

Once Again 631

Chapter 631

"I want to visit too."

"Now is not a good time. I'll definitely bring you if I have the chance, though."

Bada smiled, telling Gaeul that she had to keep her promises.

"How are classes?"

Maru was peeling an apple with a fruit knife. The peels were so thin that light passed right through them. Bada said that it was one of her brother's few specialties.

"I'm trying my best not to lag behind."

"Is it hard?"

"I can't really say whether it's easy or difficult. The assignments that the teacher gives me are definitely simple things, but I have to think about a lot of things when I do them. I can just take it easy and take a break, but I keep holding onto them because I find something lacking."

"It doesn't sound boring at least. That sounds good."

"I don't have any time to get bored. I can't say it's fun all the time, but I've never felt like I am wasting my time. I think teacher sees what's lacking in me."

"Sounds like a good person. Here, take this."

Maru forked a slice of apple and gave it to her. After being surprised due to the surprisingly smooth exterior, Gaeul put it in her mouth. Maru probably would've done well even if he chose cooking as his career. Bada ate the apples lying down and ended up coughing before sitting up. That was immediately after Maru told her that she would become a cow if she ate lying down. Gaeul smiled and put the rest of the apple in her mouth. The apple crumbled with a pleasant crunch. Had she ever visited a friend's house on a Sunday morning and had a conversation like this? She stretched her legs, which she had modestly put to her side. It was comfortable. The awareness that this was someone else's house disappeared into the back of her throat along with the apple.

"Unni, what do you like about my brother?"

That almost made her choke. She gathered her legs again and put them by her side. Bada was smiling at her while she was holding up her chin with both of her hands while lying down. Gaeul looked around her to find a helper. Maru, who was still holding an apple, had a similar smile as Bada, and was looking at her as though he was looking for an answer. The quarrelling siblings combined their forces in an instant. Seeing the impenetrable wall in front of her, Gaeul just kept staring at the wall.

"Oppa, what do you like about Gaeul-unni?"

"Everything."

The answer that came without hesitation pressured Gaeul even more. The way these two asked and answered such questions like it was nothing was definitely proof that they were siblings. It wasn't that it was a difficult question. She had a few answers she could easily respond with. She didn't know when she got those answers ready, but plausible-sounding answers were raising their hands inside her. Gaeul chose to save her words even though she could just reply nonchalantly and smile it off. She knew that they were joking with her and that they weren't looking for some grandiose answer, but for some reason, she couldn't speak that easily. She saw Bada not saying anything after blinking a couple of times. Gaeul saw her fingers slowly curling up, and her shoulders crouching inwards as well. It was clear that Bada felt embarrassed when Gaeul reacted seriously since she was just joking. Say something - Gaeul spoke with difficulty as she looked at Maru.

"Sorry."

There were a lot of pretty words in her mind. It would've been fine even if she picked any random item off the display in her mind. Or, she could've grabbed one of the toys that sprung up when it was opened. Sorry - that was definitely not on the list. On the list of numerous words in her mind, 'sorry' definitely did not exist. Where was that from? Why that word out of all things?

"Unni... I was just...."

Bada sat up now. Gaeul brought both of her hands to her mouth. She felt like she was really going to feel sorry. She felt chaotic. Why did she have to choose that word out of everything and make people awkward?

"Han Bada, she got you good this time."

Maru gave Bada a big sliced apple. Bada accepted the apology in an awkward posture.

"What does that mean?"

"Don't you get it? Gaeul was joking with you."

"Really?"

"That's how frightening an actor can get if they decide to set their mind on teasing someone. You were fooled instantly, weren't you?"

"That startled me! I thought unni was angry,"

The tension in the atmosphere loosened up immediately. Bada lay down again and started eating the apple.

"Unni, you are really good at acting. I thought you were angry."

Gaeul wasn't a fool who would pour cold water over this situation by telling the truth. She made the smile that she practiced hundreds, thousands of times. She felt like the natural smile stemming from her emotions would creak like a broken cogwheel.

"Were you surprised?"

"I was. I won't do that next time. Unni, you are a formidable foe."

Maru pushed the tray with the apple peels and the empty plate over to Bada.

“Can you get out of the way now since you’re done eating?”

“Fine. I know when to leave. But also, you can’t do something strange, okay? I’m going to be listening to everything.”

Bada took the tray to the kitchen before going into her room. Gaeul had a smile until she closed her door. She didn’t know when to put it away.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you panicking so much,” Maru said.

He sounded as though he had seen through the fact that she wasn’t playing a joke a long time ago. He probably sent Bada away after noticing that something was strange.

“It came out of nowhere.”

“Now that’s a little suspicious. Are you sure you didn’t do something wrong to me?”

“There’s nothing like that.”

It wasn’t something she should get angry about since she was the cause of it, but her words sounded thorny. She felt really strange today. She thought about the date of her period. It was still some days off, but her relaxed mind and body became tense like a kitten that had seen a person in an alleyway when she was asked what she liked about Maru.

“Do you want some green plum tea? It will make you relax.”

Gaeul nodded. She contemplated as she looked at Maru standing in the kitchen. Was she supposed to apologize? Was she supposed to thank him? Or should she talk about something else as though nothing had happened? Maru started humming. It was a song that Gaeul knew as well. It was the song that her father used to hum all the time when he was in a good mood. She hummed it herself a few times in front of Maru, and it seemed that he had memorized it. She dazedly looked at him as she listened to the melody that entered her ears. Why do you like him? Bada’s voice became vivid again through that music.

‘Why do I like him?’

She rolled that question in her mouth. She realized why she said sorry. She didn’t know why she liked him. There was nothing that she could say ‘this is it’ about. She could say that it was a combination of many different things that made her like him, but she couldn’t think of a single thing to give as an example. That was why she was ‘sorry’. It was because she couldn’t easily say why she liked him.

Gaeul looked at Maru, who was stirring a cup with a teaspoon. She definitely liked him. There was nothing false about that. But why was it that the word ‘sorry’ preceded the word ‘I like you’ when she looked at him?

“Here.”

“Thanks.”

It was just warm enough to drink. It seemed that Maru had cooled down the tea by pouring some cold water into the boiling tea.

"I like you."

"I know."

Maru faintly smiled before he drank. Gaeul drank a sip of the light brown-colored tea. It was just as Maru said. It calmed her down a little.

"When I heard Bada ask me that question, I was suddenly at a loss for words. I just couldn't think of a reason for why I liked you. However, it's not like I hate you either. It's so strange, isn't it?"

She could just not talk about this anymore, but she didn't want to do that.

"That's how it usually is."

"Is it like that for you too?"

She didn't ask that question just because she wanted him to sympathize. She was really curious as to whether Maru also felt the stuffy feeling that arose when he couldn't think of a reason for why he liked her even though he liked her.

"Honestly speaking, if someone asked me to explain why I like you, I don't think I can even say sorry."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Let's just say that it's a very complex thing that adults have."

Maru twitched his eyebrows before drinking the remaining tea. The tea had already cooled down.

"You don't have to be sorry. Anyone would be at a loss for words when a family member of your partner asks that question. It would be even more strange if you could smoothly talk it out. Liking someone isn't something that needs to be checked by others, is it? It's fine as long as you can accept it. If you want to boast, I guess you'll have to come up with clear reasons for it, but if it's your own emotions and you just feel that way, I don't think there's a need to express it clearly in words. Don't you think so too? If there's someone you like, and you definitely like that person, that's enough, isn't it? Expressing reasons for liking your partner is something you only do when you start dating. In that sense, we're quite incredible you know? We're like a married couple who's in their boredom stage already."

It was Maru's usual jokes. Gaeul smiled and gave Maru her cup since he asked for it.

"I'll wash the dishes now. You can watch some of the videotapes in the meantime. You just need to press play since there's one in the machine already."

Maru stood up with the cups. Gaeul did not put away her smile until the moment Maru turned around. Her head definitely understood. She accepted that it was fine as long as there was a feeling of liking him without any detailed explanations. His words were idealistic, and they also calmed her down.

Gaeul clenched her hands, which were on the ground, into a fist. So then, why did her heart feel so stuffy? She felt as though a black cloth was tightly wrapped around the lantern of 'I like him'. The light faintly seeping out of it made her realize that she was in love with him, but she wanted to have a look at

the lump of emotions burning inside the tightly wrapped cloth directly. What was it? What was this thing that prevented her from seeing her feelings towards him directly? Gaeul tried her best to unwrap that black cloth, but she couldn't do it.

Sorry - that came to her mind again.

Just what did she feel sorry about?

Gaeul sighed softly as she looked at Maru washing the dishes with a smile on his face.

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Did something bad happen? - Maru looked at Gaeul, who had a vague smile on her face. There were times when she made awkward expressions to the point that it was obvious. Anyone else might not have noticed, but Maru could tell instantly. Especially in these kinds of situations where her expression was contrary to her actions. When she smiled, she usually opened her hands wide like a paper fan. Right now, though, she clenched her hands into a fist like a curled up animal cub.

Maru wondered if he had to ask, but decided not to in the end. Gaeul was a wise woman. If it needed mentioning, she would've mentioned it on her own volition.

"You're practicing with Heewon, aren't you?"

He changed the direction of the conversation to switch the mood a little. Gaeul brightened up instantly and nodded. Anyone acting with Lee Heewon while studying acting would react like that. After all, he was somewhat akin to a fantasy creature when it came to acting.

"He's special, isn't he?"

"You tell me! I was really surprised when I first met him. I thought he was lying."

"About how he sees colors?"

"Yeah. I realized when I practiced with him though. He sees something that I can't."

"He's an amazing guy."

"Did you see him too?"

"Just briefly. It was near intuitive acting. In one way, it was like an artistic performance. It feels a bit iffy though when I think that he's getting proper education."

"Why?"

"Because we're in the same field. We're bound to be competing some day."

Gaeul made a flabbergasted expression when he said that before bursting out into laughter. It wasn't the fragile smile she could barely maintain, but a refreshing one. She returned to her before Bada's question. Maru inwardly sent a letter of gratitude to Heewon, who should be sleeping somewhere at this time. Thanks to him, he managed to turn things around.

"But the person in this video is even more incredible than him."

“Really?”

“In my eyes at least. Heewon will definitely become better with more time, but for now, the person in the video is better. See for yourself. Watching her might be helpful for you too.”

Maru picked up the remote from the sofa.

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She was a woman who pleased her just by being there. When Gaeul looked at the woman brightly smiling on the screen, she subconsciously smiled as well. Gaeul fell for the charm of that woman after watching her for about an hour. Leaving aside the acting part, she was filled with the desire to meet her as a person. That daringness, that kindness. The camera always focused on her. It probably wasn't intentional. It was probably just that she naturally became the center of everyone when everyone gathered, making her end up at the center of the frame.

“She passed away?”

“A long time ago. Apparently, it was a traffic accident.”

Jung Haejoo. A person who could make a smile like that passed away in an accident? It was very unfortunate. How tragic the people who've spent time with her must have felt - she never saw her in person, but she could feel how that felt like.

The screen turned blank before continuing again. It seemed that some time had passed. It was the same practice room, but everyone wasn't in it. The only ones on screen were Jung Haejoo, Maru's agency's president, a man wearing a neat suit, and a high school girl who had a grumbly expression on her face. Gaeul fixed her eyes on that girl after Haejoo. When Maru asked if she recognized who that girl was with a smile, Gaeul was unable to answer. She felt like she had seen that girl somewhere, but couldn't think of who it was. When she registered that the name of that girl was Ahn Joohyun, Gaeul grabbed Maru's hand and asked him if it was real.

The contents of the video were similar to before. Haejoo would show off her acting, and the president would tell her what she had to fix. It was an affectionate scene. She was reminded of her own teacher who taught her acting with a serious expression. The practice, which seemed like it was going to end on a good note, suddenly took a different path. Haejoo suddenly doubted her talents and expressed her lack of confidence. Maru's president said that they should rest for the rest of the day after hearing those words. Suddenly, a sharp voice interrupted the two. It was Joohyun, who seemed angry.

Joohyun proactively agreed with Haejoo and attacked the president. She said something about how she didn't like him from the beginning and pointed his actions out. It looked as though a fight was about to break out, but the president's following words extinguished the kindling of fire instantly.

I believe in her. The president's words were long, but to sum it up, it was that he had faith in Jung Haejoo. It was a declaration of truth rather than his expression of faith. Gaeul was truly impressed by the president's words. There was probably nothing more reassuring than those words to someone who was about to get tired of oneself. Haejoo probably cheered up as well. As soon as the president's words ended, Joohyun rushed out. Gaeul felt like she could understand how she felt. It was clear that Joohyun liked Haejoo and cherished her. She did her best in order to protect her big sister, but the president saw

through the errors in her words and even cheered Haejoo up, so she must have been quite embarrassed. Gaeul never knew that the actress who held nothing back against the press had a past like that. She felt somewhat happy because she felt like she now shared a cute secret with her.

