would have talked back if Miyoon was just bullying her and nitpicking her for something unreasonable.

'But she never says anything wrong.'

While Miyoon's words were rough, she did not make up facts to swear at *her*. She only mercilessly sneered when *she* made a mistake or showed immaturity in some parts. *She* was frustrated at herself for giving that woman the opportunity to rebuke her, rather than being insulted in front of these people.

"I hope things go well today."

"It'll be fine as long as I do well. It's not like she nitpicks me for something strange."

"Well, we'll have to see about that."

"Why?"

"Rumors exist for a reason. In that sense, if it ever feels hard, then tell me. I am confident in receiving insults. I mean, they say that sharing insults makes you feel better."

"There is no such saying."

"Then we can make one."

Jiseok smiled brightly to the point that his upper teeth were showing. He was a frivolous guy who acted like he'd become ill if he stood still, but at times like this, he seemed to be a deep guy at heart.

For a moment, *she* felt relaxed that someone was there to worry about her. However, *she* couldn't get him involved.

"I'm fine. I might look like this, but I'm actually quite strong. Watch me. I'll have Miss Lee Miyoon look at me again."

"In my eyes, you don't look that strong though."

Jiseok looked like he had something to say, but did not say it.

"Anyway, tell me if you find anything difficult. What are friends for? Also, you should really tell Maru about it. I think he's noticed something already."

"I'll tell him if I am having a hard time."

She watched as Jiseok walked to the other side of the set before putting strength into her stomach and walking towards her own set. It was a small room. This room, which had a bed, a closet, and a desk, was her main stage.

"You're here."

"Yes, unni."

She greeted Park Yoonhee, who greeted her from behind. *Her* character was a friend of Yoonhee in the drama, and *she* would always stick to Yoonhee to get something from her. *She* was a poor person that staked her life for even a 100 won coin.

“Looks like madam Lee Miyoon is quiet today.”

Yoonhee approached *her* and spoke in a small voice.

“I did my best hiding from her.”

“You have it hard. Poor Bunbun.”

Yoonhee grabbed *her* cheeks and twisted them slightly. When *she* first met Yoonhee, she thought that Yoonhee would be a year older than her. However, they found out each other’s ages during their first greeting, and *she* was surprised to find out that Yoonhee was 7 years older than her. She had a really young-looking face. If she wore a school uniform, everyone would take her as a high school student.

As they got along well together, they became close rapidly. This unni, who told *her* that she did plays for 6 years, really digested the acting of a high school student well. She was also the person she’d go for consultation if she was stuck on something because of her acting.

“Should we try out the lines for a bit?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, I almost forgot. You know when you kicked the bed in the last shoot, that looked really good. Finding things like that and expressing them is really helpful. Do as much as you can in the context given by the director.”

She committed Yoonhee’s words to memory before opening the script. Acting in a play was really different from acting in front of a camera. Bringing the acting skills *she* used in plays in dramas would make her acting look exaggerated. *She* also had to focus on her body movements. Although every one of *her* actions would be revealed to the audience in a play, it wasn’t like that when acting in front of a camera.

When *she* focused on her facial expression that was captured on camera, her hands and feet would sometimes become awkward, and her acting would sometimes become easy because her hands and feet had nowhere to go. Even though *she* could naturally just put her hands and feet where they should be on top of a stage, it strangely looked unnatural when she stood in front of a camera.

“Don’t be too conscious of the camera. You have to be conscious of it, but it’s hard to do that at first. I was like that as well. The eye of the camera is too stiff, making you feel bad. It’s to the point that acting in front of an audience is better.”

Since the advice came from a senior who experienced the transition from acting in a play to acting in a drama, it felt very useful. While *she* went through the lines with the help of her senior, they heard a laugh from the other set. From how there was the sound of clapping as well, it seemed that they had finished shooting over there.

“We’re going over to the B set now.”

She could see the camera moving. The lights on the ceiling were turned on. The art team entered the set and started adjusting various things. The shoot was nigh.

"The weather is quite hot, isn't it? Let's finish the shoot quickly and get some rest."

With the producer's light greeting, they started the rehearsal immediately. *She* focused on the producer's words and actions. A rehearsal was like a milestone. It was a guide that showed which direction the acting should go. The actor's job was to decide whether they wanted to walk, run, or fly in that direction.

"Understood?"

She nodded. *She* got what the director wanted to say. Now, the problem was how it was going to be expressed. Of course, the one going on the camera was Yoonhee-unni. *She* was just spice. *She* had a simple role that was inserted into the scene for just one comedy line. It was highly probable that *her* role might disappear during editing, but she had to do her best. An actor's job was to digest a role regardless of its significance in the work after all.

She saw Miyoon standing behind the camera, as well as the other main actors. They were watching the shoot. Although *she* was nervous, she also felt motivated.

"Let's focus and do this in one go," the producer said while clapping.

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"You really don't know any shame, do you?"

Next to the set where the lights were faint. *She* lowered her head as she listened to Miyoon's words. The people that walked by this place didn't even give them a glance. They just simply ignored it as though it was natural for them to be there. At first, *she* was disappointed when she saw that, but now she knew that it was their way of being considerate.

"Sorry."

"You really are good with words. But why is your acting like that? Who did you learn from? Hm?"

"I'm sorry."

Maybe *she* got used to it. *She* hated herself for apologizing mechanically.

"How long are you going to keep this up?"

"Sorry?"

"I mean how long are you going to act in front of me? No, I can't even call that acting."

Miyoon spoke as she pushed on *her* shoulders. *Her* legs were shaking. *She* was in a fight where no one could help, and shouldn't help either. Right now, *she* was too weak and was in a position where she never dared to go against her opponent. What if *she* ran after saying that something came up? What if *she* went to the producer crying and begging? Wouldn't *she* become more comfortable than she is now?

She raised her head. Miyoon's eyes were right in front of *her* eyes.

"I'm going to continue. I'm going to do it now and forever."

She knew the easy way out but didn't want to take that path. *She* didn't want to bend. Breaking was much better.

"You know who you are glaring at, right?"

Hearing her words, *her* body flinched. *Her* resolution was separate from her body's reactions.

"You, I like your eyes."

She was prepared for a rebuke, but she heard a kind voice instead. *She* blinked several times as she looked at Miyoon. There was a kind smile on her face.

"This field is quite harsh, you know? And there are a lot of accidents. That's why I become strict when I see young people like you. However, I'm not doing it because of some malicious intent. It's just, I'm awkward at expressing myself."

She looked at Miyoon who grabbed her hand. Although her hands were rough, the way she caressed *her* was soft. It was to the point that *she* was reminded of her dead grandmother.

"I treated you too harshly, didn't I?"

"Eh? N-no, not at all."

"I'll treat you well in the future. You only found out what I really meant today. If you have any difficulties, please come to me at any time for consultation."

The scary person looked like she had changed into an angel. Yes, she didn't really hate me, when you think about it, I was the one who made the mistake in the first place. Since someone like me was walking around as though nothing had happened in front of her, how annoyed must she have felt? - *she* felt very complex but sighed in relief since it looked like things had been resolved now.

However, *she* wasn't entirely comfortable with the outcome. It felt like things were resolved, but *she* felt stifled. *She* felt unpleasant and even disgusting. Was this how it was going to end?

"This is what acting is," at that time, Miyoon spoke.

She stared at Miyoon in a daze. Miyoon violently shook off *her* hands before sneering at her.

"That is what you call acting. Okay? Not your awkward mess of a gesture. Okay?"

Ah, it was a lie. The moment *she* thought that she ended up smiling to herself for some reason. It wasn't a smile that came from being flustered. *She* actually liked this situation.

"What's so funny?"

"Sorry? Oh, nothing."

"You are completely crazy."

"I'm not that crazy."

For some reason, *she* kept smiling as she said her words.

She couldn't hold them back.

Miyoon frowned and then scanned *her* from top to bottom before turning around.

"Hey, hey, hey. You okay?"

Jiseok had approached *her* and asked. The moment *she* saw him, she sat down on the floor. Even though *she* was chuckling, she didn't have any strength in her legs.

"What happened?"

"Nothing, I just found it funny."

"What's so funny?"

"She apologized, right?"

"What? Lee Miyoon was the first to apologize?"

"Yeah, but it was all an act."

"I knew it. But what about it? She was clearly toying with you."

"The thing is, I felt really strange the moment I heard her apology. I was really annoyed and wanted to cry. Now I think I know the reason. I received so many insults, and I think I got angry when I thought that she was going to make this as if it never happened at all with just an apology. But it's an act, she says! She says she does indeed hate me."

"S-so, you are happy that you confirmed her hate for you?"

"Yeah!"

"...Hey, you are being really weird right now. Your face is laughing, but your arms and legs are shaking. Are you aware of that?"

"I know. I do, but I really think that this turned out well. I don't want this to end with an awkward apology. This is much better. She might have started things, but I will be the one to put an end to it."

She looked at Miyoon who walked with her manager. That back was *her* objective. *She* would not be shaken and would walk straight ahead until that person praised her for her acting.

"...Oh my word, they have both gone crazy."

She grabbed Jiseok, who was grumbling, and stood up. Although *her* legs were shaking, she felt very refreshed for some reason.

"Let's go! I have to go home now."

"Fine, let's go."

She grabbed Jiseok's hand, who grinned.

Chapter 433

"I might be coming home late starting this Thursday."

Hearing her brother speak at the dining table, Bada turned around to look at her mother. Her mother asked if he'll come home really late with a worried face.

"I'm not sure. I'll have to go there to see how long we're going to practice."

"Where are you doing it?"

"Anyang. It's not far, so you don't have to be worried."

Her brother put his empty bowls in the sink and went to his room before coming back out again with his wallet.

"I'm going to the convenience store. Do you need anything, mom?"

"Nothing."

"How about you, Bada?"

"I want ice cream! I want a cone."

"You should really stop eating things like that. You'll gain weight."

Bada snorted and shouted at him to buy her a chocolate-flavored one.

"But why is oppa so busy recently? He's not even on TV."

She asked her mom, who was putting away the dishes.

"He's just starting out, so he must be learning things here and there. It's not like you can become a celebrity just because you want to."

"I'm worried he might start suffering later in life because of that. There are a lot of people who regret it when they are older."

"Geez, that's not something you can say to your older brother."

Bada ran away from her mom's spicy hands and stood up quickly.

"I'm just worried for him. Like you said, it's not like you can become a celebrity just because you want to. When I watch TV, I see a lot of people who just leave after just practicing as trainees."

"Han Bada."

"What! I'm just worried, I mean it."

Bada pouted and looked at her brother's room. She was aware that her brother was doing his best. He kept leaving the house even during the holidays saying he had to practice, and whenever he came back, he slept like a log.

She could see that he was really putting his efforts into it, but actually, she didn't know what he was really doing.

She asked her mom, who was doing the dishes, but the reply she got was that her mom didn't know either.

"Do you think your brother will tell Mom something like that?"

"Why? He used to tell you a lot of things before."

"When are you talking about? Your brother doesn't tell me anything these days."

"Really?"

It was understandable since her brother really did change quite a lot.

"Bada, put the side dishes into the fridge."

Bada put the side dishes into the refrigerator before going to her room. She turned on her PC and visited her mini homepage before being reminded of her homework after seeing a post from a friend of hers. The teacher for that class was a scary one that hit students on the back of their hands with a ruler if they didn't do their homework.

'Should I do it while watching TV?'

