

## Once Again 441

### Chapter 441

It was the season when the skies were high, and the horses were fat. It was mid-October. The winds were cool, and the rays of the sun looked perfect for a nap. It was the season of naps given by the heavens.

“But why is autumn the season of reading?”

Dojin asked as he read a book. When Maru had a glance at it, he saw that the book was about getting a cooking license in Korea.

“Since the weather is good, perhaps it’s called that because many people read during this season?”

Daemyung looked back as he spoke. In his hands was a book: Macbeth. Oh, Macbeth. Daemyung had been carrying that around since early October. He read through King Lear pretty fast, but it seemed that Macbeth wasn’t to his tastes.

“I think I heard somewhere that it’s a way of marketing to raise sales because October has the least book sales in the year,” Maru said.

He wasn’t sure where he heard this from since he heard about it in his previous life, but he could vaguely remember it. Statistically too, book sales were the highest during the beginning of the semesters, Spring and Winter, when it was also the season to wrap up the year, and then Summer. So it wasn’t entirely false. Though, it was nothing compared to the marketing of chocolate sticks.

“No way.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

Dojin and Daemyung retorted at the same time.

Maru just shrugged since he honestly didn’t care.

Just like how everyone called it the season of reading, there was a wave of reading craze in the class. Of course, most of them were either reading comics, fantasy novels, or martial arts novels. The paper that had the ‘list of 100 books that teenagers should read’, that the teacher put up, had already turned dull.

“Today’s Friday, right?” Dowook asked.

“Yeah. What about it?”

“We’re going to the broadcasting room today, aren’t we?”

Hearing that question, Daemyung nodded with a smile. Dowook sighed and laid back down on the table again.

“Dowook, it’s fine. Anyone can make mistakes,” Daemyung said as he patted Dowook on the back.

Dowook replied with a ‘shut up’.

“The kids really like the radio broadcast.”

Dojin pointed at the ceiling. He was probably referring to the speakers. Maru crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair.

“Did you say you were going to do that until the end of October?”

“That’s what we talked about, but I’m not sure. I’ll tell Yeondu-seonbae about it today.”

“That seonbae probably won’t tell you clearly. Her specialty is to reply vaguely when it comes to things that are disadvantageous for her.”

“That’s not entirely true. She’s really straightforward when it comes down to it,” Daemyung said as he closed the book.

“You are such a good guy. Should I go talk to her about it?”

“It’s fine. She’ll tell me on her own. Anyway, that broadcasting club alliance, or something? She might be talking to them and that’s why she can’t give me a clear answer. Also... it’s not like it’s harming us.”

Dowook, who they thought was sleeping, said that it is a big harm to him since he lost his lunch time.

“That’s true, but this is also an opportunity. If things go well, we might be able to go on a YBS radio program. And it’s also more memories for us. As Dojin said, the others seem to like it. I don’t think it’ll be bad even if we continue doing this for a while.”

“If you say so, I don’t have any complaints either.”

Dowook said that he was full of complaints, but neither Daemyung nor Maru replied to him. Dowook eventually became quiet after grumbling for a while.

“How about the first years? Don’t they find it tiring to use up lunch times on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays?”

Lunch times were pretty important to high school students. They might not consider spending their precious lunch time, which was required for saving up energy for the afternoon classes, on club activities.

“I was worried about that too, so I asked them a couple of days ago, but I instead heard from them that I shouldn’t worry about it. It seems like Aram, Jiyeon, and Bangjoo all like doing the audio drama.”

“That’s good. Well, I guess they were the most excited about it.”

“Jiyeon was a little unexpected though.”

It had been two weeks since they started broadcasting. Jiyeon, who at first, took a step back saying that she was embarrassed, now acted with more passion than anyone else in front of the microphone. Thinking back, she was the one that showed the most stable acting at the café before. Although her process of getting into acting was a bit rough, she concentrated harder than anyone else once she did get started.

“Thinking about how they aren’t making any mistakes even though it’s done live, I think practicing plays has helped them somewhat.”

“Also, their pronunciations have gotten a lot better since they started preparing for the audio drama. It’s to the point that I could tell during practices for the play.”

“That’s an unexpected benefit.”

“Apparently, Aram’s practicing all day with a pencil in her lips.”

“Did Jiyeon tell you that?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

Daemyung smiled as he said those words. Good times. Why did a corner of his heart feel so cold when he looked at a high school couple?

He knew the reason. That was because he wasn’t able to meet up with her that often because their schedules kept criss-crossing. During weekdays, he was busy, and during weekends, *she* was busy. Due to a problem with shooting the sitcom, *she* told him that the shoots were on Sundays for a while, so he wouldn’t be able to meet her for at least another half a month. He told her that he’d visit *her* house, but she clearly told him that she didn’t want to meet him for now. When he asked why, *she* replied that she wanted to focus on what she was doing right now.

As soon as he heard that answer, he realized that there was another reason for it, but he didn’t want to pry any further. Instead, he decided to wait; wait until *she* solves the problem herself and brings about a conclusion that satisfied herself. After that moment, they would be able to meet with comfort.

“Do you hang out with Jiyeon a lot during the weekend?”

“Huh? No.”

“You became a couple so you should really take her out on dates.”

“It’s fine. We meet every day at school.”

“...What did you do during the Summer holidays?”

“Me? Why do you ask? I practiced for the club.”

“No, not that. I meant with Jiyeon.”

“Like I said, I practiced, along with Jiyeon.”

Daemyung smiled brightly as he mentioned the name ‘Jiyeon’. While wondering if her name was that good, Maru also sighed to himself. Next to them, Dojin, who was listening, put down his book. Then he said something to Daemyung.

“You damn idiot.”

“What? Why?”

“Tsk, that first year looked cute. I wonder what made her like this dense bear guy.”

Dojin clicked his tongue and stood up. Maru just nodded. Daemyung made a clueless expression as he stared at Dojin who went to the bathroom. Then, he looked at Maru while tilting his head, asking a question,

“What did you do with your girlfriend during the summer?”

“We went to the sea on a short trip.”

“J-just the two of you? When did you have the time?”

“We went on a one-day trip when both of us had free time.”

“Like I said, just the two of you?”

“Would we go with our parents? Duh, we went by ourselves.”

“No way, how can you go by yourselves?”

“In my perspective, you don’t make any sense. How can we go by ourselves? We just go by ourselves. You know how to buy train tickets, right?”

“Am I a kid? Of course I do.”

“And you know that our country is surrounded by the sea on three sides?”

“Of course.”

“Then what’s the problem? You just decide on a date, buy the tickets, and go to the sea.”

“T-that’s a little.”

Just what was this guy thinking? Daemyung had turned red up to his ears. Maybe he was shooting an erotic movie all by himself in his head, even though he acted so pure on the surface?

“Your parents must be worried, you shouldn’t do that.”

...What erotic movie. He was too pure-minded that Maru wanted to dye it a little red.

“Hey, you should really think about how Jiyeon feels. She’s at the age where she wants to play around.”

“Y-you really think so?”

Maru smiled and shook his head. What was he supposed to do about this natural treasure of a couple?

“Maru.”

“Yeah?”

“T-the cinema should be a pretty moderate course for a date, right?”

“That’s textbook dating. It’s a bit old-fashioned, but it’s not bad as the first course on a date. If the movie is to her tastes, then there’s no better choice either.”

“Really? Then what about after that? No, wait, where did you go with your girlfriend recently?”

Maru, who was looking for the textbook for the 4th period, raised his head slightly. He smiled bitterly towards Daemyung, whose eyes were shining.

"I haven't met her in a while."

"Really? Why?"

"What do you mean why? Because we're both busy."

"You can't meet if you're busy?"

What an obvious question. Maru laughed before taking out the textbook and putting it on his desk. They weren't kids, if they knew about each other's circumstances, they should just be considerate of each other.

"But she might want to meet you?"

"I told her that I wanted to meet her, but she said no. Looks like she has her own circumstances to deal with."

"So?"

"What do you mean 'so'?"

Daemyung stared at Maru. Maru looked back into his eyes.

"Hey, hey. Korean teacher is coming."

Dojin, who had been in the bathroom, came in as he shouted. The kids that were reading comic books all hid them inside their desks and bags. Daemyung also turned around to look at the front. Dowook, who had been lying down, sat up as well.

The chaotic classroom became neat and quiet in an instant, and following that, the teacher came in. The teacher, who carried with him a rod made of bamboo, stood in front of the lecture desk and started the class after telling them to endure for just an hour.

Maru watched Daemyung's back for a while before turning his gaze to the textbook. What did Daemyung want to say just now?

He was curious, but that curiosity soon dissipated.

"It's important to find out the intentions of the novelist. So memorize from here to here for now. Okay?"

The Korean teacher's loud voice echoed in the classroom.

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12:45 p.m. The students all stuck one foot out of their desks. The Korean teacher, who always finished the class after erasing the board, erased the final period from the board.

"Kids. You'll only be harming yourselves if you fall over while running. You should take it slow. It's not like you're possessed by hungry ghosts or something."

“Teach, can you finish the class early since we went through all the materials?”

“It’s the wish of a lifetime!”

The students spoke as they looked at the clock. Today’s lunch had fried chicken on the menu. If they were late, they would only be given fried crumbs, so they were trying to hurry. As Maru also thought that meals should always be delicious, he also put one foot out of his desk. Rather than going there calmly and eating dregs, he might as well run there like mad and eat chicken legs.

“Good. I’ll give you a question, so the column that gets it right will get to go first. It’s easy so you’ll have to raise your hands fast. What are the four tragedies of Shakesp....”

“Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth!”

Maru had never seen Daemyung move so quickly until now. Daemyung pushed the desk and raised his hand full of battle spirit and immediately uttered the titles of four books. The Korean teacher, who looked at Daemyung in a daze, laughed loudly once before telling their column to go.

“Oh yeah!”

“Nice, Daemyung!”

Daemyung smiled and waved his hand above his head. Maru could see a glimpse of a boxer that gained the title of champion. When they heard the teacher saying that they could go, they held their breaths and opened the back door. The corridor was filled with silence. They went to the next class over and peeked through the window. Everyone looked at them with envious gazes.

“You should always go to Park Daemyung when it comes to food.”

“Of course. Let’s go fellas. Let’s get them fried chicken!”

They rushed across the corridor with lights in their eyes. Daemyung was treated as the captain and he got to go first. Maru smiled and followed them.

## **Chapter 442**

“There are no problems with the microphones, right?”

“Yes, they’re fine.”

“You told me that mic number 2 kept producing unwanted noises though.”

“We changed that out.”

This was the broadcasting room, where one corner of it was filled with broadcasting equipment. Maru sat down around a table placed in the center of the room. On his opposite side were the first years, who were waiting for him as they talked.

“Please take care of me for the next twenty minutes today too,” Yeondu, the third year of the broadcasting club, winked as she spoke.

She pushed up her glasses and checked the music CD with a junior of the broadcasting club.

“Let’s do one more read-through before we start,” Daemyung said as he picked up the script in front of him.

The broadcast was around 17 minutes. What Yeondu wanted was to gather the stories from the students of this school and modify them into fun stories, but apparently, she gave up due to the lack of participation. The other schools weren’t in good shoes either, so apparently, all of the schools would share any stories they got from their school and all of the schools would essentially talk about the same thing during lunch. The script in front of them was made like that.

“The microphone is in broadcasting mode right now so don’t power it on, okay?”

“Yes.”

Maru pushed aside the microphone in front of him. There were two microphones on the table. The first years shared one while the second years shared the other. If they had a good microphone that was actually used in the field, one would suffice, but there was no way high school broadcasting clubs had such high-tech equipment. From what he overheard, the broadcasting club had to beg the school to get them these two microphones as well.

“It was Bangjoo and Dowook two days ago, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then is it Maru and Aram’s turn today?”

Aram raised her hand and shouted ‘yes’.

“We’ll be starting in five minutes, so get your lines ready. Don’t make mistakes like last time. It was good since it was funny, but you should still do things properly.”

“I won’t make a mistake. Also, it’s fine since I made fewer mistakes than Dowook-seonbae. No one remembers because of that, hahaha!”

When Aram laughed, Dowook, sitting on the other side, sighed. Last time, Dowook screwed up while doing his opening line. The words ‘tiring afternoon’ became ‘tiring apfthernoona’.

Pfft, Maru laughed when he thought back to that time. He turned away from Dowook’s fierce glare. After that, Dowook’s nickname became ‘apfthernoona’ for the next two days. Even he, with his personality, didn’t fight anyone because of that nickname. He must have been so embarrassed that he couldn’t even get angry.

“Apfthernoona is no good, I’m serious,” Yeondu said with a wink.

“The song request is about to end. You guys should get ready to start.”

Hearing that, Daemyung quickly started reading the script. The script always arrived in the morning. They would read the script that Yeondu would pass onto them in the morning, and then immediately do the broadcast during lunch. Although the schedule was unbelievably tight, everything was forgivable since the objective was just a school broadcast program anyway. This was what Yeondu meant when she said that there was no pressure.

