

Once Again 771

Chapter 771. Sequence 4

Even though he should be doing weights right now, Giwoo told the trainer that he would be running alongside his friend for a little and went back on the treadmill.

“Didn’t you just finish running? You’re full of sweat.”

“I was going to run for a little more.”

“You don’t have any weight to lose. Why even bother?”

“This is about raising my stamina. It has nothing to do with my weight.”

“Is that how it is? That’s amazing, actor Kang. Maybe I’ll see you doing a triathlon later.”

“If the opportunity arises, I do want to do it.”

He put the speed at 10km/h and started running. He checked Maru’s speed. It was 9km/h. He put down his finger from the speed-up button.

“Anyway, it’s been a while since I saw you at this hour. You rarely visit during the afternoon.”

“My dream was to be unemployed my entire life, but I got work to do. I thought that training early in the morning wasn’t going to be enough, so I just changed slots. Calisthenics is good and all, but there’s nothing better than using machines to form a good body figure.”

After saying those words, Maru turned up the speed by one level. Giwoo put his hood on again and started breathing heavily. After maintaining that speed for about 30 seconds, he raised the speed by another level: 11km/h. His heart, which had calmed down, started pumping rapidly again. When his cooled body started warming up, the fatigue he had forgotten temporarily started seeping out of his muscles again. His soles felt burning hot, but Giwoo kept running without showing it.

“You’re good at running,” Maru said.

This is nothing - Giwoo replied as he upped the speed by two more levels. There was heat coming off of his legs as they brushed past each other. His thighs warned him to take a rest. He looked at Maru through the corner of his eyes. Although his face couldn’t be seen through the hood, from the way he had stable breathing, he looked leisurely. Was he not planning to increase the speed? Just as he thought about going down, he saw Maru tapping on the button rapidly. He started running at 15 km/h.

“You going down?” Maru uttered those words.

Giwoo deeply pressed the increase button. After setting the speed to 15km/h, he grabbed the hems of his top and wiped the sweat off his face. He felt like there were bags of sand attached to his feet. His heart and lungs were protesting due to the excessive load.

Giwoo ran for 30 more minutes before coming down from the treadmill. He sat down on a bench and started panting heavily. His knees were shaking. He smacked his knees and thighs. This body was a pathetic one that could not live up to his willpower. He came down first because he couldn’t run that

much. The fact that he was already fatigued was no excuse. Losing to someone was a terrible thing in itself, but losing to that guy leisurely jogging on the treadmill right now was something beyond terrible.

"Looks like treadmills don't suit me. It doesn't feel like I'm running," Han Maru said those words as he came down from the treadmill after running 20 more minutes.

Giwoo offered him a bottle of protein shake. The guy accepted the bottle and took a sip.

"Is it chocolate milk? It's pretty good."

"It's a supplement drink. Protein and vitamins and whatnot."

"Is it fine for me to drink it?"

"It doesn't matter. It's not something that needs a specific constitution or anything like that."

"Well, there's no way it's a bad thing when you're the one drinking it. But hey, you're in really good shape. Just how much did you work out?" Maru asked as he returned the bottle.

"If it's just keeping in shape, I kept it up for a long time. You should tell me about it if you need it. I'll have some good trainers look after you."

"I'm still semi-unemployed right now, so I don't need something that grand."

"Don't worry about money. Money's all I have right now. I can do that much. We're friends after all."

"Having rich friends is good huh."

"How about it? Want to get a consultation with a trainer?"

"Nah, it's fine. It's not like I'll be going to a bodybuilding competition or something. I'm just doing this in order to keep in shape, so I don't need any personal training. Rather than that, give me some of that. It was pretty good."

"What, the drink?"

"Yeah. If it's something that you're having, it must be organic or premium or something like that. Let me have some too."

"I'll give you every flavor you need."

The guy stared at him as though he wanted one right now. Giwoo received some supplements from the counter.