The camera shook a little. It seemed that Joohyun ended up touching the tripod as she left. The camera was slightly pointing towards the left, capturing the president looking towards the direction Joohyun left with a bitter expression. It seemed as though he regretted being harsh with her, even though it was too late. Just as she was focused on the president's zoomed in face, she saw a person moving in the corner. It was Haejoo, who was looking at the president's back. She was clutching her chest as though she was stifled, and she was licking her lips. The moment she felt a sense of desperation from her, the screen turned off. The video was over.

"It's like a drama, isn't it?"

"Huh? Yeah."

Haejoo's eyes that looked at the president lingered in her mind. Just what was that expression? It wasn't that she was scolding the president for being harsh on Joohyun, nor thanking him for cherishing her. It was more like the despair of not being able to tell him what she had to say. That was what Gaeul felt in that brief instant. Was she wrong? The videotapes weren't made in high quality, and Haejoo only briefly appeared in the corner, so it was likely that she was mistaken. Emotions only appeared according to the situation. There was no context or reason for Haejoo to make such an expression, so she must have been wrong. Perhaps it was her uneasy heart that made her see it that way. Gaeul saw Maru approaching the TV in order to change the videotape. It was this precise emotion in the video as well - expressed by the way Haejoo looked at the president. She was suddenly reminded of the rabbit she saw in a dream. Time is something that can be rewinded - those words tickled her ears.

"In this one, senior Jung Haejoo's acting changes."

Maru played the new videotape. A dim light shone down on the stage. Haejoo and the president were talking to each other in the center of the stage. The usual advice seemed to come out before the conversation headed towards a difficult to understand direction. Haejoo said that there was another self inside her. That self was specialized in acting, and she said that she could bring out that ability through talking with that self. Haejoo, who closed her eyes as though she was praying, looked sacred. A moment later, she opened her eyes and started acting.

Just as Maru had said, Haejoo's acting took a dramatic turn from that moment onwards. It was unbelievable even though she was seeing it for herself. It changed from a 'rather decent acting' to an 'acting that she couldn't take her eyes off of'. The prayer seemed like a magic spell. Gaeul was unable to hold back her shock when she looked at the change in the acting style.

"I think she's like the de-facto standard of immersive acting," Maru said.

She felt that it was the right idea. That acting attracted all five senses. While she watched the screen, all of her senses were pointing towards Haejoo. She felt like she could smell things from her, and felt like she could touch her. It was as though a slice of the TV was planted in her head. Haejoo's acting left that deep of an impression. It felt like she could replay it back in her head if she closed her eyes. Just thinking of it made her heart feel full of emotions. Gaeul had tasted a sensation like this a few times before. It

was when she watched her favorite movie; when she looked at the character that lived and breathed inside it. She played back a scene from it over and over again with the hot passion of wanting to act like them. Whenever she did, her heart raced like it was going to burst. The acting of the woman on the screen was not lacking even when compared to the seniors in the industry who had left their names behind as legends. In fact, her emotions that made people's heart ache was better than anyone she had seen before. It was incredibly difficult to express so much emotion with a character created on the spot, yet Haejoo managed to succeed.

She watched the screen with admiration, envy, and jealousy as an actress like her before turning her head around. Maru's face was filled with something very easy to read as he watched the TV while pressing his lower lip. Fighting spirit. It was the spirit of challenge and pure passion. Gaeul looked at his face from the side without thinking about anything else. He, who was in arm's reach of her; was close enough that she could hear him breathing, looked strangely distant. There was an immeasurable psychological distance between the physical space. Was it because of the difference in their attitude towards acting? It didn't feel like that. Things much more fundamental and indescribable seemed to have piled up to create this sense of distance. The distance towards Maru looked endlessly far. She felt like it was an illusion that she could reach him when she reached her arms out.

Gaeul reached out and grabbed Maru's sleeves. The texture of the clothes and the sensation of touch calmed her down.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

I grabbed you because you seemed to be getting distant - she couldn't say those words. Just as she was being conscious of the sudden distance, she heard a voice. Gaeul turned her head around. Did the house upstairs turn the radio on in a loud volume? Or did someone shout from outside? The moment she focused on her ears in order to find the source of the vivid voice, she realized that the voice wasn't coming from the outside, but from inside her.

"Wait."

Gaeul went to the bathroom. A voice she could not understand swirled inside her. She felt like cold sweat was flowing down from the side of her head. Her figure reflected in the mirror was a mess. Could a person become so pale so suddenly? She saw her eyes angrily shooting upwards. Gaeul pressed between her eyes with her palm. Was she lacking sleep?

She sat down on the toilet. She felt very strange. There was that dream she had, and there was that strange sense of distance as well. It felt like her day was messed up as badly as it could be. She wondered if taking some headache medicine would make her feel better. Eventually, the voice that made its presence known inside her faded away. She was reminded of when she lost her umbrella during a storm when she was little. She was unable to hold herself steady because of the wind, and she was unable to get a hold of herself because of all the loud noise around her. That was how she felt right now. Just as she calmed down her breathing and had the thought that she might be ill, a very clear voice resounded inside her. Unlike the storm of language that swirled until just moments ago, it was something that she could understand.

-I want to act.

* * *

Maru had a look at the clock. Gaeul's demeanor looked very bad. It had been ten minutes since she went to the bathroom, and just as long had passed without him being able to hear anything. Just as he was about to stand up, worried that something was happening, the bathroom suddenly opened.

"I-I heard it."

"What?"

"A voice. I heard a voice."

"What voice?"

Gaeul blinked her eyes and raised a finger. The direction her finger was pointing to was the paused screen.

"I heard a voice from here," she said as she put her right hand on her chest as though to calm herself down.

Maru had her sit on the sofa first.

"Do you feel ill?"

"No, it's not that. I just heard it. It wasn't a mistake. I really heard another voice inside me."

"Are you saying that there's another you inside you like what senior Haejoo said?"

"I'm not sure yet. I just heard a voice. I was startled and stayed still before focusing again, but it disappeared soon after. I'm not lying. It really....."

Gaeul hurriedly added hand gestures as she tried to explain. Maru grabbed her hands, which were waving around without direction in the air.

"Calm down. I believe you. So let's calm down a little, okay?"

"Ah, okay. Looks like I was too surprised and didn't know what to do."

She took a deep breath before gulping

"I looked strange, didn't I?"

"No."

"I really heard it. I really heard a voice inside me."

"Do you remember what that voice said?"

"Most of it was things I couldn't understand, but there was one thing I heard for sure. She said she wanted to act."

Her stiff face blushed before it turned into an expression of excitement. However, a moment later, Gaeul made an awkward smile after looking at the screen once.

“A mistake. It must have been a mistake, right?”

“If you heard it clearly, it shouldn’t be.”

“But it doesn’t make sense, though. A voice that is unrelated to my will.”

“But the person over there seems like she has experienced such a thing,” Maru said as he pointed at Haejoo.

“Calm down for now. You don’t have a headache or feel hurt anywhere, do you?”

“I don’t. I felt a bit unpleasant until just moments ago, but I’m completely fine now. No, I feel refreshed.”

“That’s fine then.”

She repeatedly opened and closed her lips as though she didn’t know what to say next. The moment she thought of what she had to say and was about to speak,

“What’s happening?”

Bada opened the door.

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“You should stay for longer.”

“I’ll come again next time. See you then, Bada.”

Gaeul waved at Bada before turning around. Maru said he would take her back, but she refused. There was only one thing on Gaeul’s mind as she walked down the stairs. That voice. If she heard that voice out of nowhere, she would’ve been worried, but right now, she felt rather excited.

Jung Haejoo. That woman said that she heard a voice as well. That overwhelming flow of emotions that could even be felt through the screen. Gaeul had fallen for Haejoo. She had fallen for the acting that she showed. How could she act like that? It shocked her the entire time. The desire to become like that, and the self-depreciation that it was impossible for her clashed inside her. It was then that the voice spoke out to her. Jung Haejoo, she also said that she heard a voice inside her when her acting miraculously changed. The identity of that voice wasn’t important right now. What filled her mind was that this was an opportunity to improve her acting skills. Rather than worries and fear, she felt the urge to hear that voice once again. That was also why she hurriedly left Maru’s house. She needed a space where she could think about it by herself. She wanted to look for that voice in a quiet place. The decision she made was to go home, where it was empty. It was the best decision for now.

She didn’t remember how she got on the bus or how she got off. The compass of her thoughts was pointing at the voice. She got the password to her front door wrong about three times before she managed to get in. She threw away her shoes and immediately went to her desk before opening the drawer. Inside were some earplugs that a friend of hers gave her as a present to use while studying. She compressed the sponge earplugs before putting them in her ears. The sponge expanded, blocking off all sound. After even the whining noise of the refrigerator was blocked off, the only thing she heard now

was the noise within her body. She sat on her chair and closed her eyes. When she consciously rejected the faint noise coming from the surroundings, she felt like she was floating.

She wanted to grab that clue. Gaeul wanted to know what the essence of acting was. She wanted to figure it out so that she would be able to stand on equal footing with the others. Maru, Heewon, and Jiseok. Whenever she felt the gap between herself and her peers, she was filled with unease. If she wanted to escape her position as a trainee who might be kicked out at any time; to become bold as an actress; to say goodbye to the unease for good, she had to change herself. The voice that said it wanted to act - that could be a trigger for her to change.

Gaeul probed around the darkness. She walked around in the cloudy darkness and opened her ears. She couldn't hear the voice yet. Her neck became stiff. She realized that it had been quite long since she had been sitting. She wandered around in search for the formless for god knows how long. The desire to open her eyes and look at the time surged inside her, but she suppressed it. She felt as though it would all be for nought if she opened her eyes now. Although it was completely dark without any guideposts, she was definitely walking forward. She couldn't turn back now. Her shoulders started hurting. She wanted to sit up straight and stretch her arms out, but she also endured that. She wanted to focus everything inside her. She might regret it for her entire lifetime if she lost focus now because of a minor distraction.

Time passed by slowly. Her butt felt sweaty. The journey through the darkness was still ongoing. She felt like she could faintly hear her heartbeat. Gaeul walked towards the source of the sound. Her body in her mind walked forward. When she stopped going forward, it was because of a small voice she could hear. It wasn't a voice she heard through her ears. It was a voice that played inside her. She focused in order to grab onto that voice. The voice that sounded like it was from a stretched out videotape became clearer.

What are you going to do during the holidays? - the voice belonged to a friend of hers. The scenery of the classroom appeared and the dark background changed into the classroom. The noise started taking clear shapes in the form of chatter. Mijin, Jiae, Yeonjoo, Minseon, Eunji. This was the conversation they had a few days ago in the classroom. Mijin was saying that she had plans to go to the sea with her boyfriend, Jiae said that she was going to stay at home the whole time, Yeonjoo and Minseon said that they booked tickets for a concert, and then Eunji who was sad because she had to go to cram school. Such a trivial conversation, which wouldn't be surprising if she forgot about it, clearly came to her mind as though it was a math formula that she memorized. The warm classroom air, someone's thick perfume, the tight-fitting uniform that made her embarrassed, as well as the sourness of the lemon candy - everything about that situation was clearly pictured in her mind as though she was reading off a detailed report.

The delicate details of the classroom became distorted after a heartbeat. Gaeul started walking amidst the blurry images again. Eventually, she came across a similar situation. This time, it was a more distant event. The hardwood stage, the bright lights - her colleagues were telling the 1st year students to calm down, while the seniors were looking at her proudly. Her consciousness had flown to the summer competition during her 2nd year. The scenery filled with vitality flashed in front of her eyes. Each and every sound was deeply engraved on her body.

She experienced a similar thing several times. When she came to herself after dazedly looking at the flow of her past, the one that stood in front of her was her father, who was smiling warmly. It was early autumn, the wind was cool, and she was wearing a white hat with a wide brim and a one piece dress with a rabbit on it. Her body flew into the air and landed on her father's shoulders. She reached out with her little toddler hands and grabbed her father's hair. Her father had never told her that it hurt. When her father's mountain-like body started moving, her vision started shaking. The way it shook up and down made her feel like she was on top of a boat. She saw a couple eating cotton candy together, a musician singing while playing the guitar, and the autumn leaves falling down. Just as everything was being deeply engraved into her eyes, she heard a humming sound. Hm~hm~hm, the sound was quite off like the rough beard, but it sounded more grand and wonderful than any other orchestra. Louder, louder! - she shouted as she swayed back and forth.

My daughter, you aren't going to cry even if daddy's not around, right? - at the same time that her father said those words, the scenery shattered. The flying fragments shone before disappearing into nothingness. The only thing left now was the pounding of her heart. Thump, thump - she started walking towards the sound once again. From the present to the past. Where was the destination of this journey?