No one had any expectations of them, and they weren't doing this for some kind of fame either. Although the YBS radio program was on the line, just one out of the numerous schools in the Gyeonggi region was going to be picked. Yeondu said that they should just treat it as a memory of their youth. Turns out, there were quite a lot of romanticists like Daemyung in the school. Also, it seemed that the word 'memories' worked well on other students as well as even Dowook showed concentration before the broadcast.

'It's a pity that my sleep time is reduced, but this isn't bad either.'

If photos were all that was left from traveling, the only thing that was left behind from the high school period would be the memories made with friends.

"I hope you can sound awkward, yet not awkward. As for Maru, well... you're just good, so you can keep doing what you're doing."

Yeondu put up three fingers in the air. Her other hand was on broadcasting equipment. Three, two, one. The moment the last finger went down, the other broadcasting club member powered on the microphones. Then cue.

"Uh, uh, have you had lunch everyone? Today was chicken, right? The competition must've been fierce."

Aram stuttered because she missed the right timing, but she soon calmed down and continued. Maru gestured at Aram to calm down and followed up.

"We're half-way through October already. The skies are high, and the winds are cool. It's such good weather that it's a waste to sit in class and study. That's why, today, we at 'Our Radio' have prepared some stories about students passionately studying. That's right, regardless of how cool the winds are, students have to study. Otherwise, we'd get scolded. Isn't that right, teachers?"

He saw Yeondu's hand gesture and pulled away from the microphone a little. He could see the first years sitting in front of him giving him a thumbs up.

"Follow up."

Yeondu quietly whispered.

Daemyung, who was reading the script, leaned forward. The intro music started fading out. After seeing Yeondu's hand gesture that signalled the start, Daemyung spoke.

"I want to date someone. I'm not joking, I'm serious. But I can't fulfill that dream. The reason? It's because my school is an all-boys school."

The audio drama began with some humor.

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"The girls in my class say that your voice sounds good, seonbae."

Maru turned his head around when Aram said those words.

"My voice?"



“Yes. That’s why I kindly told them that you’re actually a really cold person and that your voice is just acting.”

“Good.”

“No way, why is your reaction so bland?”

“I’m a taken man, so it would be quite a pain for me to be popular among girls.”

“Jiyoong, Jiyoong, don’t you think Maru-seonbae has a slight superiority complex?”

Maru glanced at Jiyoong. He saw her nodding slightly. Then, the two met eyes and she said ‘you’re cool’ as though making an excuse. He could treat Aram’s words as a joke, but Jiyoong’s actions hurt him a little.

“But I wasn’t lying when I said that the girls like your voice.”

“She’s right. A lot of them say that your voice is really relaxing.”

It was a compliment, so it wasn’t bad to hear. Maru smiled as he nodded.

“Are you going to Anyang immediately?” Aram asked.

“Yeah, I should be.”

“I thought you were practicing with us since you came up all the way here, but I guess not. You’re going to start ignoring us all once you actually become a famous actor, aren’t you?”

“Naturally. You didn’t have to ask that, to know that, did you?”

“I knew you’d say that.”

“Stop, and start practicing already. Once Daemyung and Dowook come, I’m gonna leave immediately. How can a student be awkward when playing the role of a student?”

“We’ll see about that. I’m going to become used to it soon. Jiyoong, let’s try this out once. You too, Bangjoo.”

When the 2nd year students were absent, the leader was Aram. She looked like someone who would fool around without a care when left alone due to her personality, but she was actually quite meticulous in nature and did things that she wasn’t asked to do. She was someone who knew when to play around and when to be serious. Though, the downside to that was that she played around too hard and she ran out of energy quite quickly.

Maru stood in one corner of the classroom and watched the first year students practice. Although they started off laughing, they looked very serious when they began practice.

“We’re here.”

Just then, Daemyung and Dowook came, bringing some kimbap from the restaurant in front of the school.

“Then I’m leaving. Good luck with practice.”

“Have some of this before you go.”

Dowook pointed at the kimbap. Maru took out one roll of kimbap wrapped in aluminum foil.

“I’ll eat it as I go.”

“Goddammit. You should really sit down when you eat. You should really take some slack.”

Saying that, Dowook threw him a drink can. Maru said goodbye to everyone as he ate a piece of kimbap. The first year students waved at him. Even here, Bangjoo’s voice was loud enough to echo across the corridor.

‘Looks like I’ll be just in time if I go now.’

He walked down the stairs while checking the time.

“Maru.”

When he raised his head, he saw Daemyung grabbing onto the handrails.

“What? Got something to say to me?”

“Uhm... I might be overstepping my bounds here, and it might not be necessary to tell you this at all, but it was on my mind for some time.”

“What is it?”

Maru turned around to face Daemyung and smiled.

“You know, during lunch.”

“Lunch?”

“When we talked about girlfriends.”

“Oh that? What about it? You want me to recommend you a place to go?”

“I’ll be thankful if you do, but before that...”

Daemyung hesitated once again. Maru didn’t urge him and quietly waited. There should be a reason that such a cautious fellow was having a hard time talking about it.

After scratching his head for a while, Daemyung made a very faint smile and spoke,

“We are still kids. I’m not saying that you’re a kid. You’re a little different. But whether it’s me, or Jiyoong... or your girlfriend, I think we’re still kids.”

After saying that, Daemyung became flustered for a while before sighing.

“You might be late. Get going. I didn’t mean anything much when I said that, so just ignore me. It was a little awkward, right? Sorry about that. I guess I held you back for nothing. Even I don’t know what I’m trying to say here, haha, hahaha.”

After saying goodbye, Daemyung climbed up the stairs and disappeared again. Maru listened to the fading footsteps before turning around.

“What did he want to say?”

The kimbap in his hands looked limp and swayed up and down.

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Maru leaned on the wall as he drank some water. This was a short break time after practice.

“Give me some as well.”

Sooil walked heavily towards him and sat next to him. Maru pointed at the fridge.

“It’s too hard to go there.”

“How do you even breathe then?”

He passed the water bottle he was drinking from to Sooil. Sooil took a sip before becoming limp like a sponge that soaked up water and lied down.

“You’re making such a big fuss even though you’re still young.”

Although Ganghwan said those words, he also approached them and lied down on the floor. When Maru glanced at him, he licked his lips before saying,

“It’s fine since I’m old.”

“And I remember you telling me that you’re still young.”

“It’s fine because I’m a creature that’s somewhere between young and old.”

Watching them, Hanna said ‘bullshit’. All three men laughed.

“But don’t you feel like you’re putting more effort into the prior play than the main play?”

They created a few skits in order to gather people before the main play. Due to the characteristics of street performances, it would be hard to gather an audience if they didn’t have anything to pique their interest. Therefore, it was understandable that they were preparing some skits, but the problem was how much they practiced it.

“For the main play, we’re pretty much just setting up the stage for someone else to talk, so it doesn’t really require a lot of effort. Since the play is mainly led by the audience, we can only pray that they will lead us well.”

“At this rate, wouldn’t the audience just leave after the skits?” Sooil asked worriedly.

“Then we have to use our secret move.”

“A secret move?”

Maru was curious as well so he stared at Ganghwan’s lips.

“Geunsoo.”

“...Let’s just practice.”

“If we bring Geunsoo, people will probably gather. If that doesn’t work, we’ll call Suyeon as well.”

“That’s such an incredible plan, in so many ways, that I can’t even say anything about it. Oh, right, did you decide to drop the honorifics with Suyeon-noona? You always had a hard time dealing with her,” Maru asked.

“We’re in the same company now, and I have to see her face frequently, so I should get close. She must be a good woman if you get close to her.”

“Senior, I mean, hyung-nim. You’re uncomfortable with her, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Actually, I still call her Miss Suyeon. She’s five years younger than me, but it’s still Miss Suyeon. That woman is so scary to get close to. I feel like she’ll drain my energy. In that sense, Hanna is so perfect. She’s practically a dude!”

A bottle full of water was flung at Ganghwan. Ganghwan quickly dodged. Had he been a little slower, he might have seen some blood.

“Maru, you seem like... you’ve become quite close to Miss Suyeon.”

Ganghwan approached him and said in a small voice.

“It’s a business relationship, not a private one.”

“But you call her noona though.”

“Lip service shines more with business relationships than with private ones. Rather than that, what were you planning to do during company meetups?”

“What do you mean? I just have to try my best if I don’t want to get branded by her as someone bad. Sooil, you’re quite close to Suyeon, aren’t you?”

Sooil smiled and nodded.

“I should really join an agency as well, urgh. Boys, why don’t you stop chatting and practice already?” Hanna said as she put her hands on her waist.

The three men said yes before standing up.

### **Chapter 443**

“Unni! Give us some fried rice here! Two, no, three portions!” Hanna shouted as she waved her spoon above her head.

It seemed that 6 portions of pork belly and a bowl of cold noodles weren’t enough for her.

“Hey, he’s grabbing the glass again,” Ganghwan said as he pointed at Sooil.

Maru picked up his chopsticks and slapped Sooil’s hand. Sooil looked at him for a while before grabbing the glass again.

“Who do you think you’re trying to annoy again?”

Maru took the glass away from him. Sooil had drunk 2 glasses already. From his red face, he seemed to have reached his limits already, but he kept looking for more alcohol.

“I’m not drunk.”

“That’s what they all say. Shut up and drink some water.”

Maru poured some water into the beer glass and handed it back.

It was Friday night. It had been an hour since they came to the pork belly restaurant after practice. Unlike their original intentions of having a quick meal and going home, they were now somehow ordering more and more portions of pork belly and alcoholic drinks.

“Looks like my daily expenses are getting buried here today.”

Ganghwan looked at Hanna with tears as Hanna made another ssam to eat. Hanna’s appetite was not ordinary, and Sooil also kept picking up pieces of meat without end, so the total amount they ate kept increasing. Since Hanna just ordered fried rice, it might be the end, but from how she still kept staring at the menu on the wall of the restaurant, perhaps she wasn’t satisfied just yet.

“Did Hanna-noona always eat that much?” Maru quietly asked Ganghwan.

“She’s the type of person to eat when she feels stressed. She’s always like that when she’s starting off a play. Rather than that, you don’t get drunk easily. Didn’t you just empty two bottles?”

“You’re right. Looks like I’m quite good with alcohol. Since we’re at it, here, I’ll pour a glass of rice wine for you.”

Maru poured a glass full of rice wine. After toasting, he drank the rice wine with some kimchi. The taste of rice wine that hit the back of his throat made him smile.

“Maru.”

“Yes?”

“Are you greedy about acting these days?”

“About acting?”

For a brief moment, the noise around him didn’t enter his ears.

Greed, huh. He twirled the glass once before drinking some rice wine again. Ganghwan, who asked the question, also turned away from him and ate a piece of meat.

The shout of a man saying that he’ll treat the group because he just got his salary, the sound of sizzling meat, and the crisp clanging of the chopsticks that fell on the floor became vivid again.

“I do feel greedy.”

During a conversation he had with Ganghwan a long time ago, he was asked a similar question. Back then, Maru replied that he wasn’t greedy. The reason he chose the path of acting was strictly for money. He only chose acting as the method to get a huge profit, so there was no reason for him to be greedy about it. The process was just the process. The only thing he looked forward to was the quality of the result, not the perfection of the process.

However, a lot of things had changed now. Although he still put importance on results, he now became greedy about the process as well. Not only did he start finding interest in acting itself, but he also took a step further and started wanting to become a good actor. Rather than an actor liked by the viewers or the audience, he wanted to climb to the level where the actors that acted in tandem with him would say that he was a decent actor.

The feeling he got when the other party received every last bit of emotion that he gave off, and responded with his or her own feeling filled with emotion was an indescribable feeling of joy. It was like that with the single cut - that single exchange in conversation - that he shot with the elder during the movie, and more recently, it was like that with his act with Joohyun. He felt that he was lacking, but at the same time, he smiled because he was joyful.

He wanted to continue experiencing such acting.

That sentence took place in a corner of his heart.

“You started on the path of pain, what a pitiful guy.”

Ganghwan poured some rice wine into his glass. Maru received the rice wine with a smile.

“Geunsoo probably said this before, that it’s an incredibly difficult thing for an actor to make a living out of acting. When I saw you before, I didn’t have any worries at all. You didn’t look like you were someone who’d make the wrong decisions. You looked like you’d immediately step out once you felt that it was no good. I’m not saying that you lacked effort or tenacity. I’m just saying that you’re quick at making and cutting connections when necessary.”

“Even now, I’m still going to find something else to do if things go wrong. I need to earn money. After all, a lot of money makes me happy.”

At that moment, Sooil, who had his head lowered, spoke,

“A lot of money doesn’t necessarily equal being happy, I mean it.”

After saying those words, his head swayed around as though he was dizzy before he smacked his head on the table. The shock made the things on the table shudder.

“Looks like that guy is completely done for. Anyway, right now, you don’t look like that, Maru. When you practiced with me a year ago, I could tell that you just memorized the theories and applied them to your acting, but you aren’t like that now. You’re enjoying it.”

“You can tell things like that?”

“I can. How many people do you think I’ve seen until now?”