She brought her English homework to the living room. Her mom, who had finished the dishes, was sitting on the sofa, watching TV. She put her notebook on the table and rested her chin on her hands. She had to write down four pages worth of idioms. She didn't know why she was doing this, but she could only do it since she was told to.

When she filled half of a page, her brother came back. He threw her a chocolate-flavored ice cream cone with an expressionless face.

"Thanks."

She put her notebook aside and started eating.

On TV, a daily drama was currently airing, and honestly, because the content was similar across the various TV stations she couldn't differentiate between them. It felt as though the story would be joined smoothly even if she switched from YBS to RBS, and then to KBS.

"That ahjumma is the bad one, isn't she?"

She pointed at the person who had thick makeup on her face and was wearing a fur coat. Her mom nodded. It was just as she expected. It was way too obvious. The innocent-looking girl wearing thin makeup had to be the main character. Oh, she just got slapped. Now, the male protagonist would run up to them, shouting 'mother'.

-What are you doing, mother?

Bada grinned as she looked at her mom. Her mom looked at her strangely before looking at the TV again.

“Mom, this is way too obvious. This is the first time I watched it, and I think I know the story already. That woman is the evil mother-in-law, isn’t she? And is hinting the girl to get a divorce with her son. Right?”

“That’s why I watch it.”

“But it’s so obvious and no fun.”

“Why don’t you reach my age first? You’ll really like these kinds of things.”

“No way. I don’t think I’ll be like that.”

“Yes, yes, my daughter. You can keep liking that Top Four, or Tee Tee Four or something.”

“Mom, it’s TTO!”

“TTO or Tee Tee Four, sounds the same to me.”

“It’s not the same at all!”

She made a sour expression as she pulled her notebook over again. When she moved her mechanical pencil, the TV volume started decreasing.

“You can raise the volume again.”

“I can hear it.”

She shrugged once before she continued writing.

One page, two pages, three pages, four pages. After writing everything, she raised her head. It was 9:53 p.m. Since she was simply copying, time went by in a flash.

“I’m done.”

She closed her notebook and sat next to her mom with a cushion.

“Mom, switch to channel 10.”

“What’s on it?”

“The Witness. Lee Junghoon is in it. He looks so cool.”

“Lee Junghoon?”

“Yeah. Ahn Joohyun is in it as well.”

“Mom finds her a bit scary. She looks too strong willed for a girl.”

“That’s what’s cool about her. Get on with the times. These days, women have their voices.”

“Fine, okay.”

Her mom switched to channel 10 with the remote. Just in time, the ad was finishing off and the drama started.

“What’s it about?”

Her mom pointed at the snacks beneath the table and asked. Bada reached out and grabbed the snacks and gave it to her mom.

“It’s about an investigator. The story begins with a man turning himself in after committing a murder by contract, and it’s really fun and thrilling. If you get absorbed, it’s really really interesting.”

“I never liked those things though.”

“You should watch it. I mean, you should really change your tastes.”

At that moment, the door to her brother’s room opened. He yawned as he walked towards the fridge while scratching his belly. Bada met eyes with her brother, who returned to his room with a strawberry milk in his hand.

“Can you even study in front of a TV?”

Tsk tsk - her brother clicked his tongue before going into his room.

Bada glared at the door that was closing. Change? How did he change at all? She felt that his girlfriend was wasted on a guy like him.

Bada turned her head to the TV again. In the last episode, it ended with the special investigation forces starting a counterattack after getting a clue to the identity of the assassination company. They had finally found the shadow of the organization that raised the young killers. The relationship between the investigators had gotten better again and now the story was about to kick things up a notch as it began unveiling the identity of the organization. There was also the love story between Lee Junghoon and Ahn Joohyun as well.

Even her mother, who seemed bored at first, started focusing after a car chase action scene in the middle of the city. Bada made a satisfied smile and spoke,

“Lee Junghoon is so cool, isn’t he, mom?”

Lee Junghoon, who drove the car in a cool fashion to arrive at HQ was looking at the map with a serious face. He looked really charming. The nose lines and the chin lines were what made a man look cool. These days, a lot of her classmates really liked Lee Junghoon.

By 11, the drama slowly started entering a crisis again. The member of the organization that they were transporting had disappeared again. The investigation forces started suspecting each other again after coming to the conclusion that there was a spy among their ranks. At that moment, Ahn Joohyun entered an interrogation room with the investigators without saying a word. There, the boy that they handed over to another team who was related to the organization, was sitting.

Bada inwardly shouted yes. Now, if they interrogated that guy and got the answer, the secret would be revealed.

A faint figure could be seen in the dark interrogation room. Ahn Joohyun’s footsteps could be heard through the speakers, and eventually, she sat in front of the boy. Tick - the lights turned on in the dark interrogation room.

The boy had his head lowered. When Ahn Joohyun asked a couple of questions, his body shook up and down before making a frightening noise.

“Is that acting? Urgh, it’s so scary.”

“He’s good.”

Although she said those words, she frowned when the boy bashed his head against the table. It was very realistic to the point that she was worried that he might actually get injured.

In the next scene, the boy put his face against Ahn Joohyun who had approached him. The perspective changed rapidly to create a tense atmosphere. The periodic thudding seemed to make her heart beat faster.

“Oh my word, oof.”

Her mom said those words when Ahn Joohyun grabbed the boy’s hair like she would rip it off and bashed his head against the table. Bada also groaned slightly. The rampaging boy went limp. However, he still produced that monstrous sound. Grrr - he was like a dog with heavy injuries that wanted to live.

The camera that shot Ahn Joohyun slowly moved to show the appearance of the boy. The boy’s full face appeared on camera for the first time.

“....”

The moment she saw the identity of the boy who was glaring with bloodshot eyes, her brother’s room opened again. She glanced at the boy on the screen and her brother who was washing the strawberry milk carton in the sink alternately. It shouldn’t be, right? No way.

“...Maru.”

“Yeah?”

“Is that you?”

Her mom asked with a sunken voice. Her brother went up to the TV and had a look at the screen before going back to his room with a short ‘yeah’. After the sound of the door closing, the boy’s mad roars started reverberating through the TV. Bada watched the freaky scene in a daze before standing up and slamming open the door to her brother’s room.

“O-oppa. Is that really you?”

Her brother, who was reading a book while sitting on the floor, frowned.

“Why do you ask?”

“No, but, is that really you?”

“It is me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Why didn’t you tell me that you’re in it?”

“It’s nothing amazing, so why would I cause a commotion? Also, be quiet. The house downstairs might come up.”

Finish your homework already - he finished off with those words while shaking his head. ‘This’... was the same as... ‘that’? Bada alternated between looking at her brother on screen and her real brother before returning to the sofa.

“Mom, it really is him.”

“Y-yeah.”

“Oppa is on TV.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Holy shit.”

The drama then ended. While reading the ending credits, she saw a name at the very end.

-Special appearance: Han Maru.

“Mom, did you see that?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Mom.”

“W-what?”

“That, I mean, oppa really appeared on TV, right?”

“Didn’t we go through this already?”

Bada looked at her mom. Then, she grabbed her mom’s hands, which looked like they had nowhere to go, before shaking them up and down.

“Wait, mom.”

Bada stood up and went to her room. She opened the internet browser on the computer, which was already on, before going to her mini homepage. Her mini homepage was empty since she had nothing to write. She clicked the ‘write something’ box and wrote just one line.

-The first idiot of our household is on TV!

Chapter 434

Coincidence arose from suddenness. What followed were emotions like happiness or sadness. This situation was precisely like that. In this case, the emotions that followed were unpleasantness and unfamiliarity.

“May I help you?”

Maru spoke to the boys sitting in a circle around him. The atmosphere of the class was not ordinary since the moment he came to school. A lot of them gave him glances and whispered to each other. It was like they were bachelors who just heard a rumor that one of them had met a beautiful girl.

“You met Ahn Joohyun twice now, huh.”

“And you dare say you don’t know anything?”

“I heard that each scene takes around 3 to 4 hours to shoot.”

“When I watched yesterday, he was practically rubbing all over her.”

His eyes were twitching. He was fed up with making a sympathetic face. Maru just waved his hand.

“I told you it’s just a coincidence.”

“How is two times in a row a coincidence?”

“Right!”

Even though these boys didn’t usually have any brains, they tried to pry into him like they were Sherlock Holmes. Maru needed a Watson to clear up the situation here.

Maru thought about Bangjoo for a second, but he couldn’t sell out his junior. The moment he told everyone here that Ahn Joohyun had a little brother in the 1st year of this school, Bangjoo’s school life would get tiring.

“What do you want?”

In the end, he had to raise the white flag. It was impossible to calm down hot-blooded high school students with too much yang using words. He had to negotiate in order to calm them down.

“Uhm... nothing specifically.”

“Me neither. It’s not like I want an autograph.”

“We’re too old for that.”

The reactions from his friends were lukewarm. Even though they caused all that fuss last time. Maru asked his friends once again.

“Then why the hell are you doing this to me?”

They then replied quickly as though they were waiting for him to ask that question.

“Your stomach hurts when your cousin buys real estate.”

“We can’t let you have all the fun.”

“Of course, of course.”

“Ah, wait. I think it’ll be good if I can get the autograph, now that I think about it.”

“Me too.”

“Get one for us.”

Maru shook his head. Since when did being whimsical become popular? The boys, who were all talking about Ahn Joo Hyun, switched topics and started asking things about the shoot.

Maru answered what he could. The question he received the most was about the contents of the next episode, but he couldn't answer since he did not know anything either.

“But you really did look good on camera. Last time, you were wearing a baseball cap, so it was hard to recognize you, but your whole face came out yesterday.”

“Right. But did you wear something on your eyes yesterday? They looked like they were going to burst.”

“They were so bloodshot.”

Maru scratched his eyebrows and replied to them that it was because he got hit. The boys stared at him before nodding their heads in comprehension.

“Are you going to appear again then?”

“That's it. No more.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I only went there due to a coincidence. There's also the fact that the director just saw me in a good way. I wasn't an official cast member, so that's the last episode I'm in.”

“Well, it did say special appearance in the credits. But wow, Han Maru keeps coming out on TV. Maybe he'll actually do well at this rate?”

The kids gave him light smacks on the back before going back to their seats. He probably heard ‘don't forget about me once you become popular’ around ten times. They looked like they were going to keep holding him for the entire day, but it was extremely rare for boys at this age to be so talkative over someone else's matters for a long time. They then scattered and returned to their normal lives. Games, soccer and then back to games. Rather than celebrities, who they weren't related to, game items that they could obtain were much more interesting topics.

“That must have been hard for you.”

Dowook seemed to have visited the cafeteria as he was holding a drink in his hand.

“But what are you going to do now? It doesn't seem to have ended yet.”

Dowook pointed at the back door with an interested face. When Maru turned around, he saw Aram and the other members of the acting club. The problem was that it wasn't just the members of the acting club. Students from some other departments of the 2nd year had come as well. There was a group of people from class 2 of electrical, which was the class next to theirs.

“Hey, hey. I saw you on TV!”

“Han Maru! I heard you were on TV.”

“Seonbae, I saw you yesterday. You were awesome.”

Maru sighed and brushed down his face.

“Good luck with that, Maru.”

The fact that he could feel a teasing tone from Daemyung’s consolation was probably not because he was sensitive. Maru put on some earphones and laid down on his desk. The curiosity wasn’t even going to last a day. He just had to endure through the morning.

“The pop star Han Maru is sleeping.”

He decided to remember those words, which came from Dowook.

Maru turned the volume of his MP3 to twice as loud as usual.

