

## Once Again 491

### Chapter 491

Manager Kim had been operating on a harsh schedule recently. He drove back and forth between Busan and Seoul like he was commuting to work, so he barely got any sleep. As for meals, he got triangular rice balls from the convenience store most of the time. He couldn't remember the last time he had proper, hot food.

"Hyung, let's go now."

"Oh... yeah, of course!" said manager Kim as he raised his head. He felt his vision go blank for a brief moment. When he pressed his fingers between his eyes to get himself together, Kang Giwoo asked him worriedly.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, I'm fine."

"You're lacking sleep, aren't you?"

"No. I slept from time to time, so I'm fine. Rather than that, are you done here?"

"Yes. I think we should head to the restaurant now."

Manager Kim started up the car. He glanced at the shop that Giwoo had just been to before reversing his car. He always followed Giwoo, but he had never been to that shop before. From what he heard, it was a shop that handled luxury watches, and they seemed to sell watches that he wouldn't be able to buy even with several years worth of salary. He looked at Giwoo's wrist through the rearview mirror. The watch with a black leather strap was reflecting light.

"Do you want to try it on?"

"No, I don't dare," said manager Kim as he shook his head.

If he damaged it somehow, just the repair costs would amount to more than he could imagine.

"Alright."

Manager Kim looked forward. Giwoo, who sat in the back seat, was known for his kind character at the company. When he actually worked with him, he found that Giwoo was really the kind and polite child from the rumors. However, manager Kim couldn't entirely accept that at face value. That was because Giwoo's former manager, manager Cha, left the company so suddenly, and his departure left behind several questions.

'And there's that sense of fabrication as well.'

Manager Cha was a devoted man. He was a little too devoted to the company, so even when they didn't get paid their salary properly, manager Cha stood on the company's side and stood up for them. Whenever others looked at him, people thought that he would become a team leader soon. He was called to various places ever since he started taking care of the rising star Giwoo. Manager Kim never

doubted for a second that manager Cha would get promoted whenever he talked to the excited manager Cha.

However, manager Cha's desk was missing in the company right now. Such a passionate man was fired without a moment's notice. The head manager did not talk about manager Cha's incident for a few days before starting to complain about him. He was talking about how manager Cha's work attitude was horrible.

The other managers were confused when they heard those words, but they didn't say anything since they knew that managers in this field got hired and fired quickly. It was strange that someone as loyal as manager Cha was fired, but nothing was set in stone in this field after all.

Manager Kim was put in charge of Giwoo as manager Cha's successor. A manager's power was proportional to the person they were in charge of. Of course, in official places, they were in a position where they couldn't even budge their lips, but they could act with pride when they attended a shoot or something like that. This was especially true since people who tried to talk to Giwoo directly without going through the company would try to persuade him first. As long as he trod carefully, he would be able to get his hands on plenty of money other than his monthly salary.

It was good for a few days after he was put in charge of Giwoo. Giwoo was currently being acknowledged as one of the rising stars in the industry after he was picked as one of the lead characters in New Semester after Apgu. He found his work fun when he thought about how this was a great opportunity to get close to Giwoo, who would very likely enter stardom in the future. However, his head was muddled when manager Cha called him.

-It's that fucker no matter how much I think about it. That fucker is the one that got me fired with a smile on his face. Otherwise, it doesn't even make sense seeing as how he doesn't reply to my texts and calls.

Manager Cha had become a different man since he left the company. The once devoted man who always spoke pleasant words with a smile on his face hurled unspeakable insults at Kang Giwoo and the head manager. Manager Cha said that he was betrayed. He told him that Giwoo and the head manager weren't to be trusted and that he - manager Kim - would eventually suffer the same fate.

Manager Kim consoled him over a drink with a complex smile on his face. At first, manager Cha's warning sounded like nonsense to him, but he became more worried the more he talked to him. The way he was suddenly fired and the sudden shift in the head manager's attitude - manager Cha asked if he could have an opportunity to meet Giwoo just once. As manager Kim was unable to reject him as he used to treat him kindly, manager Kim set up a meeting which would look like a coincidence. He wanted to help manager Cha, and at the same time, he also wanted to know the truth.

He left for a bit saying that he had to withdraw some money, and manager Cha took that opportunity to meet Giwoo. Manager Kim put his ear on his phone as he watched them from afar. He had called manager Cha's phone beforehand.

Giwoo's calm voice could be heard over the phone. Even as manager Cha agitatedly shouted at him, Giwoo replied with a smile on his face. Manager Kim suspected manager Cha since he was the one who was flustered while Giwoo was calm and logical. He wondered if manager Cha was fired because he did

something wrong. However, from some time onwards, manager Kim had to listen to Giwoo's words with a frown. The kind-sounding calm words sounded incredibly iffy to his ears. Manager Cha, who was shouting in agitation, felt humane, but Giwoo, who was talking back to him, felt like a machine.

It was kindness just on the surface. Giwoo, who always seemed to look after manager Cha at the company, didn't even get out of the car and pushed manager Cha away with polite words until the very end. While his words sounded calm, his actions couldn't be colder. When he smiled at manager Cha who cryingly asked him to explain the reason at least, manager Kim felt shivers run down his spine.

After manager Cha left, manager Kim went back to the car in nervousness. He gave Giwoo a drink he bought and asked him if they could leave. Giwoo replied 'yes' with a smile on his face. He looked calm as though nothing had happened. Not long after they departed, Giwoo spoke.

-Hyung, please park in more remote places next time. I want to take a break but fans keep coming to talk to me. While I feel thankful, I should rest when I can.

Those words sounded very frightening to manager Kim. Manager Cha had somehow turned into an impolite fan. The way he lied without batting an eyelid made him gulp subconsciously.

Ever since that event, what awaited manager Kim was a murderous schedule. Not to mention official business, Giwoo called him out even for personal appointments. He couldn't even remember what sleeping on his bed at home was like.

'But I should endure it.'

Manager Kim stepped on the gas after looking at the lights change. He found out that Giwoo wasn't really the kind guy he seemed like on the surface, but that changed nothing. He just had to do his work well. Manager Cha was fired because he got on Giwoo's bad side, but he resolved that he would do his work perfectly so that he wouldn't be abandoned.

"We're here," manager Kim said with a small sigh.

The sushi restaurant was in front of them. This was the get-together location for the drama New Semester. He turned off the car and got off. The stability given off by the solid ground almost made him want to fall over. Even the cold air felt refreshing. The outside air was definitely better, even if it was cold, than the stuffy air inside the car.

Giwoo walked towards the sushi restaurant. Manager Kim followed him. Although the get-together was for the main production staff and the actors, the managers would have to wait in the restaurant as well. They would have to stay still in a corner where they couldn't be seen, but they could still eat delicious food, so he was satisfied with that.

"Oh, right, hyung," Giwoo said as he opened the car door.

Manager Kim looked at Giwoo with exhausted eyes.

"Someone I know works as a designer in Daejeon, and apparently, he made a jacket for me as a present recently."

"I see."

What was he trying to say? Giwoo smiled and spoke,

“You know I have an interview with a magazine tomorrow, right? I want to wear that jacket to the interview. He put in all that effort after all. I want to promote him even if it’s for an event like this.”

“A-alright.”

“Well, then. I’ll leave that to you.”

“Huh? Leave that to me?”

“Hyung. I know it must be hard for you, but please get it for me. Who else can I ask for this? Oh, if you depart now, you might be able to get back before 11. Oh, are you tired by any chance?”

“The thing is... you know I’ve been driving for days recently. I haven’t gotten any proper sleep either. You know how hard of a time I had, right?”

“Of course, I do. I know how hard you worked.”

Giwoo nodded a few times.

“Then I guess there’s no helping it. You can take a rest. I’ll ask the designer to send it to me by post.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. You said you were tired, so there’s no need to push yourself.”

The moment he heard those words, manager Kim felt his stomach start to ache. That was because Giwoo’s eyes that looked at him looked too kind. Those kind eyes. That was the way he looked at manager Cha usually. The eyes of the kind little brother that his colleagues always praised him for.

Manager Kim clenched his fist and spoke,

“Y-you said Daejeon right? I’ll be right back.”

“No, hyung. There’s no need to push yourself when you’re tired. You should get some deep rest at home. I’ll just have to get that jacket later.”

“No, I can make it.”

“You look very tired though.”

“It’s fine. I’ll be fine once I wash my face a little. Moreover, I heard that it was a designer jacket, right? You should do the interview with that on. I’m sure it’ll look good on you,” said manager Kim with a smile.

His lips were trembling as he said those words. Ever since he dropped out of high school, he never had a decent job but he had finally found a job that he could boast to others about. On top of that, the head manager told him yesterday that his salary would double as long as he didn’t make the same mistake as manager Cha.

“I’ll be right back. Please let me.”

Giwoo made a vague smile as though he was put in a difficult position before speaking, starting with 'then',

"Please make it as fast as possible. So that you don't come back too late."

"Y-yeah! I'll do that."

"Also, hyung."

"Yeah?"

"Do not ever try to toy with me again. I'll let you go for the bank event this time, okay?"

"..."

Manager Kim could not reply.

\* \* \*

Kang Giwoo went into the restaurant while dusting off his clothes. He politely greeted the restaurant staff before asking where the get-together location was.

"You should climb to the 2nd floor."

He nodded before climbing up the stairs. When he went up, he saw the managers sitting in the corner. They were chatting by themselves. Giwoo immediately went to the large room. He took off his shoes and quietly greeted the people who were sitting down.

"You're here."

"Our lead character is here."

Giwoo laughed and waved his hand.

"Don't tease me too much. You're embarrassing me."

It seemed that the important people hadn't arrived yet. The only people he saw were the rather old actors. He knew their faces, but not their names. These people appeared a lot on TV as supporting characters in dramas. There was zero nutritional value in becoming close to them, but Giwoo put on a smile and gave them the senior treatment.

After he sat down and talked to them for a while, the director, the assistant director, the main writer, and the main actors came arrived on the 2nd floor. People applauded to welcome them.

"Sit down, sit down. I just gathered everyone here today so that everyone can eat to their hearts' content and then go back. Thus, let's not talk about anything strange. Talking about the drama is not allowed," said Park Hoon, the main director, as he drew the line.

The older actors welcomed his words and laughed.

After a brief introduction, food started coming out. People who knew each other got in groups and talked among themselves, when someone stood up from the corner and walked towards them. Giwoo thought that he was a manager at first, but when he looked up close, he found a familiar face instead.

'There's a familiar face here.'

Giwoo smiled and quietly watched Han Maru, who sat down at the edge of the table.

"Hm? Why are you coming from there?" asked Park Hoon as he looked at Maru.

People's attention naturally gathered towards him.

"I was here a little early, so I was talking with the managers. I didn't ruin the mood by chance, right?"

He smiled and stood up before saying that he'll sing as compensation. He was so smooth that everyone was clapping along.

Giwoo smiled as he looked at Maru.

'Goddammit.'

The paper cup in his hands had already become a crumpled mess.

## **Chapter 492**

"Maru, can you hand me a glass from over there?"

Maru gave the empty glass to Lee Joomin. Joomin boldly said that she would become 21 next year as she introduced herself. She looked red in the face after receiving drinks from the adults. Joomin was far from the feminine type as she acted more like the neighborhood brother, making others treat her comfortably.

"I thought I'd see you after I saw you at the audition. Want a drink?"

"I'll accept it if you're giving it to me."

"Can a high schooler drink?"

"An adult is pouring one for me, so I should."

"Oho, very good attitude."

He drank a sip of the beer that Joomin poured for him.

The get-together, which started off as one group, scattered into different groups as time passed. The main staff and the writers, as well as the elderly actors, were talking about something around the host seat. The adult actors centered around Suyeon also became close to each other and took photos as they drank.

The rest formed a group of young actors who were minors, so they couldn't drink so easily. These young people were eating Maeun-tang awkwardly without even talking to each other before Joonmin had decided to join them.

Before Joomin came, the mood maker for the place was Kang Giwoo. He talked to the others with a kind smile on his face, and as the young actors needed a center, they talked to each other while centered around Giwoo. Maru joined the conversation and talked every now and then while eating.

'I think I made my presence known.'

The reason he sang a trot while using a spoon as a microphone was to introduce himself. If the get-together had a heavy atmosphere that did not allow for him to do that, he would've just finished with a greeting, but as the main producer, Park Hoon, liked things to be noisy, he sang to his heart's content. Thanks to that, he was able to make his name known to the others. He would have nothing more to wish if others remembered him as the 'funny guy during the get-together'.

"Here, you should drink as well. You, too. Drinking with adults is fine. Also, it's just beer. Soju might be a little strong, but beer is practically a soft drink."

Even the ones that rejected her at first received a glass from her when Joomin kept offering them a drink.

"I would've felt really lonely if you ignored me. It's somewhat awkward for me to continue being in that group."

Suyeon was sitting where Joomin was looking. While they might only be three or four years apart, the actors sitting there were all actors that had works that could represent them. They were practically popular actors. Maru nodded faintly. She indeed would've felt some pressure in that group.

"That doesn't mean I can join those people either," Joomin said carefully as she looked at the main producer.

The others faintly smiled at those words.

"Unni, you should hang out with us in the future."

"That's right, noona."

"We're in the same class now."

Kang Giwoo was the one that said those last words.

Maru glanced at the people sitting around him. There were seven people including him.

Kang Giwoo, Lee Joomin, Park Jichan, Ahn Yeseul, Kim Okseon, Seong Dongho.

These seven people were going to lead the class 2-1 in Myungnang High school.