They toasted again. Meanwhile, Hanna was conquering the fried rice all by herself. It looked as though she was going to finish it soon since Sooil joined her, albeit drunk.

“Enjoy yourself. To the point that even if you turn away after all the frustration, you won’t have any regrets.”

“You’re talking about regrets to a junior with a bright future?”

“Regrets are better the earlier you get them. Rather than regretting past the point of no return, it’s better to regret while you still have options.”

“But you’re going to keep doing this, aren’t you, senior?”

“Me? As for me, I’m good at it. I have the confidence that there’s no one better than me at acting on stage. I’m someone who will do well. I can say that with confidence.”

If a nameless drunkard said those words, Maru would’ve just laughed, but as Maru knew the future of this man, it sounded like the ambitions of a great man. You will really become like that, senior Ganghwan - he thought to himself.

“Unni! Give us two portions of gochujang-samgyeopsal and some more miyeok-guk.”

Hearing the crisp voice, Maru turned around. Hanna was shouting as she raised her hand above her.

Ganghwan, who was looking at the empty grill with sad eyes, sighed after hearing those words. Maru poured him a glass of rice wine in consolation.

“Ah, right. Sir Yoon told me that he wants to see me next week. I heard that you were the one who talked about it.”

“Yes. I told the elder that I’ll bring some meat.”

“And that idol-whomever is coming as well?”

“Yes. The elder permitted.”

“Then I guess I don’t need to worry about it. Looks like I’ll be eating until my nose is red huh. Sir Yoon is someone that ends what he started. Is the fella coming with you good at drinking?”

“We did drink together before, and he didn’t act weird.”

“That’s good. But hey, you sound like you’re drinking here and there.”

“It’s one of my few hobbies.”

“Hey, hey, don’t regret it when you’re older and drink moderately. You’ll get a fat liver.”

“I could say the same thing to you.”

While they were chatting, the new portions of pork belly came.

“Well, let’s eat for now. Before Hanna-noona finishes them by herself.”

“Yeah, we should.”

The two picked up their chopsticks.

\* \* \*

“I’ll bring this kid home. I have business in Seoul.”

Hanna piggy-backed Sooil, who was practically limp, and started walking.

“Hanna sure is strong.”

“Really.”

“It’s cold. Let’s go home as well.”

The high street of Anyang on Friday night was bright as though it was day. It wasn’t just because of the lights from street signs, but also because of the red glow from the faces of those in the streets. They left the high street.

“You didn’t bring your car, did you?”

“Of course. I’m going to sleep in the jjimjilbang nearby.”

“You live in Seoul, right?”

“Yeah. You live in Suwon so I guess it won’t take long by bus. You should go home quickly. You might make your parents worried. Ah, won’t they say something if you smell like alcohol when you go home?”

“They think that freedom is the best way to raise children. They won’t say anything as long as I don’t cause trouble.”

“Splendid parents you have there.”

“Indeed. You don’t have anyone you’re in a relationship with?”

“If I did, I’d be telling everyone around me already. Maybe because I’m busy, but I don’t see a good woman.”

“Why don’t you try going on TV? People around you will set up meetings for you.”

“Acting in front of a camera just isn’t for me.”

“You’re not interested in movies either?”

“Well, if I become poor, I will do anything it takes to get me back on my feet, but for now, I want to focus on plays. Acting has its times, you know? A stage you can digest while you’re thirty-three is different from the stage you can digest when you’re thirty-four. The stage is where one year makes a big difference.”

“But you should really accept it when people scout you.”

“I’ll do it if our dear president Lee Junmin tells me to, but there’s no way he’d have me do something recklessly. Wait, why are we talking about money when we were supposed to be talking about love? Since we’re at it, why don’t you introduce me to a good person?”

“Senior.”

“What?”

“It’s a crime.”

“Age is nothing in front of love.”



"Maybe, but there's something called shame as well."

"Dammit, forget about it. You young kids can play with other young kids all day long for all I care. This old man is going to die a lonely death."

Ganghwan exaggerated his actions as though he was acting in a play. Thanks to that, he attracted attention from people around them. Maru tried to step away from him, but Ganghwan's arm hooked around his neck.

"Treat her well. Love at your age makes you think and feel about a lot of things."

"Don't worry about that. I'm doing plenty well."

"Yeah, yeah. Sure. Because it's you. But what do kids do these days?"

"It hasn't changed. Watching movies, eating out, and talking."

"Dammit, kid. At your age, you're supposed to be more passionate, and immature in your love. What is that old-fashioned setting?"

"Liking someone is old fashioned in itself."

"Urgh. I wonder what *she* saw in a guy like this. This guy should be as interesting as a grey wall to girls *her* age. It's such a curious thing."

Maru shrugged as he spoke,

"My girlfriend isn't that girly."

"Is *she* like you and her mental age is actually really old?"

"I'm saying that *she* is not childish."

"What does that entail?"

"We don't have to talk to each other to know and understand each other. You know, things like that."

At that moment, the lights changed. Ganghwan let go of his neck. At the same time, he said this,

"Hey."

"Yes?"

"It's normally not like that. The girl that was my student last winter, at least, wasn't like that. Well, *she* is your girlfriend, so you must know better, but when I looked at her, she didn't seem so strong-minded."

Ganghwan tapped Maru's forehead.

"Engrave the words this love-expert is telling you. The way you see *her* might be different from the way she actually is."

"...You're drunk, aren't you?"

"I was found out? Pfft. Hahahaha."

Ganghwan crossed the street as he waved his hand. Maru looked at his back for a while before turning around.

Seaweed soup. for more info.

Public bath + sauna. for more details.

#### **Chapter 444**

"I guess autumn is autumn."

"True," *she* said as she zipped up her jacket.

*She* was now used to going home while looking up at the moonlit skies. It was to the point that going home before sunset made *her* feel awkward.

The club president waved her hand at each of the juniors that left after saying their goodbyes. The short hair of the club president swayed.

"Isn't it hard these days?" The club president said on their way to the convenience store.

*She* waited for a while before replying that she could hold on.

"Looks like it's hard, if you're saying you can still hold on."

"I'm not at the point where I can't go to practice."

"Who told you this is about practice? I'm saying it because you look exhausted these days. It really isn't easy to do acting and receive someone else's money huh?" The club president asked as she pulled her bag upwards.

"It sure isn't."

"When did you say the broadcast was?"

"Next week is the first episode. Are you going to watch it?"

"I will. Only then can I tease you about it, right?"

"Geez."

They entered the convenience store. The warmth that enveloped her made *her* sigh in a small voice. The club president, who was heading to the counter after picking some items, spoke,

"You should drink something."

"I'm okay."

"Then drink this."

The drink in the club president's hand was something that had a ginseng printed on it and looked bitter from a glance. Since she was someone who would buy it if *she* didn't buy any drinks, *she* ended up grabbing a strawberry milk.

"You really like strawberry milk huh. I see you drinking it every time."

"I like this the most."

"Then I'll take one of those as well."

They bought the items before leaving. The dried leaves on the ground made rustling noises as they slid across the ground due to the wind.

"There are only two months left for me now. I was wondering when I was going to graduate, but now it's right in front of me."

They sat in chairs in front of the convenience store. The club president rummaged inside the plastic bag before taking out an apple pie. She received a piece of the pie and thanked her for it.

"What department did you choose?"

"Me? I'm thinking of business management."

"You'll be able to go anywhere since your grades are good."

Three times a week - that was how many times the club president came to practice. If an exam student participated in club activities until 11 in the night, he or she would've heard an earful from the teacher or their parents, but the club president was not just an ordinary student. No one said anything to her since she received top grades in every subject. She was an amazing person in many ways.

"You won't be coming starting October, will you?"

"I am going to go. I just won't be able to stay for long. My homeroom teacher told me that I should focus a month before the CSAT, and I think so too."

"Seonbae."

"Yeah?"

"You should really continue acting even in college. You're really good at it."

She always said that she was just doing it as a hobby, but her skills were just too good to let them go to waste. *She* wanted her to continue acting, even if she didn't aim to become an actress. *She* wanted this as an actress herself, and as a fan who liked her acting.

"Well, I'm not sure about that. Right now, I find investing my time in creating plays fun, but I'm not sure if I'd feel the same in college. I like acting with you, but I didn't like acting itself that much."

The club president curled up her lips and blew softly. Her white breath dissipated in the air.

"You're going to continue acting, aren't you? You told me your dream is to become an actress."

"Yes, I'm going to continue."

"Call me when you're famous."

"What if I don't ever become famous?"

"Then call me anyway."

The club president drank her milk while laughing. *She* suddenly had the thought that the club was going to be a lot quieter than it is now once the club president graduated.

"You're aiming for the department of theater, aren't you?"

"If nothing goes wrong, then yes."

"What a vague answer."

"I'm thinking about it. When I have a look at the actors I admire, most of them didn't go to university. It would be great if I can go, but I also wonder if it's really necessary. I felt something when I went to the shoots recently."

"What was it?"

"That perhaps one year of experience in the field might be more valuable than four years of university. Of course, both have their advantages and disadvantages."

"I can't say anything about that then. Whether it's about university or the field. Ah, this wasn't how it was supposed to go."

The club president touched her hair before laughing. She tilted her head and looked at the club president. What did she mean?

"Being the president, I wanted to console my cute junior a little, but it's not that easy."

"Console me?"

"I told you before, didn't I? You look tired. That's why I was going to listen to your story, and sympathize with you, and relieve your stress if possible... but that wasn't so easy. And here I was trying to act like a senior."

*She* looked at the club president making a sour face for a while before chuckling. So that was the reason why she always talked to *her* during the day. *She* finally understood why the club president seemed a little unusual.

"I'm not sure about anything else, but I'm really good at reading the mood. I always feel bad when I look at someone who's in a bad situation. I can see it - that person is acting differently from usual."

"Was it that obvious?"

"To me, yes."

"Seonbae."

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you become an investigator instead of a businesswoman? A beauty investigator sees through the psychology of the criminal! Like that."

*She* said that in an acting tone. The club president made a pistol out of her hands and acted like an investigator. It was precisely because of this that the juniors liked her. *She* kicked the leaf that rolled onto her shoes. The dried leaf rolled towards the drain.

“Seonbae.”

“Yeah?”

“What would you do if someone blatantly expresses their hate for you?” *She* asked as she thought of Lee Miyoong’s face.

Receiving the question, the club president stared at *her*.

“What is it?”

“No, I’m just surprised that someone can blatantly express their hate for you. So there are all sorts of people in this world.”

The club president drank another gulp of strawberry milk before speaking.

“Is the person that hates you a person around your age?”

“No, an adult much older than me.”

“Ah, really? Then I guess you won’t be able to pick a fight. I was going to tell you to drop-kick that person if that person was around your age.”

It sounded like a joke, but *she* decided to accept it since the club president was really someone that would try to do that. The club president fell into thought.

“Don’t think about it too deeply. I just asked without much thinking.”

“No, this is a great opportunity to act like a senior for once, so I can’t just let go of it. Wait a minute. I don’t have a bad head so I should be able to come up with a good answer soon. Wait a minute.”

She tapped her neck rhythmically with her fingers before turning around her head to speak.

“Is that person someone hard for you to get angry at?”

“Yes.”

“Then I guess you won’t be able to snap back at her?”

“Probably not.”

“So the answer is a drop-kick after all, huh.”

“Seonbae!”

“I’m just joking. But consultations are really hard. I get why the teachers say the same thing all the time. It’s not that easy giving advice to others.”

“Then what would you do in that situation?”

“As for me, I would....”

“And don’t say drop-kick.”

“Hey, just what do you take me for?”

The club president sat up before opening her eyes in a coy manner. She looked feminine, but it didn't suit her at all. She soon started giggling.

"I know it doesn't suit me, so don't look at me like that."

"You would look really pretty if you grew out your hair and put on some make up."

"I know, but it'd be troublesome if I get any prettier and my popularity explodes."

"...Yeah."

"Hey, what was that pause? Lil' bunny is all grown up now."

The club president sniffed once.

"If it was me, I would clash with her until the end. Whether that person breaks, or I break, it won't end until one of us does. If that person glares at me, I will glare back, and if that person swears at me, I'll return twofold."

The club president spoke in a calm voice. *She* nodded once. The club president was someone who would do that. She would never back down. She was strong-willed so no hardships would be able to topple her.

"But it's not a method I would recommend to others. I also think about it sometimes. What if I relented a little? What if I took one step back? Wouldn't that have made things much easier?"

After hearing the club president's words, *she* spoke.

"I want to act like you. But I get scared whenever I stand in front of that person. I want to run away, and I want to beg and say that I was in the wrong. But I can't do it. It's strange. I feel chaotic to the point that even I don't know what I want to do. A large part of me wants to fight back, yet another large part of me wants to submit."

"So, what did you tell that person?"

"Uhm... nothing good at least. I only indirectly told her that I'd fight until the end. And then... I really regretted it. Thanks to that, I'm not getting enough sleep recently."

"Oh dear, Bunbun."