* * *

“Was that really your brother?”

“I told you he was.”

“Really? That’s awesome.”

Bada smiled and shrugged. Her friends had gained interest after seeing her post on her mini homepage yesterday. It was a little embarrassing to talk about her brother, but she felt proud when she heard her friends praising her brother.

“Is he going to come out again? From what I saw, he was really good at acting.”

“W-well. I’m not sure.”

“Why?”

“Because that guy doesn’t say things like that.”

At that moment, the girl sitting on Bada’s right spoke.

“You have it good. I heard that your brother got you the tickets to TTO’s concert as well. I wanted to go too.”

“Ah, right. He did get you those as well.”

Bada coughed and said that it was nothing much.

“Nothing much? Looks like your brother is really doing well. Maybe he’s going to be a main character in a drama some day?”

“Who knows. That dude seems to have matured after entering high school. He also seems to be doing a lot of work.”

“Anyway, it must be good for you. My brother always nags at me to get off the computer because he wants to use it.”

Bada shrugged. This was the first time she received the attention of her classmates all at once. Her lips twitched in joy when she felt the gazes of envy.

“Actually, he was the one who got me Sungjae-oppa’s autograph.”

“What? Really?”

“Yeah. Oh, you haven’t seen it yet, have you?”

Although she already boasted about it to her close friends, she hadn’t talked about this with the ones she was talking to now. That was because they hung out in different groups. Although they said hi to each other, that was only at school. Once school finished, the girls only hung out in their respective groups, so there was no opportunity to talk about serious things with them.

Above all, what made her excited the most was that the girl that usually looked down on her was looking at her suspiciously. ‘Kang Sora, look at this. It’s the real deal.’

She took out the autograph she painstakingly laminated and showed it to everyone else. The girls that bought photos of TTO in batch at the stationery store exclaimed and stared at the autograph. The other girls also came to her wanting to see it up close.

Bada responded with a calm smile to all the interest and looks given to her. Actually, she wanted to boast, but she held back since Sora, who was glaring at her from the side, might nitpick.

“Are you sure that’s a real autograph? It looks similar to the one sold at our local stationery store.”

Sora ended up saying something. Bada immediately replied.

“What are you saying? That dude, I mean, my brother really got this for me.”

“And how do we believe that?”

“Huh?”

“How do we believe it? Look, it’s the same as the one sold in the stationery store. No, are you sure it’s not copied from the internet? I saw some people do that these days.”

Sora lifted the laminated autograph before putting it against the lights.

“Think about it. Her brother getting her an autograph of Sungjae-oppa on an autograph paper like this? Does that even make any sense? Also, he seemed to have appeared in a drama last night, right? Someone I know works for a TV station, and he told me that anyone can appear for short moments like that.”

“Is that true?”

Everyone looked at Sora.

“Yes. You know acting schools right? They just randomly pick people from there. The ones that have time.”

“Oh really? Then Bada’s brother wasn’t picked because he was good?”

“I wouldn’t know for sure. But he only appeared for a brief moment. That means he’s a one-off actor, so it’s probably safe to say that he didn’t do anything amazing. Oh, I’m not looking down on your brother. I’m just stating facts. You know what I mean, right?”

Sora smiled and put down the autograph. Bada looked up at that girl with a sour expression. The girls around just glanced at the autograph before going back to their seats. Although they weren't saying anything, they seemed to think that it was fake.

"Ah, right. I found out the location of Change-oppas' next schedule. Are you going to come? My mom gave me money, so I can pay for the transport fares and food."

Sora turned around as she spoke. While TTO entered a break period, the one that replaced them as the number 1 on the rankings was Change.

The girls flocked around Sora this time. Everyone replied while smiling since Sora was the most popular in the class.

"Hey hey. It's not like this is the first time she's like that so don't mind it too much."

"That's right, Bada. She's just jealous."

Although her friends consoled her with a smile, Bada was frustrated. Her sneering speech was something she always did, so she didn't really care, but she really didn't like the fact that she badmouthed that dude, her brother.

'I'm the only one who can look down on him. Not you!'

Those words circled in her mouth, but Bada was unable to say it until the end. Fighting with Sora would ruin her relationship with everyone else in the class as well. She didn't want that to happen.

Bada took out her phone and looked things up on the internet in order to relieve her depression. She also sent a text message.

-What is it now?

Dowook's short reply made her eyes light on fire. His girlfriend was depressed and what? 'What is it now?' Bada moved her fingers busily while looking at Sora sitting on her desk, laughing and chatting.

* * *

"Do something about your sister, dude."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She's upset for some reason."

"How would I know something that you don't? Don't make her cry and treat her well. She's kinda hopeless once she starts complaining. If she's upset when I go home today, I'll think that it's because of you and call you about it, so bear that in mind."

Maru held a middle finger up at Dowook who panted in anger before waving at Daemyung.

"See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow, Maru. Have fun with your class."

"Thanks."

He took the bus and the train to Seoul like always. He now entered Film, which he had gotten used to now, and opened the door to lecture room 4.

“Over there, you’re not allowed to come in.”

The floor and the ceiling were ripped apart. It was under construction.

The other lecture rooms had their classes as usual. He wondered what this was about and took out his phone.

“Ah.”

His phone had been turned off. He had turned it off because some of his classmates texted and called him as a prank in the morning, and forgot to turn it back on again. When he turned it on, he found a text message from three hours ago. There was also a missed call from Film. The text notified him that there was no class today due to construction.

“What are you doing outside?”

He heard a voice behind him. Maru made a bitter smile seeing Sungjae who stood behind him. Here was one more person that didn’t see the text. When he explained to him the situation, Sungjae just accepted it without much surprise.

“My phone number was leaked, so I let my personal phone go and was using a business one. Looks like the text went to that one.”

“Let’s leave for now. It’s not like we can do anything here.”

“Alright, let’s do that.”

Sungjae flicked the guitar he was wearing on his back.

* * *

“A mocha bun and a latte, please.”

“Ah, yes. And thanks for last time.”

“For what?”

Yoo Sooil asked the part timer girl in front of him.

“You drove out the woman who caused a ruckus here....”

“Oh! You are from back then. Nah, we should help each other out.”

He remembered back to when he first met Maru in the coffee shop in the lounge of the JA building. He did have a dispute with a female employee who was screeching her heart out. Sooil smiled and received the bun and the coffee as he sat down. His business here was done, and his day would be over once he went home after enjoying the bread and coffee.

‘This place has some really good coffee.’

Just as he was enjoying himself while sipping coffee, he saw a woman approaching him from the other side of the glass wall with a fierce glare on her face. There was an ID card around her neck. It was the woman he had a dispute with last time.

“Oh my lord.”

Sooil wanted to run away after finishing the coffee, but the coffee was too hot, and there was more than half of it left. He couldn't exactly leave behind food. In the end, he had to watch as the woman came into the coffee shop.

“Hey! You are the kid from back then, aren't you?”

“Eh? I'm not sure what you mean.”

“You are! The dude that lied about being president Kim Jaechul's son.”

“No, when did I do that? I never did such a thing.”

He laughed and stuffed the bun in his mouth. He was just about to get up and leave when that woman grabbed him by the arm.

“Who told you you can leave? Do you know what kind of things I had to face because of you last time?”

“Strictly speaking, it was you who was being unreasonable to the part timer....”

“You are no good. You picked the wrong opponent. I'm not someone that goes easy on people just because they're young. Okay?”

The employee took out her phone as she spoke.

Chapter 435

“Huh, isn't that Yoo Sooil?”

“Who's that?”

“You don't know? He was in a couple of movies and some dramas too.”

“Is he famous?”

“I guess you can call him that.”

“Not because you work in that area?”

Sooil smiled when he heard those voices around him. Since this was the JA building, a lot of people working in the industry could be seen frequently in this place. The woman that was glaring at him while holding his arm started looking around her.

“Uhm, it'll be inconvenient for both of us if this gets out of hand, don't you think so?”

Hearing Sooil's words, the woman let go of his arm.

“Who are you, some celebrity?”

“I'm just a new actor that appeared here and there.”

“Then why did you lie to me like that?”

“Back then, I did it because you looked very angry. Also, the part timer is pitiful. It’s just a simple mistake.”

“That’s her problem.”

Her voice was raised a little, but she didn’t shout due to the gazes around them.

“Sorry. I was wrong. As an apology, I’ll buy you a cup of coffee. Please let me go this time, please?”

Sooil grabbed the woman’s hand and smiled. It seemed to be true that people couldn’t spit on a smiling face as the woman clicked her tongue and nodded.

“How generous of you. What would you like to drink?”

“I don’t care.”

Sooil nodded before walking to the counter. There was one more part timer this time. She wasn’t here before.

“Uhm, you’re Yoo Sooil, aren’t you?”

“Eh? Ah, yes. I am.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. I enjoyed the movie you were in last time.”

“Wow, thanks.”

Just as he turned around after receiving the coffee. He could hear someone questioning if he was really an actor. Sooil turned around with a bright smile.

“Yes, I am an actor. I thought I was quite popular, but I guess I don’t have as much recognition as I thought. I’ll put in more effort in the future.”

When he made a victory pose, the two part timers cheered for him with awkward smiles. Sooil went back to the table where the female employee was sitting.

“Here. Sorry about last time.”

The woman snatched the coffee away from him.

“Be careful in the future. The world isn’t as easy as you think it is. I’m only letting you go this time because you look like a kind boy, alright?”

“Of course, of course.”

“Also, if you’re going to be an actor, you should really manage your image.”

“Yes, I’ll bear that in mind.”

“I’m really holding a lot back this time.”

The employee glared at the counter once before standing up, but soon she lowered herself again. Sooil wondered what was going on and turned around to see where she was looking. There were a lot of men in their fifties entering the building.

“Dammit, it’s the president.”

There was nothing more uncomfortable than meeting a superior during a break. Moreover, the president? He could understand how she felt.

However, the female employee’s refuge couldn’t last long. The president and his company turned around to walk towards the coffee shop. The female employee walked to the entrance of the coffee shop. He had a glance at her, and she didn’t look like she was annoyed at all as there was a smile on her face. That instantaneous change in expression was something that company employees all had.

The door opened and the president came in.

“Hello, sir.”

The female employee greeted him first.

“Ah, yes. But who are you?”

“I am Park Miseon who just joined the human resources team.”

“Oh, right. I see. Sorry for not recognizing you. I wasn’t able to attend the welcome party. Anyway, nice to meet you. You just joined the family, so let’s get along.”

The president smiled and walked past her. Sooil thought that she should’ve done the same thing to the part timer as he got ready to leave.

“Hm? Hey.”

At that moment, the president approached Sooil. Sooil quickly started thinking. Had he met this man somewhere before? He thought about it for a while, but he couldn’t think of anything. The fact that someone from a business company had recognized him meant that this wasn’t entirely welcome in his perspective.

“Aren’t you Lee Jaeho?”

The moment he heard those words, Sooil sighed inwardly.

“Yes, I am.”

“Haha, I was right. You might not know me, but I know you.”

Sooil smiled and stared at the president’s mouth. After the president looked around him, he asked in a small voice.

“Yes, is the chairman doing well?”

* * *

“It was insane when we went to a girl’s high for a concert.”

“A concert at a girl's high?”

“Yeah. It was last year. Just around the time we started talking about doing individual activities. Oh, thank you.”

The boiling Sundubu-jjigae was placed in front of them. Maru clicked his tongue when the grandma put a rice bowl, with rice towering high over the edge of the bowl, in front of him and said that she'll bring more if they found it lacking. Grandma, it's too much.