While she was unaware, the darkness had been lifted. Gaeul saw herself standing on a stage. The audience seats were completely empty. She looked around and combed through her memories. Had she ever been to a place like this? When she opened a drawer of memories in order to check, something white flashed by her feet. It was a rabbit with round eyes. The rabbit, with its four legs on the ground, slowly stood up. It took out a pocket watch with one hand, and a short cane on the other. On the top of the cane was a black-colored bird. It looked graceful. It was a black swan.

Who are you? - Gaeul squeezed out her voice. Reacting to that voice, the rabbit turned around. There was rage on its cute face.

In the end, you came here again. - the rabbit said.

It was the voice she heard back in Maru's house. Gaeul calmed down her heart and spoke,

-You were the one who called out to me before, weren't you?

-Probably.

-Didn't you say that you want to do acting?

-Acting? I do. I like acting after all. As much as you.

-Then come and act with me.

-With you?

-Yes. I'm not entirely sure, but I have a strong feeling that I will do much better if I'm with you. It will at least be better than what I can do right now. I want to become better at acting.

-What are you going to do after getting better?

-I want to stand on equal footing with Maru. I want to act with him. I want to stand on the same stage as him.

-Is that really enough? Really?

-Yes.

Did Jung Haejoo have a conversation like this as well? The rabbit glanced at the pocket watch. On its mouth was a smile that did not represent its joy.

-Fine. Do what you want. The moment you wanted to do that, my right to decide became as good as non-existent.

The rabbit twitched its nose before hopping to the other side of the stage.

-Hey.

Gaeul hurriedly stopped the rabbit.

-I can talk to you again, right?

-Do you want to?

-Yes.

-If you want to, then go ahead. The decision is entirely up to you. The current you will be able to come and find me whenever you want.

-Uhm, one more thing.

-What is it?

-How are you inside me? How can we hold a conversation like this?

The rabbit stomped the ground with its cane.

-Do you believe in god?

-God?

-Yes, god. Jesus, Buddha, Allah, or whatever. You know, an omnipotent god.

-I don't.

-Why is that?

-It's like how I don't believe in destiny. A life predetermined by god, a life lived according to god's will. I think such a thing is very tragic. I believe that people should live based on their free will.

-Then what about miracles?

-I believe miracles can exist, but only the ones that appear from people's efforts. I mean not the kind of benefit that god gives to a certain person, but the kind where human effort turns the impossible into the possible.

-Yes, that was the kind of girl you were.

The rabbit looked at her directly. Its red eyes were scary. It felt like something was burning inside those eyes.

-And you should've been that kind of girl back then too.

-Hey!

The rabbit then ran off. Gaeul wanted to chase after it, but her legs did not move. Hey! - she shouted once again, but the rabbit did not turn around. It became distant. When it became small enough that it was akin to a white dot on a black paper, Gaeul stumbled on a woman wearing white clothes. Just looking at her back was enough for her to make out that she was wearing a white suit. That woman then changed into a woman wearing a more cheerful suit, before returning to being a rabbit.

Gaeul looked at the stage devoid of the rabbit before finding a card on the floor. The Fool. The tarot card with a clown on it was something she had seen a lot before. The moment she looked at the clown wearing a neck-tie, the beeping of the door lock to her house faintly entered her ears. That electronic noise that penetrated the earplugs caused a fissure to appear in her inner world, and Gaeul was pulled out to reality in an instant. The moment she uttered a deep breath, she fell sideways. Her arms, legs, and waist were too numb, rendering her unable to move.

"Mom's here. What are you doing over there?"

"Uh, hm? Oh, I was just dozing off."

"You should sleep on your bed. Don't keep holding onto your studies. But my girl, did you give up on acting?"

"I didn't."

"Okay, then, what about dinner?"

"Dinner? What time is it now?"

"Now? It's past 9."

"9?"

"Looks like you were in deep sleep. Stop looking like an idiot and let's eat ice cream together. Come on."

Gaeul slowly sat up before looking at the clock on her desk. It was 14 past 9. When she came back home and sat down on her chair, it was 1 p.m.

"8 hours."

Gaeul tried stating the time she spent inside her mind. It sounded as absurd as seeing a dragon.

"My girl, are you sleeping again?" her mother called.

Gaeul shook her head and left her room.

Chapter 634

"Are you doing research for your novel?"

“No.”

“Then a travel essay like the one you wrote last time?”

“It’s not that either.”

“Then what is it?”

“Do you think mom will tell you?”

“No, definitely not.”

“Then why did you even bother asking?”

Gaeul looked at her mother, who was making a suspicious smile. She wondered what her mother was up to that required her to go out not only on weekdays but on weekends as well. When she looked at her mother, who was displaying a ‘you shouldn’t mind it since it’s your mother’s work’, as well as a ‘you want to know, don’t you?’ face, she wanted to dig into that secret. If it wasn’t for her novel, what could it be? It didn’t seem like she was doing something other than writing for work.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Can’t you give me a hint? Your daughter might die of frustration at this rate, you know?”

“Okay then. I’ll give you just a small one.”

After crossing her arms and thinking about it for a while, her mother spoke,

“Nah, I won’t after all. If I say it now, it might ruin the luck for it, so I’ll tell you later.”

“You’re so bad. What is it? Did you win the lottery or something? Is that why you’re going around since you are looking for a new house to move to?”

“If it was like that I would have told you a long time ago. Do you think mom’s playing around?”

“No, I knew you were going around doing work.”

“Just wait a little more. Once the plan is solidified and it progresses a little, no, when I press the stamp, I’ll tell you about it. Mom wants to tell you about it too. Of course I’d want to boast to my daughter.”

“Anyway, it’s a good thing, right?”

“Of course. Perhaps you might like it more than me. You’re still practicing acting right?”

“Why does acting practice come up all of a sudden?”

“It just reminded me. Anyway, do your best. And do your best at studying too. You have to hone your skills so that you can take the opportunity when it comes to you. Who knows? That opportunity might suddenly spring up from your side. Well then, get washed and get to sleep. Don’t sleep on your desk like you did before. Resting is also a form of practice.”

“Okay.”

Gaeul put down her spoon and went to the bathroom. She turned the tap to warm water before turning it on. After cold water escaped the showerhead, steaming water sprayed out. She took off her clothes and put them on the shelf before taking a step into the water that was falling down like a waterfall. What was that rabbit? Warm water flowed down her head. She thought about it while she was eating ice cream, but the conclusion she came to was that she didn't know. It might be a frightening thing to think that there was something inside her that did not share her memories, but after conversing with the rabbit, she was relieved because she felt like it wouldn't influence her negatively. She was a little concerned about the rabbit's last words, but the answers were generally positive, so it shouldn't be a problem.

After taking a shower, she wrapped her hair with a towel. She went to her room so that water didn't fall off everywhere and sat down on her chair. She took a deep breath before thinking about the stage that the rabbit was waiting on. A feeling of time slowing down overwhelmed her before a ray of light broke through the darkness under her eyelids. She was now on the stage where the lights were installed on either side.

Hello? - she tried calling out. Her actual neck muscles tensed. She could feel her tongue inside her mouth, as well as her vocal cords, moving downwards. Although she was speaking in her mind, her body also reacted accordingly. This didn't happen during the day. Gaeul thought that this was a difference due to concentration, or immersion. Considering the fact that 8 hours had passed by in a flash, the current situation felt better because she could feel the state of her real body. She didn't want to experience having half a day passing after blinking again. Her shoulders were still screaming at her that they were exhausted.

After calling out several times, the rabbit appeared from behind the curtain. Gaeul was sure that the rabbit was a female. She was sure that the two ladies she saw in the distance when they parted last time were other forms of the rabbit.

-Why are you in the shape of a rabbit?

-Are you not okay with it?

-No, it's not like that. I like rabbits.

-Do you really?

She thought this during the first time they met, but this rabbit seemed to be rather disappointed with the situation. There were thorns in its words.

-Do you perhaps hate me?

-No, I like you to death.

-What?

-I said I like you. There's probably no one in this world who likes you more than me. Also, there should be no one who knows you better than me.

The rabbit twitched its nose before turning around. Its triangular mouth moved as though it was conversing with someone. Gaeul looked behind the rabbit. There was a darkness, which looked like it

was sucking in everything, including light. The moment she saw it, she felt wary and turned her head around. What was that place?

-Don't take interest in that. You will find out later anyway.

-Ah, okay.

-Alright. So what brings you to me again? You aren't going to act now, are you?

-I just wanted to have a talk. I wanted to know who you were too. You didn't answer me the last time I asked, did you?

-I don't have a reason to answer your every question, do I?

-That's true, I guess....

-Then forget about it. The reason I'm allowing you to meet me is because you came all the way here. It would've been better if you never noticed this place in your lifetime.

-Why is that? Is there a reason I should not know about you, miss rabbit?

-No, there is no reason for that. You'll find out eventually after all. I'm just vexed at you because you're so foolish.

-But I thought you liked me.

-I do! More than anyone. That's why you vex me even more.

The rabbit stopped talking before raising its head.

-I don't want to talk to you any longer. From now on, I'm not going to reply even if you come to this place. If it's about acting, then don't worry about it. You will definitely change. You will improve to the point that the people around you will be surprised. So don't think about anything and keep walking forward. If you are stuck on something then just think about this stage. If you do, you will naturally see what you have to do to proceed.

The rabbit with its fire-like eyes turned around and left. Two red glass balls floated in the darkness. Gaeul looked at those eyes until she opened her actual eyes due to the cold sensation from her shoulders. A drop of water fell from her hair, which she couldn't wrap with the towel completely. When she checked the time, she saw that about 20 minutes had passed. She threw the wet towel into the laundry basket before drying her hair with a hair dryer. When she looked at the fluttering hair in front of her eyes, she was reminded of the fluttery fur of the rabbit. Just why was that person angry? Rather than questioning the very existence of that strange being inside her, her curiosity was directed towards the emotions it harbored. It was a curious thing. It should be natural for her to be wary and watch out, but her body was completely vulnerable without any defenses towards that rabbit. It was as though she had met someone she knew well.

Why did it have to be a rabbit of all things? To her, rabbits were an important symbol. It was an animal that had a special meaning. Gaeul returned to her room and touched the ring that Maru gifted her. It was a ring with a cute rabbit engraved on it. When she stroked the rabbit's ears with a smile, she suddenly had this thought - what made her like rabbits in the first place?

“Must be because of Alice, right?”

A rather vague answer reverberated in her mouth. She thought that she would give a clear answer just like how she would when showing off an act that she had practiced for months, but what came up was a twisted fragment of memories. There should definitely be a reason that made her like rabbits, so she decided to think about it at this opportunity.

“My girl, can you bring me a towel?”

The strand of memory that was about to come to mind shattered into smithereens. Gaeul sighed softly before standing up. That was enough thinking. She was curious, but it wasn't important.

“I'll put it in front of the door.”

Gaeul put a towel in front of the bathroom.

* * *

“I want to ask one last question I really wanted to know.”

“You know? You've always asked a difficult question when you said those words, journalist. Can I take a sip of tea before you ask?”

“Sure. You can take two if it means that I will get a good answer.”

Junmin raised the teacup. He quite liked this young journalist that was interviewing him. He was much easier to talk to than the self-proclaimed 'veterans' who monitored his mood at every moment. Thinking that youngsters were full of energy these days, Junmin put down the teacup and looked at the journalist. This was his signal for the journalist to ask.

“This is a really personal question, so I will ask if I can put this on the final interview separately. If you have to come up with one reason that you were able to become successful like this, what reason would you pick?”

“Just one?”

“Yes. Of course, as of right now, JA Production is said to be lacking when it comes to the scale or the careers of the actors in it compared to the other management agencies, but there are a lot of expectations placed on it just from the fact that you, president Lee Junmin, is the one leading it. Also, I have the feeling that this agency will operate with only a small group of elites. I think my prediction is not wrong based on the fact that you, who has produced multiple stars, are not cooperating with them, and instead choosing to start the JA business with a completely new group of people. Am I wrong?”

“You're entirely right. I don't plan to host a lot of actors in this agency. Below ten. That's the range I plan to maintain while operating this company.”

“So I was right after all. Does that mean that you think that the current actors under your wing will grow to be bigger than the actors who have been through you?”

“You can see it that way.”

“That’s what I’m curious about. How can you strategically pick your actors like that? Oh wait, was I a little strange with the choice of words?”

“Not at all. Strategic choice, in one sense, that’s the right expression for it. A management agency is ultimately a business whose merchandise is people. You have to find the source stones, refine them and then package them before you put them out in front of people. This is primarily the case.”

“What do you mean by primarily?”

“If it’s just that, an actor’s lifespan will be too short. Actors who were nurtured to suit the tastes of the public will not be able to continue sailing and will sink if they get swept by the trends. In the end, as fundamental as this might sound, acting is everything for an actor. Everything from beginning to end is about acting. It’s a hard job that requires you to keep climbing onto a stage where you will be evaluated critically.”