The club president clicked her tongue before hooking her arm around her shoulders. *She* felt a little better after that but soon realized that nothing had changed. *Her* heart pricked whenever she thought of Lee Miyoona's face. *She* felt stifled as though she choked on her food, and sometimes, she would sweat cold sweat as though she was having nightmares.

*She* couldn't expect help from anyone else there, and she couldn't tell anything about it to her mother since she would probably tell her to stop.

Would it feel better if *she* complained about it to the club president? Would *she* feel better if she cried her eyes out saying that she was wronged? The moment *she* had those thoughts, she saw the club president looking at her worriedly. *She*... smiled.

"It's fine. Well, things will get better. Oh, I'll go home now. It's about time for the last bus."

"It's that time already, huh."

"Seonbae, thank you for listening to my words. I feel better now thanks to you. I'm not even worried anymore."

Hearing those words, the club president made a despondent smile. It was just as she said - she was quick at reading the mood. She probably understood what was on her mind already.

"Sorry for not being able to help you. Looks like I only ended up wasting your time."

"No, it really isn't like that."

*She* shook her head vigorously. The club president shrugged before standing up.

"Alright. Get going. Watch out since it's dark."

"You should be careful too, seonbae."

"Well, I can just beat up any perverts coming my way, so I'm not worried."

*She* said goodbye to the club president who waved her hand and walked towards the bus stop.

'I shouldn't have mentioned it.'

It would've been better if *she* hadn't said anything about it. *She* knew that it was a problem that other people couldn't help her with. It was *her* fault for trying to rely on someone else. *She* felt sorry when she thought back to the expression the club president made just before they parted. It wasn't the club president's fault at all.

'Yes, it's better not to talk about it.'

*She* tried to calm down. There was no need to share *her* worries with someone else. It was better for *her* to worry by herself.

*She* thought back to Maru's figure in the cinema before. Such a strong boy, who never showed his weak side, was crying silently while watching the movie. How many things had he experienced? How many pains did he endure by himself?

Everyone had it hard. There was no need to show *her* pains to someone else. It was painful and scary, but *she* thought that she had to endure it by herself.

After getting on the bus, *she* subconsciously started biting on her nails. Then, *she* heard a snapping noise, and when she had a look at her hand, she saw that the nail she was biting on had cracked. *She* shook her head once. *She* felt her tongue drying out when she thought about the shoot tomorrow. *She* tried to think about something else, but it was to no avail.

When the bus arrived near her house, *she* got a call from Maru.

-I just called because I wanted to hear your voice. You home?

"No, I'm going home."

-It's quite late. Practice?

“Yeah. Are you home?”

-I’m almost there.

“Alright, be careful on your way home.”

*She* swallowed the words echoing in her mouth. *She* didn’t want to grumble like a little child. However, *she* thought that she would burst out crying and tell him everything if she continued calling him. So *she* decided to end the call.

“I need to get off now. I’m hanging up.”

-Are you... okay?

“Of course I am. Don’t worry about it. I mean it. Really.”

Just as *she* said those words, she realized that she wasn’t hearing anything from her phone. There was a slight buzzing noise before the call ended. *She* pulled her chin inwards, bit her lips, and put her phone inside her pocket. *She* pressed the buzzer and stood in front of the back door. The bus stopped and the door opened. *She* sniffed once before walking down the stairs.

A chilly wave of wind stroked past *her* face and she just stepped on the ground while curling up a little, when she saw someone sitting on the chair underneath the bus stop.

That boy, wearing a chestnut-colored cardigan waved his hand as though nothing had happened, and said this,

“Your mom said that you weren’t home yet. I didn’t come at a bad time, right?”

## **Chapter 445**

“Youth sure is good alright.”

Choi Haesoo breathed in a wave of coffee fragrance that came from her mug. A colleague of hers gave the coffee to her as a present saying that the coffee had a strong sour taste, but for now, the smell was enough to satisfy her. She grabbed the mug and sat in front of her work table. It was a sitting table in the living room. This old table that had been with her for more than ten years was the one that Haesoo cherished the most, and it was her number one item to make a living. The cream-colored laptop on top of it was number two.

She put the mug next to the laptop and looked at her draft that she had printed out. The manuscript she had written two years ago was only polished into a draft quite recently. The story was about the love of a young couple. She never had any plans to complete it, but when she had a look at her daughter recently, she really had the urge to write it. She thanked her daughter for reminding her of this old manuscript.

She turned on the music at a low volume so that she could not hear the lyrics and opened the word processor program. To arrive at this moment, Haesoo did some cleaning and laundry, created some side dishes, and not only that, she even carefully cleaned the clay dolls that she put up as decoration next to the TV. After that, only when she admitted that there was nothing else for her to do other than write, did she make a cup of coffee and sit in front of the laptop.



However, just because she opened the word processor didn't mean that she was going to write immediately. As for how long it would take her to write the first sentence, no, even the indentation for the first sentence, Haesoo herself didn't know that either.

"What a bold kid."

He carefully asked if her daughter had returned only after all sorts of formalities and blessings for her family. She was impressed by the amount of effort he put into knowing the absence of her daughter so she answered him pretty easily.

-Then *she* should be back soon, I guess. Understood, thank you, ma'am.

Saying those words, Maru then said all sorts of other formalities like how he'll visit next time, apologized for calling so late, and things like that. Haesoo herself ended up asking him to take care of her daughter and hung up.

"Wait, did he aim for that?"

What a devious kid. The way he used his smarts wasn't that hateful, so he didn't lose points there, though. The text from her daughter saying that she got on the bus was twenty minutes ago, so perhaps the two had met up at the bus stop right now.

Haesoo drank a sip of coffee. She was told that it had a strong acidic taste, but perhaps thanks to her dull taste buds, it was no different from any other coffee. In fact, it was good that it tasted ordinary. If it was too peculiar, she wouldn't be able to drink it properly.

"Maru should be the one leading huh," she muttered as she put her hands on her laptop.

She wondered if she should ask him sometime. It was obvious that asking her daughter would make her jump around in embarrassment and gloss over it, so it would be better to ask Maru instead.

"Should I just call him here instead?"

It was another kind of fun to watch her daughter being uneasy. Ever since her husband passed away, her daughter seemed to be under the impression that *she* should grow up strong, leading to the loss of her cute side that she showed when she was young. Although she was thankful that her daughter was growing up healthily, there were definitely some parts she wasn't entirely satisfied with. Her daughter was a kind girl, but *she* always found it hard to rely on someone else. It wasn't that *she* hated it, but that she found it hard to do so.

As a parent, she couldn't help but feel sorry whenever she saw her daughter like that. Her daughter was a girl of a lot of tears but was not weak, and *she* was always worried about her mother.

Her daughter had become, no, tried to become an adult early.

Haesoo always hoped for her daughter to rely on her more. Acting childish, stubborn, and even crying at times. She wanted to see *her* being immature just like any others of her age, but her daughter always wrapped her immature soul in the shell that she should be an adult and smiled.

As a mother, Haesoo did not want to ruin her efforts, and as such, just accepted it silently.

'At least *she* looks she has changed now.'

Haesoo didn't know whether it was because *she* started acting, or because she met Maru, but ever since she entered high school, she had changed quite a lot. There was a lot less hesitation when talking about what *she* holed up inside.

Recently, *she* looked like she was holding something back just like before, but Haesoo did not pry. If she asked worriedly, that child would instead curl up even more and say to her that *she* was okay with a smile.

"Would it have been different if he was still alive?"

Haesoo looked up at the ceiling while holding the mug which still had some warmth, before shaking her head. That was enough reminiscence. It was time to work now.

Just as she was thinking that she got a message through the messenger program that she opened. The message was from Ahn Pilhyun. She had sent him the completed draft a while ago to get his opinion, and the message seemed to be about that.

-Isn't it too old woman-like?

Haesoo clenched her teeth and sighed in a low voice. This man was a cheap guy that would sell his soul for a glass of beer and some fried chicken, but he was brutal when it came to evaluating others. He never went easy on his colleagues.

Haesoo made a smirk as she pressed the spacebar.

Thanks to him, she was now motivated to work.

\* \* \*

The swing made some creaking noises. *She* kicked the dirt beneath her foot once again. The swing once again made some loud noises.

"The weather's gotten cold," said Maru, who was sitting on the next swing over.

*She* said 'true', in a small voice.

"What brings you here?"

It had been ten minutes since they met. *She* greeted him dazedly back at the bus stop, and she followed without thinking when he said that they should go to the playground. *She* was only able to ask that question after spending ten minutes in a daze on the creaky swing.

"I'm here to see you," Maru said, as though he was stating the obvious like 'the sun will rise again tomorrow'.

*She* became speechless once again when she heard such a direct answer. Normally, *she* would tell him that he shouldn't have come in a panicked, prankful, then joyful manner.

That was what 'being herself' was, but for some reason, it was hard for *her* to say that today.

"Really?"

For some reason, *she* replied in a dry tone. *She* thought to herself that that wasn't right, but she soon reached the conclusion that this was for the better. It would be better to show him *her* tired side. Then, Maru would worry about *her* condition, and if she led the conversation that way, they wouldn't have to talk about what she was holding within her.

It was a shallow method, but *she* did not have the leisure to think too deeply. I didn't come at a bad time, right? - Maru said back at the bus stop. *She* inwardly thought that he came at the perfect time.

The moment *she* saw Maru at the bus stop, she almost blurted out the story of that person that bullied her for the past several weeks. *She* wanted him to know and understand just how hard and painful she had it, and she wanted him to console her. The only reason *she* managed to hold back her urge was because she was reminded of her resolve to not become luggage for him.

"What a bland reaction."

"Sorry, I'm just tired. I've been yawning for a while now."

*She* forced her mouth open to act like she was yawning.

"You know what?" Maru said after staring at her.

"What?"

"When you yawn, you usually end up showing your canine teeth. If you yawned that intensely, then it means that you are really tired."

Maru smiled as he showed his own canine teeth.

*She* made an awkward smile and avoided his gaze. How he knew such a thing didn't matter right now. What mattered was the fact that Maru was looking at *her* worriedly.

"I'm just tired. I have practice during the week and shoots during the weekend. I don't have any free time at all. Moreover, mom keeps sending me on errands at home. You know that my mom doesn't do any housework when she starts writing, right? I had to do the dishes, the laundry, the cleaning, and... let's not even get there. I'm practically a housekeeper. Even if we do get married later, I'm not worried about doing household chores."

*She* spoke without any directionality. *She* didn't even know what she was talking about as she was talking. *She* felt her hurried words sink like wet cotton. Maru was quietly looking at her.

What was *she* supposed to say here?

*She* then talked about the things that happened during the day without taking a breath: like how she felt bad because the noodles that came out for lunch were all bloated; like how she was surprised because she was picked out to present in front of the class; like how funny one of her club juniors was....

*She* felt her mouth drying out. *She* made an awkward smile before standing up from the swing.

"Hey, we might go past midnight at this rate."

"True."

*She* hesitantly looked at Maru. At that moment, Maru stood up from the swing.

“The practice I do in Anyang is really hard.”

Something completely unexpected came out of Maru’s mouth. *She* was dazed and just stared at Maru’s mouth.

“Senior Ganghwan really isn’t easy to deal with. He never takes a break unless everything from one to ten is perfect. I want to just fall down and get some rest, but he doesn’t allow that. Not only that, senior Miso is no better than senior Ganghwan, in fact, she’s worse. But the problem is, even as I do so much practice, I feel uneasy in a corner of my heart. I put in so much effort, but what if all this effort becomes useless?”

Maru looked really exhausted and afraid as he said those words. *She* had known him for two years, but this was the first time he showed her such a weak side. This was completely different from when he cried subconsciously at the cinema.

“Even now, I think to myself every now and then - Do I need to stop now and focus on something else? But I become hesitant once again because I find acting fun. It’s frustrating, really.”

He looked like he was going to fall down at any moment.

*Her* heart raced. What happened? Why was he acting like this? Maybe something serious happened to him? But above all,

“...Don’t worry. Everything will go well. I mean it,” she said from the bottom of her heart.

*She* couldn’t think of anything else other than calming down the uneasy Maru. *She* wanted to say something cooler and more helpful, but that was all she ended up saying in the end. *She* felt that anything else was unnecessary.

Maru, who was making a depressed expression, took in a deep breath before making a relaxed smile.

“That makes me feel much more relaxed.”

Maru approached *her*, and slowly spoke,

“If you have anything to tell me, you really should.”

“...”

“If you don’t, then that’s fine too. It’s getting cold. Be careful on your way home. Thanks for listening to me.”

Maru tightly grabbed *her* hand once before turning around. At that moment, *she* started talking without even knowing it.

“There’s someone I really don’t like. She’s an actress called Lee Miyoon, and I really hate her. When I look at her, I just want to run away. I want to cry, and I want to give up on everything. But I don’t want to do that. I’m going to keep doing it, I will endure it, and I. Will. Overcome her. I will make her acknowledge me.”

*She* said those words as though she was shouting. *She* panted to calm her rough breathing as she looked at Maru. Maru, who had his back to her, turned around slowly and made a soft smile as he spoke,

“Don’t worry. Everything will go well. I mean it.”