The lead characters were Ahn Yeseul, Kang Giwoo, and Park Jichan - these three. The drama was centered around these three and talked about the episodes between students and adults. RBS decided to take a deep dive into the inner state of the female lead with their youth drama 'Youth generation', while YBS decided to approach it from the angle where they talked about a broader range of problems and conflicts that happened between generations.

Of course, nothing was set in stone since the shoot hadn't even begun yet, but that was how it was going to go in the future according to the public information. The director of the drama was sitting right next to them, but he couldn't exactly ask since the director had declared at the beginning that they shouldn't talk about the drama here.

"So Giwoo and Jichan fancy Yeseul at the same time?"

Joomin asked as she rested her head on her hands. Giwoo smiled and said that that was the case. The lead characters had already received their scripts. According to Giwoo, one of the elements in the drama was that Giwoo and Jichan fell in love with Yeseul simultaneously. Love and one-sided love couldn't be done without in a youth drama, so it was to be expected. Joomin was Yeseul's best friend, while Okseon was portrayed as someone that opposed her. The story was that Okseon was envious and jealous of Yeseul, who was loved by all because of her kind heart despite the fact that her character was rather random.

This sounded similar to any other youth drama. It was the producer and the writers' job to decide how they were going to use these characters.

Maru had the role of the 'know-it-all' in the drama. He knew many things, and sometimes even flustered the teachers with his knowledge. While he looked rational, he was actually a prankster at heart and turned out to be the perpetrator of a lot of events that happened in the class. Furthermore, he would always leave himself out of the plan before he got caught since he was smart. Apparently, Dongho and Jichan were the ones that would usually get scolded.

Maru rather liked his character. He even smiled a little when he heard that he always escaped trouble. This character sounded like he had some similarities with him, so he thought that acting would become quite easy.

"I'm already nervous. This is my first time as a lead character," said Yeseul.

He didn't know a lot about her since he didn't talk to her much, but from the way she acted and talked until now, this Ahn Yeseul was a rather cautious girl. She always looked around her once before saying anything. Her distinct facial features seemed to indicate that she would become quite a beauty in a few years. He couldn't easily picture her acting as a cheerful girl.

Kim Okseon was a girl wearing round glasses, and she didn't speak a lot as though she wasn't good with words. Whenever she smiled, her snaggletooth could be seen, and from the way she covered her mouth in a hurry whenever she did that, she seemed to have a complex about it. That was something to be of note when he talked to her later. She was someone that had to play a character that was jealous of Yeseul. He would probably get to find out what she's like in the future.

"I hope it goes well," Dongho said.

He wasn't saying those words for others to hear. He talked to himself a lot ever since they started talking together, and most of the time, his words had negative connotations. Did he want attention? Or was that just how he was? Maru wasn't sure yet, but he never met anyone decent who complained all the time, so he decided to maintain his distance.

The plan was 60 episodes. It was one episode per week, meaning that the drama would run for more than a year. The number of episodes could be adjusted according to the viewing rates, but unless there were some big changes, it meant that Maru would have to spend a lot of time with these six people.

The first thing he had to do was to find out what everyone was like.

Shooting wasn't a mechanical type of labor. There was a close interaction of emotions, making it relative labor where the output would differ according to how much the opponent could express in their acting.



It would be ideal if he could become friends with everybody and laugh together, but ideals were ideals because they did not happen.

Even in this get-together, where they could not talk about work, there was a strange confrontation between people. Being young didn't mean that they weren't capable of fighting over territory. In fact, the fight could be even more intense precisely because they were young.

"By the way, your historical speech wasn't that good," Park Jichan said to Kang Giwoo.

As he said those words rather randomly after a period of silence, everyone's attention was directed towards him.

"It was pretty hard. I should've practiced more."

"Not anyone can do historical dramas. I was also in one as a child actor 2 years ago, and it was really hard. But I gained some recognition. The director asked me to appear in his next work."

"That's good. I also wish I heard something like that."

Giwoo praised Jichan with soft words. Jichan smiled in satisfaction before speaking,

"Hey, you were pretty good too. You'll get better with a bit more practice."

"Really? I don't think I'm doing it right, so can you show it to me once?"

"Right now?"

"Who cares? It's not like actors care about where they act."

Kang Giwoo drove Jichan to a corner.

Maru sipped on some beer as he looked at the flustered Jichan. He was unnecessarily talkative. When he smiled awkwardly and said 'maybe next time', Giwoo said that it was such a pity.

"Please show me next time. I want to learn too."

"Alright, I'll show you next time for sure."

Jichan, who boasted about himself for a while, did not say anything after that. He seemed like the type of guy who would forget about today's events once the day changed, but for today, he wouldn't be able to speak in front of Giwoo.

'There was the time with Lee Uljin too.'

Giwoo, who met eyes with Maru, made a kind smile and pushed a side dish that Maru couldn't reach, towards his side. Maru thanked him before picking up his chopsticks.

Each of his actions was filled with favorable impressions. He also didn't act too considerate. It felt like he kept his territory and respected other's territory as well. However, he would immediately retaliate once someone crossed the line like Jichan did. Of course, even that retaliation didn't go too far and break his polite image.

During the summer, a boy named Lee Uljin hit him and pushed him over when he shot Apgu. He could have dodged it, but he got hit because he thought that it would act in his favor, and ever since that happened, Uljin latched onto Giwoo and begged him for something. He looked like a small businessman trying to beg his debtor to push back the payment date. Just what made him beg Giwoo so desperately at such a young age?

“It’s good to talk to you like this. I wanted to stay close to you when we shot Apgu, but there simply wasn’t enough time back then.”

Giwoo talked to him.

“It was quite busy back then. Oh, how are things with that guy named Lee Uljin from back then? You two looked close.”

Maru turned around slightly and asked as though he didn’t have any interest. Maru gave Giwoo a glance through the corner of his eyes while picking up a sea squirt with chopsticks, and saw that his smile had turned slightly stiff. It seemed that the name wasn’t entirely welcome.

“You two know each other?”

Yeseul, who was listening this whole time, quietly interrupted.

“Yeah. Maru was a minor actor in Apgu. He was great back then. Even the producer praised him for his acting. You know The Witness, right? The drama on YBS. Maru appeared in it as a one-off character, and he was really good. I watched that episode, and it made me exclaim out loud.”

Maru faintly smiled as he looked at Giwoo. This guy was talented in switching the topic. He praised Maru as though to tell him to not talk about Uljin anymore. The attention was switched to him. Maru explained about the shoot for The Witness and returned the attention.

“I recently had a photo shoot for a brand recently.”

Jichan spoke again after getting himself together. It seemed that his personality didn’t allow him to leave the center of attention. Maru thought that he would be able to gloss over some annoying things with flattery in the future when it came to this guy.

“Uljin was acting strange. I thought he was a good guy, but I stopped contacting him after I saw him do that to you. I’m telling you this just in case you misunderstand.”

Giwoo stood up, approached him, and whispering into his ears before going to the bathroom. He thoroughly prevented the others from listening to those words. Maru picked up his glass by the lip. He looked at Giwoo, who was walking to the bathroom before taking a sip.

‘A boasty, a mute, a cautious, a muttery, a cheerful and lastly... crocodile tears, huh.’

He tapped the glass down on the table.

Wasn’t this an interesting group of people?

Maru grinned as he looked at the people in front of him.

A year.

He had to spend a year with these people whether he liked it or not.

Spice fish stew. Usually eaten after the main course at a sushi restaurant. for more details.

A genre of pop in Korea that used to be popular before the 80s.

### **Chapter 493**

“Let’s exchange numbers,” Joomin said as she held her phone out.

“Sounds good.”

“Let’s call each other frequently.”

Just like that, Maru had gotten six more numbers in his contact list on his phone.

“Yeseul. I think you should stop drinking,” Giwoo said as he put away the glass placed in front of Yeseul.

“What’s this? You’re looking after her already? Yeseul, it looks like Giwoo is interested in you,” Joomin said as a joke.

Yeseul shook her hands in front of her and laughed. From what Maru saw, she didn’t seem to hate it.

“I’m a little sleepy,” Dongho said rather suddenly.

His voice was a little loud, attracting everyone’s attention, and when Dongho received that attention, he twitched his lips and looked elsewhere.

“You must be worried sick about something, huh. Why don’t you tell this big sister?”

“I don’t have any worries. It’s just a little boring here.”

“Boring?”

“This get-together isn’t really necessary, is it? It would be fine as long as each of us does our work well.”

Dongho sat crookedly as he put his hands in his pockets. Maru let out a faint laugh when he saw that. Was he in the rebellious phase? He probably didn’t like literally everything so it wasn’t entirely out of the question for him to say those words.

“Why is it unnecessary? We got to meet like this and talk to each other, didn’t we?”

Joomin laughed exaggeratedly and poked Dongho’s shoulder. Dongho felt pressured by the gazes around him so he ended up relenting and said ‘that’s true’. He was a cute guy.

“What was your debut piece, Joomin-noona?” Giwoo changed the topic.

Joomin sighed before making a complicated expression.

“It’s horrible to think about it now. You know, my debut piece was a movie.”

“A movie?”

“Yeah, but it turned out to be a scam. It was when I was in middle school, right? I was eating tteokbokki with my friends and some random man gave me a business card, asking if I was interested in becoming

an actor since I looked pretty. I was immature back then, so I trusted his words and told mom about it. The problem was that my mom trusted that man as well. That's why she spent around 5 million won for contract fees, shooting fees, and even lobbying fees for some reason, I think? I did stand in front of the camera though. It was really good back then...."

"What happened in the end?"

"From some time onwards, we couldn't contact that man and he disappeared without a trace. My mom cried a lot back then. I also thought that I should get myself together and start studying, but it was so frustrating. Being deceived is one thing, but I really tried hard you know? I looked into acting a lot after this happened and ended up meeting my current president. That's how my life as an actress began."

"I heard that those kinds of scams happen a lot even now. A friend of mine was an aspiring idol, and a person who approached her asking for money to train her disappeared."

"I think scams like that happen really frequently in the entertainment industry."

Everyone nodded their heads as though they had experienced or came across a similar story before.

'In that sense, I guess I was lucky.'

If he met a scammer like that before he met Lee Junmin, he might have let go of the entertainment industry and start looking into something else.

"Giwoo, what made you want to become an actor?" Yeseul asked in a quiet voice.

"Hm, I always liked drawing. That's why my dream as a child was to become an artist. But one day, I was drawing a face, and this thought suddenly flashed across my mind - why is this person making this face? That's when my interest shifted to people's expressions. Watching people's expressions was so fun. Then, I saw a foreign movie, and the expressions of the people on the screen looked incredibly cool to me. That's when I thought that being able to create those expressions as work must be fun. It's a little strange, isn't it?"

"No, it's not like that at all."

"Yeseul, how about you? What made you decide to become an actor?"

"Me?"

Giwoo smoothly handed the question to Yeseul this time. Yeseul hesitated for a bit before talking about herself in a small voice. After an ordinary story of 'my dream as a child was to become an actress' was finished, Giwoo then asked Okseon about it. Thanks to the structured conversation, everyone could speak with ease.

"Maru, how about you?"

Giwoo acted like the presenter of a fair discussion and tossed the right to speak to the next person. When that person finished speaking, everyone would naturally look his way.

"I just became an actor due to a coincidence while I was doing a play. So I don't really have an amazing story to tell."

“You were really good considering that.”

“Thanks for seeing me that way. I felt this during Apgu as well, but I think I’m really lucky. I’m not that good, but the people around me make me look good. Giwoo, the producer praised you for your acting during Apgu as well. It was thanks to you that I had an easier time blending in.”

“I didn’t do anything. If it wasn’t for you back then, I would have troubled the shoot. I was at a loss on what kinds of emotions I should have while I was acting, but I got to know thanks to you.”

“Did something happen at the shoot?” Joomin asked curiously.

“When I was shooting Apgu, the shoot was delayed because my acting wasn’t up to par. I could make an image in my mind, but it was so hard to express it in my acting. Moreover, I was feeling a lot of pressure because there were a lot of great senior actors watching me. That was when Maru stepped up and showed me the direction. I got a hint thanks to him and everything went smoothly after that. I would have been in trouble if he wasn’t there that day.”

Maru smiled and shook his head.

“What are you saying? You were plenty good back then. You were just at a loss since it was late at night. The shoot was tiring after all. You didn’t get to rest properly due to all the heat and had to start the evening shoot like that, so it wasn’t surprising that you were exhausted. You got an okay right after a bit of rest. That was amazing back then.”

Giwoo smiled and shook his hand in front of him. Everyone else asked him to talk about it a little more.

Maru looked at Giwoo who smoothly told his story despite having a complex expression on his face. It had been a while since he was involved in a flatter-each-other situation. He remembered the days he had to say all sorts of good words in order to get the business deal in his previous life. He got along with Giwoo in that sense. He may have other motives in his mind, but it was fine as long as Maru wasn’t the one receiving the damage. There needed to be a center in a meeting, and Giwoo seemed like the perfect fit for such a position. It would be much easier for Maru to let him do what he wanted to.

“Looks like our main characters are getting along well.”

Producer Park Hoon appeared. He seemed to have drunk a lot as he reeked of booze.

“Have you eaten your fill?”

“Yes,” everyone replied in unison.

“We’ll have to see each other for a year whether we like it or not, so I hope we can get along well. You’ve introduced yourselves right?”

“Yes, we did,” Giwoo said as the representative.

No one complained about the fact that Giwoo replied by himself. Park Hoon seemed to have seen how this group of people worked and looked at Giwoo with a nod.