“Do you mean to say that JA Production is not nurturing actors to fit the public, but rather actors that the public will have to adapt to?”

“Ultimately, that is the goal. As arrogant as I might sound, that is my dream. I will not accept any other actor than this actor - that is what I plan for the audience to say.”

“I think that’s very cool. At the same time, it begs the question: potential is a matter of probability in the end, is it not? If that’s the case, I think interacting with more actors and finding value among them will be better.”

“That is definitely correct. It is right, but it does not apply to me.”

“I see that you have confidence that the actors currently with you will stand at the top of the country?”

“It’s not confidence.”

Junmin faintly smiled.

“It’s closer to blind faith.”

The young journalist looked rather flustered.

“I’m really curious. How did you find and pick such actors? Is it a business secret?”

“I know that you will definitely get angry at me if I say something like this, so I must apologize in advance, but you will know when you see them. I was able to tell by looking.”

“We’ll know when we see them. Masters used that expression quite a lot, yes. Also, when you say you ‘were’ able to tell, does that mean that you no longer can?”

“Honestly speaking, yes, that is the case. Perhaps it’s because I’m getting old, but my eyes that discern people aren’t functioning properly anymore. That’s why I plan to pour everything into the ones I’m currently raising. Sorry for that bland answer.”

“Not at all. In fact, I am grateful that you’ve committed to the interview. Actually, I was quite nervous before we began. You are a famous person after all.”

The young journalist turned off the recording device and his laptop.

“Thank you for the interview. We’ll send you a copy of the interview before it’s released, so if there are any expressions you don’t like, please don’t hesitate to tell us. We’ll fix it right away.”

“Alright then. I very much enjoyed today. Let’s have a meal together next time.”

“I would be honored.”

Junmin stood up from his seat and shook hands with the young journalist.

Chapter 635

After sending off the young journalist, Junmin lay down on the sofa. According to his medical check-up, he didn’t have any big problems, but the doctor did tell him that he should increase his sleep time. Sleep is not said to be the cure for everything for no reason - the doctor emphasized the importance of sleep once again. He thought about having a midday nap according to the specialist advice, but he didn’t feel sleepy even after counting 100 sheep. He had spent 20 years without naps, so his body refused to sleep during the day. He just closed his eyes until the heat inside his eyes died down. That made him feel much better.

“Head manager Lee. See if you can pull next Wednesday’s dinner schedule ahead by an hour.”

With a slightly clearer head, he immediately took care of what was on his mind before sitting at his desk. There was a business card on the sofa that the young journalist was sitting on. He had not put it away after receiving it. Junmin touched the nameplate on his desk. He picked talents that had the potential to become big and nurtured them in order to earn money. This building was founded on that money. The last question that the young journalist asked him was asked to him several times before. Did you know that such and such actor or actress would become so big? - those journalists asked as though they were asking if he knew the winning lottery number. Whenever he was asked that question, he gave the same answer. Surprisingly, I can see the lottery numbers - the journalists ended the interviews on an iffy note after hearing that response. He remembered their expressions as they turned around. They seemed to think that he had a special education method for actors or a specific criteria for picking them. They were wrong. Even if he said that there was nothing like that and that he could just ‘see’ it, the journalists would misinterpret his words by themselves, yet Junmin respected them for it. After all, the important thing for journalists was not the ‘undeniable truth’, but a ‘realistic-sounding truth’.

He finished everything he had to do before dinner. When he realized that there was no longer any work for him to do, he was suddenly overwhelmed with sadness. How would he live on without work? He heard that male hormones would decrease with age, making men sensitive as they get older, and thought that perhaps he was reaching that stage as well. Junmin looked at the photo album he put next to his nameplate. They were photos he took with the puppies he raised at home. He opened the album and took out one of the photos. Behind the photo was another photo that had been discolored. The Junmin in that photo was young. The woman smiling next to him was also young. This was a photo he had to hide behind a dog photo and look at secretly. This photo was simultaneously a memory for Junmin and at the same time a hot iron. Whenever he felt that his mind and body were about to collapse, he looked at this photo. The smile of the woman in the photo became a hot iron that burned his soul, and whenever that happened, Junmin reminded himself of his guilty conscience and the

tragedy once more. He could not allow himself to rest until he could achieve what Haejoo had to see. The sole survivor had to feel the warmth of the dead in a way like this.

Knock knock - Junmin slowly put the photos away when he heard a knock on his door. He closed the album before telling the person outside to come in.

“Prez.”

Ganghwan came in while calling him such. In his hands were canned beers. From the way water droplets had formed on it, it seemed that it had been quite some time since they were taken out of the fridge.

“Why don’t you have a drink?”

“The sun’s still up.”

“Senior, I mean, hyung-nim. Beer is supposed to be drunk during the day, you know? It’s not like you have anything to do, right?”

“How would you know if I don’t have any work or not?”

“How long do you think I’ve known you for? The day of your interview is the day you don’t have work. Your work patterns are already inputted in my mind.”

“Looks like you and I have known each other for too long. You know me better than I do.”

He wasn’t feeling sleepy and he didn’t have anything to do. He rather welcomed Ganghwan, who appeared at a time like this. Honestly speaking, he welcomed the beer even more. Junmin sat down on the sofa. Ganghwan sat down diagonally opposite him.

“What did the doctor say when you went to the hospital?”

“That’s the reason you barged in?”

“Don’t change the subject. What happened? Did they say that you were still healthy? Perhaps they told you that you had cancer?”

“Do you want me to have cancer?”

“Looks like you’re completely fine from the energy in your words. So there’s no problem, right?”

“I’m supposed to drink less, smoke less, and get more sleep.”

“That’s what all doctors say though. When they say that, it means that there are no big problems. That’s good, I was worried.”

“Thanks for being worried about me.”

“You should live a long, healthy life. Only then will you see me rise into stardom.”

“Why don’t you stop saying those words and actually start climbing? How was Russia?”

“The theater troupes there are really something. The translator I brought with me was almost exhausted to death. Oh, I visited the ballet side as well, and man, I never knew people could fly. I’m not lying. They can fly like they have wings on their back or something.”

"If tourism is all you did, I'm going to deduct your travel expenses from your contract, okay?"

"It wasn't tourism. It was studying. How's the company these days?"

"It's doing well."

"It's doing well without me? I can't believe it."

"When you were out of contact for months because of your homeless life, and when we lost contact because you wanted to try experiencing a boat life, the company was still doing well. It won't help you even if you try to express your love for your company at this point."

"I won't be able to feel the desperation if I have a secret escape route. Only if I cut off everything will I feel like I'm doing it."

"I know that your personality is like that. It's not like you did it just once or twice. But really, you should look into preparing for work now. I got talks about a double casting for you in a musical."

"Man, they must have fallen for my singing."

"They know what they're dealing with. But your double is pretty popular so it will hurt your pride if your ticket sales are less than your double. Are you okay with that?"

"I don't have a pride to get hurt."

Ganghwan clenched the beer can and emptied it in one go. He said stuff like this a lot before he started acting: that it was okay, that he could just ignore it. If this oblivious-looking, smiling Ganghwan was the real him, Junmin would not have picked him and led him this far. Ganghwan was a docile wolf, the kind that escapes from group life and lives with humans. To kind people, he would lie on his back and try to act cute, but the moment he smells blood, he would change. To him, the stage was a place filled with blood. Once he started working and digging into his play, he would show an obsession on the level of madness. That didn't mean that he showed it on the outside. Other actors working with him would only think that he's doing his job.

Junmin thought back to the time he got to know Ganghwan. Only a murky gray floated around the ears of a young actor who was staring at the stage while mopping the floor. An actor without talent - Junmin branded him as such immediately. His magical senses had never been wrong. He watched the play in order to find a decent talent. He watched until the curtain call ended, but there was no one to his liking. He thought that it was no good, but just as he was about to return after saying goodbye to the members, he saw Ganghwan, who was cleaning the stage. The grey color around his ears had changed into a bright color. He had never seen someone with a bright color like that after Haejoo and Geunsoo. The moment he tried approaching that actor in order to have a closer look, that light disappeared. The other members of the troupe said that he just joined them and had nothing to show, but Junmin shook his head and put him on stage. Under stage lights, Ganghwan shone brighter than when he was in the corner. When he started acting his entire person changed. Junmin decided to bring him in without hesitation.

"What are you thinking about?"

Ganghwan was wiping off the beer around his mouth with his thumb. Junmin closed the drawers of memories and spoke,

"I was just thinking about when we first met."

"Why that all of a sudden?"

"You were such a bad guy, so I was thinking that you grew up rather decently."

"I had my way with being bad. But now that I look back, why did you decide to choose me? I didn't show you anything special."

"I told you. I have good eyes."

"You know? You look like a gambler from time to time. You keep trying things out without measuring."

"Gamblers bet on the things they want to believe, while a risk-taker bets on the things they trust in. I had something I trusted, and you fit that criteria. Well, the results speak for themselves. You became a good actor."

"Why do you sound so cheesy all of a sudden? Are you sure there was nothing wrong with your medical check-up? I think something happened to your emotional side of things."

"Maybe something is malfunctioning because of old age just like you said. Why don't you take the mantle of the president at this opportunity?"

"I can say this with confidence. This company will go bankrupt in less than a month."

"Sounds reassuring."

"You should leave the business side to that girl. I mean Kim Suyeon."

"Have you two become closer now?"

"It took years to drop the honorifics so like hell we've gotten closer. Even now, the first thing I think when I see her is that I have to be careful. Then again, she seems pretty docile these days."

"Because Geunsoo never falls for her antics. She'll probably stay obedient until he does."

"Man, Geunsoo is quite something too. If Suyeon came to me to sleep together, I'd unbuckle my belt in one minute."

"Not five seconds?"

"Is that how it is?"

"I know you'd run away if that actually happened."

"Just saying. If Suyeon does come at me, I will run. She's not a woman anyone could handle."

"She has her circumstances."

"Is there someone who doesn't have that?"

Ganghwan jerked back his head before flicking the beer can by his mouth. When a few drops fell, he grinned in satisfaction.

“Where’s that musical going to be held?”

“Seoul Art Center.”

“Wow, the rental fee should be quite expensive there.”

“The actors are just as expensive too.”

“Can I really join them and ruin the reputation of their main actor? I’ll do it if I set my mind to it, you know? If they thought that they got a double cast who’s a lower tier than they thought and I actually end up getting more ticket sales than them, what would their actor become?”

“That’s why I’m sending you. If you’ve spent company money for your studying, you should pay it back.”

“This is why I try not to borrow money from you.”

“Since you did, you have to earn me several times as much.”

“Okay then. I’ll cause a ruckus. Oh, is that guy doing a single drama these days too?”

“That guy?”

“The guy you gave a 300 million won cheque to.”

“He’s only doing New Semester. He’s quite earnest. Unlike a certain guy who has only been spending money for all sorts of peculiar reasons, he’s at least earning profit. He’s different from a certain precocious kid.”

“It’s all thanks to my teachings, don’t you think? Even though I might look like this, he’s my first disciple.”

“But sir Yoon says he’s his first disciple?”

“Sir Yoon Moonjoong did? No way. I nurtured him first.”

“Go to him for that later. No, you should go visit him quickly and say hello. You’ve never been there since New Years, have you?”

“That’s right.”

“What did I expect from a guy who sent the congratulatory gift money by bank transfer for Miso’s wedding, huh.”

“Ah, right, Miso’s back, isn’t she?”

“She is.”

“I guess she’s an ahjumma now.”

“Try saying that to her face.”

“I’m still too young to smell incense from behind a portrait so, I’ll refuse.”

Ganghwan checked the time on his phone.

“Let me just ask in case, but do you know Han Maru’s schedule?”

“His shoots are on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, but recently his role has been decreasing in importance so most of his shoots are on Saturdays alone. It’s mostly during the night as well.”

“You know all that?”

“I should at least know how my money bags are moving. There are only 11 of them. But why Maru?”

“A youngster like him shouldn’t play around all day. I’m going to have him do some work while he has time.”

“Work?”

“Yes. I’ll have to talk to the director to see if I can make this happen or not, but the producer who is debuting with a short drama is someone I know. They said they needed a decent young boy, so I’ll try to see what I can do.”

“You got work for me, huh. How rare.”

“You did spend money on me after all. I know how to write accounting books too, you know? Let me get going now. Also, you should get some sleep. Your eyes are red. See you later.”

Junmin waved his hand at Ganghwan, who was leaving with the two empty cans.