“Enjoy your food, my pups.”

“Yes. Thank you for the meal,” Sungjae replied while raising his spoon.

He had taken off his hat and was sitting down comfortably without having to look around in case someone recognized him. This restaurant, which was in an alley a bit far away from Gangnam station, looked like a refuge for Sungjae.

“But they really don't recognize you here,” Maru said as he mixed the boiling soup.

Although the 8 or so tables were all occupied, no one recognized Sungjae.

“Is it because their general ages are quite high?”

Including a middle-aged man who was eating scorched rice water as a dessert, the minimum age of the customers here seemed to be at least 50.

“Even people barely older than thirty usually don't recognize us. They might know that we might be on TV, but they wouldn't know our names. Our main target audience is teenagers and people in their twenties after all. So there's no better place than this one where I can eat in peace. I guess you could call it a shelter of mine.”

As they walked to this place, Sungjae was unable to lift his head even once. He pressed down his baseball cap until the tip reached his nose. Even then, people seemed to have recognized him and approached him so he had to get away quickly.

“It's hard being popular, huh.”

“I should cherish it while I still have it, but when you actually live like this, you find it annoying that you can't move around freely.”

“If you suit up and walk in front of a girl's high school, you might cause chaos. Oh, what happened at the concert in a girl's high you were talking about just now?”

“It was more chaotic than any other concert. The stress of third year exam students was unleashed at its fullest. I mean, we were taken aback by them.”

“Haha, I can imagine. But don't you usually go to colleges for concerts like that? No wait, at your level, I don't think school events are economic at all,” he asked while munching on some kkakdugi.

TTO wasn't some new boy band. They were one of the top idol groups in the country, so he found it curious that they attended an event at a high school.

“It was the request of an acquaintance of the president.”

“Oh.”

“Apparently, the daughter of someone important attended that school. Our president doesn’t usually schedule small events like that, but the fact that she accepted it probably means that the request was from someone she couldn’t decline so easily.”

“Do such things happen often?”

“Does it happen often? More than often, really. We didn’t have it as bad once we started making a name for ourselves, but we were called to all sorts of places when we were still new. Doesn’t JA have stuff like that? Or is it different because they’re more towards the acting side?”

“They haven’t started managing me yet. I’m below their required level, so I just look for auditions and work myself.”

“You? But the actors back then really talked good about you. Including sir Yoon Moonjoong. I don’t think you’re below the required level.”

“Well, while I’m thankful that you say such words...”

Maru scooped a big spoonful of rice before continuing to speak,

“Being good at something and being popular are two separate things. I guess the president hasn’t found me profitable yet. I did hear him say that official management will start after graduation, but he’s the kind of person who’d approach me first even before graduation if he sees fit. Sooil should be like that as well.”

“Sooil?”

“Ah, you don’t know him? Yoo Sooil. He’s a high school student actor.”

“Well, I’m not sure I know him.”

“He seemed quite popular among girls my age.”

“People like that are poured out in batches in this industry. Who knows, we might be forgotten in just a few years if we don’t do any activities.”

“I don’t think TTO would be like that.”

“I thought the same when I looked at senior idol groups before we made our debut. But you know? It only takes a brief moment to be forgotten. People with skills keep showing up after all, so it’s only a matter of time. We might appear on the same TV, but the consumption rate of idols is too different from that of an actor. That’s why idols try out various things.”

“You said that you were originally an aspiring actor, didn’t you?”

Sungjae nodded.

“Like I said last time, I kinda started this thinking that being an idol must be easier, but nothing was easy in this world after all.”

“Right, nothing is easy.”

“But it’s not like I regret not pushing forward with my dream to become an actor. I just find it a little pitiful. I’m curious what I would look like if I continued to pursue acting back then.”

“You would’ve done well even if you pursued acting.”

“Your flattery is a bit too obvious now, you know?”

“I’m lobbying so that I can get something from you. But hey, the soup here is great.”

“If the atmosphere was the only thing I cared about, I wouldn’t come here so frequently. The food is good as well,” Sungjae said with a smile.

This was a time when Maru could talk one-to-one with someone that had reached the peak of their field. Maru found it pitiful that the rice was decreasing. After all, it wasn’t easy to get an opportunity to talk with someone who reached their area’s summit. They were able to talk about what they weren’t able to in the lecture room. If it was up to him, he wished that he could bring a bottle of soju and listen to some more honest stories.

“Maru, how do you practice your acting?”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“There’s nothing special, really. When I receive a script, I analyze the character, try projecting myself into the character, and after that, it’s just trial and error.”

“Hm, I guess it’s similar for all people?”

“Probably. If you want to become good at soccer, you have to be always near a soccer ball, and if you want to ride a bicycle well, you always have to be near a bicycle. It’s the same when it comes to things you do with your body. If you want to become good at acting, you’ll have to be next to your character at all times.”

“You’re right.”

“It’s not like anyone tells you that you’re bad, right? I haven’t seen instructor Miso saying things about you either during class.”

“Well, for me it’s like, hm, textbook acting? It doesn’t look awkward, but it lacks that final stroke. That’s how I see it.”

“Geez, are you boasting to me now?”

“Is that how it is?”

Sungjae smiled awkwardly.

“Have you gotten any works your way recently?”

Sungjae shook his head when he heard that question.

“There are a few offers, but I don’t plan to accept any for the time being.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to do an act when I am satisfied with my own acting. Also, I should learn while I still can. The president will only let us roam free until mid next year.”

“After that, you’ll be recording your albums again?”

“Probably. If I don’t encounter a big turn in my acting career, that is.”

After saying that, Sungjae stared at his cup of water. In Maru’s eyes, he looked hesitant. It looked like he had something to say, but he couldn’t say it.

“If you have anything you want to say to me, you should say it.”

“Was it obvious?”

“A little.”

After hesitating, Sungjae spoke,

“The event that changed my perspective of actors is my encounter with Sir Yoon Moonjoong. Thanks to him, I was able to concentrate during the movie shoot as well. I wanted to contact him myself after the shoot, but it wasn’t that easy. With that being the case, aren’t you close to him, Maru?”

There was a reason he was hesitating. Maru put down his spoon.

“If it’s just greeting him, there’s a way for you to do that, isn’t there?”

“Greeting, yes. But I want to talk to him. A great lesson... would be great to hear, but I don’t even expect that much. I just wanted to listen to the rest of the story he told me in the mountain back then.”

It was an honest request. That was rather unexpected. For now, Maru liked him for the fact that he wasn’t being roundabout with his requests. However, he couldn’t decide this here since this was about the elder.

Of course, he didn’t plan to outright refuse either.

This was a great opportunity to have a top idol indebted to him.

“I can’t exactly ask the elder to meet you. It would be rude of me to do that as well.”

“I thought so. Forget I said anything. Don’t feel pressured.”

“But participating as a friend over some soju and pork belly is another matter.”

“...What?”

Maru smiled and asked back at Sungjae, who was clearly confused.

“Hyung, how many bottles of soju can you drink?”

“About two.”

“Alright. I’ll ask him for now. If the elder remembers you, and if he sees you in a good light, then he’ll probably accept.”

“R-really?”

“Please wait a moment.”

Maru took out his phone.

It was time to hold that pork belly party in Yeonhui-dong.

Spicy soft tofu soup. for details.

Diced radish kimchi.

Chapter 436

“Thanks. I was a bit embarrassed after asking, but I feel really good now that I actually got a schedule with him. Well then, see you at that time.”

Sungjae drove off while smiling.

“That went well.”

He called the elder at the restaurant, and was given the reply that he could visit whenever he wanted. He even was told that it would be fine to visit tomorrow. He was a little worried that he might be inconveniencing him, but he was told that he was actually rather welcome since elder Yoon was taking a break from work. Things led to one another and president Lee Junmin and Ganghwan got involved in this as well. When he told Sungjae about it, he seemed rather happy. It seemed that he was a fan of a lot of people.

Maru threw the hat in his hand in the air once before catching it again. He got an autograph on the hat Sungjae was wearing.

“I guess this should calm her down for a while.”

This was a magical item that would turn his coquettish little sister into an obedient one. He even had Sungjae write ‘Bada, do well in your studies’ on the inside of the hat. It would be great if she was touched after seeing it and actually end up going to a good high school.

He thought about going home before walking to the convenience store right across the street. He wanted some coffee. He saw the part timer flinch before standing up. He felt sorry for some reason.

He brought two cans of coffee to the counter. The POS device created beeping sounds.

“That will be 1000 won.”

He took out a bill and handed it over before grabbing the coffee, but just then, he felt the part timer staring at him. He was just going to ask what it was, when the portable media player entered his eyes. There was a video playing back, and it seemed to be a drama. When he focused, he saw Joohyun in it.

“You’re the one, right?” The part timer asked.

“Ah, yes.”

Maru smiled awkwardly before grabbing the coffee. The part timer told him that she'd put them in a bag for him before rummaging below the counter.

“I don't need one.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

He took the coffee and left the store. He turned around just in case, but he saw the part timer staring at him. When they met eyes, they both smiled awkwardly and nodded.

‘So there are people that recognize me.’

That was the scariness of the media. No, perhaps it was the power of a popular drama? It felt rather strange to have a total stranger recognize him first and talk to him.

He took a sip of coffee as he got on the elevator. He suddenly realized that he didn't check the episode himself. He wondered whether he should do some monitoring, but decided not to in the end. It wasn't like he had a fixed role there anyway.

He grabbed the door handle and twisted it. The lights in the living room had been turned off. His mother was working at the supermarket so she would come home late, and as for Bada... was she hanging out with her friends?

Just as he took a step into the living room after taking off his shoes, Bada's door suddenly opened. She was fuming as she approached him.

“What is it?”

He was rather confused, so he asked first.

“It's not fake, is it?”

“What's not fake?”

“The autograph!”

He had no context to work with here. Bada went back to her room in frustration before coming back out again with a laminated autograph.

“I mean this.”

She said with a rather depressed voice this time. Her heart was on a roller coaster. Even though she just looked like she was going to snap at him, she was sighing right now.

“There are fake autographs?”

Maru took out the hat he brought and gave it to her. He was originally going to have her write a contract saying that she would be obedient for the next three months, but he subconsciously handed it to her when he saw her so depressed.

“What’s this?”

“Try flipping it around.”

Bada’s expression brightened instantly. She grabbed the hat with both of her hands and hopped into her room. Was it that good? He then remembered the news about a middle school girl fainting and being carried away by the ambulance during an idol concert. She wasn’t going to faint, right?

He went to his room and changed his clothes. His sister’s room was slightly open, but it was strangely quiet. He sat down on the sofa with a yawn when Bada came out dejected again.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Where’d you get this?”

“What do you mean where? The name’s right there.”

“Don’t lie to me. When you think about it, it doesn’t make sense. Let’s leave aside the tickets from last time. But this hat just doesn’t make sense! I mean, this is indeed the hat that Sungjae-oppa wears after concerts end. It is, but that’s even more strange.”

You are more strange for knowing when he wears such hats - he held back his words since Bada looked depressed.

“Something happened?”

As she was a rather hyperactive girl, she often came home after a fight. Even boys wouldn’t fight as often as her. When she was young, she had to make the other party bleed before coming home satisfied, but she became more girly ever since entering middle school.

However, it wasn’t like her personality would go anywhere. Once she started a fight, she would not back down at all. Even if she did something wrong, her expression would be daring. Yet such a girl was talking with a worried expression, not to mention her depressed demeanor.