“You know that youth dramas are the gateway to stardom right? The popular actors in their 30s these days all debuted in youth dramas. Lee Joon, Ahn Dogang, Park Joonsik, Yoo Ilmin, as well as a lot of

others. We can't say for sure that the same thing won't happen for us, so I hope everyone does their best."

"Yes, sir."

Park Hoon shook hands with all seven of the people sitting at the table. Maru grabbed his hand lightly, and Park Hoon spoke to him with a big grin.

"Please bring a viewing rate fortune to our drama as well. Like what you did for *The Witness*."

Park Hoon patted his shoulder before walking over to the adult actors.

"Our director sounds like a friendly person."

"I know, right?"

Yeseul replied to Joomin's words.

"I hope it's like this during the shoot as well," said Okseon, who had been staying quiet this whole time.

"Does anyone know what his style is?" Jichan sounded a little worried.

He might be acting like a neighborhood man in this get-together, but no one here could say for sure what he was like during shoots.

"I haven't heard about anything."

"Me neither. He seems to be a famous producer, but since it's my first time doing a drama, I really don't know anything."

"Joomin-noon, don't you know anything?"

Joomin shook her head at Dongho's question. Everyone here hadn't spent a long time in the entertainment industry, so they didn't seem to know what producer Park Hoon was like during shoots.

"He's a pleasant guy."

"Ack!"

A person appeared behind Yeseul. The one smiling with her hands on Yeseul's shoulders was Suyeon, who had been rather far from them until just now.

"Senior Kim Suyeon."

"S-senior."

Everyone seemed flustered by her appearance.

Maru sipped some water and thought that this was really unexpected. The kids that didn't seem too awkward with the producer found Suyeon difficult to deal with? That just went to show what she was portrayed as to these kids.

'Does she pass off as a strict senior in front of the juniors?'

Someone who knew more than that would know her as the devious fox that devours men, but it seemed that such rumors didn't spread around among the younger generation. Well, it wasn't surprising since there was no way Suyeon wasn't cautious of that, and Junmin wasn't the type of person who would let someone in his company when she couldn't even manage rumors about herself.

"Why does everyone look so nervous? You're making me sad. Here, here. I'll pour you one each."

Maru ignored Suyeon who blatantly winked at him and held out his glass quietly. After she poured one for all of them, Suyeon looked at her empty glass.

"Should I receive one from the juniors as well?"

When everyone hesitated, Maru looked at Giwoo. When he did, Giwoo grabbed the bottle as though he was waiting for it. Everyone visibly brightened up and nodded their heads. They were urging him to do it.

"So Giwoo is pouring one for me."

"Yes, senior."

"You were doing well these days, Giwoo. You'll become rich soon."

"Please don't flatter me."

"Aah~, there was someone I specifically wanted to pour for me, but I don't think I should stay here any longer so I'll be satisfied with Giwoo. Well then, pour as much as you love this senior."

Giwoo filled the glass to the brim. Suyeon raised the glass, which was overflowing with foam, above her head and shouted 'For the drama'.

"Cheers!"

The senior actors, who were watching from afar, told her to not make the kids drink too much.

"Let's get along well in the future."

Suyeon wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and left.

"Phew, I was really surprised. But I don't think she's scary like the rumors say."

"Apparently, she's really sharp during shoots."

"Oh really?"

"I guess I will have to not make a mistake if I don't want her to scold me."

Everyone spoke worriedly. Their words went through one of Maru's ears and out through the other. Her strict image was probably done to make an image of herself for the juniors. She would have an easier time with the juniors being cautious around her. She was incredibly good at making a product out of herself.

“Well, then. Those that want to go to round 2 can get going, and the kids should go home and get some sleep. I guess the next time we’ll meet is at the shoot. Watch out for your health until then, and let’s hope the shoot goes well. Dismissed!”

Park Hoon shouted in a loud voice. Everyone clapped and fired up their fighting spirit. Some of the actors seemed to have made appointments as they quickly left.

“Watch out on your way home.”

Maru said goodbye to the others and left the sushi restaurant. He was about to call Byungchan as he took in a breath of cold air when he saw people sitting at the table outside the convenience store across the street. When he had a closer look, he found out that they were managers. Byungchan was among them as well.

Maru smiled and approached them.

“Hyung-nims, the get-together just finished.”

“Oh, really?”

The managers couldn’t be seen ever since the get-together started for real, and it seemed that they were spending their time in the convenience store like this. When he talked and laughed together with the other managers, Byunchan asked in curiosity.

“You know these people?”

“I talked to them on the 2nd floor before the get-together started. Oh, hyung-nims, please wait a moment before you go.”

Maru went into the convenience store and bought enough warm coffee for everyone.

“You must be tired, so drink these before you drive. Also, Jaehan hyung-nim. I saw you drinking beer and soju. You aren’t planning to drive, are you?”

“Hey, hey. Don’t worry about that. I only drank because I was given the okay to go home since he had business.”

He gave coffee to all nine managers. The managers told him that they’d treat him to food one day before leaving.

“I was planning to introduce them to you, but you knew them already, huh.”

“I had to get to know them. They are the people closest to us. Only when I become close to them will I be able to make requests in the future.”

“Hey hey, don’t say that with a big smirk on your face. You look like a typical villain.”

“Really?”

Maru sat down on the chair. He could see actors getting in their cars across the street and drive off.

“How was it?”



“People are the same wherever you go. I just blended in.”

“Why do you sound like an old man? Rather than that, were there a lot of people around your age?”

“There’s a lot. Looks like the shoot will be fun.”

“There weren’t any strange kids?”

“Well, I guess I’ll find out who’s strange in due time. Oh yeah, how did your talk go with that manager you knew?”

“He’s looking into some other line of work. He says he’s done with this kind of work.”

Byungchan smiled bitterly.

“Why don’t you get a license too? I heard that welding licenses are the best.”

“Hey, don’t say anything strange. I’m going to become an actor.”

Byungchan sniffed as he drank his coffee.

“But hey, does welding make a lot of money?”

“It’s tough work, but the money makes it worth it.”

“Should I try it out then?”

“I heard you wanted to become an actor.”

“Well, I need to prepare for retirement.”

“Then let’s get it together later.”

“Huh? Why would you get it?”

“To prepare for retirement.”

The two giggled at each other before raising their heads simultaneously.

“It’s snowing.”

“It sure is.”

Maru reached out and grabbed a snowflake.

“It looks like it will really be a White Christmas,” said Byungchan with a sour face.

Maru laughed when he saw that.

## **Chapter 494**

He met the same man yesterday. He had become used to greeting him with an awkward smile on his face.

He spat out a breath of white air before breathing in deeply again. The cold air that raised his hair made him wake up completely. Feeling the cold air cooling down his vocal cords, Maru shook his body slightly.

Maru thought that the snow had piled up quite a lot as he looked down at the apartment complex from the mountain. The cars had become blocks of white under the snow. It would take quite a lot of effort for people to go to work tomorrow.

He returned home as he walked on the sticky ground. Bada, who was usually asleep at this time, was heading to the bathroom while scratching her head.

“You have something to do today?”

“Yeah, \*yawn\*.”

He took off his coat and turned the stove on. When the soup was just about to boil, Bada came out of the bathroom, and his mother came out of her bedroom as well.

“Mrs. Lee, have you woken up?”

His mother stood next to him while sniffing.

“You have a cold?”

“I’m not sure. I did feel slightly cold yesterday, and then this happened.”

“You don’t have any work today, so just go back and rest some more. I’ll call you once the rice is ready.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m not fine.”

After taking his mother, who was adamant on making side dishes, to her bed again, Maru cooked the rice. He put down the spoons and chopsticks around the table while listening to the blow dryer sounds.

“Let’s eat breakfast.”

His mother came wearing thick clothes, while Bada came with her bangs rolled in a hair roll.

“Where are you going?” His mother asked Bada.

Bada scooped a big spoonful of rice and spoke gibberish as she put it in her mouth.

“Don’t go anywhere strange, and don’t come back too late,” his mother didn’t pry any further.

“Okay.”

“And how about you, son? You staying at home today?”

“I’m leaving as well.”

Bada finished eating quickly and rushed back into her room. His mother asked if she got a boyfriend in a small voice.

“It wouldn’t be strange if she did.”

“Sheesh, kids these days are too fast. I hope they don’t cross the line too early.”

“Don’t worry, your daughter isn’t that stupid. She should be able to take care of herself. Rather than that, you keep coughing. Are you sure it’s not serious?”

“Colds are things that get cured with a bit of rest.”

His mother returned to her bedroom while coughing. After washing the dishes, Maru had a look at the clock. It was slightly past 9. He put his jacket on again and went to the pharmacy near his house.

“Please give me something for a cough. As well as two ssanghwa-tangs.”

When he returned home with the medicine, Bada was getting ready to leave. She was wearing a beige coat and a new-looking t-shirt. She had even put some makeup on.

“Play healthily, okay?”

“Don’t worry. Dowook-oppa is actually pretty pure.”

“Like hell he’s pure.”

“Oh, I’m going to use the card a bit today.”

“Don’t spend too much.”

Bada left saying ‘thanks’.

Maru opened the door to the main bedroom and peeked inside. His mother, who was sitting on the bed, was coughing dryly.

“You should lie down a little.”

“The fridge is totally empty. I have to go grocery shopping.”

“I’ll go in your stead so get some rest. This is some cough medicine so take it and get some sleep. There’s nothing better than sleep when it comes to colds.”

His mother refused him, but he boiled her the ssanghwa-tang he bought anyways. She didn’t seem to like medicine but she seemed to be okay with ssanghwa-tang as she drank it without making a fuss.

“I’ll ruin my body if I take medicine just because of a cold.”

“I get it already so lie down.”

Maru stood next to his mother for a while.

“I thought you were leaving? Why are you still here?”

“Mom.”

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t you stop working? Working at the supermarket isn’t that easy, is it? You have to be standing all day, and facing customers should be stressful, too.”

“I should do it so that I can do something when you and Bada get married.”

“Don’t you know that kids grow up even without you having to do anything? You did everything when you gave birth to us. I heard you saying that the ahjummas are going travelling together.”

His mother was part of a housewives group that had formed between people that went to the same barbershop, and Maru had overheard his mother say that they were going to Jeju island together. She was saying how Jeju island during winter had a different charm than the other seasons.

“What travelling.”

“Why don’t you go?”

“Sheesh, forget it. Don’t say anything strange and get going.”

His mother kept coughing as she said those words. Maru left and returned with a cup of hot water.

“I’m not saying this out for nothing. I have a fixed amount of income now, and I think I will keep having one in the future. I understand that you want to keep working, but your complexion looks really pale these days. If you really want to do it, do it after getting plenty of rest.”

“I told you I’m fine.”

“Listen to your son. If you get ill while earning money, it will only harm you. Dad seems worried, too. He’s not saying anything because you’re adamant on working, but he probably wants you to stop as well.”

“Oh, geez.”

His mother made a complicated expression.

“I’m not going to ask you to send me to college, and I’m not going to ask you to buy me a house either. Mom, you actually don’t need to spend any money on me anymore. It’s not like Bada is asking you to send her to cram schools either. You kept working even after getting married, didn’t you? No one will blame you if you take a bit of a rest. There’s no one to say that to you either. Go travelling with your friends and get plenty of rest. If you still want to work after you become healthy, you can do that at that time.”

Maru sat down on the chair in front of the makeup table and continued speaking,

“Also, I don’t think I can keep up with cooking and washing the dishes every morning. We need a full-time housewife. Mrs. Lee, let me rest for a bit as well,” Maru said with a smile.

His mother stared at his face for a while before letting out a breath. Maru didn’t know whether it was a laugh or a sigh.

“Looks like my son has grown up after earning money from elsewhere.”

“Your son was mature from the beginning.”

“Fine. However, you have to contribute my monthly wage’s worth of money to the family account. If you can’t do that, this conversation never happened.”

“As expected, Mrs. Lee. You’re really meticulous when it comes to calculations.”

"It's been twenty years since I lived with your immature father. This much is nothing."

"Don't worry. I can do that no problem."

His mother, who hugged her knees with a smile on her face, spoke,

"You're giving pocket money to Bada too, aren't you?"

"Did she tell you that?"

"She never asked me for money even though she's going out. It's not like your father is quick-witted enough to give her money before me. So, there's only one option left."

Maru nodded.

"I'm earning enough, so you don't have to worry and can get plenty of rest. You should go on that Jeju island trip as well. You should also boast to your friends about it as well; about how your son let you go."

"I already told them that you're on TV. But no one seemed to know you though. You really should appear in daily dramas. The ladies like that kind of stuff."

"Mom, the competition for that is really high. It's not something a beginner like me can try."

"You are still a beginner?"

"I am. Also, there's another pack of ssanghwa-tang, so take it when you feel like you need to. If you really feel strange, you should go to the hospital."

He told her to rest before standing up. He closed the door and sighed in relief. He was worried that she would be adamant on working, but thankfully, she listened to him.

"It's cold out there. Make sure you wear enough clothing."

"I will."

Maru put his jacket on before leaving. He was putting his scarf on as he was walking towards the bus stop when he received a message.

-You know mom really appreciates you right?

"Sheesh, you're making me feel embarrassed."

Maru faintly smiled before replying that she should go to sleep already.

\* \* \*

*She* blew a breath of warm air into her hands. *She* didn't realize that it was cold since she was so absorbed in watching the snow when she left, but now that she was staying still, she was shivering.

"Is he not here yet?"

*She* looked at the mirror she attached on the back of her phone. *She* thought that she had tidied her bangs in the morning, but now that she looked at it, they were a mess. *She* pouted and quickly started tidying it with her hands.

“You’re pretty even without doing that.”

*She* quickly put her phone inside her bag and turned around when she heard the voice.