Chapter 636

After Ganghwan left, an oversized silence crawled its way into the office. It was so large that Junmin was pushed into the three-legged chair in the corner of his office. After vitality made rounds and left, his office felt like a foreign space. Junmin decided to escape this place until the stiff atmosphere of the office filled this place again. The three-legged chair wasn’t a chair he could sit comfortably on. He had to pull himself together to maintain balance. He sat upright and thought back to the words that the chatterbox said: “What did you see in me?”. Until just five years ago, Junmin’s eyes discovered the special talent within people as though there was a special filter on his eyes. As the accuracy was pretty high, it was very easy to make a profit. It was five years ago when a problem occurred with the filter that allowed him to continue to score. It was when he was looking at young actors just like normal. His eyes that saw many colors from people suddenly became colorblind. He had finally become able to see the world in the same colors as the others, but the sense of loss was immense. After all, there was nothing more frustrating than a privilege you took for granted being taken away. He felt rather confused, but he soon came up with a counter plan. It was to pick people who had similar characteristics to the ones he nurtured until now. The accuracy was now lower, but he could still maintain his reputation as the ‘master of finding new talent’. Among the child actors he contracted until now, the only one who he had seen the ‘color’ of was Sooil. The rest were those that he picked based on his knowhow, as he did not have any means to see their talent.

Han Maru was one of them, but he was a different case than the rest of them. When he made a pseudo-contract with Maru on a piece of tissue, Junmin did so according to his intuition, which he stopped believing in after losing his ‘colors’. Back then, he thought that relying on intuition should be fine for just

one person. Perhaps he was being conceited, thinking that he could find actors even without his magical powers, or perhaps it was his way of teaching the bold kid a lesson. It was true that he was hasty, but the results brought by that were very satisfactory. Maru was smooth-sailing and did not run into swift currents or obstacles. He was a rather pleasant kid. If there were flowers that required the caretaker to switch out the vase, the soil, and water them frequently to grow, there were also some flowers that blossomed even with watering every now and then. Maru was clearly the latter. He was a flower that had the vitality of grass. There was fun in nurturing him, but there was fun in watching him.

Junmin stood up from the wobbly chair and picked up his coat. Staying still was akin to torture. Rather than waiting for sleep that wouldn't come, it was better to go meet work nearby. He wasn't someone who ignored the doctor's advice, but he wanted to work busily for today. Even Ganghwan, who wandered around like a loafer, brought work today after all.

"Get the car ready."

He talked through the interphone before opening the door.

* * *

"I know it's hot. I really do, but don't make that tired face in front of me. The stage you are supposed to go on is even hotter. This place doesn't have lights after all. Once you go on stage after getting fully dressed and putting on thick makeup, even the people who say they never sweat will sweat buckets. Are you going to cringe while acting because it's hot? Unless you're an idiot, you can't do that. Once you're on stage, or behind the side curtains, watch your expressions. If you go on stage after cringing, even if you smile, the only face you'll make is a mouth smile with cringing eyes. You have to consciously look out for your facial expressions. Understood?"

Hearing Miso's merciless words, the club members were unable to even make tired expressions. The seventeen people not participating in the summer competition were watching the others practice nervously from one side. They knew that Miso's scolding would be directed at them once winter comes.

Miso clapped and said that they would start practice again in three minutes. The heavily sweating juniors all left the hall. Their destination should be the bathroom. Only after pouring cold water over them would they be able to stave off all the heat.

"Aren't they going to collapse at this rate?"

Maru looked at the ceiling. There was a large hole between the ducts. That was where the air conditioner was supposed to be. He felt like the temperature was getting even higher when he looked at the electrical lines and pipes that were dangling like a tired dog's tongue. The school building, which was receiving the brunt of the heat of July, was becoming a splendid oven.

"Don't worry. I might collapse before they do."

Miso wiped her face with the towel around her neck.

"But hey, what the hell is up with your school's administration staff? They know full well that we're practicing here. How could they rip out the air conditioner like that? I want to have a look at the faces of the administrative staff here."

“As far as I know, teacher Taesik is one of them.”

“My oppa is so pure that he probably doesn’t know that such an evil thing is happening at school.”

“Man, that’s marriage for you. There’s someone always on your side.”

The juniors returned. Water was dripping off their faces regardless of whether they were boys or girls.

“Let’s do one more rehearsal. Everyone here is feeling hot so don’t express it. Get yourself together and we’ll do this without making a mistake. Okay?”

“Yes!”

Maru picked up his script and got away from Miso. The rehearsal began with Miso’s nod. Usually, the rehearsal would continue until the very end without interruptions, but for the past few days, Miso interrupted from time to time to point things out. This was the final check for the performance they were going to hold in just a few days. After this check, Miso would not speak anymore. From then on, the club members would have to discuss among themselves to find the solution.

“Wait. What was that awkward hand gesture just now?”

“Eh? I-I was pointing towards the right direction.”

“I’m not trying to eat you. Don’t shake and say it clearly. Are you going to shake like that on stage too?”

“I’m sorry!”

“Say that again. Why did you do that hand gesture?”

“I was trying to point out the right direction.”

“For who?”

Being pointed out, the junior pointed at another junior who was on stage. This was when two onlookers disappeared into the back of the stage, and that boy was gesturing towards the direction they were going in.

“You didn’t do that before.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Then why did you do it now?”

“Uhm, so....”

Under Miso’s pressure, the junior was unable to speak a word as though his lips were sealed together. Maru groaned lightly. It was easy to tell the temperature of this air conditioning-less hall. He just had to look at the corners of Miso’s eyes. Miso’s eyes were very precise, and they would point upwards along with her thick eyebrows the higher the temperature was. Right now, the corner of her eyes and her eyebrows were as high as they could go. Without any air conditioning to cool her off, that position was very dangerous now. It was a sign that she was about to explode, and a warning for others to evacuate.

“If you are going to do it, you have to do it properly, right?”

Maru stood next to that junior. After checking that Miso's lips stopped twisting, he continued to speak, "When you're practicing, you'll sometimes forget the basics. I'm the same. However if you forget the basics, there will be no order. Instructor Miso said that actors must be able to control everything about their body down to each strand of hair, right?"

"Yes."

"It's true that you have to follow a specified movement path, but actors aren't machines, are they? If you keep doing this, you will naturally wave your hands and perhaps you might do something like an unplanned action such as ad-libbing. It's something that happens all the time. However, even those actions have to look natural for the audience and furthermore, have to have meaning. Do you know how you were before?"

The junior looked at Miso before raising his left hand to point left. His arm was right by his side, was not sticking out, and his fingers were curled up. Maru grabbed the junior's arm and changed his posture. He made the fingers open up wide while extending the arm towards that direction.

"This should be a lot easier for the audience, and your fellow actors to understand, right?"

"Yes."

"That's what instructor Miso wanted to tell you. Don't forget it. Okay?"

"I won't."

"Good. The rest was good. Isn't that right, instructor?"

Miso's eyebrows slowly fell. It seemed that the barrage of words inside her mouth returned to where they should be. Maru inwardly sighed in relief. If Miso snapped out, the temperature in this already hot hall would have risen by another two degrees centigrade. After all, running caused the heat within the human body to rise.

"You seem caring these days."

"I thought you wanted that. I'm doing just as I'm told."

"I thought you'd say a couple words at best, but you're explaining from A to Z in kind. It makes me wonder if you're still the cold kid from before."

"Looks like you didn't know that even I want to care for my juniors."

"Like hell you do. But still, it's a good thing. I'm not going to make a move, so you give them feedback."

"Isn't that dereliction of your duty?"

Miso wordlessly pointed at the others. Maru knew that there was no winning when quarrelling with your superior, so he obediently stood in front of everyone.

"From now on, Maru here will be the one coaching you. I'll set the general direction, but ask Maru for the details. Also, Aram."

"Yes!"

“Listen to what Maru’s saying carefully and watch out for it when you practice by yourselves, okay?”

“Understood,” Aram replied from the side.

“Then let’s continue, shall we?” Miso said that while leaning against the wall as though it had become much more comfortable for her.

Maru just shrugged.

* * *

“Thank you for your work.”

Miso left in her car. The first year students of the acting club gathered by the school gates also started leaving one by one.

“Maru, where are you going?”

“The hall. I’m going to stay for a little longer.”

“Is there something you need to make?”

“No. I’m just going to practice. I can’t exactly scream my lungs out at home. There’s no better place than the hall if I want to practice with my heart at ease.”

Daemyung took out his phone and looked at it before speaking decisively.

“Can I watch you practice?”

“There’s nothing special. Plus, what are you going to do about her?”

Maru glanced at Jiyeon, who was staring at them by the school gates.

“Ah, right.”

“Don’t ‘ah, right’ me. You’re going to get dumped if you do that. Anyway, get going. She’s waiting.”

Maru pushed Daemyung’s back. Daemyung walked over to Jiyeon while telling him that he’d definitely like to watch next time. Daemyung was incredible in a sense since he put importance on practice even though his ‘youth business’ was still ongoing. After sending Daemyung off, he went up to the 5th floor by himself. He opened the tightly shut door before going inside. The hall still retained its heat and was like a stage after a play had just ended. The thick smell of sweat calmed his mind.

“Good.”

After putting his bag down. He walked slowly along the walls. The sound of his footsteps quietly rang out. At the end of May, he met Haejoo through the videotapes. He also had a glimpse at the secret she held. After hearing that she was conversing with another self that existed in her inner world, Maru talked to himself several times. When acting, the other self naturally came forward, but normally, that self did not reply to him no matter what he said. Once he started acting, he could see that self, but he could not talk to him. If he tried to consciously talk to him, his concentration would waver, breaking the immersion and making him no longer able to detect that other self.

He loosened his feet and slowly started walking. He constantly tried to converse with that other self after practice ended and when he was by himself in this hall. Haejoo said that she improved her acting skills by conversing with her inner self. He would be able to show off better acting skills if that inner self was a target of communication rather than a target of control. He couldn't be sure about this, but since there was a precedent known as Jung Haejoo, it was worth trying.

"Why don't you stop blocking me off and answer me for once?"

He quietly talked as he kept walking along the wall like a monk in training.

Chapter 637

Facing a silent partner was something that felt much more solitary than facing the wall by oneself. The wall would reflect their voice at least, so it was at least possible to check that they said something. However, talking to someone with sealed lips was even worse than talking to a wall, because the soft skin that humans had absorbed all sound. It would be better if that partner rolled their eyes to express that they're up to something, but the person he was facing now didn't have any eyes. He didn't have a nose or a mouth either. Not to mention arms and legs, he didn't even have a body. There was only one thing that was there - it was the presence.

Maru leaned against the wall and sat down. He breathed calmly and closed his eyes. A man who didn't even have a phone these days? He wanted to get that man the latest phone and say a word to him - pick up the phone when it rings. The man within himself did not reply as though he was a bear in hibernation. He popped out without asking when he started acting, but now that he wanted to have a slow conversation, he did not show up at all.

Around two weeks ago, he did things that would make other people call the ambulance if they saw him. He shouted into thin air in order to wake up the unresponsive guy and tried bashing his head against the wall to see if that guy reacted to pain. He even kneeled down in the center of the hall and tried politely writing a letter too. My dear nameless guy within me - of course, there was no reply. Though, he was willing to try again if he found a post box that could deliver letters inside a person's body.

After that, he tried numerous methods in order to just get a greeting. He tried his hand at meditating to access his afterlife, tried dreaming a lucid dream, and even did some weird physical exercise that was known to allow one to see the inside of a person through qi. As he had experienced that there was a world that surpassed science, he tried his hand at many things with faith, but that guy, within the world of his mind, did not even budge.

In the end, the only way to see him was to act. That guy seemed to have no interest in everyday life other than acting, and when he stopped acting and tried talking to him, he disappeared into thin air. He tried changing things up and tried to talk him through the lines in his acts, but again, there was no response. That guy went back home deep inside the heart like a civil worker who tightly kept office hours. In other words, he was an extremely hard guy to talk to.

Someone that he could call out, but not talk to. There was nothing more frustrating than this.

Maru opened his eyes. The tug of war with the presence was something very tiring, but it was still too early to give up. He had his experiences with boring, dragged out fights. That guy would be in trouble if he underestimated the mind of a father who fed a family. A tree that did not fall even after ten chops

with an ax, can be cut down with a chainsaw. If there wasn't a chainsaw available, he could just keep shaving away at it with a wire saw.

Maru stood up from his seat. The only window of communication was acting after all. Who knows? That guy just might give up and speak.

He opened the script that the acting club was practicing. There were 11 characters. Including the bypassing characters, there were around 16 people in total. He was going to do all the roles by himself. If he kept expressing different characters like he was driving a car with 16 different gears, the guy inside will have to raise his head up numerous times. He didn't know if there was such a thing known as stamina to spiritual beings, but he was going to have a battle of endurance with him.

"Officers!"

The start began with a shop owner. He was one who bribed the Japanese police in order to live a fulfilling life. The moment he thought of the character he had to express, 'he' reacted. That guy who didn't appear when he called out to him several times. Feeling rather frustrated, Maru handed that guy the baton immediately. He took a step back and watched his act. Now, even his emotions were completely separated, which allowed him to regain calm when he stepped down from the stage no matter what intense emotions he had. This was the result of calling him out so many times. It was definitely a big advantage for an actor to quickly switch emotions without mental pressure.