“The girls... are teasing me saying that it’s fake.”

After pouting, Bada calmed down. Her lips trembled before she sniffed.

Maru gulped. If he was allowed to choose the most nervous moment of the year, he would choose this moment. His sister was about to cry!

“Hey, hey, hey. What is going on?”

He thought that he might react more calmly if he was told that the world was going to end tomorrow. Maru was uneasy as he watched Bada crying. If she was angry instead, he would’ve tried to persuade her with words, but this time, she started crying so he was at a loss for words.

Was this the sensibility of girls? Perhaps emotions welled up inside her without her being able to express them? He first gave her some tissue.

“Were you sad because someone said it was fake?”

“No, but she really... I was... ugh...”

It seemed that something happened at school. She usually didn't act like this when she fought boys, so it seemed that some trouble had occurred with other girls.

Bada wiped her tears with the tissue. From how she wasn't sniffing anymore, she seemed to have calmed down. All sorts of things arose in Maru's mind as he looked at his sister's sealed lips. Was she being bullied? Were there delinquent girls bullying her?

Although he quarrelled with her a lot, she was still his sister.

“If you can't tell mom about it, then try telling me first.”

He was truly worried for her when he said those words.

When he did, Bada raised her head up before looking at him in a strange way.

“What the heck do you mean? It's nothing like that.”

Bada sniffed in her snot before speaking. Her expression clearly spoke 'who are you to worry?'. Maru clenched his fists slightly. If he didn't have a sister, but a brother instead, he would've smacked him first.

“Then why are you crying? You surprised the heck out of me.”

“Because I'm frustrated!”

“I didn't make you feel frustrated though.”

“You did!”

He was really annoyed now. He regretted worrying about her at all. Ah, that's right. The fact that he cut off all communication with her was probably to protect his own feeble heart. Maru sighed.

“Well then, sum it up for me. What do you want me to do?”

“Prove to me that this is real.”

“...Give it back to me. All of them. Right now.”

“They're fake after all, aren't they? You just signed on whatever item you saw fit and brought them to me, didn't you? This hat too.”

Bada waved the hat he brought in front of his eyes. He was reminded of Sungjae's smile as he gave him that hat. He felt sorry, again and again.

“What are you going to do if it's fake?”

“I'm going to kill you, for real.”

He crossed out the option to say that it was fake. She was someone that really went through with her plans if she said so. He could still remember her throwing a remote control at him because he ate some snacks in front of her. It was fortunate that the item nearby was a remote control. If it was a fruit knife or something, he would probably be smelling incense behind a portrait right now.

“Wait a minute.”

So this was how he was going to use up the favor he just got? Maru called Sungjae. His business was simple. Sungjae just had to let his sister hear his voice. Of course, this was only possible with Sungjae’s permission. Also, the other precondition was that his sister’s lips had to be sealed tight. If it was found out that a singer, who was supposed to be managing his image, had a phone call with a fan, he didn’t even want to imagine the consequences.

-Sure.

“Is it fine to accept it so easily?”

-It doesn’t matter. We’re on a break anyway. It’s just that, you gotta remember that your sister can’t talk about it to someone else. It’s not about me. Your sister might get into huge trouble.

Perhaps one might ask ‘what’s so bad about having a phone call with a singer?’. Maru would’ve thought Sungjae was overreacting if he didn’t see the news a few days ago.

A girl was beaten up because she hugged a popular idol and was taken by ambulance to the ER. Back then, he realized that obsession went beyond common sense.

Maru took his phone off his ear and looked at his sister.

“Promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“Don’t boast about it to your friends. Can you do that?”

Bada made a confused expression, but she still nodded.

“If someone asks you about the items, tell them that I got them because I know an insider, okay? Well, here you go.”

“Who is it?”

“Try talking.”

Maru handed over the phone before going back to his room. A while later, he could hear hopping noises on top of cheerful screams.

* * *

Anyang 1st street. Maru was really glad to see the practice room building after such a long time. But just as he was about to enter the building,

“Maru.”

He turned his head around when he heard someone calling out to him. Sooil was waving his hand at him as he was walking.

“What’s that?”

“Oh this? Some snacks.”

Sooil shook the plastic bags in each of his hands with a joyful smile.

“It’s mysterious how you don’t gain weight when you eat like that.”

“It’s fine because I move just as much. Rather than that, which floor is it?”

Maru pushed on the glass door as he spoke.

“It’s on the first basement floor, room 205.”

The moist air unique to old buildings was circulating throughout the staircase, but it would change once he arrived at the practice room. When he went half way down the stairs, he heard some sounds already. A band accompaniment, and the singing of the singer, as well as the shouts that could be heard throughout. Although the practice rooms had been soundproofed, the rooms were so closely attached that sound could still be heard anyway.

“That’s a nice atmosphere.”

Sooil waved around the plastic bags before following him. Maru slightly pulled on the door that said 205.

“You’re here!”

Inside was Ganghwan, who was doing a handstand.

Chapter 437

“What are you doing?”

“What do you mean? I’m obviously doing a handstand.”

Ganghwan’s face was red as though he was drunk.

“Your face looks like it’s about to burst at any moment.”

“This is good for blood flow, you know?”

Maru smiled as he entered. The practice room looked the same as the last time he came here. The faint smell of sweat, the texture of the wooden floor, as well as the slogan that pricked his conscience.

“The weather’s pretty cool now, isn’t it?”

“It’s nearly the end of September after all.”

He sat down next to Ganghwan as he spoke. Meanwhile, Sooil had laid out the snacks he brought. He had brought quite a diverse variety.

“He’s eating whenever I see him, but he doesn’t gain any weight for some reason.”

“My words exactly. But how long are you going to stay like that?”

“I’m done!”

Ganghwan lightly kicked off the wall and lied down just like that.

“I’m dizzy.”

“I’m not surprised. Also, there’s no one here.”

“What do you mean? We’re all here.”

Maru looked around the practice room. Unless there were invisible men in this room, only the three of them were in the practice room right now.

“There’s only four, including one other person.”

“That’s not a lot. Where’s the last person right now?”

“She’ll be here soon. Rather than that, can you bring me some water, Maru? I’m too dizzy to stand up.”

Ganghwan smiled and pointed at the mini fridge in the corner. Maru walked on his knees and opened the fridge. The waist-height fridge was filled with soju, beer, water, and some side dishes. Even a single man would have a better fridge than this.

“There’s practically a whole bar in here.”

He gave Ganghwan a water bottle. Ganghwan, still lying down, poked out his head and drank water like a turtle. He soon started coughing violently.

“It got caught in my throat.”

“Of course it’ll get caught in your throat if you drink it like that. You should really sit up if you can.”

“I’m tired so I’m gonna stay like this for a while. Sooil!”

Sooil blinked his eyes and looked at him.

“Massage!”

“Yes.”

His hand movements looked like he was very proficient with doing something like this. It didn’t look like this was the first or second time he had done this.

“This is why I like Sooil. Maru, that kid is so uncut.”

“Sooil. Don’t forget to get paid after doing that. Otherwise, it’s extortion of labor.”

While Ganghwan received a massage, Maru picked up some snacks to eat. He could feel Sooil’s glare whenever he touched the snacks, but he decided to ignore him since he was hungry.

“You two haven’t had dinner yet?”

“I came here right after school, so, no.”

Sooil also chimed in with a ‘me too’.

“Then I guess I should tell Hanna to buy something then.”

“The last one is Hanna-noona?”

“Yeah.”

"I saw her when I went to see a play with a friend last time. Oh, how is she doing with Soochan-hyung? I did hear that Soochan-hyung proposed to her and gave her a ring."

Park Hanna. She was a senior that taught him a lot about acting. She was also the person that created the opportunity to meet her when he didn't know her yet.

"Don't even start. You wouldn't be able to imagine the lengths she would go in order to sleep with Soochan once. Soochan's so pitiful now."

It seemed that her habit of throwing around lewd jokes hadn't changed at all. While Ganghwan was on a phone call with Hanna, Maru jogged around inside the practice room. They shouldn't start practicing for the play today, but he had a habit of warming himself up whenever he came here. He rotated his ankles and wrists and was just about to exercise his vocal cords with a vocal exercise when Sooil approached him.

"Do you wanna see who can voice a low tone longer? Loser buys drinks," Sooil said as he placed one hand on his stomach.

"I don't do bets with scammers."

"Why am I a scammer?"

"Do I have to bring up what happened at the billiard table?"

Sooil avoided his gaze and smiled.

"Then let's just try. I'm confident in controlling my breath."

"If you wish."

"You can start first. I'll start right after."

Sooil sounded confident. Maru got into position while looking at the mirror in front of him. As dramas were real-time shoots, he had to focus on his pronunciation rather than voicing. That was because the microphone would pick it up as long as he was louder than a certain volume. However, the same couldn't be said for a play. In a play, the actors had to move the hearts of the audience with just one output device - their vocal cords.

This was why play actors always did vocal exercises. They had to produce a deeper sound by using their entire bodies as a vocal chamber, just like how a singer would do it.

Voicing out a low tone was one such exercise. It was done by voicing out a lower-than-usual tone for a long time.

He breathed in with his stomach and started producing a sound. Following that, Sooil joined him.

Just as they were focusing on their breath,

"Your voices are echoing in your mouths, kiddos! Are you doing a mumbling competition?"

Ganghwan, who was rolling around behind them, suddenly shouted. His loud voice reverberated in the practice room.

He hadn't heard it for a while, but Ganghwan's voice was quite incredible. It sounded as though there was a huge bell in the middle of the practice room. The other minor sounds were trivial and were eaten up by the sound of that bell. Only after Ganghwan's voice dissipated could Maru and Sooil hear their own voices.

"Focus. Voicing is the alpha and omega of play acting."

Maru focused on the vibration of the sound inside his stomach as he voiced out. Sooil, who sounded confident, seemed to be as proficient as his confidence made him out to be. Unlike his usual crisp voice, it sounded very heavy right now. It was a voice that was worth boasting about.

"If your acting voice can't travel further than your normal voice, it'll sound like a mosquito to the audience. Relax your neck and lower your vocal cords! The sound should be focused in front of your body and spread out from there! Don't swallow it and spit it out. It'll be easier for both you and the listeners if you spit it out. Don't squeeze it out."

Ganghwan made scary eyes before putting his hands on Maru's stomach.

"Looks like you haven't done your vocal exercises at all. You took a break because you were shooting dramas, didn't you? You were too loose because the microphone did the work for you, huh?"

Maru frowned and tensed his stomach. He thought his voicing wasn't bad, but it seemed that Ganghwan found it unsatisfactory.

"What good is tensing your stomach like that? What's the part that supports your diaphragm when it expands and you make a deep sound? It's your back muscles. This part is all loose so it's not going to make a good sound at all. You too, Sooil. Relax your shoulders and neck. Why are you tensing unnecessary muscles? That's what's killing the sound. There's a clear difference between suppressing your voice and speaking with power, and your voice being suppressed due to lack of strength."

Ganghwan pressed the tip above the back of Maru's waist, at the end of where his latissimus dorsi muscle was. Maru pictured a balloon in his head and focused on the sound.

"That's it. That's much better. Why didn't you do that until now? Both of you, cut your breaths!"

Maru cut his breath short. He felt a little dizzy. Sooil was also swallowing his breath with difficulty.

"Breathe in and say ga ge gi go gu like you're spitting it out."

Maru shot words like a bullet towards the mirror in front of him. He used one breath for one word. The first time was easy, but the more he did so, the more that he felt his words were coming from the back of his head. At such times, he had to start over. It was simple, but hard to continue doing the same thing.