“Why are you so late?”

“There’s still ten minutes until the appointed time. I’m still early, you know?”

“So, you’re proud of that?”

“No, of course not. It’s my fault, why of course.”

Maru grinned from ear to ear. *She* also chuckled.

“But why did you wear so little?”

Maru untied the scarf around his neck and stepped closer to *her*. *She* widened her eyes before pushing her neck outwards.

“You’re such a hard girl to handle.”

“Give it to me quickly. I feel cold.”

Maru wrapped the scarf around *her* neck for a while before making an evil smirk and wrapped her face with it as well. *She* shouted ‘hey’ in annoyance and punched out when she felt her vision darken.

“Don’t go around punching anyone. I think you might knock someone out with it,” Maru said as he put the scarf on *her* properly this time.

“I’m not such a violent girl, you know?”

“Yeah, right.”

“Hey, Mr. Han Maru, you keep getting on my nerves recently. Do you want a beating?”

“No.”

Maru reached out his hand. *She* shrugged before grabbing it. *She* felt warmth from their locked hands.

“Hey, let’s get your hair done,” *she* said as she pressed on Maru’s hair.

His hair had grown out quite considerably behind his head.

“Doesn’t your agency care about that?”

“They do, but only if I do anything. There haven’t been any shoots lately.”

“You should still get your hair cut frequently. You give off a scary impression so you really need to care about your hair. Why don’t you try glasses today? I think it will make your impression look a lot smoother. Wait, let’s get everything done today since we’re at it,” *she* said as she locked her arms around his.

Maru flinched and tried to distance himself, but *she* quickly grabbed him and did not let go.

“I thought we were going to Daehak-ro to watch a play today.”

“We can do that next time.”

“Why don’t we go watch one today? We can go to your favorite pork cutlet restaurant. Oh, the curry on the next block over is good too.”

“You....”

*She* narrowed her eyes and looked at Maru. Maru shook his head.

“I’ve decided. Let’s go over to Yoojin’s right now.”

“Huh? Why there?”

“Because her mother runs a hair shop. I went there last time and it was really good.”

“No, but there’s no need to go today, is there?”

“Then we’ll go shopping for clothes together. I’ve been thinking about this for a while, but your clothing style is really bad. That vest and padded jacket you wore when we went fishing last time especially!”

Maru looked down at the clothes he was wearing.

“This is warm and good. It only costs 20 thousand won, but the durability and heat retention is really....”

“It totally makes you look like an old man though!”

*She* pointed at the shirt and cardigan that he was wearing underneath his padded jacket. A white and grey match. It looked clean and neat.

“You really care about the inside, so why not care about your jacket too?”

“Warm clothes are the best clothes.”

“You’re saying the same thing as my mom. Alright, I’m done with this. I got some money recently from the TV station, okay? Let’s go buy a good jacket for you with that. Also, one for my mom while we’re at it. Though, I won’t be able to get anything too expensive.”

“Forget it.”

“No. Let me spend some as well. Also, we’re going to get you a pair of glasses. Your eyes are good so let’s get one that doesn’t have any strength. Since your face is really angular, you’ll look cute with round glasses.”

*She* smiled and pulled Maru forward. Maru struggled because he didn’t want to go, but when *she* pinched his waist, he started walking slowly.

“We’re going to keep the window shopping short, right?”

“Who knows?”

*She* smiled as she listened to Maru’s sigh.

It was going to be a fun shopping time.

## **Chapter 495**

Yoojin laughed as soon as she received the call and then changed her clothes before leaving. She was planning to get some rest during the day since she had an appointment at night, but she couldn't miss this opportunity. She rushed to the street and grabbed a taxi.

"Take me to Hena Shop in front of Yeoksam station."

Yoojin fiddled with her phone as she looked outside the window. Since they were coming by train, they should have arrived by now. She stopped the taxi at the junction before getting out. She found a couple holding hands in front of a building that was entirely covered in glass. Yoojin waved her hand and approached them.

"You're actually here."

"I dragged him here even though he didn't want to."

"Now that you did well. I always thought about this, but this guy really needs to get his hair done properly. Why don't we try a baby perm on him?"

"I think that'll suit him."

Bunbun pulled on Maru's clothes with a big grin on her face.

"Please touch it up just a little bit."

"Let's think about that once we're inside."

Yoojin opened the door and entered. The staff greeted her with a smile, and the head manager-unni standing behind them waved her hand and came to them.

"Where's mom?"

"She's not here because she had something to do at the branch shop. But what brings you here at this hour?"

Yoojin brought over Maru and had him stand in front of the head manager-unni.

"I want to change this guy's style a little."

"Who's he? A friend of yours?"

"The boyfriend of a close friend of mine," said Yoojin as she looked at Bunbun.

"Then I guess I should do it myself. I don't have any appointments at this hour either."

"I'll be thankful if you do it, unni."

Exchanging gazes with Bunbun, Yoojin had Maru sit on a chair. Maru looked around in unease as he sat down.

"Is this your first time coming to a place like this?" Yoojin asked.

"Not really. I've been to places like this quite often."

"Quite often?"



“...In my dreams.”

He was speaking gibberish. Bunbun, who stood next to him, tapped on his forehead. The head manager brought a cape and put it around him.

“How would you like your hair done?”

Maru couldn't look into the eyes of the smiling head manager. Yoojin poked Bunbun's waist.

“Hey, he's flustered.”

“You're right. I've never seen him act like that before.”

“Should we keep watching him for a while? It looks fun.”

Bunbun fell into thought for a moment before nodding her head. They took steps back and observed as Maru mumbled. The scene of Maru desperately trying to find Bunbun through the mirror was so rare that Yoojin took photos of him with her phone while holding back her laugh. Bunbun also took photos.

“Why is he so flustered?”

“Looks like it really is his first time in a place like this.”

“Should we save him now? I think he might cry at this rate.”

“We should. He actually gets mad quite a lot, so it'd be troublesome if he does.”

Bunbun hummed as she walked forward. She always hummed that melody when she was having fun. As soon as Bunbun appeared, Maru sighed in relief.

“Why are you so flustered?”

“Because I don't know anything. I'll just go with a sports style cut.”

Maru desperately pleaded with Bunbun. Bunbun seemed to have become weak-hearted as well as she fell into thought while tapping her lips. Yoojin thought that this was her time to step up.

“No way, you came all the way here, so you can't leave with just that. An actor should change up his image frequently. Only if you find the style you like should you start polishing up based on that style. Why don't we dye your hair while we're at it as well?”

“I have a shoot, so I need to keep it black.”

“Oh, really?”

“Just make me look like a student. A high school student can't exactly have a peculiar hairstyle. I don't want to get an earful from the producer later,” Maru argued logically.

“Oh, you're an actor too?” The head manager-unni asked as she combed through Maru's hair.

Maru nodded without saying anything.

“Unni, please look after this guy carefully. I don't know when, but he will definitely become popular. Mom said that as well.”

"If the owner said that, then I guess I really should take good care of him. So, what do you suppose we do? From what I heard just now, I don't think changing him up too much is allowed since he has a shoot."

At that moment, Bunbun spoke.

"The character he's playing is an intellectual one. A type of person who can use his smarts."

"Really?"

"Also, we're going to try putting glasses on him."

"If it's like that, why don't we cut his back hair short and polish his bangs like this? Also, let's do his eyebrows too."

"Uhm, you can just use a hair clipper...."

When Maru tried to say something, Bunbun immediately covered his mouth. At times like these, Yoojin thought that Bunbun really had full control over him.

"Then please do it that way," Bunbun said with a smile.

The head manager-unni said that he should listen to his girlfriend and consoled the sighing Maru.

"Let's drink some coffee. I'll make you some."

Yoojin put some coffee beans from the shop on top of a coffee filter and poured hot water over it little by little. She picked up the steaming coffee mugs and went to sit next to Bunbun on the sofa.

"How's it going with that crazy woman these days?"

Crazy woman - that was what Yoojin called Lee Miyoon. Bunbun grabbed a mug and spoke,

"The thing is, you really get used to getting insulted."

"That's not a good thing you know?"

"But she's not shouting at me like before. These days, we don't meet each other that often since our shoots don't overlap. At first, I was frustrated and sighed all the time, but I don't feel anything now. Also, I look at her with the gaze that's asking if she has anything to nitpick with me, right? Then that woman snorts and turns around. That makes me a little thrilled."

"Sheesh, hey. You really have a lot of courage. What are you going to do if she does say something to you?"

"I already declared war, so I won't lose."

Bunbun looked resolute. Yoojin stared at her for a while before pressing down on Bunbun's wrinkled forehead.

"You'll get wrinkles like that."

"Ah, right."

“Also, are you really looking after yourself recently? You have a pimple here.”

“Oh that, I get one on that spot all the time.”

“You should really take care of yourself. My mom always tells me that the skin is vital for an actress. You know that cameras have become really good and they capture every little detail on your face, right? One of the model-unnis that comes to the shop a lot told me that the skin is decided from birth, but you can’t ignore constant management.”

“I do have to look after it I guess.”

“And Maru, too.”

“He seems to be taking care of himself if not for his strange hair and jacket. I heard that he uses mask packs all the time.”

“That was unexpected.”

“I also thought that when I first heard him and he told me that he would be disqualified as an actor if he couldn’t take care of his own body.”

“At least he knows it. Even though he never went to a proper stylist shop before.”

Yoojin looked at Maru sitting on the chair. Whenever the head manager-unni asked him a question while cutting his hair, he replied awkwardly with a very tough expression on his face. Even though he was usually very snappy, he was being awkward in a place like this. She suddenly wondered how he would react if he was taken to a nail shop. If she told Bunbun about it, she would probably take him to one with joy.

“Looks like your mother is really busy.”

“My mom’s always busy. She has meetings, gets invitations, and stuff like that all the time. An unni that worked with her for a long time has recently opened a branch store, and she’s been going there a lot recently.”

At that moment, the door opened and a woman with messy hair entered. The head manager-unni realized who she was first and greeted her.

“Oh, what brings you here?”

“Looks like you’re busy. I had to come here without a reservation since I had something urgent.”

“The owner isn’t here right now though.”

“What about the designer who took care of me last time? That unni was good.”

“She’s on break today.”

“Then I’ll wait a bit, so can you take care of me, unni? I have plenty of time today.”

“Alright, then. It won’t take that long.”

The woman was led by an employee to a private waiting room. Bunbun asked in a small voice.

“That person is Hyerim, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she’s a regular here.”

“You must see a lot of celebrities here, huh.”

“Yeah. Since my mom has a lot of connections, all sorts of people come to visit.”

Yoojin didn’t feel anything since this happened rather frequently. Once, she tried sitting here all week and saw numerous celebrities being guided quietly to private waiting rooms. If they made reservations, they were led to the 2nd floor, so the normal customers didn’t even see them usually. Also, most celebrities came here late at night or before dawn.

“Hey, he’s sleeping,” said Yoojin as she pointed at Maru.

He was cocking his head like a chicken.

“Do men feel sleepy when they get their hair done?”

“You tell me. It’s so curious. How can they be so insensitive?”

“He’ll probably wake up saying that a strange style is also okay.”

“You’re right.”

At that moment, the door opened again.

“Huh!”

Yoojin stood up in surprise this time. There was an unexpected guest behind her mom, who came in with a smile on her face.

“Come in.”

“Nice shop.”

“Of course it is. How much do you think I spent on interior design?”

The person that came in while talking to her mother was Ahn Joohyun.

“Hello, senior,” said Yoojin as she stood in front of Joohyun.

Bunbun was staring in a daze from afar. Joohyun blinked her eyes a few times before smiling.

“Didn’t think I’d see you here.”

Yoojin’s mom, who stood next to her, laughed quietly as she covered her mouth before speaking,

“That’s good. I was about to call you here too. But my daughter, what brings you here?”

“A friend of mine was looking to get a haircut.”

Yoojin called over Bunbun. Bunbun approached and introduced herself.

“I see, I see. You’re a friend of Yoojin, huh.”

“And him.”

“Him?”

She pointed at Maru, who barely opened his eyes. Her mom narrowed her eyes to look at him before exclaiming ‘aha’.

“He’s the one I saw at the movie get-together. I should say hi to him later.”

Her mom quietly approached Maru and tapped on his shoulder. Maru flinched in surprise and turned to look at her. While the two had a conversation, Yoojin talked to Joohyun in front of her.

“What brings you here?”

“The owner of the hair shop I usually went to said she was going overseas for education. I was originally going to go to the shop that my agency introduced me to, but that person recommended your mother to me. I heard about this place a lot, but never actually got to visit this place, so this is my first time here. Oh, I know her on a personal basis, but this is the first time I’ve come to the shop.”

“Welcome. I’m not saying this just because she’s my mom, but her skills are really good.”

“I know, I know. Rather than that, I guess we haven’t met since the movie, right?”

“We haven’t. Didn’t you miss me?”

“Not really?”

“What a shame. And here I was once your daughter.”

When she said those words, Joohyun grabbed Yoojin’s cheeks and twisted them.

“Even though you were so awkward in front of me when we first met.”

“I always act nervous in front of seniors I respect. Oh, you’re busy these days, aren’t you?”

“I am, I guess. But why’s Maru here?”

“Because we want to change his hairstyle. Oh, and this is a friend of mine.”

“Hello.”

Bunbun greeted as she introduced herself. When Joohyun heard her name, she immediately looked at her hand.

While Bunbun was at a loss, Joohyun reached out. She grabbed Bunbun’s right hand and raised it to her eye level.

“So it’s you.”

“Eh?”

“The girlfriend that Maru’s been boasting about.”