And then,

“If it doesn’t work, then I’ll give her a good rebuke. That bad woman, that is.”

Maru waved his hand at *her*.

*She* dazedly looked at Maru who was getting further and further away before clenching her fists and running towards him. Then, *she* grabbed his shoulders and turned him around forcefully before placing her lips against his.

Maru was surprised and took a step back.

*She* turned her head upwards and breathed out before looking at Maru again.

“Don’t just come over as you wish, that’s a warning.”

“...Okay.”

“And also, thanks. I’m going now!”

“A-alright. S-see you next time.”

*She* waved her hand at the stuttering Maru before turning around. The frustration in *her* heart had disappeared without a trace.

## **Chapter 446**

The sensation that brushed his lips still remained. When he looked at *her* face that approached his like it was in slow motion, he ended up closing his eyes. He ‘received’ the kiss nervously as though he was a little kid being teased by a girl older than him. When their lips parted, Maru almost let out a breath of nervousness. He barely held himself back from doing so.

Until the very moment he arrived back home and laid on his bed, Maru was dazed. And then, when he covered himself with a blanket and looked at the moon-shaped glow-in-the-dark stickers on the ceiling, he burst out laughing from the bottom of his heart.

“Looks like *she* got me this time.”

*She* one-upped him so pleasantly that he would welcome it at any time. Strictly speaking, this was the first kiss. The first kiss that *she* did for him.

‘How aggressive.’

He chuckled and grabbed his phone. He was about to call *her* but saw that it was late and texted her instead. Since she was someone who would sleep like a log, she would probably check the text tomorrow morning.

-Wasn’t that too hot?

After sending the text, Maru closed his eyes. He felt as though he was going to smile throughout his sleep.

\* \* \*

"I'm going to have a look at your individual acting in an audition-like format next week, so be prepared for that. Prepare your clothing as well. Consider it as a real audition. Okay?"

Miso stood up with her coffee mug.

It was 8 in the evening. Wednesday's schedule was now over. Maru stretched his neck left and right. He was on edge after acting as an angry person the whole day. The emotion known as anger required not just the voice, but all the bodily muscles, so it was really hard to do. Even now that he had relaxed his body, his emotions were still on edge, and didn't easily calm down.

"Gosh, that's killing me."

Gwangseok got his bag and stood up.

"Hyung, I'm leaving first. I'm going to play with the girl at the mixer today. Look forward to my review. The two of you, see you next time."

Gwangseok boasted that he had a mixer with a college girl who majored in dance ever since he came to class.

"Does he really have to be like that?"

As soon as Gwangseok left, Gyunglim clicked her tongue. Sungjae just smiled without saying much.

"Girls who like those kinds of guys need some mental consultation."

"Noona."

"What?"

"Why don't you shoot a fighting scene with Gwangseok-hyung? Kick his ass in the name of practice."

"Should I?"

Gyunglim seriously thought about it. Maru shrugged before turning around to Sungjae.

"Hyung, you know today's the day, right?"

"Of course I do. Let's visit the supermarket before we go. We need to buy high-quality ones."

"We just need to buy some pork belly and some soju."

Gyunglim, who was listening, interrupted.

"Where are you two going?"

"I have an appointment with Sungjae-hyung."

Gyunglim hesitated for a while before speaking,

"I can't join you?"

Maru scratched his eyebrows. Normally, he would take her, but he wasn't making the decisions for this one.

"Sorry, Gyunglim. We're meeting some adults, so Maru will be in a tough spot if he brings someone that wasn't planned to attend."

Just as Maru was about to explain, Sungjae spoke first.

"If that's the case, it's fine. I just asked. I was wondering if you two were leaving me out or something."

Gyunglim immediately shut her mouth in an awkward fashion after saying those words. It seemed that her habit of blurting out what was on her mind was not going to be fixed anytime soon.

"Then let's eat together next time. We're going to have a drink today. Noona, how about it?"

"Don't mind me. I'm completely fine. ....But when specifically?"

Maru and Sungjae laughed at the same time. Sungjae asked if this Saturday was good. Gyunglim said that it was okay with a bright face.

"Maru, how about you?"

"How busy can a high school student be? It'll be two when my club activities finish, so why don't we meet up at five? But you can't just go to any restaurant, can you, Sungjae-hyung?"

"We'll just drink over at my house then. As fellow actors in the making."

"Don't call Gwangseok over."

Gyunglim firmly spoke.

"Alright, fine. Gwangseok already said that his weekend was full. Let's meet on the weekend then."

Gyunglim replied yes before standing up first.

"See you then!"

Gyunglim waved her hand in excitement as she left the classroom.

"Geez, that noona."

"That was unexpected. I thought Gyunglim didn't like hanging out with people."

"She probably does. She must just... have her own circumstances."

Sungjae nodded.

"Let's go as well. We'll be just in time once we visit the nearby supermarket. Wow, I'm really nervous though."

"We're just going over to have a drink. You don't have to be so nervous."

"It's not as easy as you make it to be. I think I'm even more nervous than at my concerts."

Sungjae seemed like he really looked forward to meeting the elder. Maru faintly smiled as he watched Sungjae's slightly childish side.

After leaving the classroom, the two headed to the parking lot underneath the building. They left the parking lot in Sungjae's car and went to a nearby supermarket. Sungjae had to wear a hat and press down the shade deeply to hide his face. After watching him put some items in the cart, Maru spoke,

"Hyung."

"Yeah?"

"You don't need to buy so much."

"I'm going to meet Sir Yoon, so it would be rude to go with nothing in my hands."

Saying those words, Sungjae put a box of red ginseng gifts in the cart. Red ginseng, dried persimmons, traditional sweets, and even high-class soju. Maru had to drag Sungjae to the meat corner from the well-being corner. If he left Sungjae alone, he might have piled a tower of well-being foods.

"Is pork belly really okay? Isn't beef better?"

"Pork belly is fine."

He had to stop Sungjae from ordering 10 geun and asked the staff to package three geun. Ganghwan and his appetite should be able to finish two, and the other one should suffice as a side dish for drinking.

"Is this really fine?"

Sungjae looked very worried in front of the counter.

'Dude, this is nearly 500k worth of items.' Maru clicked his tongue as he looked at the number keep ticking up. The red ginseng set was 270 thousand won. The Andong soju-in-a-gourd set was 80 thousand. The Sangju dried persimmons and the Naju pears also took a significant portion of the final tally.

"You bought too much."

"I should at least do this much."

"Are you marrying in or something? Geez."

They went back to the car with their hands full of items. Maru had a hard time preventing Sungjae from picking up some oriental medicine items on the way out.

They barely got the car going and drove towards Yeonhui-dong.

"I wonder if Sir Yoon still remembers me."

"He does. He permitted you to come because he remembers you. So please calm down already. Sometimes I wonder how you are still a singer."

"It's not anyone ordinary but Sir Yoon. It's someone I really wanted to meet after all."



He looked like a child on the night before a field trip. Maru shook his head and opened the window slightly. The car was being driven at a slightly fast speed that reflected Sungjae's excitement. Thanks to that, they arrived earlier than they expected.

Sungjae parked the car in front of the house and they took out the items from the back seats. They had bought so much that just carrying them could be considered labor.

"The lights are off. Perhaps he's sleeping?"

Like Sungjae said, the house behind the fence didn't have any lights on. No human presence could be felt. Just then, Maru heard a dog barking from the hill. When he turned around, he saw a yellow dog wagging his tail as he ran towards him. Oh, was it a Shiba-inu?

Anyway, Maru knew the name of the dog.

"It's Dalgu."

Dalgu seemed to have remembered his scent and came right up to Maru and wagged his tail. Maru reached out and tickled Dalgu under his chin. Dalgu raised his head while barking.

"The fact that you're here means that...."

Maru turned around to look at the hill again. He saw a person walking towards him calmly under the faint moonlight. Dalgu barked before running back to that person.

"Elder!"

Maru greeted after putting the items on the ground. Sungjae did the same. The elder, who walked to his house along with Dalgu, greeted them back in kind.

"Oh my, why did you bring so many things?"

"Sungjae-hyung over here went a little overboard because this is his first time visiting you."

Maru took a step back. Sungjae looked at the elder with a nervous expression.

"H-hello, sir."

Sungjae greeted with a shaking voice. The elder pushed up his rectangular gold-rimmed glasses and smiled gently.

"So we meet again. Nice to see you, Mr. Ahn."

The elder reached out his hand. Sungjae smiled brightly and grabbed the hand with both hands.

"Well then, we shouldn't stay here instead of going inside. Maru, you should come in as well."

"Yes, elder."

They grabbed the items and went into the house. The elder's house hadn't changed at all since the last time Maru came here. The worn-out sofa, the old table, as well as the cutting-edge laptop that looked out of place among all the other old items. The smell of doenjang circulated inside the whole house.

On one corner of the sofa was a pile of books, and next to those were some scripts. Sungjae looked around the room once as though looking at treasure, and then at the scripts.

“You might burn a hole with your eyes.”

“Ah, yes. Sorry about that.”

The elder laughed before walking towards the kitchen. Maru followed behind.

“The portable stove should be around here.”

“I put it over there the last time I came here.”

Maru opened one of the cabinets and took out the portable stove.

“For some reason, you know your way around here better than me, even though I’m the one who lives here.”

“True. Just sit down. I’ll get things ready.”

“Alright. Let me receive the king treatment after all this time. Oh, when is Ganghwan coming?”

“He should be here soon. He’s never late to an appointment for a meal.”

“Indeed. That boy might as well jump into a pit of fire if there’s food in there.”

The elder laughed and headed to the living room where Sungjae was. Maru stuck his head out and looked at Sungjae. Sungjae was stiff like a statue as he faced the elder.

‘Does he find it that good?’

For today, it seemed that he was no longer the idol, but the fan meeting the idol. Conversation could be heard from the living room. The elder seemed to have spoken first. Hearing Sungjae reply in an excited tone, Maru smiled as he got things ready. He laid out some newspaper on the ground of the living room before coming back to the kitchen to chop up some spring onions. He made some sesame oil-and-salt sauce, and some ssamjang before washing some vegetables. He also prepared a handful of crispy peppers that the elder liked.

“I’m here!”

Just then, Ganghwan’s voice could be heard along with the sound of the door opening.

“Oh! A popular idol!”

Those were his first words. It was just like Ganghwan. As they had met before, Sungjae didn’t get flustered and replied with a greeting. Maru heard this as they came here, but apparently, Sungjae liked Ganghwan to the point that he watched many of Ganghwan’s plays. Though, last time at Film was the first time they met.

Ganghwan peeked inside the kitchen.

“Here you are.”

“You’re here?”

“Yeah. Need help?”

“Please carry these out for me.”

“Roger that.”

Sungjae said that he would help out as well, but the elder stopped him. You’re here as a guest, so stay still - those were the elder’s words.

“Ooh, Andong soju, huh. Sir, can you give me one of these?”

“I got them as a gift. How come you’ve never bought me any gifts even though you’ve visited me several times?”

“Sir, I’ve learned that I should stay further away from materialistic gifts the closer I am to someone. I always do what I learned.”

“You and your tongue again. Fine.”

The living room was filled with laughter. Maru brought the side dishes and meat to the living room.

#### **Chapter 447**

A soju glass was placed on top of Dalgu’s head as he slept with his front paws overlapping. Despite that, Dalgu did not budge. Following that, a long slice of cucumber was placed on top of the glass. Dalgu didn’t move even with that.

“He might not wake up even if we build a tower on top of him.”

“Don’t. By age, he’s the second oldest here after me.”

“Dalgu’s that old already?”

“He is.”

Ganghwan smiled and stroked Dalgu’s head.

“I think they’re all done.”

Maru cut the pork belly strips into pieces on top of the grill. He sliced them into bite sized pieces and moved them in front of the elder.

“I guess I’m going to eat something good thanks to Sungjae.”

Ganghwan smiled as he spoke. While the meat was being cooked, they had already exchanged some alcohol, and Ganghwan had dropped the formalities with Sungjae. It seemed that alcohol set the hierarchy straight regardless of era.

“The meat is grilled well.”

“I’m good at that. You should eat some as well, elder. It’s good.”

“Alright, alright.”

Everyone made ssam and put them in their mouths.

“Here, you should all receive one from me.”

The elder picked up the bottle of pot soju. It was the Andong soju that Sungjae had bought. When Sungjae was about to kneel to receive a glass from him, the elder shook his head.

“You should be at ease.”

“Okay.”

The empty glass was filled with soju. Sungjae poured one for the elder.

“May I say something again here?” Ganghwan said as he raised the glass.

The elder smiled and nodded.

“Sir, please look after your health. I still feel shocked when I think about what happened last time when you collapsed.”

“I can take care of my own health, boy.”

After a round of laughter, Ganghwan shouted ‘to his health!’ to toast. Maru raised his glass in the air a little before turning his head around to drink. The drink was so heavy that he had a hard time swallowing. He held it in his mouth for a while before drinking it slowly as though he was slowly melting down a ball of ice cream. As the alcohol content was 30%, he would not be able to recognize even his parents if he drank it like ordinary soju.