"What did we ever do wrong?"

Maru acted out the wailing man on the floor himself. If he took control away from that guy and acted himself, he could vaguely feel the guy's gaze. Until a while ago, he only had the feeling that he was just being watched, but right now, he could faintly notice the emotions hidden inside as well. Dissatisfaction. Maru could feel the gaze of a pitcher who's being switched out at the last second just before winning.

Maru, who was about to finish acting out one role and was about to go to the next, gave that guy the baton for a brief moment before taking it away again.

"Deal with it. This country is done for. The Empire of Japan will not fall. If you're an intellectual, then act like one and read the trends. Are you going to let your children be the children of a fallen country? Don't do it. Look at the future."

When he played the role of a news journalist, Maru felt that the gaze was thickening. 'He', who was just staring at him as though he didn't exist, was coming towards the stage. Maru tried to be conscious of him before deciding not to. He focused on acting and intentionally ignored him.

He yielded the next turn to that guy. He saw that the guy was overjoyed like a puppy who had seen snow for the first time. Even though Maru and that guy had separate emotions, thoughts, and the like, it was sometimes easy to see through what he was thinking as though they were one. It was like that right now. That guy acted as though he was trying to quench his thirst. Maru could feel through his own body that the emotions being released from his body were much more intense and compressed than usual. That guy was acting as though he was possessed and put all of his energy into it. Watching, Maru became an audience member and was in a daze for a while. It was an act that shook something at the very foundation of any human. Just watching him filled his blood vessels full of satisfaction.

“Why do you think we are still alive even though those distinguished high officials had their heads chopped off? The foundation, the root of a country lies within us, does it not? Also, isn’t protecting that our duty as the owners? Even if the word ‘Chosun’ disappears from this land, as long as we, who have rooted down in this place, are still alive, the lineage will continue. Isn’t that what being the people of a country is about?”

He grabbed a mop in reverse and raised it high into the air. For that very moment, he was a hero with a resolve. He was an anarchist pointing his spear at the ideals that were forced on him. The marble floor was a grassland scattered with blood, and the empty hall was filled with people under the will of the old nation. Intense heat rose from the surroundings, and an ear-piercing shout seemed to feel real.

That was the result of continuing ‘his’ act. His body that was filled with passion towards acting forgot about the lines and made him become that character itself. This was a different acting method from his usual one. It was that guy’s role to become immersed and become that character while Maru’s role was to analyze that character to the very core before unfolding it in the form of acting. That guy used instinct and intuition, while Maru himself used reason and judgment. His mind, which was supposed to be cold and rational, was filled with heat. This was an acting method he usually avoided, but he could not hold himself back this time. Immersing in the character gave him a sense of bliss like a tight knot being untied in an instant. His senses spread out in all directions without stopping. For this moment, he felt a sense of satisfaction that made him think that it would be fine even if the being known as Han Maru disappeared.

It was when the character’s lines reached their peak that a hand suddenly poked him, causing ripples to appear in the lake of immersion. His immersion broke instantly. The delicately locked gear wheels did not allow even the tiniest gear to leave its spot. The owner of the hand that interrupted the perfect moment was none other than ‘that guy’.

Maru threw the mop on the floor and plopped down on the ground, panting heavily. He didn’t know how long he had been rampaging for. He felt like his sense of time disappeared somewhere far away. He barely raised his head to look at the clock. Only 10 minutes had passed. Maru’s container for emotions was too small to accommodate the emotions he felt during those ten minutes. Maru felt the records of his experience that he could not fully contain scattering away. As much of a pity as that was, he couldn’t help it. 13 eggs couldn’t fit into a carton made for a dozen. He had to accommodate what he could and let the rest go. If he tried to be greedy, it would ruin everything else.

“Looks like you were pretty desperate, huh?” Maru said as he raised his head.

Even though the act was over, that guy was still around, glaring at Maru. Acting is mine - he seemed to shout.

Maru bit his lower lip as he stood up. It was that guy that did not accept despite waving so many carrots at him. Now that there was a whip in his hand, it was time to do a tug of war.

“Keep watching from there. It’ll be quite fun,” Maru screamed his lungs out before picking up his script.

You like acting, huh? Why don’t you keep watching from there? You shy guy.

Feeling that guy shaking as though he wanted Maru to let him off, Maru joyfully went about his acts.

* * *

A voice could be heard through the slightly open door. Daemyung felt like his ears were burning from the voice alone. He had a look at Jiyeon next to him. She also had her eyes fixed on what was behind the door. Daemyung exerted some strength to push the door slightly. He did so carefully so that it didn't make any sound.

Maru was in the middle of the now wider vision. Around him were mops, brooms, hammers, nails, and the like. Maru ran around the messy hall. He was a colonist, the spearhead of the ruler, and the flagbearer of the rebels. His voice, which was filled with heat, filled the entire hall. It was hotter than when thirty people were practicing. It was so hot that he couldn't dare to go near him.

Daemyung subconsciously grabbed Jiyeon's hand tightly. The act felt like he was going to be sucked in. Jiyeon also tensed her hand.

"Maru-seonbae wanted to do this kind of acting. Something that he could never do with us."

Jiyeon spoke in a small voice. As sad as that might sound, Daemyung couldn't help but nod. Maru, who rampaged around in front of the moonlit window, was an actor who could fill the entire hall with his presence just by himself. There were no gaps. After spending ten minutes as an uninvited audience member, Daemyung sat down and took out his notes.

"Sorry Jiyeon. I think I'll keep watching."

"Not at all, I want to keep watching too."

Daemyung tensed his eyes. He moved his hands to record everything about Maru: his facial expressions, speech tones, and gestures. He momentarily stopped when he saw Jiyeon taking a video with her phone, but Daemyung thought that this was a method that suited him better. Videos contained facts. However, words contained opinions. What he needed right now was not facts, but the emotions he felt at this moment. Rather than a video, he wanted to express this moment through writing after all.

Maru rampaged around like an unleashed pony. How did he manage to hold back the boiling urge this whole time? Maru sometimes said incomprehensible stuff, but Daemyung thought that it happened because Maru was immersed in acting.

"It feels like two people are acting."

"I'm thinking the same."

He flipped over the page. His words filled the empty space without stopping. It was incredibly hard to transform into writing the changes occurring in the acting right before his eyes, but Daemyung did not rest. Eventually, Maru stopped before looking up at the ceiling and sighing.

"This is so goddamn hard."

They were Maru's words.

Chapter 638

Jiyeon barely managed to get her breathing going again. When she looked at Maru, who was breathing out a heavy breath, she thought that it was the right thing to have come back to the hall. It was back

when they were parting with each other by the school gates. Daemyung said let's get going, but was actually looking backwards. Jiyeon stopped and asked him what was going on.

"Maru's practicing by himself these days. I want to help him, but I can't think of a way to do so."

"The reason Maru-seonbae hasn't been going home with us is because he was practicing?"

Daemyung nodded. Jiyeon raised her head to look at the 5th floor. The hall had its lights turned on again. She knew that Daemyung and Maru were very close friends. When Daemyung said that he couldn't find a way to help Maru, he probably didn't exaggerate. After a little bit of hesitation, Jiyeon carefully grabbed Daemyung's hand. She was still as nervous as ever when they made skin contact, but now she was able to grab him whenever she wanted. It was great progress. She led the confused Daemyung up the stairs.

"We might not be able to do anything for him, but wouldn't Maru seonbae do better if there's an audience for him?"

She mustered up the courage to say those words. Jiyeon did not want to see Daemyung with a powerless smile on his face. It would be great if she could solve his worries, but she had no such ability. The only thing she could do was to lead the disappointed-looking Daemyung up towards the hall. Daemyung walked from behind until the 2nd floor and took the lead afterwards. He looked bold, which made Jiyeon smile in satisfaction. They eventually reached the hall where Maru could be seen practicing through the small opening of the door.

From that moment onwards until now, when he finished acting, Jiyeon stared at Maru's acting in a daze without any time to become shocked. When Maru fell on his back like an athlete after a full sprint, Jiyeon grabbed Daemyung's hand and shook it slightly. If they wanted to go inside, now was the chance.

* * *

"Why are you here?"

Maru looked at the couple that had opened the door and came in. They say those who like each other will become similar to each other, and the way the two smiled awkwardly looked very similar.

"We were about to go, but we came here."

"You should've walked Jiyeon home. It's getting late."

"It was me who said that we should make a visit. I'm sorry," Jiyeon said while looking down.

Maru's nose twitched.

"It's nothing to be sorry about. A student wants to come to school. Did you come here just now?"

"No, we were watching from outside the door."

"You should've come inside if you were here."

"Uhm, should I say that we couldn't interrupt you mid way? I just felt like I shouldn't open the door."

"You're worried about unnecessary stuff. How long have you been there?"

“About 20 minutes?”

“20 minutes? Hey, you let Jiyoong sit down on such a cold floor for so long?”

Daemyung, who stared at Jiyoong in a daze for a while, suddenly flinched and waved his hand around in the air.

“Uhm, Jiyoong, sorry for not being able to take care of you.”

“It’s okay. I used my bag as a cushion so it wasn’t cold.”

“I should’ve noticed anyway.”

“I said it’s fine. But rather than that, are you okay, seonbae? You were crouching down the whole time.”

“I did feel a little numb, but I’m okay now.”

“That’s a relief.”

Maru looked at the smiling couple before picking up the mop. He poked the long handle of the mop in between the two people who were confirming their love for each other. How dare you flirt in front of me.

“If you’re here to make me cringe, then you should get going. Geez, your PDA is out of hand. You want me to feel jealous, don’t you?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Why don’t you say that again after removing that grin on your face?”

He put the mop against the wall. He also placed the rest of the cleaning equipment in their respective places. Daemyung and Jiyoong also helped out.

“I want to show the others this too,” said Daemyung while putting the broom inside the container.

“Show what?”

“You practicing.”

Maru shook off the rag in his hand before placing it by the window. With that, the cleanup was done.

“It’s nothing worth showing. It’s just me going on a rampage by myself.”

Practice was the act of slowly unfurling what was agreed upon. There was no impulsive action, nor intuitive lines. Constructing the tower known as ‘completion’ by confirming their agreements - this was what practice was. Wrestling with a mysterious man inside oneself couldn’t be called practice.

“I thought it was moving though.”

The words that entered his ears made him feel ticklish. Maru quietly looked at Daemyung. Did this chubby fella not know that his words could shock others, make them shy, or sometimes even very embarrassed? He looked at Jiyoong through the corner of his eyes. He was looking for a target of sympathy. Unfortunately, she was looking at Daemyung with admiration. She was completely hopeless. Maru shook his head once before speaking.

“This isn’t the right occasion to use the word ‘moving’. Do you see these goosebumps on me?”

“Why? It was very impressive, I was touched. It was the best act I’ve seen in my life.”

“I’m going to shut you up physically if you say that again. Why don’t you nag at me instead? That would be much better.”

Labeling a scene of screaming and screeching his lungs out while running around everywhere as ‘touching’ was splendid mental torture. It made his hairs stand on end whenever he heard it and want to run away due to the shame he felt. The memories of his reincarnation on top of his personality gave birth to a persona that could not accept compliments as compliments. He knew that Daemyung did not possess any malice, jealousy, or a teasing tone in his words, but his gaze was like a child looking at a superhero from a cartoon movie. It was naively malicious, naively jealous, and a pure tease. Not only that, there was Jiyoong who was adding fuel to the fire, so he could feel his heart cringing into nothingness. At times like these, he really wanted to become a genuine high school student. The disparity of his body and mind felt realistic at odd times like these.

“That was just me putting on a show by myself. It’s nothing worth showing to others.”

“I think it’s fine though.”

“I’m not okay with it. If you’re done cleaning up, let’s go home.”

“Did we disturb you?”

“No, I was about to leave as well. The security guard will give me a glare if I stay any longer.”

He led the hesitant duo outside. He knocked on the guard room on his way out and told that he was done. The security guard opened his tired eyes and waved at him to get going.

“Let’s practice together next time.”

“I told you it wasn’t practice. Jiyoong, take your boyfriend and get going already.”

After sending the two off, Maru slowly started pedaling on his bicycle. Today, he had made some progress, as little as it might be. That guy, who didn’t budge like a statue, didn’t just stop at moving, he even came around to the stage and hung around. Had he managed to fan the guy a little more, that guy might have jumped on stage. He had to stop because of the appearance of Daemyung and Jiyoong when he was about to do the tug of war with that guy, but he had no regrets. In fact, he felt good after thinking that doing that might have made ‘that guy’ feel urgent. After all, bargaining was usually done by the side that was at a disadvantage. If he slowly waved the fishing rod with the bait known as ‘acting’ on it, that guy will have no choice but to break his unresponsive state. If there was a reaction, Maru could counterattack. Silence was that guy’s weapon of choice until yesterday but starting today, it was the other way round.