“He boasts about her?” Yoojin asked while laughing.

“He told me that there’s a really skilled person. I asked him who it was and he told me that it was his girlfriend with a big grin on his face.”

“Really?”

“This rabbit ring is a couple ring, right? He was wearing it even when he came out as a minor character in The Witness.”

Joohyun closed in on Bunbun’s face and narrowed her eyes. Bunbun smiled awkwardly and tried to step back, but Joohyun held her still.

“You’re an aspiring actress, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes.”

Yoojin explained to her that Bunbun was already appearing in sitcoms.

“Really? What about an agency?”

“I don’t have one yet.”

“Ah, I see.”

She nodded before reaching out her hand again. This time, it was for a handshake.

“I’m Ahn Joohyun.”

Surprised, Bunbun grabbed her hand quickly.

Yoojin looked at the two from next to them. On one side, there was an actress who had entered the ranks of top stars, while on the other side, there was an actress who hadn’t even made a name for herself.

‘But they look good with each other?’

Joohyun and her sharp impression and the cute Bunbun matched each other strangely well.

“Let me in too,” said Yoojin as she stepped in between the two.

Joohyun smiled and hugged her neck with her arm as well.

“Let’s go watch that guy who’s been gazing at us this whole time.”

Joohyun, with Yoojin and Bunbun on either side, walked wide strides and stood behind Maru. Maru, who looked at Joohyun through the mirror, made a sour expression.

“Please don’t say anything.”

“Why? It suits you. Why don’t you just shave everything off?”

The sighing Maru and the grinning Joohyun seemed to be on close terms. Yoojin could see her mom’s eyes flash. Her habit was probably coming out again.

“Oh my, how crowded. Why don’t we sit down and have a talk? We need to finish this boy up first after all.”

Her mom pointed at the waiting room behind the counter.

## Chapter 496

Maru recognized the woman that approached him, asking him if he remembered her. She was the woman who was standing with Yoojin during the get-together for Twilight Struggles. She was probably Yoojin's mother. He nodded when she told him that he should come around often in the future. From the way she looked at him as though she was evaluating his worth for a brief moment, this woman didn't seem as good as she did on the surface.

"You and Miss Joohyun know each other?" asked the lady who was doing his hair.

Maru explained to her that they shot a few scenes together before.

"You must be quite famous then."

"It's not like that at all. I only appeared for brief moments as minor characters."

"But doesn't it mean something when someone as famous as her recognizes you first? Try your best. Who knows? You might actually become famous one day."

I want to become like that too - Maru smiled instead of replying and looked into the mirror. This was the first time he got a haircut in a place like this. He had been to many places like this as a manager in his previous life, but he had never actually sat in one of these chairs himself. As he thought that going to the neighborhood barber was the best option, being asked if he was okay with his current looks constantly by the stylist was stifling to him.

"You said that you were going to put on glasses, right? Wait a bit."

He was going to tell her that it was okay, but the lady had already left. When she returned, she was holding a pair of round glasses in her hands. Maru remembered that one of the female employees here seemed to be wearing those. Did she get them from her?

"Try putting them on. You're a friend of Yoojin, so we have to take proper care of you."

Maru felt dizzy the moment he wore those glasses since they were very strong. The lady looked at Maru's face from afar before nodding her head as though she had decided on a decision.

"Looks like we should reveal your forehead a little more. These glasses suit you as well. I think I'll be done if I cut a bit more side hair, so wait a bit."

Snip snip - scissors danced next to his ears. When he was told to open his eyes a while later, Maru opened his eyes slowly. His figure reflected in the mirror looked pretty good. The neat side hair was very much to his liking. Men really needed to cut their side hair short.

"I'll wash your head."

After washing his head, he had his hair dried with a dryer. The lady dusted his hair a few times and snipped a few more times with her scissors before taking her hands off, saying that she was done. After taking off the cape, Maru approached the mirror.

"It's nice and neat."

“You like it?”

“Yes, I do.”

He wasn't saying empty words. His hair really looked good. Perhaps this was why people went to expensive hair shops. He had a brief thought that maybe the results would've been even better if he exchanged opinions with the hairstylist, but he came to the conclusion that that would've been useless since he didn't know anything about hairstyles.

“I'll be taking my leave since there's a customer waiting for me. Your friends should be in the waiting room behind the counter. Tell me any time if you don't like your hair. I'll polish it up quickly.”

Maru said his goodbyes before going to the waiting room. When he went inside, he saw four people sitting around the table.

“That looks much better on you,” said Yoojin.

She, who was sitting next to her, quietly smiled before telling him that it suited him. Maru smiled awkwardly since he felt rather embarrassed.

“Then you three can talk by yourselves. Miss Joohyun, let's go to my room.”

“Okay. See you two next time. And you too, Maru.”

Maru sat down as he listened to Yoojin's mother say that they should take their time here. Maru strangely felt tired even though all he did was let someone else do his hair.

“You were dozing off and you're still tired?” asked Yoojin as she offered him a cup of coffee.

“It's because this doesn't suit me.”

“You'll have to become used to it.”

“That's not good news.”

He took a sip. The bitter taste spread around in his mouth. His dreamy consciousness felt like it was coming back.

“Why is senior Joohyun here?”

“Apparently, the owner of the hair shop she's a regular at went overseas to study,” she replied. After saying that, she yawned a little.

“Are you sleepy?”

“Maybe it's because I warmed up. I'm a little sleepy.”

“If you're tired, you can lean on me and sleep. I'll sleep a bit as well.”

“Shall I?”

At that moment, Yoojin, who was watching them from the side, spoke,

“You guys really poke where it hurts.”



She and Maru chuckled.

“What are you going to do now?”

“I’m going to take him to some shops. The department store should be too expensive, so I’m probably going to independent shops.”

“Ah, you said you were buying Maru clothes, didn’t you? I wonder if I should join you guys. I need a place to kill time until dinner.”

“Then let’s go together. It’ll be less boring with the three of us.”

Maru narrowed his eyes and looked at her smiling face.

“Uhm, hello? Weren’t we supposed to be on a date today?”

“Who says only two people can go on dates? Also, I’m going to take you shopping all day today, so it’ll be better if Yoojin’s with us. She has a good eye for clothes after all.”

*She* seemed to have already come to a decision. Maru turned around to look at Yoojin. He signalled her to stay out of it, but Yoojin made a suspicious smile and said ‘let’s go’.

Dammit.

“Do you want to try the shops in front of the station first? There are a lot of stores on clearance so you should be able to get a lot for cheap. I saw them putting up a bunch of padded jackets for sale, so there’s probably some left.”

Yoojin walked ahead of them like their boss.

A cold wind blew past them as soon as they left the hair shop. Maru told *her* to put on the scarf.

“It’s cold.”

“If it’s cold, you can just go, you know?”

“It’s suddenly not cold at all!”

Yoojin grinned. She, who was next to him, approached Yoojin and hooked *her* arms around her. Maru stuck up his middle finger at Yoojin who looked at him with a smug expression. The only thing he got back was a snort.

As they walked towards the station, they saw a lot of independent stores just like Yoojin said. Flyers advertising cheap off-season products were rolling on the ground.

“Should we try that place first?”

“Yeah.”

The two girls opened the door to a shop with glee on their faces. Maru thought about it for ten seconds before deciding that he should not be entering the store. However, his decision was mercilessly trampled upon by the two that left the store to get him. Being dragged inside the store, Maru had to try on clothes like a lab rat. Resistance was out of the question.

“Is this better?”

“No, I think this looks better.”

Maru glanced at the clothes she told him to try on before speaking,

“I tried this on before.”

“I know.”

“But then why do I have to do it again?”

“Just try it on.”

“...We are planning to buy things here, right?”

Hearing that question, she avoided his gaze and started humming to herself. Maru saw a small tremble in the corner of *her* eyes. He fell into the trap. It was the discount sale trap that all married men went through. They would be dragged around to all sorts of places under the excuse that ‘there was something to buy’ and end up buying a bunch of useless things.

Telling the wife to just go home after buying a few things would only result in ‘why don’t you just wait in the car’ along with a fierce glare. It was a one-sided match that men could never dream of winning.

Not only that, there was another girl fanning the flames here.

Was this hell?

“There aren’t any pretty things here.”

“You’re right. Let’s try the next store.”

Maru tried to shake off *her* arm with a slightly dazed expression, but her gripping strength was quite considerable, not matching her cute face. In the end, he was dragged to the next store, and the same thing repeated again.

“This looks good. I want this.”

Under the pressure that the day would end fruitlessly at this rate, he ended up choosing clothes he liked, but that was the wrong move.

“See? This guy only likes stuff like this one.”

“Hey, this looks exactly like the ones *ahjussis* wear to hiking every weekend.”

“This is not good. I can’t trust this guy anymore. Yoojin, let’s tell Maru properly what kinds of clothes he needs to look for.”

“Good. I’ll gladly join you for that one.”

Haha - Maru laughed dryly as he put down the padded jacket in his hands. The padded jacket, which was a mix of red and grey, and had sufficient padding inside the jacket fell on top of the counter. The price was only 25 thousand won as well. It was really good for the price.

“Should we go to Dongdaemun after all?”

“That is definitely a better option, but-”

What the heck was this about? Maru interrupted their conversation. He tried to persuade the two that there should be good clothes here as well. If he was dragged all the way to Dongdaemun by them for clothes, they might as well drag him to Namdaemun for a pair of cosmetic glasses. His plan to spend his date in leisure might actually become out of reach.

“Well, I guess going to Dongdaemun doesn’t really make a difference.”

“It’s a pain to confront the owners there too. I was there last time, and they were scolding me for staring at the clothes for a while.”

“Right, right. They really scare us and look down on us just because we’re young.”

Thankfully, they seemed to have decided that going to Dongdaemun wasn’t the right idea.

Maru smiled powerlessly as he looked at the two girls walking into the next store. If he knew things were going to be like this, he should’ve told *her* that they should meet at home.

Maru put his hands inside his padded jacket. A box could be felt by his fingertips. He bought a necklace as a Christmas present, but the right time to gift it to *her* wasn’t coming. He couldn’t give this to *her* as long as Yoojin was around. He couldn’t leave her with teasing material for another year.

“Hey, what are you doing! Come in!”

Yoojin opened the door and shouted at him. All the passersby stared at them. Maru palmed his face and sighed in a small voice.

\* \* \*

“Hm, this looks good.”

“Then let’s go with this, okay?”

“Han Maru, why does your face look so unwilling, huh?”

“Me? When did I look like that? Can’t you see me smiling? I’m so happy right now.”

Sure - Yoojin remarked while bursting out into a laugh. She was covering her mouth and laughing as well. He thought that everything was over when they managed to buy a padded jacket, but there were the glasses left.

Maru took off the large horn-rimmed glasses. Looking at *her*, who kept making him wear uncomfortable glasses and then laughing at his looks, he felt bitter and happy at the same time. Nothing relieved Maru more than *her* laughing at ease.

“Stop playing around, I think this is good. What about you, Yoojin?”

The pair she was holding was just a rim with short legs. The part where the lens was supposed to be was mostly round but was slightly angled at the corners. It was a mixture of silver and black.

“Wouldn’t that make him look old?”

“I thought that too, but look closely.”

*She* approached Maru and changed his glasses. Maru sat down upright and looked at *her* and Yoojin. After making a ‘hmm’ sound, Yoojin clapped.

“It does look good on him.”

“Right?”

“He looks mature. Not like, the old kind of mature, but, hm, hm, good.”

Yoojin raised her thumb. She laughed and told him to look in the mirror. Maru looked in the mirror next to him. His eyes that made him look cold looked a little softer now because of the glasses. He could tell that his impression had changed a lot at a glance.

“What do you think?”

“This looks okay. I’ll ask the producer if I can wear them during the shoot,” Maru said as he took off the rims.

He could see *her* with a satisfied smile on her face.

He had been dragged around for many hours today, but he felt that it was all worth it when he looked at that smile. If *she* was happy, then he was happy as well.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Maru held out the rims to the optician.

“Please give me these.”

## **Chapter 497**

“Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.”

Although it was a bit late, they separated from Yoojin with a greeting that was only allowed on Christmas. She waved at Yoojin, who disappeared in a taxi, and spat out a breath of white air.

“I heard that snowy days aren’t as cold.”

“It’s snowing because it’s cold.”

“Is that how it works?”

Maru grabbed *her* hand and started walking.

“You’re done shopping for the day, right?”

“Why do you ask? You want to do some more?”

“Of course not.”

“Oh, I thought you wanted to look around some more.”

*She* swung her hands back and forth while smiling. The hand he was holding moved back and forth like a swing.

“Are you hungry?”

“I was about to ask that. Now that I think about it, we didn’t even have a proper lunch, did we?”

“All we had was hotteok, I guess.”

They didn’t have lunch properly since they were busy walking around looking through clothes. It was 4 p.m. Although it was still a little early for dinner, Maru’s stomach was rumbling, wanting food.

“Why don’t we go there?”

The place *she* pointed at was a shabu-shabu restaurant. A hot soup was perfect on a cold day like this. Thinking that it was a good choice, they entered that restaurant.

“Welcome. A table for two?”

“Yes.”

“Come this way.”

Since it was a public holiday, the restaurant was quite crowded. They sat by the window and Maru took off the padded jacket that *she* bought for him. They had spent an hour looking before deciding on this. Maru thought that he should wear it for a long time as he looked at it.

“Are you fine with the spicy one?”

“Yeah.”

They ordered the spicy broth. As for meat, they ordered 3 portions for now. Since *she* had a good appetite, it probably wouldn’t be enough. They were given a kettle with broth that was intended for drinking and Maru poured it into cups. The white soup filled up the cup. After putting down a cup in front of *her*, Maru tried drinking some as well.