However, the elder, who was also known to be a good drinker, was putting down his glass with a refreshed expression already. If no one was here to stop him, he would probably empty the entire bottle by himself.

“Gosh, that was strong,” Ganghwan said as he chewed on some cucumber sticks.

Sungjae also coughed. He said that he was confident at drinking, but he probably wouldn’t be able to last long considering the alcohol capacity of the people here.

‘I’m happy that my constitution allows me to drink a lot.’

Being able to drink a lot was a considerable advantage in South Korea. From small meetings to places with hundreds of millions of won lobbying, the negotiation table in this country usually considered soju as more important than documents. As the country like the word ‘we’ and ‘us’ so much, it placed importance in a sense of belonging, and the single most effective item to create that sense of belonging was alcohol. Assistant manager Kim might fail to get promoted even though he’s good at work, but assistant manager Park might get promoted because he’s good at drinking.

They exchanged drinks quietly for a while. Sungjae left half of the glass starting from the fourth glass.

“If you can’t drink anymore, then you shouldn’t. Don’t push yourself. That’s the most unsightly thing of all.”

“Yes, elder.”

“Maru, there’s cold honey-water on the door side of the refrigerator. Bring a cup of that for Sungjae.”

Maru replied yes before bringing the honey water. Receiving it, Sungjae looked very happy, and that was probably because the elder dropped the honorifics with him. 'Mr. Ahn' and 'Sungjae' sounded very different after all.

Since it had been a while, the meat they brought started running out.

"Should I cut up some fruits?"

"Yes."

Maru grabbed the fruit knife after putting the fruits that Sungjae bought next to him. He peeled them before cutting them to suitable pieces and putting them on a plate.

"Here they are."

He forked a piece of pear and handed it over to the elder. Ganghwan grabbed the part where the seeds were and started biting into it. Sungjae refused. From his reddened face, he looked like he might throw up if anything entered his body right now.

"You should get some water to drink."

"Uhm, okay."

Realizing that Sungjae had reached his limit, the elder did not offer any more alcohol to Sungjae after that. Instead, Maru and Ganghwan's glasses became busy.

"Shouldn't you find a partner for Dalgu? He's been by himself for a long time," Ganghwan said after eating some dried persimmons.

"I told Junmin about it already," the elder said as he looked at Dalgu.

"Ah, that senior has a lot of dogs at his house, didn't he? Dalgu, you have it good. There's a person that looks for your partner even if all you do is eat and sleep. Dogs live good lives."

Ganghwan woke the dog up and played with it. Thankfully, Dalgu had a calm nature. If he had a bad character, he would probably have started growling.

"I'm going to get some fresh air. With this guy, too. Let's go, Dalgu," Ganghwan dragged Dalgu outside.

"I guess it should be quiet now that the noisy kid left," the elder raised the soju bottle with a gentle smile.

"Ah, Maru."

"Yes?"

"Don't you need to go to school?"

"I do. I need to grab the last train," saying that, Maru glanced at the clock.

It was 3 to 11. He would probably have to go after a while.

"Then stop drinking. I know that you are a good drinker, but you shouldn't let it affect your studies."

The elder turned the bottle around and tried to pour one for himself.

“I’ll pour one for you.”

Maru received the bottle and poured a glass for him. The elder put his nose on the tip of the glass and inhaled deeply before raising his chin a little to drink.

“It really is good.”

“I’ll come more frequently in the future,” Maru said, as he pressed on the part between his eyes.

“I’ll clean up now.”

Sungjae tried to help out, but it seemed that his body wasn’t listening to him. After saying that it was okay to Sungjae, Maru cleaned the table. He only left a plate of fruits and took away everything else. He opened the window to let the air circulate a little, when he saw Ganghwan sleeping on the rocking chair in front of the house. Dalgu was on his lap.

As the weather wasn’t that cold, he decided to leave him like that for now.

After doing the dishes, he shook the water off his hands before returning to the living room. Sungjae was leaning on the sofa, his eyes half loose, and the elder couldn’t be seen. It seemed that he went to the bathroom. After a while, the elder came out of his room and in his hands were some blankets and a pillow.

“Are you planning to sleep here?”

“Since I have guests around, I thought I’d sleep in the living room. Sungjae, you should sleep over as well, if you don’t have any work.”

“I’m okay sir.”

“I saw you bringing a car. Or is it that you have work tomorrow?”

“No, it’s not like that, but I was thinking I was going to be a bother to you.”

“You’re not a bother at all. In fact, I quite like it with all the presences here. Maru, help me out a little.”

Maru received the blankets and laid them out on the floor. Just then, the front door opened and Ganghwan and Dalgu came back. Ganghwan dived into the blanket as soon as he saw them. The elder smiled with satisfaction as though he was used to seeing this before putting a thin blanket over him.

“I wonder who’s going to take this immature kid.”

“If he ever does get married, I’d feel sorry for the wife.”

Maru lifted Ganghwan’s head and put a pillow underneath. Ganghwan soon fell asleep and started snoring. The elder’s face was full of smiles as though he liked the fact that Ganghwan made himself at home.

“It would’ve been great if you slept here as well.”

“I do need to go to school. I’ll excuse myself during the holidays.”

Maru laid out the blanket for the elder and then for Sungjae right next to it. After hesitating, Sungjae lowered his head at the elder's gesture before lying down next to him.

"Urgh, I should lie down as well."

Maru looked at the three people lying comfortable on the ground - well, one of them looked uncomfortable. It seemed that Sungjae had recovered from the alcohol, as he was looking at the ceiling with unease.

Maru stroked Dalgu who came over and stroked his head while on his knees. He probably had ten minutes to spare.

"At first, you know," the elder, who Maru thought was sleeping, spoke in a low voice.

"I thought acting was something that I was supposed to hide. I found it natural to hide myself and cover myself up with the role I'm playing. But after doing this for a long time, I realized that it's not that. Acting is, you know, showing all of me. My embarrassments; my rage; my sadness. The profession known as acting is one that showed all of that without falsities. Both of you, become honest with yourselves. Do not put on a lie when you act. It's extremely difficult to show yourself, but you must understand the difficulty. Do not take the easy route. The easy route, more often than not, ends up being shallow."

After saying those words, the elder calmed down his breathing and fell asleep. Maru looked at Sungjae who lay next to him. He was looking at the ceiling with clear eyes. Nay, he seemed to be looking at something beyond that.

Maru got up from his knees and bowed towards the elder before putting his shoes on very quietly. When he slowly turned the doorknob, he heard Sungjae's voice.

"Thank you so much."

Maru turned around with a smile.

"Have a good night."

Before he closed the door after leaving, he looked back inside one more time. Was there a better place to learn than this place for someone that does acting? This place was practically the holy land. He received precious teachings after doing some chores. He had benefitted a lot today.

"It's quite chilly."

Maru crossed his arms as he started walking.

There were stars in the deep indigo-colored sky.

## **Chapter 448**

"Thank you, goodbye."

He left with a small box of bagels. He wished he could bring that person out of his workplace and treat him to a good meal, but since that person wouldn't budge once he started working, he had to buy bagels to bring him instead. It was rather fortunate that that person liked all types of bread.

Sinsa-dong, Seoul. This place had changed a lot since the last time he visited here. The old-style coffee shop where LP music could be heard had been replaced by a franchise café, and the bar that used to be the top dog of this place was now surrounded by metal beams. It seemed that it was going to be torn down, and a new building was going to be built.

Junmin drove along the stream and stopped in front of a small café. After he parked the car, he climbed to the second floor using the staircase next to the building.

‘Studio M’. He looked at the gold-colored plate on the door before opening it. Black soundproofing materials covered every wall inside. Junmin stopped in front of the door that said ‘Mixing Room’. When he peeked inside through the small window on the door, he saw a man working in front of the mixer.

Junmin pressed down on the rather stiff door handle. Despite the door opening sound, the man sitting on the white chair was staring at the monitor without budging. He probably didn’t hear the door being opened at all. Looking at the black headphones that the man was wearing, he went inside.

‘His vision still becomes narrow when he concentrates.’

He tapped on the man’s shoulder. The man turned around to see him before nodding with a smile.

Junmin quietly pulled a chair over and sat behind him. On the wide white table was various equipment for mixing purposes. On one side, there was a microphone, and it was probably to be used for recording in the recording booth next door.

The large, human-sized speakers on each end of the room kept their silence. The man, who was spinning some dials to do his work, eventually took off his headphones.

“Our dear sound supervisor.”

“What are you planning to have me do now?”

“There you go again, thinking weirdly.”

The man laughed.

“But what brings you here?”

“I’m here to cheer you on,” Junmin said as he waved the box of bagels in the air.

The man, Moon Gyungtaek, raised his hand and gestured for Junmin to wait for a moment. After he pressed a few buttons, the speakers that had been silent until now started producing sound.

The sound made Junmin feel like he was standing in the middle of a downpour without an umbrella. A handcart passed by him. Trod, trod. The sound of powerless footsteps could be heard as well.

“I really like the ambiance I got this time. Thanks to that, I have a plentiful library.”

“So this is the sound of rain after coming back from dumping the corpse?”

“Yes, that’s it. You’re quite good.”

“Of course. I put a lot of money and effort into this.”



He opened the box of bagels and handed it over.

“Your work on this part is almost finished, right?”

“I just have to go to Namyangju and do the final mixing. Please give us some money once we finish so that I can take my team out to a meal. Our team worked really hard this time, you know?”

“Of course I know. That’s why I’m here.”

“Oh, no. You must be here to see if we’re working or not.”

“Geez, there you go again. Here, I should shut your mouth with this.”

As Gyungtaek had finished his first bagel in a flash, he handed him a cheese-topped one this time.

“For this movie, we only took three hours for the ADR. Everyone’s a veteran so the process is so easy.”

“It’s the elder’s comeback piece after all. We should only be using veterans.”

“But even if we break even with this movie, I don’t think we’ll profit much off this.”

“You never know what will happen. Who could’ve guessed that ‘The Way Home’ would receive more than 4 million views? People are bound to be attracted to good movies.”

“How can you compare a human drama that warms your heart with a movie where an elder goes around killing his own kids with a hammer? I heard that you had to edit the poster three times because it didn’t pass the restrictions.”

“Although it’s become a lot more liberal, this country is still not that accepting of sex and violence.”

Gyungtaek chewed on the bagel while nodding his head.

“Ah, right, hyung-nim.”

“Hm?”

“I went to the Namyangju poly studio, and the new guy seemed really talented. You should watch over him for a while and give him some money under the table so you can hire him for your next work. He seems to be learning under engineer Nam, but from how I see it, he’ll surpass engineer Nam.”

“There you go again, what’s with ‘under the table’?”

Even while saying those words, Junmin committed Gyungtaek’s words to memory. Getting to know good engineers were just as important as getting to know good actors. This was especially the case with sound engineers and designers since individual talent mattered a lot in those fields. Putting in a request through someone else and putting in a request directly definitely had differences.

“The scenes looked good. I think the mise en scène that Joonggeun-hyung is so obsessed over can be seen as well.”

“I had a look at the edited video as well, and I could see that.”

Junmin smiled. The depressing ash-colored streets and the vain insanity of Sir Yoon Moonjoong blended well in the scenes.

“When’s the preview?” Gyungtaek asked.

“In two days.”

“Whoa, it’s that time already?”

“It is.”

“So if the final mixing goes as planned, it should be released around November?”

“Yeah.”

“I suddenly lost the will to work now.”

Junmin stuffed Gyungtaek’s mouth with one more bagel. After chewing on it for a while, Gyungtaek turned around and started typing on the keyboard.

“There was a kid that followed me when I got the ambiance, yeah?”

“A kid?”

“His name was Han Maru, and I can still remember that kid since his acting was so savage. I even gave him my business card.”

“Haha, really?”

“You know him?”

“I do, I know him well.”

“Have you heard his audio?”

“No, I haven’t watched the whole video yet. I also skimmed through the soundtrack too. I’m quite busy, you know?”

“You’re supposed to be supervising the overall production, though. Aren’t you being too negligent here?”

“I gathered the best of the best precisely to care less about everything. I didn’t gather the best of the best just so I could be more than just the person that gives them money. I hired them so that everything will go well even without me.”

“Fine then. Since you’re here, though. You should try listening to it. It’s quite short, but it has a lot of impact. To think that an actor that can transfer so much emotion just through audio is that young - He’ll definitely become big.”

Gyungtaek smiled as he clicked on the mouse a few times. A brief moment later, the voices of the actors could be heard through the speakers. It wasn’t the sound that would be used in the final movie, but the raw voices of the actors that were captured using the microphone during the actual shoot.

The boy’s voice that could be heard along with some noises made Junmin smile. The moment he heard the boy’s words, he felt displeased. He felt humiliated and angry. That was what made him smile.

“How is it? Pretty good, eh?”

“It’s decent.”

“If you hear that while watching the video, you might end up swearing subconsciously. Such an ungrateful bastard, or something like that,” Gyungtaek said as he leaned back in his chair.

\* \* \*

“Doctor, the patient disappeared.”

“What? The patient disappeared?”