"What, you started already?"

Hanna's figure could be seen through the mirror. Although he had to greet her, he couldn't stop now. Ganghwan's instruction was one thing, but he couldn't stop first when he looked at Sooil, who hadn't stopped either. Although they started lightly, they turned it into a fight of pride that he didn't want to lose.

“It’s been a long time since I last saw Maru, and I guess you must be Yoo Sooil, right?”

Hanna approached Sooil from the back, who was still voicing out a low tone. After staring at his neck, which was tense, Hanna suddenly grabbed Sooil’s waist with both of her hands.

Sooil collapsed on the floor with an ‘uhuh’ sound. Literally ‘uhuh’.

“Your waist is weak. You look like you’re worth my time tickling.”

Maru looked at Sooil while finishing his breath.

“That’s my win, right?”

“Let’s do it again. I can’t acknowledge that.”

His competitive spirit seemed to have been fired up again as he got into position again, but Maru didn’t face him. If he did that one more time, he might fall due to anemia.

“It’s been a long time, noona.”

He greeted her as he sat down. Hanna smiled as she waved her hand.

“I heard you guys haven’t eaten yet, so here are some lunchboxes.”

“Hanna, what about me?” Ganghwan asked as he raised his hand.

“I have yours as well, so don’t look at me like a little child would. In a couple of years, you’ll be in the latter half of your thirties.”

“My heart will always be a Peter Pan.”

“Bullshit.”

Hanna smiled as she handed the food out.

* * *

“But is it a play that people like us can butt into?” Maru asked as he put down the empty lunch box.

The four of them would suffice if it was a small-scale play, but the problem was that two out of the four were high school students.

Stages didn’t come for free. Unless it was a theater owned by the theater troupe, rental fees would occur. Taking into account the money required to practice, a play had to produce a profit. Of course, they could attract an audience with just the name ‘Yang Ganghwan’, but that didn’t explain why they decided to bring 2 high school students in.

There was a clear difference in the target audience between movies and plays. Almost no one would specifically find and watch a play because of one unknown high school student actor and a slightly-known high school student actor.

“Of course, it won’t work for a normal play.”

“Then?”

"We're going to turn it into a play where the audience participates. The target audience is middle to high school students like you."

"A play where the audience participates?"

Ganghwan nodded once.

"Maru, remember what you did with me last winter?"

Last winter? Oh, was he referring to that?

"The amateur acting class?"

"Yes, that. It's in collaboration with that and we're holding a free play as a project to tell more of the public about plays. But the funds really aren't looking good."

Maru understood the gist of it when he heard that the funding wasn't good.

"That doesn't mean that we can just use anyone, so we switched strategies like that. That allows us to decrease the number of actors and increase the participation of the audience, making them interested, if possible. These days, young kids use mini homepages or something like that, don't they? Rather than targeting adults, we thought that targeting kids who are proficient with the internet might help promote us in the long term."

"That sounds nice. There's less pressure for the audience since the actors are not that much older than them, if at all. So we're being used to catch their attention?"

"That's one of your roles. First, we'll complete the play, and try acting it out a couple of times in Marronnier Park. Once we have decided on a set format, we'll move over to the stage as well."

"Oh, sounds fun."

Sooil smiled as he spoke.

"What about the script?" Maru asked Ganghwan again.

"Tomorrow. Today, I just gathered you here to get to know each other. Maru may know Hanna, but Sooil doesn't. We'll have to get closer to each other if we're going to stand on stage. Speaking of that...."

Ganghwan crawled to the fridge before taking out four cans of beer.

"Let's have a drink."

Chapter 438

"Why's he on the floor?"

"Because you made him drink, obviously."

"But he only drank a bit of beer and soju."

"Maybe he's weak to alcohol."

Ganghwan looked at Sooil, who was on the floor, with an apologetic expression. Maru tried poking Sooil's waist. He twitched but didn't wake up. Even after shaking him a couple of times, he did not respond. It hadn't even been an hour since they popped open the first can of beer, yet one of them was wasted already.

"I thought he was good at it since he kept drinking."

"Me too. I think he drank a bit less than one bottle."

"He did keep drinking whenever we toasted. Looks like this is his first time drinking. He's completely out of it."

"Hey, hey, Yoo Sooil."

Maru shook him a bit more violently this time. Sooil opened his eyes just barely and sat up. Maybe he came to himself?

"Look at him."

Hanna burst out laughing. Sooil's body was swaying from side to side like he was a pendulum. The rhythm was so perfect that it reminded Maru of a metronome.

"I think I need to take this guy home. Are we meeting up here at the same time tomorrow?"

Maru grabbed Sooil's arm and stood up.

"Now that I think about it, Maru, this kid, is really strong, huh. Don't you think so, oppa?"

"He really is quite strong. He always carries the heavy stuff when we're moving props. Maru, you should really come over when I move houses to help out."

After saying his goodbyes to Ganghwan and Hanna, who were talking about random crap, he left the practice room. The chilly night air of autumn greeted him.

"Hey, get yourself together."

Lost consciousness after half a bottle of soju? It seemed that his ability to not gain weight after eating so much was compensated by the lack of the ability to break down alcohol. Sooil didn't wake up no matter how hard he shook him.

"I really don't like carrying men around on my back, so wake up quickly."

He entered the convenience store he saw in front of him and bought some drinks that eased hangover. He had Sooil drink them, as he was half-asleep before waiting around 10 minutes.

"Phew, what was I doing until now?"

"You up?"

"I dunno whether I'm up or not to be honest."

"If you don't then you aren't. Hey, where's your house?"

"Uh... near Yeouido park."

“Can you get there by yourself?”

“That I can.”

Sooil stood up and took a few steps before collapsing on the ground again. If Maru sent him home like this, he would probably end up sleeping on the streets somewhere. Moreover, some girls were approaching the two while seemingly aware of who Sooil was.

“Remember this. I wiped your ass.”

He couldn't let someone with a bright future get caught up in controversy at such an early age. Maru carried Sooil and walked to the road. He grabbed an empty taxi and got on with him.

“Please take us to Yeouido Station.”

He stared at the taxi fare that was rising as the horse icon excitedly galloped before looking next to him. He saw Sooil sleeping as he bashed his head against the window.

Just as he was looking outside as he listened to the radio, he heard a dangerous sound next to him. Sooil suddenly bent forward with a ‘urgh’ sound.

“Hey hey! That's definitely not good! Not here!”

The driver seemed to have heard the sound as well as he quickly handed Maru a black plastic bag. Maru received it and gave it to Sooil. After making a couple of vomiting sounds, Sooil swallowed something before becoming calm again. As for what he swallowed, Maru decided not to think about it.

“Sorry about that.”

“No, no. It's understandable for young fellows to do that.”

Whether the taxi driver was a kind person in general or was acting that way because it was a long taxi ride, he smiled as he spoke.

“Here.”

Maru received the change and dragged Sooil out of the taxi. Sooil who waved his arms around before half-lying on the ground started causing a fuss about the weather being hot. He was weak to alcohol, and his actions when drunk weren't that good either. Maru put him at the top of his list of ‘people he shouldn't drink with’.

“Where's your house?”

“Over, there.”

An apartment complex could be seen where Sooil was pointing towards.

“Looks like you're pretty well-off huh.”

The apartment complex was near Yeouido Station and the park. Maru couldn't even begin to imagine the real estate prices here. He supported Sooil, who was staggering, and walked.

“But are you sure you can show your parents what you’re like right now? I don’t care about you getting scolded, but they might swear at me as well.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. No one’s home.”

“Do they both work?”

“...”

Sooil didn’t reply. Looking at how his eyes lacked focus, he didn’t seem to be in the right mind to answer. They crossed the street together and entered the apartment complex. Only after Maru had Sooil repeat the building number and the apartment number several times could he find the right place, since Sooil was mumbling so much.

“Hey, type your passcode.”

He put Sooil down in front of the door before sighing. This guy was pretty tall so he was quite heavy. After a few beeps, the door opened. He dragged Sooil, who was about to become one with the floor and entered the apartment.

There were no shoes at all on the shoe racks. After glancing at the desolate shoe racks once, Maru dragged Sooil to the living room. He put Sooil down and straightened his waist.

“What a desolate scene.”

There was a large TV, a beige-colored sofa, and a black metal display that had various plaques on it. The veranda could be seen since the blinds were open, and some vases could be seen there. There weren’t any flowers or plants though. They were all just empty vases. There was no other furniture in the household. Not even a box of tissues which was typically seen in the living room. Even a household that just moved in would have more items than this.

“Get me some water.”

Sooil spoke in a dying tone. Maru walked to the kitchen, which was connected to the living room, and stood in front of the refrigerator. Even the refrigerator looked like an expensive, door-on-each-side one. He remembered seeing these in commercials. He opened it to see what was inside.

“Wow, your mother must be quite organized.”

The refrigerator was filled from top to bottom. He took out a container at the top. There was a memo that noted the day of the week as well as the food inside. The other containers were the same. He went down the stack thinking that Sooil’s mother was really organized, but the more he saw, the stranger he felt.

‘It’s all just for one.’

Even the side dishes were organized into small containers for just one person. This would make it incredibly easy to eat since all Sooil had to do was take out those containers every day, but....

As Maru didn’t have a habit of poking through others’ refrigerators, he did not look anymore and just took out a bottle of water. He grabbed a cup that was above the kitchen sink.

'Why is there only one of each?'

One spoon, one pair of chopsticks, one set of plates, and one cup. This didn't look like a family of three at all. After looking around the extremely clean kitchen, he poured the water in the cup before bringing it over to Sooil.

"Do you perhaps, by chance, live alone?"

After drinking half of the water, Sooil made a loose grin before nodding. He lived alone in this wide apartment that looked to be around 40-pyeong. He looked around the desolate living room when he heard the electronic beeping sound from the door lock. The door opened and a lady holding plastic bags entered the apartment.

"Oh, didn't know there was a guest here."

"Hello."

"Hello."

The lady who walked with quiet steps and a kind smile put down the bags on the table before starting to walk around busily. She gathered what looked like clothes for laundry into a basket and went inside each room before coming back to the kitchen.

"Please don't mind me," the lady spoke with a smile.

For now, he understood that she wasn't Sooil's mother. From the way she acted, she looked like a housekeeper. She naturally prepared food and threw some out from the refrigerator as though she had done this for a long time. The lady, who moved busily, finished cleaning the kitchen and left the house with the basket of laundry clothes. When she left, she was walking backwards and closed the door very quietly. She was acting like a maid at a royal palace that was leaving the royal chambers.

Maru looked at Sooil. He had woken up a while ago. He was watching TV on the sofa, but the TV was on mute. The program on TV was a comedy program where the actors never failed to laugh. Even though the people inside the screen were laughing, their laughs did not escape the screen at all.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

Sooil was a bit more chatty than boys of his age, though, not as much as Jiseok, yet he only gave a short answer. He was showing that he wasn't in a state where he wanted to talk; whether through his expression or his posture.

"I'm going then. Drink plenty of water, and don't turn the temperature on too high when you take a shower. I don't want to see an article talking about the early death of an actor."

"Okay, I'll do that."

Sooil faintly smiled and waved his hand.

Maru put on his shoes before leaving. Through the gaps of the door as it closed, the desolate scene of the living room entered his eyes once again.

'I guess not everything is how it seems, huh.'