“It’s good.”

“It is.”

The strong taste of seasoning was to Maru’s liking. Maru wasn’t planning on eating healthy so he liked strongly seasoned foods more. When he poured another cup for *her*, they got the shabu-shabu they ordered. After they put it on the stove and turned it on, the broth started boiling.

“You should leave the thick slices of mushroom in the soup for a while, and as for the rest, you can eat them immediately.”

Maru put a bunch of vegetables into the broth and cooked some thin slices of beef before putting it on *her* plate.

"I'll eat by myself. You should eat as well."

"Don't worry about me."

*She* blew on the meat to cool it down and ate it before making a joyous expression. Maru looked at *her*. Perhaps this was why being next to someone could empower a person so much.

"How's the shoot these days? Isn't it hard?"

"It's hard, but it's fun. I'm a little worried though."

"Why's that?"

"Because I feel like my portion keeps decreasing."

*She* twitched her lips and twirled her chopsticks in the soup to look for the mushroom.

"At first, I started off with the mindset that I'm learning, but I still find it a bit of a pity. When Jiseok says he has a shoot but I'm staying at home, I feel like I'm lagging behind. If I get fired up because of that and stand in front of the camera, I get scolded for being too tense. Acting really is hard after all."

"It just comes down to experience. If you get more experience, you'll be able to do better."

"Is that how it is?"

"It is how it is."

Maru put some cooked meat on *her* plate again. Even while saying that he didn't need to do so, *she* ate the meat quickly.

"Should we order some more?"

*She* nodded faintly. Maru ordered two more portions of meat before speaking,

"What are you going to do from now on? If you are going to continue being an actress, I think you should look into joining an agency. There's a limit to how much you can do by yourself."

"I'm still thinking about that. I do want to, but I keep wondering if it's the right thing to do and keep hesitating. Acting definitely is fun. I want to keep doing it as well. But wanting to do something and doing something well are two different things, right? I don't want to jump in hastily."

"In my eyes, I think you're doing plenty well."

"Let's say it's a matter of confidence. Actually, I don't know either. It's a bit different from doing plays after all."

"It is."

"Mom's telling me to do what I want to do, but there's no guarantee that I would be as lucky as this time around."

"You said that a graduate at your school connected you to the audition, right?"

"Yes. She works for an agency."

“Did you look into that?”

“I asked her once before, and unfortunately, they aren’t looking for new actors for the time being.”

“What a pity.”

Maru picked up a suitably cooked mushroom before looking at *her* eyes. *She* chewed for a while before shaking her head.

“Don’t mention JA. I don’t think I’ll be able to last if I join like that. Also... that’s a place for only the talented people.”

“That’s not entirely true. The president supports people as long as he deems that they’re worth investing in. It’s not as much as an exclusive contract, but he’ll give you some form of care. Daemyung is going to receive college tuition from him. Of course, I’m not saying that Daemyung is bad at acting, but still.”

*She* bit on her chopsticks and looked at him. From *her* expression, it didn’t seem like she liked that. Maru smiled and no longer spoke. He did not plan to force *her* to do something she didn’t want to do. He could try explaining to *her* that grabbing an opportunity through people she knew wasn’t a bad thing, but he did not want to deny her way of life outright nor tell her to follow him. It had to be *her* decision. The only thing he could do was to give *her* some advice.

“I’ll tell you when JA is holding an audition to recruit new actors. That’s okay with you, right?”

*She* nodded. After looking at the pot that only had a few pieces of mushroom left, *she* spoke,

“Am I being too stuffy? It’s not that different from how I got the audition for the sitcom through a school senior.”

“It is a bit different. I understand where you’re coming from.”

Hearing those words, *she* made a sullen expression.

Maru raised his voice a little and spoke,

“Looks like I brought up something I shouldn’t have. You’ll be getting calls from various places because of your skills soon enough.”

“That’s obviously not happening.”

“You never know.”

*She* made a sour expression before saying that it would be great if it was like that. They left the restaurant after finishing their meal.

“It’s snowing again.”

Reaching out *her* hand, she brightly smiled and told Maru to see. There was a large snowflake on *her* palm. Though, it soon melted away.

“Looks like it’ll pile up again.”

“You’re right.”

“Where should we go now?”

“I want to drink some coffee.”

Maru pointed at the café on the other side. Actually, he wasn’t desperate for coffee. He just needed a quiet space.

“I’ll buy you the coffee.”

“Nah. I received a present from you today, so let me buy one for you today.”

“Then should I rip you off a lot? Maybe I’ll get some cake too.”

“You have the room for that?”

“There’s always room for desserts.”

*She* tapped on her stomach as she entered the café. They bought two cups of coffee and a chocolate muffin. *She* grabbed a table first and watched the snow outside. *She* was waving her toes, and they seemed to be in sync with the lights flickering on the other side of the road.

Maru quietly looked at *her*. He wished for *her* to only see and experience the pretty side of life without experiencing any of the hardships and bitterness of it. Just then, the emotions he had when he looked at his daughter became vivid again.

‘No wait, was it a son?’

Perhaps one day, he would even forget that he had a child at all?

“Here’s your order.”

He picked up the tray and walked towards her.

“Am I ordering you around too much today?”

“You can do that on a day like this. Here’s your coffee.”

He put down the tray and sat down. *She* grabbed the mug with both of her hands before drinking a sip. *She* smiled. It seemed that the coffee was not bad.

Maru thought that now was the right time and reached into his chest pocket.

“Here.”

“What’s this?”

“A Christmas present.”

“Ah... but I...”

“I already got mine.”



Maru lifted up the padded jacket. *She* widened her eyes before leaning backwards slightly in embarrassment.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

“Can I?”

“I’m going to put it on you, but you can open the box.”

*She* nodded and opened the box. *She* carefully took out the necklace inside and put it on her palms.

“It’s so pretty.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good. I was worried when I was deciding. Can I put it on you now?”

“This? That’s a little...”

Maru got the necklace from *her*. *She* flinched and shrunk her neck back, but she eventually brushed her hair to one side, making it easier for Maru to put the necklace on her.

Maru grabbed the necklace in his hands to get rid of the coldness before putting it around *her* neck.

“If you wrap it twice, you should be able to use it as a bracelet.”

*She* fidgeted with the small jewel on her neck before frowning.

“It wasn’t expensive, was it?”

“Don’t worry. It wasn’t that expensive.”

“Why does that sound like it was expensive to me?”

“Please just pretend that you didn’t ask.”

“...Thanks.”

“Now all you need is a plunge dress to go with it.”

“There you go again with your mouth!”

*She* grabbed Maru’s lips before letting them go.

“The coffee is going to get cold. You should drink.”

“Yeah.”

Even while drinking the coffee, *she* fidgeted with the necklace. It seemed that *she* had taken a liking to it. He felt relieved to see *her* so happy about it. He was worried when he bought it thinking that *she* might not like it.

“Oh, did you get the stamp for this place?”

“No.”

“There’s one of these stores around my house. I got a coupon last time too.”

“I can’t be bothered with that.”

“Give me the coupon. I’ll get it. 8 coffees get you one for free, so it’s such a pity to miss out on it.”

“Fine, let’s live a frugal life.”

Maru handed her his wallet. *She* opened the wallet and took out the coupon when a piece of paper fell on the table. It was the tarot card Maru got from Daehak-ro.

“A tarot card?” *she* looked at The Fool card as she asked.

“You know about it?”

“I do. I like tarot after all.”

“Really?”

“But this was unexpected from you. I thought you wouldn’t like fortune telling.”

“I got it through a coincidence. I didn’t know what it meant, but Daemyung explained it to me. The upright position, was it? Adventurous and whatnot, wasn’t it?”

“Adventurous. Hm....”

“Why?”

*She* put down the card and spoke,

“You can interpret it that way, but usually, The Fool has more negative connotations.”

“Really? Well, it wasn’t like Daemyung knew that much about it. So, what does it mean?”

Her gaze headed towards the card.

“The foolishness of knowing nothing. Ignorance.”

\* \* \*

“Have a safe trip back.”

He waved at *her* as she got on the bus. The bus soon disappeared from sight. While waiting for the bus home, Maru took out the tarot card from his wallet.

“The foolishness of knowing nothing. Ignorance.”

Was he ever concerned about fortune telling as much as this? Well, he did pray to whatever god possible when it came to his child. A clown standing on stage. He could throw the card away, but he kept it with him for some reason. That woman, he felt like he had seen her somewhere before, yet also thought that he had never seen her before. He was concerned and went back to that same place in Daehak-ro, but he never got to meet her even once.

Ignorance. Maru rolled that word in his mouth once before looking up at the sky.

It was snowing a lot to the point that the dark sky couldn't be seen.

A type of street food.

A hotpot-like dish where you dip the ingredients in and fish them out when it's cooked.

## **Chapter 498**

The stage sunken in the darkness calmed him. He felt like he was in a space where all sound was cut off. The sound of breathing, the sound of his thumping heart, the sound of his clothes rustling all made him feel lax. Solitude, depending on the person, was the best kind of rest.

Eventually, the lights turned on, signifying the start of the play, and once the noise from the audience seats died down, the scattered tension gathered on the stage. The moment the high density of tension turned into just the right amount of pressure, Maru once again confirmed that he was in his best state.

On the stage were his club members. Daemyung at the center was saying his lines without any mistakes, and the club members lying down behind him were acting individually while waiting for their turn.

There were no mistakes, and the momentum was okay as well.

Everything was going well without any problems, but Maru couldn't help but smile bitterly.

Maybe they shouldn't have watched after all - he muttered to himself behind the side curtain.

Today was the 2nd day of the southern Gyeonggi preliminaries. Maru hesitated when he saw the list of schools posted outside Anyang Hall. Hwasoo High and Myunghwa High. The two schools in front of Woosung Engineering High were the two schools that pushed Woosung High to 3rd place and went to the finals. Myunghwa High had her, and Hwasoo High had Heewon. Myunghwa High boasted the greatest skills in the Gyeonggi province, and that went without saying. Meanwhile, Hwasoo High did impressive performances centered around Heewon. In order to advance to the regional finals, there was a need to beat one of these two schools at least.

Myunghwa High was first, Hwasoo High was second. Woosung Engineering High was 5th in turn, so there was plenty of time left. As the plays started in the morning and ended late in the afternoon, their original plan was to practice in the opening next to the hall, but the performances of Myunghwa High and Hwasoo High were things that attracted the acting club's attention.

They wondered whether they should watch or not.

They weren't the type of people who would make a mistake just because they lacked an hour or two of practice. If they were that bad, then they wouldn't even be aiming for the grand prize in the first place. They clearly wanted to know what the people who won against them last year were like.

At that moment, Daemyung quietly called over Maru. Taesik had said that he was going to join them in the afternoon, so the decision was up to Daemyung. Before he even asked what Daemyung was going to do, he said that he wanted to see the plays.

Honestly, Maru thought that it might be dangerous. Actors who had consolidated their own system of acting would not be easily influenced by other people's acting. However, that didn't apply to the club members here. If they experienced a fresh shock or were deeply impressed by someone else's acting, they might subconsciously change their acting style. If they showed an acting style that they didn't even practice because they judged that they decided on a better acting style, that would become a variable in itself. Becoming 'better' at acting meant becoming different from before. The other club members might feel that discrepancy and panic slightly. Practicing was done in order to decrease mistakes, which creates a frame for everyone, but a sudden change in someone's actions may break that frame.

High school plays were usually done in a fashion where everyone followed the instructions to a tee rather than watching others' every action and then sharing their emotions and acting naturally according to that. That was natural. They had to show a completed play in such a short time, so they did not have the time to learn properly. So rather than striving towards completion step by step, they would try to fit themselves into an already completed script.

Blue Sky's play was at a decent completion rate in Maru's eyes. They would be able to show the audience a decent play without any mistakes if they brought themselves under just enough pressure before the play began.

Daemyung's point was regarding that.

Not making any mistakes and achieving results. While they were similar, they were definitely not the same.

They weren't able to follow Myunghwa High in terms of completion rate. Over there, they even held auditions before starting to practice for a play. Furthermore, their facilities and support from the school couldn't be compared to Woosung High's either.

In terms of being 'impressive', Hwasoo High was ahead of them. Woosung High might be ahead of them in terms of completion rate, but Heewon's stage energy was enough to cover up trivial mistakes as though they had never happened.

Being average in every field was Woosung High's advantage as well as disadvantage. In this situation, Daemyung said that they should watch the plays of the two schools as a means for them to advance to the finals. It was similar to cramming for an exam, in a sense. Daemyung said that while there was the risk of ruining the frame of their play, there was also the opportunity for them to improve.

The only way Woosung High with its inferior number of members and support could win against those two was to watch the other teams' acting and improve themselves in a short period of time. Daemyung seemed convinced about that.

-Also, if we watch the plays of schools that are ahead of us, they may stimulate us to do better. If we find a point we're better at, our confidence levels will rise as well.

Of course, Daemyung was thinking about the inverse effects as well. Maru told him that they should talk to the other members about it, and the other club members immediately said that they should watch it as though they had been waiting for Daemyung to say that.

Daemyung emphasized that they shouldn't think too deeply as they watched the play, and the club members nodded vigorously. Even Dowook said that they should go in quickly. It seemed that the loss from last time had frustrated him quite a lot as well.

After putting their possessions on one side of the waiting room, they quietly entered the hall. They might distract the people on stage if they wore patient clothes - their stage costumes - so they changed into ordinary clothes.

They waited around 10 minutes for Myunghwa High's play to start. There were sixteen people on stage. The number of staff members moving around during blackouts was quite high as well.