Ganghwan panicked exaggeratedly and stood up from his chair and waved his shaky hands left and right. Next to him was Hanna, who was holding a diagnosis chart.

“Ah, there he is.”

Hanna approached Sooil, who was sitting down. Sooil shook his hand in the air in awkwardness, but due to Hanna’s passionate gestures, he was forced to sit in the chair next to Ganghwan.

“Mr. Patient.”

“Eh, yes?”

“You can’t run away like that. If you run, who would pay the hospital fees? Our hospital is not in a good situation financially. Your wallet is the only way to save our hosp-”

“Doctor!”

Hanna flinched and approached Ganghwan before hitting him on the head with the chart. It seemed pretty painful. Maru was reminded of Hanna's evil laugh before they started practice as she put a stack of paper in the plastic file. Maru remembered that evil smile and sighed in a small voice.

“That hurts!” Ganghwan shouted as he rubbed his head.

That was an ad-lib that wasn’t in the script. No, perhaps he was really crying out in pain instead of ad-libbing. But who was Hanna? She pressed Ganghwan down in the chair as though nothing happened and continued the skit.

“Well then, Mr. Patient. Please tell us what happened today.”

“Eh?”

“You know, things like what you had for lunch, why you’re here, as well as how much money you have in your wallet.”

“Doctor, can you please stop talking about money?”

Hanna poked Ganghwan’s shoulders with her elbow. The two really got along well. They might be a great comedy duo.

Sooil started talking about what was planned. He came to Daehak-ro with his girlfriend and planned to go to the famous pork cutlet restaurant.

Like that, they conversed for a while until Ganghwan suddenly grabbed his chest and fell to the ground. Hanna flurried about before talking to Sooil, who was sitting down.

“He needs CPR!”

“Eh?”

“Quickly! Hurry!”

Sooil made a rather difficult expression as he looked forward. Maru, who was supposed to be the audience, clapped and cheered for Sooil. Eventually, Sooil got into the position to do CPR.

“I think this skit looks good like this.”

Ganghwan, who was lying down, sat up. Sooil also stopped acting awkwardly and sat down on the ground.

“I think dragging the audience like this to the stage is pretty good. There’s no pressure, and we are telling them what they need to do.”

Hearing Sooil’s words, Maru nodded in agreement.

“The problem is talking about serious stuff, but that’s up to the heavens so it’s not like our efforts will do anything much. I want to listen to the honest stories that people harbor in their hearts, but if that doesn’t work, continuing things in a comedic format like what we just did now doesn’t seem to be too bad.”

Ganghwan took a sip before sighing.

“But what are you going to do if someone talks about something really heavy?” Maru asked as he received the water bottle from Ganghwan.

Ganghwan said that what he wanted was for the people participating in the play to share their sadness. He planned to use the stage as a place for the audience to release their sadness. Maru didn’t know how much participation there would be, but if there were a lot of participants, and one person talked about something brutal that they couldn’t do anything but try to console them, would they still be able to continue the act?

“At that time, I will also use the power of the audience. You know? I don’t care if this project doesn’t influence how people think of plays at all. I would be satisfied as long as the individuals that participate in the play release their unspoken worries and sadness in the form of a play even if it’s just a little. The main point of this play is that sadness is halved when you share it with others.”

“It’s the higher-ups’ fault for letting this guy be in charge of the project. They should’ve looked more into him.”

“That’s right. It’s always a problem with the higher-ups.”

Hanna mercilessly poked the smiling Ganghwan’s waist. Ignoring him, who writhed on the floor, Hanna spoke,

“We’re going to do a guerilla performance tomorrow. It’s going to get cold soon, so we need to pull forward the schedule a little. If we get some decent reactions tomorrow, we’re going to start immediately.”

“Why do you get to tell them that? That was supposed to be my part.”

When Hanna raised her hand in the air, Ganghwan shut his mouth.

Maru and Sooil both laughed when they saw that.

“Looks like I should pray that there will be a lot of people tomorrow if I don’t want to sit in a daze in Marronnier Park with no one in it,” Maru said as he looked at the calendar.

Sunday, October 17th.

“7 is a lucky number so, it will go well,” said Ganghwan with a confident expression.

Presumably ‘Automated dialogue replacement’. for more details.

## **Chapter 449**

‘I’m going to close the store tomorrow, so take my daughter somewhere. Don’t go anywhere shady.’

Dojin thought back to what happened yesterday as he looked at the five ten thousand won bills in his hands. Saturday night. As he took a breather after a lot of customers left, Iseul’s mother quietly approached him and handed him the money. Dojin was originally going to refuse, but Iseul’s mother was adamant and stuffed it into his hands. Her hands were rather strong, yet gentle.

“Yeah, Iseul. I’m just leaving. Wait, you’re there already?”

Dojin looked at the clock. It was 10 in the morning. They promised to meet at Suwon station by 11.

“Why did you leave so early?”

-Because I was too bored while waiting at home. Take your time.

“Hey, how am I supposed to take my time when you’re there already? Wait a moment, I’ll be there soon.”

-Then get here in 10 minutes.

Iseul’s cheerful laughter could be heard over the phone. She really acted as she wished. Of course, it wasn’t that he felt displeased or anything. It wasn’t like this was the first time, and that was also one of her charming points.

“Mom, I’m leaving!”

He put on his shoes and hurriedly walked to the bus stop. Luckily, the bus heading towards Suwon station was just arriving. He stamped his travel card on the scanner and stood in front of the back door. He looked at his faint reflection on the window and combed his hair until the bus arrived at Suwon station.

“You’re here?”

The first thing he saw was the one-piece dress that Iseul was wearing. She always wore pants at school and at the restaurant because she found skirts uncomfortable. Dojin was unable to speak for a while as he looked at the pink one-piece dress that matched her reddish face.

“What, am I that pretty?”

“Uh, yeah? No, what?”

“You’re supposed to say that I’m pretty. But it feels rather uncomfortable after not wearing it for so long.”

Iseul grabbed the hem of her skirt and waved it sideways. Glimpses of her white thighs could be seen intermittently. Dojin abruptly opened his eyes and took off his jacket to cover her legs.

“Hey, they can see you!”

Hearing those words, Iseul smiled before pinching Dojin’s nose. Dojin made a nasal sound.

“I get it, so don’t overreact.”

Dojin sighed and put his jacket over his arm. Although it had been nearly a year since they started dating, she was still hard to handle.

“So? Where are you going to take me today?” Iseul asked as she reached her hand out.

Dojin grabbed her hand tightly just like he always did.

“I said we’ll go to Hyehwa station to see a play.”

“Before that, we should get lunch. You must have done your research, right?”

“Of course, I saw on the internet that there is a restaurant with a good curry. I’m learning how to make Japanese-style curry at the cooking academy, and apparently, I’ll get to taste what it’s like when we go there.”

“So are you going there to study or are we on a date?”

“Can’t I do both?”

Iseul chuckled and replied ‘you can’. They passed the ticket barrier and went inside. As it was Sunday, Suwon station was packed with people. After watching the crowd of people for a while, Dojin pulled his arm so that Iseul was right next to him.

“Oh, being considerate of me, are you?”

“Of course.”

“How reliable.”

When they smiled at each other, the train arrived.

“How’s the academy these days? Can you still handle it?”

“Yeah. I thought there would be a lot of girls, but surprisingly, there were a lot of men. Most of them are older than me so they look after me a lot.”

“The famous chefs and cooks are all male if you watch TV. That’s probably why.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“If you’re too busy to go to the academy, then you don’t have to come to help out anymore. My dad has gotten a lot better and he can start working now.”

“I’m doing it because I want to. I’m earning wages too.”

They got off at Geumjeong station and switched to line number 4. There were a lot of people wearing backpacks and they seemed to be going hiking. Dojin had Iseul stand next to the door and blocked in front of her.

“Where did you learn manners like these?”

Iseul smiled as she brushed Dojin’s hair. As they waited, they talked about the TV program that they watched on Saturday, then about dramas, and then their conversation led to talking about Maru.

“That was freaky.”

“Yeah. I thought it wasn’t Maru at first even when I had a look at his face.”

“He’s a friend of mine, but he really is incredible.”

“He’s also a friend of mine, you know?”

As they watched the scenery outside, they were told that the next station was Hye-hwa. The train stopped, and they took a step outside the door.

Dojin was looking around as he climbed up the stairs, and from what he saw, 70% of the people there seemed to be on a date.

“The weather’s good,” Iseul said, as she looked up at the sky.

The yellowish sunlight was emitting just enough heat to be comfortable. The strong winds had died down as well so it was the perfect day for a picnic. Dojin grabbed Iseul’s hand.

“It’s still a little early for lunch, so should we look around?”

“Sounds good. I hope I can see the guitar guy that we saw last time. He was good.”

“I want to see the guy that played the janggu.”

“It’s a djembe, not a janggu.”

“Same thing.”

The two walked around the ticket office in front of the exit for a while before walking towards Marronnier Park. As expected of Daehak-ro on a Sunday, it was filled with vitality. They bought a corn dog each before walking towards the park.

“Looks like there’s a photo exhibit here.”

There were large photos lined up along the trees. Kids holding cotton candy were flocked in front of them, and Iseul was very fidgety as she looked at them. Iseul always liked children. When she looked at kids that came to the restaurant grabbing their moms’ hands, she would often go up to them and ask if she could hug them. Whenever that happened Dojin thought of Iseul being a preschool teacher. That would definitely suit her.

“This looks cool.”

Clouds on top of a cliff, and a tree covered in snow. That photo had a charm that attracted people’s eyes. When they looked below the photo, the name of the photographer was written on it, and the name under each photo was different. To the left of that was a noticeboard that explained the details of this exhibit.

“Apparently these are taken by the elderly.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. They aren’t taken by professionals, but by old people as a group activity of sorts.”

They looked around the photo exhibit. This was what was good about Daehak-ro. They didn’t have to prepare anything and there would always be things to look around and spend their time on in a joyful manner.

“We went there last year and did a small performance as the acting club, didn’t we?”

Iseul pointed at the bathroom. She was probably pointing at the place beyond the bathroom where the public performing grounds were - the place where there were round marble chairs around.

“Should we go there?”

Dojin moved. They went past the bathroom and as they approached the performing grounds, they heard murmuring sounds. Was there a performance? The last time they came here, a cool college band was playing music.

“Oh?”

They saw a group of four people where everyone was looking; three men and one woman.

“It’s Maru.”

“Senior Ganghwan is there too.”

“Oh!”

Iseul widened her eyes before grabbing Dojin’s hands and walking forward. Dojin was practically dragged by her.

“It’s Yoo Sooil.”

There was a good-looking boy where she was pointing. Dojin felt like he had seen that guy somewhere. He thought that it was perhaps on a telecommunication commercial. Dojin looked at Iseul displeased.



“Aren’t you liking it too much?”

“Whew, Han Dojin. Jealous, are you? Maybe I should do this from time to time.”

Iseul chuckled as she poked Dojin’s waist. How could she be so cute? - Dojin subconsciously grinned. He was going to get himself together and look at her seriously again, but he would always become soft when he looked at Iseul smiling at him. He was in a seriously bad condition.

“Maru said he was practicing for something recently and I guess this is it.”

Dojin said as he looked forward. Actually, while it was called the public performing grounds, there wasn't any equipment set up or anything like that. It was just that the chairs placed around were pointed at a wide opening. The four performers were standing on top of a pedestrian road as well.

They pushed forward and stood at the front. Dojin met eyes with Maru, and he nodded at him. There were around 30 people here. Some of them left after watching for a brief moment, while some took a seat.

“Ah, ah! My heart!”

Ganghwan clenched his chest before lying on the ground. Even though the ground must have been cold, he pulled out his tongue in a comedic manner and shouted ‘help me’. He rolled on the ground for a while before making a cool expression in front of a pretty girl and asked her ‘Is this ahjussi cool?’ making everyone around laugh.

“Someone help!” The woman that was also in the performance shouted urgently.

Dojin thought that there was a performer reserved for that role, but the woman kept shouting at the audience.

“There’s so many of you here and not even one of you is willing to help? Please help us. You should save this man.”

At that moment, Dojin felt his hand rise into the air. Iseul had raised her hand that was grabbing his.

“I’ll do it!”

“Thank you, lady.”

Iseul walked forward and put her hands on top of Ganghwan’s chest before pressing down. The people around all cheered.

“I think we need to do mouth-to-mouth.”

“What?”

“Mouth-to-mouth.”

The woman raised her hands in the air and started clapping. Mouth-to-mouth! Mouth-to-mouth! - when she started saying that in a certain rhythm, the audience followed suit.

Dojin looked at Iseul who was kneeling down with her knees together. Absolutely not - he vigorously shook his head, but Iseul made a strange smile and brushed her hair behind her ears.

“I’m really doing it!”

When Iseul said that, Ganghwan raised his hand in the air and shouted ‘okay!’. The audience started laughing again.

Iseul’s head started lowering down. The moment Iseul’s hair touched Ganghwan’s cheeks, Dojin tensed his eyes and walked forward!

“I’ll do it!”