* * *

Gaeul looked in the mirror. The face she always saw when she washed her face was there. Her clearly open eyes, quite sharp nose, and lips which she wished were slightly thicker. She could say with confidence that she saw it more than anyone, but these days, she found the figure somewhat unfamiliar for some reason.

“What kind of magic did you use?”

Gaeul was at a loss for words when Gyeonmi said those words with a smile. She knew that it was a compliment, but the word ‘magic’ became the water that soaked her cotton, rendering her unable to speak. She raised her fingers to stroke her face in the mirror. Ever since she talked with the girl inside her - the rabbit - her acting skills improved. It was something she should be happy about, but rather than happy, she was at a loss. It was just like how losing ten kilos overnight was a cause for worry, not joy. It was something she always wanted, but the acting skills entered her grasp way too easily and simply. It tugged at her mind that this wasn’t the result of her efforts until now, but the product of a mysterious meeting.

“If I earn enough money to move, I’m going to install two, no, three air conditioners in the house. That way, I’d catch a cold even in the summer. Man, it feels good just thinking about it,” said Heewon, who was lying down at the back.

Heewon always became one with the floor during breaks. The way he rolled around on the ground regardless of Gyeonmi’s presence was something that Gaeul actually quite envied.

“Do you think my acting improved?” she asked in a light tone.

She tried to not be mindful about the fact that her acting skills improved too easily.”

“Don’t ask me stuff like that. I don’t know.”

“But you should feel at least something. Tell me how it feels.”

“You know? You look really restless recently. It’s like you’re a dog holding back the urge to poop.”

“Hyung!”

Haewon, who was sitting next to Heewon, lightly smacked him on the shoulder.

“Noona, don’t mind what he said. He didn’t get proper sleep last night because it was hot.”

“No. It’s my bad for asking something like that.”

“Uhm, I’m not that knowledgeable about acting, but I could tell that there’s much more leisure in the way you act, noona. It’s much easier on the eyes. You look much more natural as well.”

“Thanks.”

Gaeul sat down on the chair. She closed her eyes and tried to talk to the girl inside her. That girl said that she would not reply, but when Gaeul kept knocking, she eventually came out and greeted her with a vexed expression.

-What is it this time?

The rabbit said from the center of the stage.

-Can I earn it so easily like this?

-It’s what you wanted.

-But I feel like I'm cheating.

-Do you want to go back to the old times then?

Gaeul couldn't reply easily. The rabbit looked at the pocket watch she always carried with her before continuing.

-This is really the last time.

-What?

-This is farewell, I mean. But don't worry too much. Your acting skills will keep improving.

-Will we not meet again?

-No, we will meet eventually. At that time, I guess we'll talk about things we couldn't talk about. There's only one thing I want to say. Don't yourself too much.

She couldn't hear the important part. The rabbit disappeared.

"Han Gaeul, why don't you get up?"

Gaeul opened her eyes when she heard the voice next to her. Gyeonmi was looking at her with dissatisfaction. She shook her head and stood up. The illusion of the stage disappeared, and she was greeted by the practice room where Heewon was lying down.

"I get that it's summer and you're tired, but perk up a little. It will get even hotter in August, so you can't be like this already. Lee Heewon, you go wash your face a little. Get that dumb expression off your face."

Gaeul sighed softly. The presence of the rabbit who always existed inside her disappeared completely. What was she trying to say before she disappeared? She thought about the rabbit that vanished in front of her eyes. The rabbit had the same gaze of those that looked at her when she told them that she didn't have a father. The eyes that she could never get used to - eyes full of pity.

* * *

-This is a first. I didn't know I'd see you like this.

Should he be surprised, or welcomed? Maru decided that he should feel both as he looked at the man before his eyes. The mysterious existence that sprouted inside him turned out to be the masked man from his dreams. The man wearing the funny white and black mask led Maru to the chair in the center of the stage.

This is the first time I've wooed a man. Did you know that? - Maru said as he sat down.

It was a novel experience. He could feel his actual body flinching. His mind wasn't entirely cut off from his body and he was feeling everything from his physical body even at this moment. He thought that he wouldn't be able to feel the outside world since he was in the world of his mind, but his predictions were wrong.

-Do you remember me?

The masked man asked. Maru nodded.

-Didn't we meet in a dream before? Acting and monster or whatever. It's been quite a long time, hasn't it? A year, two years?

-Do you feel that we haven't seen each other in a long time?

-Then did we meet recently?

-Not at all. I must have been mistaken. So, how do you feel?

-Rather mysterious, if I think about the fact that there's another person inside my body.

-Don't you feel worried because it's the symptoms of a psychological disorder?

-I've returned from death. I am willing to believe if you tell me that ants could speak the human tongue, so this is nothing. I guess this must also be one of those presents that god gave me?

-Who knows? Maybe, maybe not.

Maru stroked his chin. He could feel his beard. Even his hand had grown some curly hair. His blood vessels were popping out like they were trying to break free of his skin, and his hands were tattered. It was the hands he had right before his death when he was driving buses. It would be great if there was a mirror around. After thinking about such things, he talked to the man. There was one thing that the man said that tugged his mind.

-When you say 'this is a first', you seem to imply that there have been other, similar situations?

Maru asked.

Chapter 639

-You won't miss a clue, will you?

The masked man said.

-I slipped up a couple times after missing them. You know, assistant manager Han, just turn a blind eye to it. You just need to let it flow by this time. If I knew that not listening to those words would be the end of me, I would have stayed still. Whether it was obstinacy, faith, a sense of justice, or even the mindset of youth, this is what I had on my mind when I just quit that place: Ah, I threw myself into a shithole.

He endured each day by looking forward to the weekend, endured a month by waiting for his salary, and endured a year hoping that he would get promoted. Perhaps it was because he became frustrated with that life that he became a whistle-blower. The president's son embezzled money – had he not said that one line out loud, he might still be wrestling with numbers and not driving buses. Though, as a result of leaving his company, he got a chance to live another life.

-But didn't you feel happy when the president's son was fired from the company as a punishment? You got him good.

-How do you know that?

-Because I share your memories.

-Now that's very unfair. I don't know anything about you.

-Was the world ever fair?

After hearing the masked man's words, Maru burst out laughing.

-Right, right. The world was never fair. I was being foolish for a moment.

Maru wiped his mouth. He liked this masked man even though the only interaction he had with him was meeting him face to face a couple times. He was reminded of when he was having a talk about life over a drink and some grilled pork belly with a very close friend. The feeling of liberation from a smooth conversation as well as the informality of laughing together without restraint.

-I shouldn't have stopped and should have tried to sue him, but I was too scared and wasn't able to go that far. Now that I look back, I was a rather incompetent father. I had a family to feed at home, yet I ended up whistle blowing without being able to hold back. Perhaps I should've acted shamelessly and stuck to the company while the president hadn't processed my letter of resignation yet. Many things might have turned out differently if I desperately kept clinging onto it even after a friend of mine told me that he would introduce me to a bus driving job.

-Do you regret living your life again?

-Regret? There's no way I'd feel regret when I got another chance. It's just that it's such a pity. I feel extremely apologetic. Did you know? In the world I died, my wife is living by herself. Fortunately, I did have life insurance so she shouldn't be living a financially difficult life.

-Did you not have any children?

-Children? Children, huh. Now that I think about it, I didn't have any children.

-Not having any children at 45 is rather peculiar. Were you afraid of having children?

-It's not like that. It just turned out that way. Isn't it common to have a late child in a household that's busy with work?

-But forty-five is still late.

-I guess that is true too.

-Why did you not have any children?

-Why do you want to know that so much?

-There's no reason for curiosity is there? I'm just curious because I don't know. Usually, around that age, it's the children that brings the family together to the point that some say that they aren't getting a divorce purely because of their children. Was it your wife who didn't want to have children, perhaps?

-No, it wasn't like that.

-Then perhaps there was a problem with you. If you were having a hard time getting her pregnant, perhaps you should've considered the possibility that you had aspermia.

Maru glared at the masked man. He felt like the masked man was smiling under that plastic-looking mask.

-You said you share my memories, so why don't you look into why I didn't have any kids?

-Just because I share your memories doesn't mean that I know everything.

-How peculiar. You know the reason I quit my job, but you don't know the reason I didn't have kids. Which one am I supposed to trust? Do you know what I'm thinking right now?

-You must be thinking that I'm playing with words.

-There you have it. Looks like your thought process is similar to mine. Did you get influenced by me because you had a look at my memories?

-I wouldn't be so sure.

-Asking about my family matters, no my children problems is making me feel suspicious of you. I feel like you're even obstinate about it.

-I just can't hold back my curiosities, that's all.

-Why don't you try to deduce it with that good head of yours? About why I didn't have any children even when I was forty-five.

-Well, that's not my job, but yours, is it not?

-My job?

-Don't take it badly and think about it deeply. Why did you not have any children? No, why do you believe that you didn't have any children?

-Your words are pretty strange. It's not that I believe that I didn't have kids, it's that I did not. I don't have to believe whether I didn't have kids or not. I just didn't have any.

-Do you really think so?

What close friend. It was all a momentary misunderstanding. The man in front of him was like mud, sticky, and unremovable. Just when he thought that he washed the mud away, there would be some left behind his ears, and below his armpits. What kind of an answer did this guy want? What was this masked man trying to get from this conversation? In order to solve that question, he felt like he needed to find out the identity of this man first.

-Let me ask you a question too then. Just who the hell are you? No, are you even a person? Why are you inside me?

-You said 'a' question, and you managed to ask three.

-They're all similar questions, so think of them as one.

-I don't like half-assed negotiations like this.

-With that logic, you are no better since you're the only one asking questions without showing anything in this 'negotiation', don't you think so?

-You really haven't changed in the way that you won't lose a word.

-I'd like to return those words right back at you.

-You hear that you're obstinate quite often, don't you?

-Not as much as you, I would think.

Maru blocked one nostril with his thumb and blew his nose. A habit he had forgotten about popped out. Whether it was his speech or his appearance, he felt like his 45 year-old self was being shown without filtering in this place. Just what did this secretive stage that existed within him signify? Where did this person, who acted like the owner of it, come from, and why did he live in this place? He was sure that this was related to his second chance at life, but the reason behind his existence was a complete mystery. Did god send another resident to his body? It would've been great if the guy paid rent. He did not welcome a neighbor who had good skills but had a bad attitude.

-Just what are you? You keep popping up in my dreams from time to time, and there's also the fact that you're practically making a living inside me.

-If you're so curious, why don't you guess?

-Are you like this because I mocked you? If that's the case, you're quite narrow-minded, I must say.

-Looks like you're getting annoyed because the conversation is not going the way you intended it to, huh?

Maru smiled bitterly. It seemed that the opponent had nothing to lose. He only asked sharp questions when asking about his children, but after that, they had been exchanging empty words until now. Since the opponent had the lead, he could only change strategies. That guy looked like he had a high pride and looked pretty smart, so he thought that he might try to make him feel unbearable by speaking nonsense.

-Are you perhaps the ghost of Chungmuro that everyone's been talking about? The one that became a resentful ghost because you never became big?

-Do I look like one?

-If you aren't, then don't mind it. But why do I think that you are one? The fact that you're hiding your face means that you want to hide something, and hiding something is something you do when you have done something that goes against your conscience, no? Dying after a pathetic life and freeloading in another person's body, huh. That's something that definitely goes against your conscience.

-Rather than a certain man who quit his job because he couldn't endure a momentary insult without thinking about his family, a life that ends by drowning in dreams is not irresponsible at least.

-So you don't plan to reveal yourself until the end?

-In the first place, there is nothing to reveal. It's just you who doesn't recognize.

-I don't recognize? Don't recognize what?

-If I was in a position to tell you all that, we would have never reached this point in the first place. Let's stop this meaningless probing. We both won't lose easily when it comes to a fight with words.

-What I do get is that your mouth is a force to be reckoned with. I'm not someone who loses a battle of words easily.... Oh, don't misunderstand. That was a compliment.

-Of course I'm good at talking.

-Of course?

The masked man laughed once. That laugh seemed like his way of not answering the question.

-Hey, now that I look at you, you're quite similar to me.

Maru uttered after a realization.

-No, it is you who is similar to me.

The masked man retorted.

-Let's leave aside the trivial talk for later since the important thing is this, isn't it? What will we do about acting in the future?

Finally, a conversation that was meaningful. Maru loosened the tension in his eyes. He put aside the conversation they just had. Right now, he had to have a more constructive talk with this guy.

-This right now is a bit of a special case. Originally, I only open my eyes when you act.

-Are you asleep normally?