Maru watched the stage with his mouth firmly shut. Myunghwa High's play was one where they modified Hamlet into a modern version, and the basic code seemed to be humor. When the line 'To be or not to be: that is the question' came from a passerby, the audience laughed. The structure of the play, the acting of the actors, the acoustic and light controls - everything seemed perfect to the point that he couldn't think of it as a high school play anymore. The fast-paced music that sounded in the middle of the play seemed to be created by them as well as the voices of the actors could be heard from it. The actors moved according to the music as though it was a musical, and despite the complex movement lines, they did not clash with each other even once.

We can't win against that - he heard those words next to him. Aram was the one who said that and no one seemed to disagree. Daemyung said that they should find something to learn from in a small voice, but everyone had become an ordinary audience member and was just watching them. It was just that overwhelming. It clearly showed why Myunghwa High swept the national prizes for the past several years.

Maru looked at her, who was combing her hair in a funny manner in one corner of the stage. *She* seemed to doubt her own acting skills, but in Maru's eyes, they were incredibly good. *She* was the one that shined the most among the sixteen actors on stage. Of course, it might be because he was lovestruck with *her*.

After Myunghwa High's play ended, the club members left and everyone sighed. However, they didn't seem to be depressed. They were probably just surprised because Myunghwa High did unexpectedly well.

While they took a break, Daemyung gathered everyone and had a talk. They quickly gathered opinions, analyzed them, and shared them with everyone else. They changed their acting while being careful to not change it too much.

After that, they entered again and watched Hwasoo High's performance.

Hwasoo High's stage definitely lacked in the level of completion. The simple-looking lights and sound seemed even a little bland compared to Myunghwa High's musical-like play. However, the situation was completely reversed ever since Heewon came on stage. The bland-looking production instead emphasized Heewon. It could even be said to be contrast effectiveness. Maru thought that they had made a splendid choice. As a newly-found club, they would not be able to win against the other schools when it came to the completion rate of the play. They had to make a decision, and by boldly abandoning things they did not need, they managed to gain a deep impression. Everyone supported Heewon so that

he could shine on stage. They showed the audience that this stage was purely for Heewon. When Heewon took control of the stage and the play reached its peak, the audience turned freakishly silent.

If Myunghwa High brought out the emotional expressions from the audience, Hwasoo High did not even give them time to do that as they pushed ahead. Maru could not decide which one was better. However, he could say for sure that both of these plays did not lose out compared to the plays he watched in Daehak-ro, albeit in different ways.

Myunghwa High had brought the overall level to a very high level through combined harmony, while Hwasoo High had gained control over the stage with just one main character.

The club members didn't say much after the play ended and they left the hall. Maru understood how they felt. Myunghwa High definitely had points that could be called 'technique'. Those were things that they could follow, reference, and bring into their own play. However, when it came to Hwasoo High, honestly speaking, they were at a level where Woosung High had to teach them, except for just one - Heewon. Heewon's acting wasn't something that they could do something about after just watching him once. It felt different from watching him at Hwasoo High. It felt like a properly armed general had stepped into the front lines. He gave off a completely different pressure from when he was practicing.

They did read-throughs until the play started and burned with passion. They forgot about the things they couldn't imitate and brought in the things they could follow. Eventually, Woosung High's turn came and they were now standing on stage.

Maru looked at the acting of the club members from the edge of the side curtain. Fortunately, they were just like they were during practice. Daemyung's vocal tone was a little high, and it seemed to be his way of inducing the audience to laugh. Myunghwa High's stage code was humor, just like Woosung High. They were likely going to be compared to Myunghwa High rather than Hwasoo High since Hwasoo High went with tragedy. They had to bring their skills up as much as possible. Daemyung was showing an amount of change that did not change the flow of the whole play.

'Good, you're doing good.'

Everyone else seemed to be digesting the sudden change in acting as well. When Jiyeon started crying and blew her nose on Daemyung's clothes, the audience laughed more than Maru had expected. Joining the flow, everyone became more daring. It seemed that Heewon's acting had influenced them positively. The audience also noticed the confidence contained in their play. A play that did not contain any hesitation heightened the immersion rate of the audience.

Whenever he went on stage for his various trivial roles, Maru thought 'maybe'. The situation was improving by the moment. They were fired up more than they were during practice and they expressed their emotions vigorously, but clearly. They also acted boldly as though they had thrown away any kind of embarrassment. He could see that they were bringing out the best in each other. There were parts that looked more awkward than practice, but that didn't lead to making mistakes.

Their acting knitted tighter together. They were perfectly in sync. Maru thought that they were lucky. The coin they threw hoping for heads was spinning around and was falling tails first. He looked forward to the results. They were still lacking in their individual traits compared to the other two schools, but

they seemed to have a chance of winning when everything was averaged out. He thought that they might be able to win against Hwasoo High depending on how the examiners did the scores.

Just then - he didn't know where it started, but - the flow of the play was cut off once. It continued just as usual after that, and there seemed to be no problems, but Maru could clearly feel the difference.

They almost stumbled and fell over - that was the emotion he felt from everyone on stage. There were no mistakes. The play continued just like before.

However, the joy in it was broken. Their acting became more firm. They became perfect as though they would not allow a mistake to happen. At the same time, the fun that excited Maru, the passion that he could clearly feel despite being in the side curtains, had turned cold. The cogwheels that didn't fit slightly, but turned with interesting sounds, had now become cogwheels manufactured to perfection and turned without making a single noise.

Maru watched from the side curtain as the stage reached its end.

"Well done," he said to himself in a small voice as he waited for the curtain call.

The music they prepared started flowing out, and Maru stood at the very end and took a bow while grabbing Aram's hand. The music ended and the curtains fell. When the audience clapped and they walked down the stage, Aram said 'sorry' in a very shaky voice. Maru realized where the flow of the play had been cut off.

"No. You did well. We did really well. We were just... a bit lacking. It's no one's fault, you don't need to apologize."

As soon as Daemyung's words ended, Aram, who always acted boldly, collapsed on the spot and started crying. She was crying like a little child, Jiyeon was crying with her next to her, and the other club members were saying that it was okay. Maru faintly smiled and patted Aram's shoulder before starting to clean up the props.

Their play was over, and the only thing left now was to clean up.

## **Chapter 499**

They cleaned the stage and moved away the props. The hospital mark that was painted on a piece of wood, and the makeshift bed they got from god knows where. The elements that made up the stage felt foreign to Maru. That couldn't be helped. While the rest of the club members prepared for the play, he was at Film or on a set. He bought some of the props, but the props that were made with effort clearly didn't have the slightest traces of him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

After watching everyone surround Aram and give words of encouragement for a while, Maru started moving by himself. He carried the wooden frame out, then the makeshift bed. He greeted the next group of students coming up to the stage for their play and cleared out the rest of the props. Around that time, the other club members started moving as well. As Aram hadn't finished crying yet, she was sniffing as she moved the chairs.

-The next performance will be...

An announcement about the next performance started flowing out of the speakers.

“Well done. Also, Aram, you don’t need to cry. Why are you crying? We haven’t even got the results back yet. You did well.”

Taesik encouraged everyone. Suyeon wasn’t here. She apparently had a shoot.

“I ruined everything because I almost made a mistake,” said Aram while panting.

When she looked like she was about to cry again, the others all surrounded her once more. Even the people that told her that it was okay and that they did their best, had red eyes as though they were about to cry. Even the usually cold Dowook seemed to be sharing their sentiments as he clearly seemed to be holding back something to the point that his Adam's apple was trembling.

After watching everyone encouraging each other for a while, Maru started moving the props onto the back of the truck first. He moved quietly so that the others wouldn’t notice. When he loaded about half of the items, the other club members approached him.

“Seonbae, let’s do it together.”

“Why are you doing it alone?”

They started moving the props onto the truck. As they didn’t have a lot of things for the set nor a lot of props, they were able to finish rather quickly.

“I’ll go ahead by myself first, so take your time. Once you arrive, let’s go get something nice to eat.”

Taesik departed first with the truck. Daemyung led the rest to the bus stop. While they walked, Aram seemed to have calmed down as she no longer cried. Jiyeon and Aram were walking hand in hand and Jiyeon kept talking to her, seemingly to distract her from depression.

“You never know what will happen. We did really well today, so we might be able to win against Hwasoo High. Isn’t that right, seonbae-nim?”

Bangjoo used his usual loud voice to ask Daemyung. Daemyung made a confident expression and said ‘of course’.

“That would’ve been the case if I did a little better back then,” said Aram as she lowered her head.

“Hey, I did several times better than usual, so we’ll go to the finals no matter what you say. I could feel the examiners looking at me all the time. Also, you ‘almost’ made a mistake, you didn’t make one for real. No wait, who cares if you did? I was great. Seonbae-nim. Isn’t that right?” Bangjoo asked for agreement as he raised his head.

Daemyung gave a thumbs up. Jiyeon also clapped and agreed.

“Rather than you, Bangjoo, I did well.”

Even Dowook, who usually didn’t go along with pranks, chimed in this time. When Bangjoo and Dowook were arguing about who did better, Aram eventually chuckled.

“Did you just laugh? You laughed, didn’t you?” asked Jiyeon as she swayed Aram’s arm back and forth.



The laughter, which was as contagious as a sigh, quickly spread amongst everyone else, and the acting club returned to the usual, fun acting club that could be seen back at school. Aram still seemed a little cautious, but she did not mention that it was her fault anymore. After chatting for a while, they patted each other's backs and made relaxing smiles. Maru could see that they were truly caring for each other.

Maru watched that scene from a few steps back. The cries and sighs of regret after the performance, as well as the encouragement and the smiles of harmony that followed suit, were emotions that only they could share. It would be deception if he cried amongst them, and it would go against his conscience to laugh amongst them. He wasn't qualified to join them and discuss the performance together.

Envy - Maru envied the club members in front of him right now. He tried imagining himself in that group, smiling and chatting with them. Maru thought that sharing heated emotions with someone else was an incredible thing, but he eventually just chuckled and dismissed that thought.

It was instead him who had to apologize to everyone - he thought as he made a bitter expression while putting his hands inside his pockets. Between the acting club and studying, Maru chose studying. Making a choice did not mean choosing both sides. It meant abandoning one thing completely, and Maru decided to abandon the acting club. He did make some time to visit. He participated in practice, and he also helped them out by buying them props. It was a suitable compromise after his decision, but the results weren't that good.

The sense of regret in his heart.

When Daemyung told him that they should watch Myunghwa High and Woosung High, he should have persuaded otherwise. Gambles usually ended in failure, and last minute cramming only added to the confusion. However, he could not stop him. In fact, he even agreed that they should watch the other two schools. This was because he was suspicious. Not of the acting of the other club members, but of his own acting. The suspicion naturally gained by those that did not practice enough made him unable to believe the things he had done until now which induced the decision of the wrong choice.

Would things have been different if he focused on the acting club more? Maru hypothesized such a situation, but he soon shook his head. The only thing gained from looking back at the past was the meaningless resolve to do better next time.

'That's just being greedy.'

He did not regret choosing to study over club activities. He had definitely gained a lot from Miso's classes, and he had learned what it was like to stand in front of the camera through various auditions and playing characters in the field. He had definitely chosen the more profitable path if he looked at the bigger picture that was his life. Maru had already imagined that something like this would happen when he told Daemyung that he might not be able to frequent the acting club.

Feeling the same emotions as someone who put in 100% effort while he himself only put in 50% was not possible. That was definitely being too greedy.

"Seonbae, come here quickly."

"Seonbae-nim! Run! The bus is coming!"

Maru nodded as he looked at his juniors waving at him.

He felt very sorry since he neither felt sad nor happy even though the stage had ended. He got on the bus and grabbed the handle. The others stood together at the back and were now talking comfortably.

"Thanks for your work," said Daemyung as he walked up to him.

Maru only replied that he did nothing.

"Do you regret it?" Daemyung asked.

Maru looked at his friend's face. He then slowly gave an answer.

"No. I don't regret my decisions, as sad as it might sound to everyone else."

"That's good. I thought you were regretting it."

"You know I'm not such a romanticist."

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure about that," said Daemyung with a smile.

"How about you? Do you have anything to say to me?"

After thinking about it for a while as he looked out the window, Daemyung replied,

"I do, a lot, actually."

"Really now?"

"Yeah, there's a whole lot. How would it have been if you showed up to practice more often? How would it have been if you talked with everyone else more? How would it have been if you taught them in detail and guided them? Instructor Suyeon was definitely a good instructor, but we didn't work with her that much. In fact, your explanations often sounded easier than hers. I feel like many things would have changed if you showed up more often. Everyone else should be thinking the same thing."

He paused and spat out a deep breath. Maru did not speak. Daemyung's words hadn't ended yet.

"That doesn't mean I hate you. In fact, I'm angry at myself. I feel sorry towards everyone as well. I should've done better to fill your absence so that we wouldn't have to be as urgent before the performance, but I wasn't able to do that. I keep thinking now that we should've spent more time practicing, that we should've concentrated more, things like that. If I did, maybe I would've trusted everyone to stand on stage and perform just like we've been practicing."

Daemyung bitterly smiled.

"It seems like Aram felt something after looking at Heewon's acting. She tried to do something better in the middle, and it didn't go as she had intended. She didn't reveal any mistakes, but everyone felt that they might really make a mistake at that rate. Even I was frozen stiff. How much better could the others be?"

The bus stopped. People got off and got on. Along with a beep, the doors closed, and Daemyung continued speaking,

"Perhaps what I should have said before the performance was not to watch the two other schools and try to learn from them, but that we should trust in what we have done."