Then he pushed Iseul away before taking a deep breath in. Since it came down to this, he decided he should have a blast doing it.

“H-hey! Not you!”

“It’s okay, senior! I’m good at kissing.”

“H-hey!”

He grabbed the resisting Ganghwan’s face and was about to ‘press down with his lips’ before turning his head around at the last second. It was impossible to do it for real.

“Doctor, have you come to yourself?”

“Yeah! That really brought me back to life. But for a brief moment, I had a really scary dream, you know?”

“What kind of dream was it?”

“In it, I was wearing a wedding dress.”

Ganghwan twisted his body up in embarrassment before coughing awkwardly and sitting down on a chair.

“The two patients over there, please sit down.”

Iseul, who looked like she was having an extremely fun time, grabbed Dojin’s hand and sat down. Dojin felt like he was sweating cold sweat due to all the gazes and boos that he was getting from around him. He was extremely nervous just like when he was standing on the stage.

“Are you two lovers?”

“Eh? Yes!”

“Then prove it to me.”

“Eh?”

Just as Dojin was dazedly looking at Ganghwan, he heard a smooch sound from next to him. When he looked next to him in surprise, he saw Iseul taking her face off his as though nothing happened at all. ‘Hey! Don’t you have any shame, woman?’

“My, my. You have a serious condition! Everyone, please give a round of applause to cure this man of his disease!”

Ganghwan stood up and induced the audience to start applauding. His prankster eyes and movements reminded Dojin of a clown. The audience reacted to each of his movements and followed him. Dojin became part of the audience for a moment and watched Ganghwan.

“Well then, go down. This place is only for the sick to come up. A lovey-dovey couple doesn’t belong here!”

Dojin went back to the front row under the applause of the audience. He was dazed by the sudden turn of events, but soon, there was a grin on his face.

“Everyone. I’m going to fall down due to heart disease in about 4 seconds, and let me remind you of something. First, only ladies are allowed. Second, the kiss should be a deep one. And third, I hope it’s someone who’s seriously willing to date me.”

When he said those words, the college girls lined up on the right side of the audience seats started screeching. It seemed that they were fans of Ganghwan’s. Dojin laughed and watched as Ganghwan fell down once again.

A Korean traditional drum-like instrument with ‘drum faces’ on both sides.

## **Chapter 450**

The play went according to plan. The people accepted the comedic theme without any sense of rejection, and they were able to call people to the stage without difficulties. No one found any difficulties when participating in the play as they treated it as a small event or wanted to make memories with a lover. They came up easily and got along with the actors, and they soon laughed and enjoyed themselves. There were no difficulties regarding the progression of the play. Although there was a set script, it was plenty possible to add some ad-libbing in the middle. It was a time to play together; they weren’t doing a stiff stage but rather a light-hearted game of sorts. They confirmed that the play could progress without a hitch as long as the audience reacted well.

“Thank you, thank you. Please come again next time.”

“Thank you.”

Maru politely thanked the people who stayed in their seats until the end. Although they started off with around five people, now that they were at the curtain call, about forty people were with them. A lot of people joined at once mid-way, and that was because those in the audience who recognized Ganghwan and Sooil had called their friends here. This was why fame was useful.

Ganghwan and Sooil were taking photos with some people. As this was Daehak-ro, there were quite a lot of people who recognized Ganghwan.

“He’s popular, isn’t he?”

“He is. People recognize him more than Sooil.”

“It’s because they’re people who frequently watch plays. Although he has his downsides, Ganghwan-oppa is really good when it comes to plays alone.”

Maru could feel a sense of pride from Hanna's words. He nodded. There shouldn't be a lot of people in this country who could disdain Ganghwan when he stood on stage.

"But what brings you two here?"

Maru looked at Dojin and Iseul who stood in front of him. From how they were dressed up and everything, they seemed to be on a date.

"We're of course here to play around," Iseul replied.

"Are you going to grab a proper stage and do this?"

Iseul's gaze was directed at Hanna. As the two women were both sociable, the two got along quickly.

"No, we're going to keep doing this here. That oppa's intention is to talk to as many people as possible."

Hanna looked at Ganghwan.

"But it's gotten a lot colder, hasn't it?" Hanna said as she crossed her arms.

Even though the wind wasn't blowing at all, it felt rather cold after staying outside for a long time. It seemed that autumn was autumn after all.

"Looks like we should prepare if we want to do it until late into the night. While we might be okay, we don't want the audience to leave because they're cold."

"I guess we should provide a heater. Oh, and some blankets if we can."

"We should get a hot water tank and some hot tea as well to attract some audience."

"That's a nice idea. It's not like that costs a lot of money."

Maru thought that all art had its purpose in being shown. Even the most perfect sculpture was just a stone if there was no one to appreciate it. The sculpture could only be called 'art' because the sculptor was the first viewer to appreciate it.

This play was set up with the purpose of communication. He wanted to attract as many people as possible. A heater, some tea, and some blankets. Although these were trivial things, they should help out a lot when it comes to attracting people here and making them stay.

"Let's do some advertising as well. We don't want too many people here, so we should hand out balloons around the park on the day of the performance. No, that might be too much work, so let's go with something more practical."

"I think handing out food is the easiest way. How about warm cans of coffee?"

"I guess we can write the characteristics of this play on those then. If people with the intention to share their worries come to the play, we'll be able to more easily induce them to participate, and once we form an atmosphere where people are talking about themselves, it should be easier for them to talk."

"Hm, Maru."

"Yes?"

“Do you want to sell some tickets in front of our theater next time? I think you’ll do really well.”

“I’ll think about it if you give me hourly wages and incentives.”

Maru made a circle with his fingers. Hanna tapped on his shoulders to tell him that it was just a joke.

“What should we write then?”

“Free talk platform?”

“That’s too general.”

Hanna shook her head. Words that could attract a certain group of people. It’s good to have an audience with a variety of characters, but if they wanted things to go as Ganghwan intended then they needed an audience that could talk honestly about themselves.

The purpose of this play and the reason for its birth was to handle more sadness than happiness. What did they have to write in order to induce them into talking about their pains, or perhaps their embarrassments?

“What are you talking about?” Dojin, who was listening from the side, asked.

Maru was so focused on exchanging opinions with Hanna that he forgot about the two. He explained the basic outline to Dojin and Iseul.

“A play where you share your sadness huh. It sounds good, but would there be anyone who wants to do it?” Iseul asked in confusion.

“We’ll have to gather as many as we can. There are always people who want to complain about things. Or, they might want people to cry with them.”

“Why don’t you keep things simple and write ‘we’ll cry with you’, or something?” Dojin said.

While it got the meaning across really well, it was so blatant that it might actually arouse the antipathy of the audience instead. They were in Daehak-ro, the street of the young. Just how were they supposed to transfer an emotion that was the polar opposite of the vitality that this area had in order to make it sound less rejective?

“We’re going to perform here regularly from now on, so please come. Also, there are a lot of great things in Daehak-ro so please look around as well.”

“Like our play.”

Ganghwan and Sooil used their popularity to advertise the play. Although it looked like they would always have an audience thanks to those two, they required an audience with pent-up emotions if they wanted the pathos that Ganghwan wanted.

“Let’s eat some food for now,” Hanna said as she eased the wrinkles on her forehead.

“Sounds good. You two are....”

Maru looked at Iseul and Dojin.

“We’ll leave now. We’re on a date today, so we should make the most out of it,” Iseul said as she pulled Dojin’s arm.

“Alright, go on then.”

“Good luck with practice. Unni, I’ll definitely come and watch some time.”

Maru waved his hand at the couple that left the park.

“What should we do about lunch then?”

“Let’s just go to any place once those two come,” Hanna said as she looked at the two that were being held back by fans. Meanwhile, Maru folded up the chairs they used as props during their performance. Even if they officially started performing, there shouldn’t be a lot of props. Maybe a doctor’s gown and some medical charts?

“What about the other two?” Ganghwan asked after coming back from taking photos with his fans.

“They went to get lunch. We should get going as well.”

“Really? I was going to treat them though.”

“They came here on a date so we should let them be. Rather than that, where should we go?”

“Let’s go to the pork cutlet restaurant nearby. We should eat lightly and try it again in the evening.”

While they walked towards the restaurant, Hanna talked about the few ideas that came up during her conversation with Maru.

“That sounds good.”

Sooil suggested that they should hand out small presents to those that came up on stage. It was a great way to increase participation.

“I think we should go with souvenirs or discount tickets.”

“How about my autograph? No, we should get a hundred autographs of Geunsoo. That should work, it’ll be cheap too.”

“That’s a little....”

They walked into the restaurant while smiling. They each ordered a pork cutlet dish and while the food was being prepared, they started adding flesh to the ideas they talked about.

“Hey, that notepad is the same as the one the president carries with him,” Sooil said as he saw the notepad that Ganghwan was holding.

“Oh, this? He gave it to me. I usually don’t like writing stuff down, but he told me that even geniuses write notes. But I’m not a genius either. So that’s when I started carrying this around, writing various things. At this point, I feel rather awkward when I don’t have it with me.”

The worn-out leather cover seemed to signify Ganghwan’s efforts.

Maru clenched his fist before loosening it again. A notepad huh.

“What, Maru? You want one too?”

“I’m thinking about it. But I have a phone to write in instead, so I wonder if it’s really necessary.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to throw this away no matter how good those machines become. It’s a part of my body now.”

Ganghwan faintly smiled and wrote down the ideas that came up until now. He was writing quite quickly but his handwriting was pretty good. Looking at him writing neatly with even spacing, he was reminded of one person.

Maru took out his phone. Hanna looked at him wondering what he was going to do.

“I’m going to get some advice.”

“Some advice? What kind of advice?”

“About the promotion line.”

“From who?”

“I have a friend who is good at writing. Please wait a sec.”

Maru scrolled through his contacts and called Daemyung’s number. While the signal sounds could be heard, the pork cutlets came out. Daemyung picked up at the moment the plates were put on the table.

-Hello?

“Oh, Daemyung. It’s me, Maru.”

-Yeah, Maru.

“You busy?”

-No, the writer told me that we should go out for lunch.

“Are you at writer Bae Chulho’s house?”

-Yeah, I’m here with Joon-hyung. But what made you call me?

“I need your help with something. I need a line for something and you know I’m bad with stuff like this.”

Maru told the three people looking at him to start eating first before explaining the situation to Daemyung.

-Hm, I’m not confident with things like that either.

“I just need your opinion. There are four people here bringing up ideas, but we didn’t come up with anything good yet. Also, there’s no pressure. I’m not saying that we are going to use yours. If you think of anything, just send it via text.”

-Alright, alright. Have a nice meal.

“You too.”

He hung up before putting the phone on the table.

“Does he have any good ideas?” Hanna asked.

“He’ll give me a text once we wait a little while. He’s talented in writing, so he’ll come up with something better than me.”

“Alright, you should eat. It’s going to cool down soon,” Ganghwan said with his mouth full.

Hanna screeched when she saw the grains of rice flying everywhere and smashed Ganghwan’s back with her palm. The loud slap was loud enough to be heard across the whole store.

“Oh please!”

Ganghwan turned around and groaned.

“You’re a girl, why is your hand so spicy?”

“Let’s keep our manners, don’t spill food everywhere!”

“Soochan is the real buddha here.”

“I wonder if you’ll shut up if I smack you once more.”

When Hanna raised her hand, Ganghwan shut up. Maru felt like he was watching a scene from ‘Tom & Jerry’. It was just that Jerry’s power was so strong that Tom was practically unable to do anything.

They couldn’t think of anything good even after they finished eating. Ganghwan was able to deal with the blankets and the heater, so there was no problem with that, but they were stuck on something unexpected.

“Should we just go with ‘come and watch’?” Sooil said.

“That might be better, but it might be more promotion if we just write down the location.”

“Let’s just try it out anyway. We should hand out around 30 warm cans of coffee and see how many people come. Though, since the performance is done at night, people might have their own schedule so they’re not as likely to come,” Hanna said as she tapped on the chair.

At that moment, Maru received a text on his phone. Maru quickly checked the text.

-I want to listen to your story.

Maru tried reading it out loud. Although it didn’t sound cool or anything, it was definitely eye-catching. He told the other three the line he got.

“I want to listen to your story? That sounds good. The ‘I’ part really brings it to life. It’s just a story between us two - that’s what it sounds like. There’s a secretive feeling to it, and it also sounds cozy.”

Ganghwan wrote down the line on the notepad as he spoke. Hanna also closed her eyes and said it to herself several times before snapping her fingers and saying that it was good.

“I think it’s better than all sorts of flowery words.”



Sooil said as he pointed at the notepad in the middle of the table. That note had a lot of lines that they thought of while they ate. That one line touched the heart more than anything before it.

“I guess we should just write where we are performing below that. Wow, Maru, who told you this?”

“Yeah, who was it? I thought it was a friend of yours?”

Just as he was about to reply that it was Park Daemyung, he got another text.

-Joon-hyung came up with that line. He wants you to treat him to a meal later.

Ah, right. After checking that text, Maru said to the people sitting around him.

“The author of a best-seller came up with the line.”