The house was a space that showed one side of a person without filtering. That house, which went beyond minimalistic and looked even desolate, was a stark contrast to Sooil's cheerful attitude. Not to mention hiring a housekeeper for one, an apartment in Yeouido itself was too much for a high school actor, who had made a not-so-bad name for himself, to afford by himself.

The reason he didn't ask anything about such a strange combination of elements was, one, because they weren't that close enough to talk about such things, and two, because Sooil's expression clearly told Maru to not ask anything.

As he went down, he got a text from Sooil. It was a text filled with emojis. There was a faint suggestion that he would be smiling like usual if they met tomorrow. There was also the request that told Maru to just treat him normally - not in words, but subtly in context.

Maru glanced at the apartment before turning around.

"Well, he's well-off, so I guess that's that."

It was better than seeing him dirt-poor with 'seize' stickers plastered all over the furniture, so perhaps this could be considered fortunate? Maru texted Sooil back with the words '50 thousand won'. That was the taxi fare. There was no reason to care about someone well off, so he had to get what he had to. He did think about putting 70 thousand won instead to include labor fees, but he decided to be generous. He decided to put it on Sooil's tab for when he became successful later.

"Ah, my wallet."

When he sent the text message about the taxi fee, he realized that he left his wallet on the sofa. He returned to the apartment and pressed the button to call the elevator.

"Wait."

Just as the elevator was about to close, a woman stopped him from the entrance. Maru pressed the open button. The woman slowly walked before getting on the elevator. Maru could smell the faint scent of cigarettes.

He pressed on the 7th floor. The woman glanced at him. It seemed that she was going to the same floor. The door opened, and Maru got off first before standing in front of Sooil's apartment. Just before his thumb was about to press the bell button, the woman interfered before sliding up the door lock lid and typing in the passcode.

"Are you a friend of Sooil's?" The woman asked.

"Yes, perhaps."

"What a strange answer."

The woman opened the door before telling him to go in first. Was she Sooil's sister? He thought that Sooil was a single child, but it seemed that he was wrong. Sooil wasn't in the living room. It seemed that he was taking a shower. He grabbed his wallet from the sofa before leaving again.

“Hey.”

The woman, who was standing in front of the door, called out to him. The woman opened her clutch bag before taking out a cheque. It was a 100 thousand won cheque.

“Please get along with Sooil in the future. Here, take it. It’s pocket money.”

Maru stared at the cheque before lowering his head.

“He’s the type of guy who can have fun by himself so I don’t think there’s any need for me to do that.”

“Well, I guess that’s true. But hey, aren’t you going to take this?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Why? Is it not enough for you?”

She took out another cheque as she said so.

“No.”

“Then why aren’t you taking it? I told you it’s pocket money.”

“Someone I know told me that it’s not right to take money without reason. Then I’ll take my leave now.”

He got in the elevator he came up on. The woman snorted while throwing the cheques on the ground. Maru lowered his head to greet her one last time before pressing the close button. The moment the two cheques landed on the floor, the door closed as well.

Chapter 439

This was what ‘interest’ was, in the end. Maru yawned as he looked at the others in his class. Even though they bothered him every break time until a few days ago by talking about Ahn Joohyun, now they were talking about soccer just like always. Today’s topic was Park Jisung, who played for PSV which was based in Eindhoven.

“Take one each.”

Daemyung seemed to have visited the cafeteria as there was a bunch of snacks in his hand.

“How’s practice going?”

Not too long ago, the acting club decided on the play they were going to do. They chose a play from a list given by Suyeon this time as well.

“For now, there aren’t any problems. The instructor is coming on time as well, but she says she might have a hard time coming in the future because of her drama schedule.”

“You can’t do anything about that.”

An actress who actually worked in the industry was coming to teach them. They had to be willing to take the consequences.

“Why don’t you visit today?”

"I was planning to. The meeting in Anyang is a bit late."

"You're starting practice there as well?"

"Yeah. I just received the script yesterday."

When he thought about yesterday, he was naturally reminded of Sooil's smile. Sooil greeted him with a kind smile just like he always did, so Maru did not say anything and went along like normal.

"You're doing it with sir Yang Ganghwan, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but you can just call him senior. It's really weird to call him sir. He's not even 40 yet."

"I-is that so? Anyway, sounds fun. When will it be put on show?"

"We're aiming for one month."

"That's tight."

"People working in that field apparently finish their practice in a month or two with tight practice hours if it's a short play, apparently."

"Pros, huh."

"Right, pros."

Maru looked outside as he dusted his hands of the snack dust. The sky looked really blue without a speck of cloud in sight. Today, he was in very good condition.

"It's been a while since I last went to the club."

"You really should visit often."

"Fine."

Just then, the front door opened. That was the end of their conversation. Maru turned his head to the textbook in front of him.

* * *

Aram liked Judo. To be specific, she liked martial arts. When she talked about K-1 or Pride FC, she would often hear people ask why girls like her watched things like those, and she always retorted by saying that a girl's job wasn't to sit quietly and do stitching or something. Sweat and passion. Things that are done with the body were honest and you gained just as much as you invested. Winning was only secondary, and what mattered was the sense of achievement.

"But acting doesn't go the way I expect it to."

"What do you mean?"

Jiyeon, who was hugging her knees next to her, asked.

"Acting, you know? In my head, I can draw a clear picture, right? I can imagine it clearly just like the excitement I get when I do a clean shoulder throw."

“Uh, okay.”

Jiyoong clearly looked like she didn't understand, but Aram didn't mind. She was really talking to herself after all.

“You know I do a lot of sports, right?”

“Yeah. Judo, basketball, table tennis, volleyball and lots of others. You really do a lot.”

Jiyoong started counting with her fingers.

“When I do sports like those, I can always follow the image I have in my head to a certain extent. At first, it's hard, because you don't get as much as you invest, but if you keep doing it, you can feel the change. You can gradually feel that you're getting better, right?”

“Yeah, and?”

“That's not the case with acting. I mean, honestly speaking, I'm quite bad, am I not?”

Jiyoong shook her hand in denial.

“No, you're really good. I mean it.”

“There you go again. When will you fix your habit of incessant flattery? The world is not such an easy place!”

Aram grabbed Jiyoong's shoulders and shook them violently from front to back. Jiyoong groaned and closed her eyes. Aram had even more fun shaking her because she found her cute.

“Aram, stop,” Daemyung spoke worriedly.

Aram raised her eyebrows and looked at Daemyung.

“Seonbae, I'd be disappointed if you're taking her side because you're her boyfriend.”

“N-no. It's not like that.”

“What's not like that? You know? These days, I think you're looking after her too much. This won't do. Since Jiyoong is my friend, I forbid you from meeting her from now on!” She spoke as she hugged Jiyoong's neck tightly.

“Stop teasing them.”

Aram felt a sharp pain on her head before raising it. She saw Maru come in while yawning. His fist must have been what hit her head.

“Oh? Maru-seonbae, what brings you here? Didn't you only come here on Saturdays?”

“I got some time today. Where's Bangjoo?”

“He's on cleaning duty. He'll come up after that.”

Aram let go of Jiyoong. Jiyoong sighed in exhaustion.

“Dowook went home since something came up, so I guess we'll be able to start once Bangjoo's here.”

“You’re practicing as well?”

“I thought you wanted me to. I should do my worth if I don’t want to get scolded by my juniors.”

Maru looked at the wall and started doing some stretches.

“Sorry for being late!”

Just then, Bangjoo opened the door and entered. He was also surprised by the presence of Maru.

“Am I a mythical creature to you?”

“You are,” Aram grinned as she spoke.

All the members would have gathered if Dowook was here, so that was a bit of a pity. She took out the script from her bag and put it on the floor.

“But Maru-seonbae. Have you practiced? We’re almost done going over our lines.”

“I read through it whenever I had spare time, so I won’t screw up my lines. Though, they might sound awkward,” Maru said as he also took out his script.

“Uhm, seonbae, can you give me that for a sec?”

Aram opened her palms towards Maru. She got his script and opened it. Jiyeon, who was watching her by the side, exclaimed in a small voice.

‘This is ‘spare time’ quality?’

She asked him to give it to her because she found the tattered cover a bit strange, but as she had expected, there were a lot of notes inside. Since he said that it was hard for him to focus on club activities, he was in charge of a minor role and a passerby, yet he was able to do so much research with roles like those. He also created some traits and habits so that the roles wouldn’t clash. He even had ideas for clothing on the side.

Aram glanced at her own script. It was a bit worn out since she read through it so many times, but it wasn’t tattered like Maru’s was. She tried looking at Jiyeon’s, but Jiyeon hid it away from her sight already. As for Bangjoo’s script....

“What?”

Bangjoo was holding a clean copy. Yes, that was the norm. But, why did it look like a completely new copy? Did he not read through it at all?

“You should really read the script. Why is it so clean?”

“Oh this? I made another copy because I didn’t want it to get dirty. This is for notes, and this one’s for practice.”

Bangjoo took out another script, which had its cover missing. He had as many notes as Maru did.

“You are... forget it. Traitors should go away.”

After spending time with Maru, even this kid had become quite hard-working. No wait, was he always hard-working? Aram smiled bitterly and gave back the script to Maru.

“The script doesn’t signify the amount of practice!”

“Did anyone say something? Daemyung, we’re going to start right after warm-ups, right? I’m going to have to go in two hours, so I hope we can start as soon as possible.”

Daemyung nodded his head as he stood up.

“Let’s do a vocal exercise and then read through the script, and then practice with movement. We can start the club after lunch tomorrow, so let’s keep things simple for today before finishing things up, sounds good?”

“Yes!”

“But instead, anyone that makes a mistake will have a separate time to practice tomorrow before practice, so don’t make any mistakes. But Maru, can we really start right away?”

Maru nodded without a word.

“The extra practice also applies to Maru-seonbae, right?” Aram asked in excitement.

Daemyung looked at Maru with a sorry expression.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Maru replied blandly.

* * *

“Hm.”

Daemyung coughed before looking at the club members. Maru didn’t participate in practice since the start of the semester. This was true even after he received a script. All he did was visit the clubroom and watch them practice for a few minutes before going to Seoul.

“Haah.”

He saw Aram sighing in front of him.

“How can you be so natural even though you haven’t practiced with us even once? Someone might think that you’ve been with us the whole time.”

The reason Aram was depressed was simple. It was because she made the most mistakes. Even with parts where she would usually have no problem with, she made a mistake today.

“This was a great chance to one-up him.”

The reason she screwed up her words and moves was probably because of her competitive spirit. The problem was that her opponent was Maru.

“Daemyung-seonbae.”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Can we practice just one more time?”

“We’re lacking members since Maru just left.”

“We can just take turns doing the roles that aren’t here. How about you, Jiyeon? Bangjoo, you can just say yes.”

Jiyeon and Bangjoo smiled and said that they were good with it.

Daemyung was planning to end things early, but he looked at the clock once before taking out the script again.

“Let’s just do it one more time. We can look back at the parts we screwed up last time, before doing a run from start to finish. Does that sound okay to you?”

“Yes.”

The practice room was filled with vitality. Daemyung thought that Maru’s participation was not so bad from time to time. It was a good stimulus for the rest of the members.

He should’ve been busy preparing for other things, yet Maru prepared a near-perfect role. If he knew things were going to be like this, he should have just had him be one of the main characters instead.

“Seonbae! Let’s start.”

“Alright.”

Daemyung smiled as he stood up.

* * *

-I’m practicing with the others. Looks like they felt something when they saw you.