After saying those words, Daemyung shrugged once. Maru tapped Daemyung's arm with the back of his hand.

"It would be interesting if the results were actually good."

"True. It would be great if it was like that. We could just laugh it off and say that we were worried for nothing."

After saying those words, Daemyung pointed at the rest of the members talking at the back. Maru shook his head.

"Alright, see you after we get off."

Daemyung walked towards the back. The club members stared at Maru, and Maru just waved his hand to tell them that they shouldn't mind him. He could also see Daemyung stopping Bangjoo from walking up to him.

Maru watched the scenery outside flash by. The last stage he could participate in as a member of a high school acting club was now over. He wasn't planning to participate in club activities in his 3rd year even if he put his name on the list. If they asked for help, he might give them a helping hand, but he would never lead them by any means. Today was the last day he participated as an actor. Although the results weren't out yet, he could intuitively feel it. There was no way the audience wasn't able to realize the discrepancy when he was able to feel it on the stage. He thought that they might have a chance of competing against Hwasoo High for 2nd place if they finished the performance with that momentum, but it was very unlikely that they would win against Hwasoo High's dominating performance with one that became stiff halfway through the play. There was no need to mention Myunghwa High either. They were just on a whole other level.

'The end.'

He rolled that word with his tongue for a while. The times that would never come by again had gone past, and now he had to face a world he had never experienced before.

"What a pity."

If the acting club was to become a memory for him, it would've been better if they won instead. What was he supposed to say after he got off the bus and ate together with everyone else? He could neither say that they did well nor that they should try better next time. Just as he was looking outside in a daze, the other club members had come up to him and were staring at him.

"It's because of you, seonbae."

"Right."

"You should've looked after us more often."

He looked at his juniors with a rather dazzled expression. After saying a word each, they grinned as though they were done before pointing at the door.

"What are you doing, seonbae? We're here."

“Get yourself together.”

“Let’s get off.”

The three juniors got off and Daemyung got off after them.

“Looking cool can come later, you idiot. Get off, we’re getting food.”

Dowook smiled and slapped Maru’s head. Maru chuckled and got off the bus.

The club members were standing in a line at the bus stop.

“Maru, let’s go.”

Daemyung directed his gaze next to him.

The juniors were all waving at Maru to come.

Maru scratched his eyebrows and started walking.

The words that ‘kids know what they need to know’ flashed in his head.

Oh, and one more thing,

‘They are better than adults’ - that as well.

## **Chapter 500**

“Yes, happy new year to you too. Be healthy and I hope you earn a lot of... I mean, I hope you get good grades.”

Daemyung hung up from the other side of the phone while laughing. It was January 1st of 2005. Last year, he spent New Years at the hospital, but fortunately for him, he didn’t have to do that this year. He felt nervous even when he thought about that event now. If Daemyung and Dojin did not return back then, he wouldn’t be at the hospital, but somewhere much worse. Perhaps the woman in white might have come for him with a disappointed expression again. All while saying ‘you died again, huh’ or something like that.

“Oppa, I’m leaving.”

Bada was busy even on the first day of the year. She was probably going out to meet Dowook. The holidays began and the acting club no longer had any practice. Since all they had was time, it wouldn’t be surprising for the two to meet up. The two seemed to be getting along well as they had hung out frequently without fighting that much until now. Dowook complained to Maru about how Bada always wanted to go to idol concerts, but he seemed quite weak at heart from how he ended up going with her anyway.

‘I wonder if he’s okay though. He was going at it yesterday....’

He laughed to himself when he thought about how Dowook fainted while holding onto the toilet seat.

Two days ago, the results came out. When Taesik said that they didn’t make it, the club members smiled bitterly before sighing. The shock didn’t seem to be as big since they had expected it somewhat.

Suyeon, who joined them later, said that they should have fun precisely at times like those and took them to her apartment, where they had a wild drinking party like last time. Maru was unable to get any rest since he had to look after those that lost themselves, but he felt a little better after being able to help them, even if he got no rest. It was a twisted way of consolation as an adult. After that, he had to face Suyeon in drinking, and he could only get some rest after seeing Suyeon doze off.

In the morning, he cooked up some bean sprout soup for the half-dead students. When he returned home after sending the zombie students home, he realized that tomorrow was the next year.

"I hope there won't be any accidents this year," he said to himself before standing up.

Today, he had something to do. It was about time he got ready and left.

"Mom, I'm leaving too."

"Are you going to be back late?"

"No, I won't be that late."

"Alright, be careful on your way."

Ever since she quit her job, Maru's mother's complexion had definitely become better. Although it had only been a few days since she started resting, his mother no longer woke up in the mornings while coughing, and now woke up energetically and prepared breakfast. Maru's father also really rejoiced when he found out that his wife quit her job. Maru could still remember how he had a smile on his face as he drank beer by himself during dinner. It would be great if he did that in front of his wife, but like any other breadwinner of his age, he was awkward at expressing himself in front of his family. Even so, though, Maru's mother should've noticed already - about how worried he was about her.

"I'm off."

Maru opened the door.

\* \* \*

"I told you not to eat in my car."

"Your car is already pretty dirty. A couple of crumbs shouldn't make a difference. You don't even clean your car often, but you're acting like a clean freak. Hey, hey! There's a car upfront!"

Miso let go of the wheel and reached out for Ganghwan, who sat on the passenger seat. Ganghwan screamed at her to look forward, but she did not bat an eyelid and grabbed Ganghwan's hair before rocking it back and forth. Only when Ganghwan apologized and put down the bag of snacks did Miso loosen her grip.

"Maru."

"Yes."

"Should we get off and grab a taxi or something?"

"I think that is a wise choice, but I think you should ask if you can get off in the first place."

Maru made a stiff smile. Geunsoo, who sat next to him, was the same.

“Men in the back seats. If we die, we die together. Alright?”

Miso giggled and stepped on the gas. Maru shut himself up before grabbing the handle above the window. Geunsoo put on his seatbelt.

The car, which was far from what was considered ‘neat’, was filled with all sorts of stage costumes, books, as well as cute dolls. Soojin was probably responsible for the dolls. Whenever Miso turned the wheel, the clothes and the dolls rocked left and right. No, ‘rolling around’ was probably a better expression.

“Geunsoo hyung-nim.”

“Yeah.”

“You should’ve brought your car.”

“I’m regretting that too.”

The car with the four people in it climbed up a hill. After climbing on a wobbly road for a while, the car stopped on the side of the road. As soon as the car stopped, Maru opened the door and rushed out. Geunsoo and Ganghwan did the same.

“Phew.”

He was sweating profusely. He knew that Miso’s way of driving was quite harsh, but today, it reached the level of a circus. He had his suspicions when she stepped on the gas while panting heavily on the driver’s seat, but he never imagined that she would be this rough.

“Apparently, she fought with the man that’s going to be her husband,” Ganghwan quietly whispered as he looked at Miso making a refreshed expression.

Maru and Geunsoo nodded their heads while saying ‘ah’. Miso said that she was going to get married this May. He could still remember how Miso acted a little embarrassed when she said that she was going to be a bride of May.

‘She should be busy right now because of that.’

The wedding wasn’t such a heavy occasion in itself. It was just that the process of getting there was quite tiring. She was probably starting to prepare now if she wanted to reserve a wedding hall she liked for May. Taking into account the photoshoot, honeymoon as well as the most important residence, it would be strange if a fight did not break out.

“A civil servant versus a famous acting instructor. In my opinion, I think it would be Miso noo-nim who should be buying the house and Mr. Taesik who should be marrying into her family,” Maru sneakily added.

“From what I know of her character, I’m sure she has saved up an enormous amount of money. Who knows, she might already have an apartment in Gangnam. No, I’m pretty sure she has one. I’m sure of it.”

Ganghwan's words contained conviction.

"I still can't believe that she's getting married. If I think about how she was during high school.... phew."

Even Geunsoo, whose moniker was the lunatic during his time at Woosung High, seemed to be helpless in front of Miso.

"I still can't believe it."

"Mr. Taesik is a really good person. Maybe she knows his weakness or something?"

"That sounds plenty plausible. Maybe his household isn't doing well financially."

"Aah, so he's being sold out, huh. Tsk, tsk. He gave me a good impression too."

Just as they were whispering to each other, Miso approached them asking what they were doing. Maru and Ganghwan immediately looked up at the sky, while Geunsoo took out his phone and put it against his ear.

"Let's go in. He should be waiting for us."

Miso pressed the bell. A dog barking could be heard closing in on them before Junmin showed up at the door.

"The door's open."

Junmin walked back in again after saying those words. Geunsoo opened the front door and entered. Maru waved at Dalgu, who was jumping around in joy in the front yard. He seemed to have remembered his scent as he wagged his tail around him.

"I think this guy hates me."

Miso reached out, attempting to stroke Dalgu's head, but Dalgu turned his head away and stared at Miso's hand. Miso reached out again to touch Dalgu's head, but Dalgu didn't allow it so easily. Watching that, Ganghwan and Geunsoo tickled Dalgu's neck for Miso to see before going inside. The two were grinning.

"Alright, this is only the second time, so I'm not surprised he's wary of me. But at least welcome me properly next time, alright?"

Miso waved at Dalgu before going inside. Maru and Dalgu crossed the main door together. The warm air and the smell of doenjang. The elder's house hadn't changed at all.

"So you're all here."

The elder was sitting in the kitchen while Junmin was brewing some tea.

"It's really uncomfortable when there's no one below me. I mean, I have to make the tea and everything."

"That's how it works."

Junmin placed the tea on the table.

The four of them greeted the elder before sitting down.

“What made you come all the way here in this cold weather?”

“Of course, to say hi for New Years,” Ganghwan said.

The elder laughed and thanked him.

“I heard that Miso’s getting married?”

“Yes, sir. I decided to hold it in May.”

“I see. Congratulations. You must be busy right now if you’re planning on May.”

“Don’t even talk about that. She has been on the edge since the morning and she....”

As soon as Ganghwan tried to say something, Miso pressed his thighs with her elbow. Ganghwan groaned and made a teary face, and the elder laughed out loud while nodding.

“Marriage is always a noisy thing. You find out that your ideals and values might be different just before marriage, and you may get into a fight because of that. As long as you talk to each other a lot and adjust yourselves, and you listen to each other more than you listen to the others around you, these harsh times will become an opportunity to tie you closer together.”

I will - Miso slowly nodded as she replied.

“Give me an invitation once they’re out. I will definitely make some time to go.”

“Of course I will. But uhm, sir, I’m really not good at being roundabout, can I ask you to officiate for us?”

The elder seemed a little startled as well by her bold request as he didn’t say anything for a while.

Maru didn’t think she’d ask him to officiate at their wedding when she was here to greet him for New Years. He inwardly smiled as he looked at Miso.

“If you’re alright with me, I guess I can but... did you talk about this with your partner?”

“Yes. My fiancé also told me that it would be really great if you could do it.”

My fiancé - Maru almost burst out laughing when he heard that word. When he looked next to him, he found that Geunsoo and Ganghwan were also clenching their teeth trying not to laugh. Even Junmin was scratching his forehead, trying to control his twitching lips.

“I see, if you have already come to an agreement, I shall do it for you. But I’m worried if the parents of both of you are okay with it.”

“Sir, please don’t worry about that. Actually, you might have to prepare yourself. My mom might run up to you and ask you for an autograph halfway through the ceremony.”

The elder laughed and sipped his tea.

“How are you doing these days, Geunsoo?”



"I'm reading through a few scenarios I got. I seemed to have gotten lucky last year and there have been some talks."

"Rather than luck, it must be because of your skill. I hope you encounter good work. Only when you do well will the guy next to me smile brightly for me."

The elder pointed at Junmin with his chin.

"I was just going to find someone to do a ritual to wish that everything goes well. It would've been great if I started on that movie, but that went down the drain."

"There are a lot of fraudulent people in this field whether in the past or now."

The elder turned around to Ganghwan.

"As for you... I just hope you don't cause an accident. That's all I want from you."

"No way, sir. You should say some good words for me too."

"I saw you just a few days ago. What would saying a few more words do? I already told you everything over a drink."

"That's not true."

"Just don't cause an accident, and get married after meeting a good woman like Miso. If you do, you'll be able to have a good year. Are you thirty-two this year? That's the perfect year to get married."

"Sir. I can acknowledge everything but the fact that Miso is a good woman. You should really see what she's really like. She's only obedient and humorous in front of you, you know?"

"Boy, what's bad about Miso? Don't speak nonsense and find a good woman to get married to. Geunsoo, you too."

"Haha. I'll do my best."

Geunsoo laughed.

The elder's gaze was directed to Maru this time.

"I see that you're fortunately intact this year."

"I had the same thought yesterday."

"Yes, yes. Health is always the priority. Don't push yourself just because you're young and you should be careful in the future. Don't get close to alcohol and smoking like a certain someone."

"I will bear that in mind."

"However, you should drink on a day like this. Ganghwan. There's ginseng wine in the cupboard. When would I open it if not on a day like this. Bring it here."

"...Elder."

The elder laughed heartily. Ganghwan quickly stood up and went to the kitchen. Maru also stood up. He got the drinking glasses and looked for light side dishes in the refrigerator.

“Drinking during the day is the best kind of drinking.”

Ganghwan said as he put the ginseng wine on the table. The thick yellow color made it look like it was brewed properly. At that moment, the bell rang.

“I’ll go get the door.”

Maru put his shoes on and walked outside. Outside the main gate was Suyeon, who was wearing a white sweater and jeans. He could also see Sooil yawning on the side.

“Open the door!” shouted Suyeon as she waved her hand above her head.