-Rather than sleep, it's closer to a blackout. I am not able to hear anything, see anything or feel anything. I'm trapped in stopped time until the moment you start acting which allows me to barely manage to wake up.

-Why did you not respond when I talked to you before?

-I just told you, didn't I? This right now is a bit of a special case. Originally, we cannot meet or converse. That's the kind of relationship we are in. We coexist and help each other, but cannot check each other's wills. Put it simply, it's closer to using a tool. A tool that can't speak.

-But you can talk to me right now? Did my wooing work then?

-I guess you can say that. Honestly speaking, even I don't know why we can converse like this. This is extremely rare.

-Extremely rare? So that means it happened before, huh?

-Stop digging into details like that. Right now, you'd be better off focusing on work and business. You don't know how long this will last.

As soon as the man's words ended, a crack appeared in the ceiling. The thin hair-like crack soon became wide enough to fit a foot. Bright light seeped in through the crack. It was quite a contrast to the gloomy-

looking stage. Stop staying in that gloomy place – someone seemed to tell him. Maru looked at the masked man. Was this man good or evil? Beneficial or detrimental? Harmful or helpful?

-So it is time for us to part.

The masked man turned around, seemingly feeling pity. The light seeping out from the ceiling slowly formed into a hand, grabbing Maru's arms and shoulders. Come to the right path – someone engraved that into his mind.

The moment he heard those words, Maru violently reached out and grabbed the masked man's shoulder. The masked man became surprised and turned around.

-We'll have to see later. Let's have a handshake.

The strength pulling on his body became stronger. The hand of light did not seem to like Maru hanging out with this masked man. Maru resisted that force until the end and reached out. The masked man looked at him in a daze before grabbing that hand.

-See you again soon.

-Alright, cocky guy.

-You are no less cocky yourself.

At the moment he shook hands, his eyes opened. He could see the monitor that went into sleep mode and the book that he opened. It was dark outside, and the clock was showing 2 o'clock.

"I really don't like this roommate."

Maru looked down at his right hand. The sensation from the hand he grabbed still remained. The rough hand. Unlike his skinny body, his hand was that of a laborer's. It was also a hand that was very similar to his own.

Chapter 640

"Why is there no announcement?"

Maru felt like he was hearing a clattering sound. He looked at Sora, who was biting on her thumb's fingernail. Today was the 19th of July, the 2nd day of the long summer holidays. Today, Sora and Ando came to visit the acting club. It wasn't that they had some special business for their visit. After all, grumbling could not be categorized as business.

"Why the heck did she come here?"

Maru looked at Ando, who stood next to her.

"I don't know. I want to ask too. Why am I here?"

Ando yawned as though he was very tired. From the way his face was colored with the desire to sleep, it seemed that he was dragged here against his will.

"But why! Is! There! No announcement?"

“What announcement?”

“The film festival. It’s been two months since we handed it in. The deadline was the end of May. It’s strange that there was no news for two months.”

“Why are you asking me? Ask the organizers.”

“Of course I did.”

“What did they say?”

“They said that they are going to delay the deadline by a month due to internal circumstances.”

“Well, there you have it.”

“But two months have passed. Isn’t it strange? So I asked again, about why there has been no news at all even though an extra month had passed. Apparently, they were supposed to announce a recruitment notice for the judges of the non-competitive sections, but apparently, the employee in charge of that went missing, and the entire festival is being delayed. It didn’t stop at that either. Apparently, the number of volunteer applicants wasn’t going well either, so it might be delayed even further. It’s flabbergasting. They’re adults, but their work speed is really subpar. Even I would do better than that.”

Sora sighed towards the ceiling.

“Is my comprehensibility lacking because it’s the morning? You phoned the organizers and found out about all of the circumstances, yes?”

“I did.”

“So you know why they aren’t giving out notifications, right?”

“Yes!”

“Then why are you venting it out on me?”

Maru thought that Sora would flinch since he attacked the bullseye, but Sora boldly raised her head as though that wasn’t a problem.

“Because it’s frustrating! I was frustrated the entire time I was calling them. They’re adults yet they can’t even work properly.”

“I’m asking you why you came all the way to me to vent.”

“You know, just telling you while I’m here.”

Maru felt like he was looking at a vegetarian holding up a piece of steak with a smile. I am a vegetarian and this steak is delicious. What the heck did that even mean? He was combing through his memories to see whether he did anything that might have gotten on her nerves when Daemyung came inside the hall. He greeted the first year students who were doing stretches before finding Sora and coming over. Maru raised his eyebrow. What was the meaning behind those cheerful footsteps? Sora jumped out as though she was waiting for him. The two met up in the middle of the hall and talked to each other before going to the window.

“What the heck is up with them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Koo Ando, what do you know?”

“I don’t know anything. I’m lacking sleep, and my head isn’t working. She called me at 5 a.m. Not throwing my phone at a wall was the last strand of rationale I had in me.”

“And this Mr. Rationale of yours has left the house?”

Ando nodded before leaning against the wall. His body softened like ice cream under the hot sun. Ando was crossing the line of sleep and awake several times while he was curling up his body, and he looked very miserable like an abandoned dog. He was so pitiful that Maru even felt sorry for him. Maru brought a blanket and covered him with it. Sleeping on the cold floor was not a good thing.

Maru walked towards the duo talking by the window. When did these two get so close? According to his memory, there was no point of contact between these two. At most, it was a couple of conversations as the president of the acting club and the director of the film. After that, they didn’t even have the opportunity to greet each other. Maru suddenly jumped in between the two, who were having a secret talk and looked like Jiyeon would definitely misunderstand.

“That startled me! What the heck was that, seonbae?”

“That’s what I want to say. Don’t you think I’m kinda pitiful when the person venting her frustration on me suddenly disappears without a word like that?”

“There’s Ando-seonbae. I left him by the wall because I thought you might get bored.”

“Ando is an object to you, isn’t he?”

“What the heck are you saying? Do you know how much I like Ando-seonbae? I’d never treat him like an object.”

That smile was very suspicious. Maru turned away from the girl with the deceitful mask. Picking an opponent that could actually communicate through words was an attitude that any intellectual must have after all.

“Now that I think about it, I think you’re the reason she barged into the acting club so early in the morning.”

“Don’t call it barged. I scheduled a meeting beforehand.”

He turned away from the chatterbox Sora and looked at Daemyung. He wanted a quick answer, but Daemyung’s lips were clearly hesitant.

“Seonbae. He’s my guest, you know?”

Sora waved her hand and interrupted.

“Guest?”

“Daemyung-seonbae. Let’s talk over there. It’s no fun to reveal it now, right?”

Sora took Daemyung to a corner. She also took Ando, who was drooping on the ground like seaweed, on the way as well. Maru couldn't begin to imagine what they were scheming.

A chatterbox girl, a dozing-off guy, and the former president of the acting club were forming a different space within the acting club in the corner. It was natural for the juniors to watch them. Maru clapped to get their attention. He didn't know what they were up to, but since Daemyung was involved, he didn't feel like it would become a problem.

"Let's not mind the three strange people over there. Aram, what should we start with?"

"Let's do some warmups first."

Standing in front of the juniors, Aram led the practice without looking awkward. After some light stretches, starting with turning the wrists, she started properly working out. When an ordinary day at the acting club - mixed in with slight groans from time to time - began, the second guest arrived in the hall. Maru forgot to greet that person since he was even more unexpected than Sora showing up and just stared at him.

"Why are you looking at me like that? You're making me embarrassed."

"I thought you were a ghost."

"So I look healthy?"

"Correct. But, hyung-nim. What brings you here?"

Ganghwan had brought some paper bags in both of his hands. The first year students, who were working out, all stopped and looked at the door. It seemed that they were curious about who this man with a stubble was.

"Keep going. It's not good to stop practicing just because someone is visiting," Ganghwan said.

Maru signalled Aram with his eyes. As someone who was quick to take a hint, she quickly gathered their attention and continued the exercises. Seeing her take control of them instantly, Maru quietly uttered 'good'.

"Have you been doing well?" Ganghwan asked as he put the paper bags on the ground.

"I have. When did you come back hyung-nim? This is more surprising than when you said you're going overseas through text."

"It hasn't been that long since I came back. You can be touched. Be impressed by the love of your teacher who came to visit his student as soon as possible since he came back into the country."

Maru ignored those words. He was perhaps a teacher the first time they met two years ago, but right now, he was nothing more than a hopeless big brother. Well, hopeless was going a little far, so slightly lacking?

"Do you want a hug and a deep kiss or something?"

"Come on then!"

"I do it when I say I will."

Maru jumped towards Ganghwan without hesitation. Before he could hug Ganghwan with all of his might, Ganghwan groaned and took a step back. He looked like a caterpillar had landed on the back of his neck.

"You're creepy."

"You're even more creepy for asking me to do it. Anyways, what're all these?"

"Your group uniform. I went to meet Miso yesterday and she gave me two options: either die or deliver these to the school."

"You should be thankful that you didn't die. Someone who sends congratulatory gift money through bank transfer with a single text that he's going overseas is definitely more than death-worthy. She's a close friend of yours too."

"I couldn't bear to look at her in a wedding dress. Wasn't that dude a man? I'm sure there's something between the crotch."

"I'm surprised you're still alive. Miso-noonim should have chased you with a sushi knife in hand a long time ago."

"I finally feel like I'm home after hearing you say things like that."

Ganghwan suddenly reached out his hand. Maru responded to the handshake.

"I'm glad that you're back safely. I was kinda worried because you said you wanted to try wrestling with a Russian brown bear. I know you'd definitely do it."

"I did see some bears, but man, they were freakishly huge. It's unthinkable to go against them as a human. I'd rather jump off a bungee without a rope instead."

While Ganghwan clicked his tongue, Maru picked up the paper bags and went to the first year students. Inside the heavy bags were hoodies with the hanja characters for Blue Sky stitched on them in blue.

"Miso-noonim is quite caring when it comes to stuff like this. Everyone, take one."

There was a nametag on the neck of the hoodie. Everyone soon found their hoodie thanks to that. Although these free-size hoodies were generally large so anyone could wear any one of them, Miso went through the lengths to match the sizes to each person. She won't have a problem doing household chores at least - that suddenly came to Maru's mind.

"How was Russia?"

"Cold."

"And?"

"The women are pretty. Oh, they also drink vodka like water."

"That sounds very educational."

“Educational indeed.”

Maru asked Aram to take care of the rest before leaving the hall.

“So what was the real reason you went there?”

“Of course, I went there to study. The history of acting over there is quite solid.”

“Was it helpful?”

“I was only there for two months. I wish I could stay there for a few years and learn various things, but you know that our president despises playing around without working.”

“That I do. So you’re going to start working again now?”

“He got me some work already. I guess I have to start earning my expenses now.”

“There goes your good days then.”

“Indeed.”

“What’s going to happen to the street performance?”

“It’s too late for that. There’s a right time for everything. Unfortunately, once it went on the media, we got a lot of people coming to us with fake stories, didn’t we? It was practically over from that point. There’s no need to continue a stage that has lost its purity.”

“I was planning to get famous through that, but I guess it isn’t happening, huh?”

“Of course not. Rather than that, you’re already famous, aren’t you? You’re in a TV drama.”

“I’ve been getting a lot less screen time recently. Ever since the story started focusing on the love story between the main cast, I only appear biweekly. I might lose my means of earning money at this rate.”

“When I looked at the news articles, the drama itself was doing well though.”

“The next door neighbor becoming successful doesn’t mean that my food plate will be filled. I want to try other pieces too, but I’m not finding anything suitable. In an era where fully grown adults are acting high school students, there’s practically no one who’s willing to use a less-grown-up kid. I only managed to get into this drama since it’s a youth drama, otherwise, they would have used an adult actor instead.”

“You haven’t changed that pessimistically realistic view, huh. I’m glad that you haven’t changed.”

“You came here to tease me, didn’t you?”

“Hey, don’t say that to the mother bird who brought an insect for the little bird. Or wait, am I the father bird?”

Maru’s ears perked when he heard those words. Associating the word food with Ganghwan’s suspicious smile brought him to one conclusion. Work, or an audition.

“Let’s do a one-act play. A refreshing one.”

“I like refreshing.”

"You can make the time for it, right?"

"I can."

"Good. Then do you have a shoot this weekend?"

"No, I will be a splendid unemployed man."

"That's good then. There's an assistant director that I'm close to, and he's shooting his first main piece. A late-night piece on YBS. You know, that one that numerous stars went on."

"I know that one."

"I said that I'd introduce a young face, so do your best. Okay?"

"You don't have to tell me twice."

Opportunity landed at his feet so he couldn't miss it. Even an idiot would swallow if someone put porridge in their mouth.

"But he's quite picky."

"Is anyone not picky working in that field?"

"I guess that's true. Good, that's the attitude. Please come back alive."

Those last words were questionable - Maru made a stiff smile.