Maru closed his phone after checking the text. As he had to travel to Seoul and Anyang, he couldn’t practice with them every day, but that didn’t mean that he had treated the club activities lightly. He didn’t want to drag everyone down when he was a senior, so he started practicing by himself on the day he received the script. His time on the bus and train was a splendid time to practice for him.

Since he was the one that persuaded the others to enter the acting club in the first place, he couldn’t take things lightly. In order to act like a splendid ‘kkondae’, he had to be responsible for his words.

‘Well, they were doing well without me.’

Although there were some trivial mistakes, the play itself was pretty well done. The three first years were following well. They were showing off their traits within the frame set by Daemyung, and just watching them made Maru satisfied.

The experience at the movie shoot seemed to be of help as Bangjoo’s acting also became more stable. Having him be the main character was a splendid choice.

“Yes, senior. I think I’m going to be around 10 minutes late. Sorry. I was practicing with the others at the club, so I lost track of the flow of time. Yes, yes. I’ll buy some drinks before I go.”

Maru hung up the phone call with Ganghwan and stretched his arms out. If he had some leisure with practice at the club, the practice in Anyang was probably going to drain the life out of him.

“I wonder if my stamina is going to hold out.”

Miso’s lectures and Ganghwan’s practice.

His week was quite dynamic, to say the least.

* * *

“Is he coming?”

“Yeah. I told him to buy drinks since he’s late.”

“Why are you having a kid buy something? It’s not like you’re poor.”

“Hey, Maru probably earns more than me.”

“Urgh, what a mean guy.”

Ganghwan twitched his nose before doing some exercises.

“Sooil, you should exercise your voice as well. Maru’s coming soon.”

“Yes.”

Sooil, who was doing a leg split, stood up and started some vocal exercises. Hanna also did some vocal exercises while singing her favorite song.

“Pull out your voice, people,” Ganghwan clapped as he spoke

Chapter 440

Let’s tear down the fourth wall - Ganghwan said before they began practice. The stage and the audience seats - although these two were physically correlated in space, there was an unspoken wall between the two. The wall that was put up in order to create a reality within reality; to turn a play into another truth - that was the fourth wall.

The actors were able to see the audience. The audience was also able to see the actors. However, there was an invisible wall put up between them. One that allowed both parties to see each other, yet not see each other.

That wall acted like a TV screen. The audience in the audience seats used that wall to separate themselves emotionally since they couldn’t separate themselves physically. They forget about their own reality while watching through that wall, and the actors created their own reality on the other side of that impermeable wall.

“Originally, I thought about doing comedy, but I wanted to hear a more diverse range of stories. A story about all of us, I mean. That’s why I decided to focus on the individuals.”

A black line was drawn on top of the whiteboard. Ganghwan drew a pretty realistic-looking stage. His drawing skills were pretty decent.

"I threw away the topic. This stage will become the audience's in its entirety."

Ganghwan put a pointy crown on top of the word 'audience'.

"The topic of that day will be decided by the member of the audience that comes up on stage. It might be a celebratory story, and it might be a sad story. We just need to follow along and do a short skit and then call someone from the audience to the stage."

"What if no one volunteers because of embarrassment?" Sooil asked.

"We should prepare safety measures for every play. We'll scout one person beforehand to come up if no one in the audience is willing to come. That person will be a spy of sorts."

"It's all a scheme then!"

"Let's call it an inevitable part of the play, shall we? A scheme sounds too evil."

Ganghwan wrote 'audience first' on the board.

"You have read the scripts, right? That's the basic outline. However, this has more elements of improvisation so you'll need to improve your reflexes. It won't be good for any of us if we can't follow along even after a member of the audience comes up."

After hearing that, Maru asked,

"How are we going to practice then?"

"We're going to practice the main flow together and then split into different situational contexts. For now, we'll split it into two big parts, one happy and one sad. The happy part isn't that difficult, but the problem is the sad part."

Ganghwan told them to open the script. The three people sitting in front of the whiteboard opened the scripts on their laps.

"I think what's important in this play is to find out just how far we and the audience can share a pathos together. A play always appeals its strong pathos to the audience. Although people say that the actors communicate with the audience, objectively speaking, the transfer of emotions in a play is one-directional: From the actors to the audience. It is possible for the actors to be influenced by the reactions of the audience, but that does not change the roots of the play. However, it's a completely different matter for a communicating play like the one we're doing. It's bi-directional. We receive the feelings of the audience, and we transfer the emotions back in the form of a play."

Ganghwan wrote 'sadness' in big letters.

"But when it comes to 'sadness', there is too much variation. When it comes to happiness, we can just tie everything together and express it. Even if you tie the happiness of winning the lottery and the happiness of having a fulfilling meal, it doesn't really matter. That's because, from the perspective of the

audience, who are the ones receiving our emotions, they don't feel much rejection. However, sadness is very picky."

While Maru nodded, Ganghwan was writing something on the whiteboard. When the marker stopped moving, a new set of words were written on the board.

The death of a lover.

Then he put some space below and wrote: a child that lost 100 won.

After writing the two sentences, Ganghwan turned around.

"Both of these can be classified as 'sadness', right? The sadness of losing a lover, and likewise, the sadness of losing money."

"Yes, I guess we can," Sooil replied. Ganghwan pointed at Sooil.

"That's it. That's the answer. That's the nuance. 'I guess we can'. Sooil, what did you mean by that?"

"The intensity of sadness is different between losing a loved one and losing 100 won."

"Right. That's what's picky about sadness. Changing examples, finding someone you love, and picking up a 100 won coin. Both of these can be classified as 'happiness', right?"

"Yes."

"When expressing both of them, would it be strange if I said 'laughing loudly'?"

"No, it's not that strange."

"But that's not the case with sadness, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Hanna, who was sitting next to the whiteboard, stood up and walked towards the fridge.

"We should get something to drink. Oppa, catch."

After receiving a drink thrown by Hanna, Maru looked at the board and Ganghwan again. Ganghwan took a sip before speaking,

"Sadness is both inclusive and individualistic. You feel like there's a clear boundary, but it's not actually like that. The death of a person and the loss of materials. Putting it like that, the two seem like different kinds of sadness since they're on the opposite ends of the spectrum. Well, then, from here."

Ganghwan erased the 'death of a lover' and wrote 'death of a family member', and then 'death of a company colleague' below that.

"Which's more sad between these two? Ordinarily speaking."

"It has to be the death of a family member."

"It's natural to be more sad about the death of someone comparatively closer to you, right?"

"Yes," Sooil replied as he put his empty can beside him.

“Then what about this? The death of a company colleague versus the death of a nearby supermarket owner. What if you compare these two?”

“Then I guess the death of a company colleague will feel more sad.”

“Because you’re closer to that person?”

“Yes.”

“Then what about the death of a supermarket owner and the death of a fruit market owner? Under the assumption that you are close to them equally.”

“I don’t know. Shouldn’t it be difficult to say which one’s more sad?”

Ganghwan nodded.

“The farther away the person is from your own fences, the less intense the sadness gets. To use an extreme case, think about the death of a man in some country you don’t know the name of. You wouldn’t even feel anything. It’s always like that. Even if you turn on the TV right now, you’ll see death tolls rising due to something. Some traffic accident killed someone, some fire caused N deaths, someone committed suicide, et cetera. Although they are all ‘deaths’ in context, the sadness we receive is...”

Maru, who received Ganghwan’s gaze, spoke,

“Not that sad at all, actually. You don’t even care.”

“Right. The death of a complete stranger might impact you even less than losing a 100 won coin.”

Ganghwan wrote one word on top of the words he wrote.

“Sympathy. The objective of the play we’re planning to do now is to have the audience sympathize with each other’s sadness. Of course, if the audience decides to tell a story about something good that happened to them, we’ll follow along. We’ll make it sound more cheerful. However, what I’ve always been thinking about when preparing this play is the sadness of each individual.”

“This time, you’re shooting towards the extreme minority again. Well, I guess all you’re interested in is the honest side of mankind and their taboos,” Hanna spoke while sighing.

Maru understood why Hanna sighed. When he didn’t have any money in hand, Ganghwan did all sorts of plays. The story of a man who won the lottery, the story of a dad who suddenly got a child. The story of a jobless man who fell in love.

After filling his wallet with the romantic comedies that work really well in Daehak-ro, he would leave and do really depressing plays as though they were the ones that he really wanted to do. Maru still felt the chills from when he watched a video of Ganghwan’s ‘Human Repayment’. The contents of the play were one thing, but the last scene left an incredibly bad taste in his mouth. It showed the end of a laborer who threw himself off a bridge without any signs of making a comeback, without going through any filters.

The reason that play left a bad taste was not because the main character died, but because it wasn't even sad, or worth being remembered by someone. That emptiness that didn't even become a tragedy made him think about a lot of things.

"So that's why the background is a doctor's office," Maru said as he closed the script.

Ganghwan smiled and started erasing the board.

"If it goes well, I think it will become quite controversial for sure, but will it go well?" Sooil asked.

He wasn't asking whether the play would be good or bad, but whether it would be successful or not. Maru wanted to know that as well. Whatever the play was going to be, this project was started in order to tell the mass public about acting just like the amateur acting class. Although he said that they were going to do happy plays as well, he was practically setting everything up so that the participating audience would tell a sad story, so he wondered if the audience would participate at all. Standing in front of complete strangers and talking about their own honest stories on stage? It might be easier if it was something that everyone could laugh about, but if it was a sad-enough story that that person would have to bite their lips just to talk about it, it wouldn't be so easy.

Also, acting in tandem with such an audience wouldn't be so easy either.

"Don't worry about the results. What matters is doing it."

At that moment, Hanna muttered from the side.

"Hey, we don't have a large budget to work with. The people from the association don't have a huge interest either. The reason we scouted you two was because oppa belongs to JA. Otherwise, he would have handed out pamphlets and be done with it. That's the reason this play contains all of his desires. He can think with his dick because no one fucking cares."

Sooil chuckled when Hanna said those words.

Normally he would be shocked when a woman said a word related to a man's genitals, but Hanna was an exception. He was so used to it that it didn't feel weird at all.

"Hanna, watch your words. Also, this will work. People these days don't have a place to talk about their worries. But we're setting up the stage for them. We're urging them to talk. People will talk about what they think on the inside. In any case, let's finish talking about the overall format and talk about the details now."

* * *

Junmin read some news regarding the entertainment industry on a web portal while drinking some red tea. The top news was about the disbanding of the girl idol group Blue. So it was finally happening.

"Looks like Yellow Star must be having a hard time. It would be good if their agency creaks and they spit out Ahn Joohyun."

One of the actresses he wanted to recruit for a long time was Ahn Joohyun. He regretted it so much when Yellow Star took her while he was distracted.

Next to that was an article about the president of a production company who disappeared with more than 10 billion won. He sighed when he read about this news. This had brought tremendous losses to him. Leaving aside Geunsoo, Jiseok, who was supposed to climb the ranks, had suffered a setback thanks to that. He had picked that movie after rejecting everything else, yet that went up in flames. No one could find the location of the president that committed the scam, so everyone thought that he wasn't in the country.

Junmin clicked his tongue as he scrolled down. At that moment, an article at the bottom of the screen caught his eyes. It was a short article by a nameless internet journalist. When he clicked on it, there was a familiar face, and a short article was written about it.

-Drama's renewal of viewing rates. Brought by a young actor?

Han Maru's face was among the other child actors of other series. The journalist wrote that the moment of Maru's interrogation was the moment that set the record.

"So he's doing his worth by himself, huh."

Junmin faintly smiled as he drank his tea.