"I get to eat something like this thanks to having a good friend, huh. Thanks."

Maru lined up the bottles of supplements under the bench and started giggling. Looking at the smile on his face, Giwoo recalled the chilly eyes that he showed a long time ago. Those eyes, which reminded him of his grandfather, stopped him from speaking and restricted his heart. The eyes that were reminiscent of a beast's vertically slit pupils were deeply engraved into his retina, and ever since then, his heart started racing by itself whenever he saw this guy. His sense of shame told him to trample on the guy, but a sense of wariness and fear that eclipsed his shame made him unable to speak. Above all, this guy knew his secret. He couldn't help but be restless whenever he thought that this guy would start threatening

him with the 'play'. Although he didn't leave anything behind that would lead to him, he felt like this guy was more than capable of creating previously non-existent evidence and driving him into a corner. There was a time when he changed his attitude and tried to be friends with him, but Giwoo didn't take it the slightest bit seriously. He treated it as a cheap tactic of betraying after putting down his guard.

It was three years ago when he realized that the beast had died. It was 2008 when he was busy due to his acting skills which received a spotlight after 'Building' became popular. Back then, he got a message from Ahn Yeseul and Park Jichan that the members of 'New Semester' should meet up. Although he had no reason to refuse, the name 'Han Maru' got on his nerves. He hesitated due to the unease that something might happen if they met again, but the moment he saw his reflection in the mirror, he agreed to go to the meetup. He couldn't forgive himself for looking like a defeated soldier. The master of not just his own life, but everything in his environment, was crumpled tragically. He had a hard time accepting that. The moment he opened the door to the meetup place, Giwoo looked for Maru. He recalled the shame he received two years before. He thought that he had changed and was plenty capable of winning against a beast. When he made eye contact with Maru, who was quietly drinking at the corner of a table, Giwoo couldn't help but laugh in vain. There was no need to get ready to fight. The guy's eyes were dead. He had the same eyes as those who screamed and begged for forgiveness while kneeling down in front of his grandfather. They were the eyes of someone who had given up as well as the eyes of someone who had lost the will to flee.

For a moment, he became curious. What happened to Han Maru in the past two years that had changed the chilly eyes of the 19 year-old Han Maru into ones with such murky darkness in them?

"I'm going to the military next week."

The guy who had never shown his face in the drama industry after New Semester chose his next destination to be the military. Giwoo told him to watch out and filled the guy's glass full of booze. It was the booze that represented his farewell to his lacking self that had been enveloped in fear all by himself. It was also his way of mocking the beast that had died.

After that, he had no opportunities to hear the name Han Maru for a while. He came across the name again after two years. The guy, who had a sly smile on his face with a tanned face, had changed once again. Although he was smiling, Giwoo was unable to read anything from his smile. Neither hostility nor goodwill. He couldn't help but feel like he was facing an intricately-made doll.

Ever since he realized that they went to the same gym, he saw the guy's face from time to time, but Maru had changed again during that short time. When he just got discharged, he looked like a doll without emotions, but right now, he once again showed that nonchalant attitude from when he was in his 3rd year of high school.

Giwoo looked at Maru who was looking at the instructions on the back of the supplement packaging. This guy had become a human that wasn't even worth his attention now. The acting charisma that he showed during 'Apgu' should have disappeared due to the long break, and the bone-chilling gaze that reminded him of his grandfather was gone without a trace as well. Talking to him was a waste of life since he had become another one of the people who looked like ants from the top of a skyscraper.

"I wonder if strawberry flavor tastes good."

“It was pretty good in my opinion.”

“If it suits picky taste buds like yours, then I’m sure it’ll fit me. How much does this cost per bottle? Isn’t it expensive?”

“I’m giving it to you so don’t think about the cost. If you need more, you can tell me about it.”

“You’re giving me more? I know shame, I can’t receive more.”

Giwoo wondered as they spoke. Even though it was clearly a waste, why was it that this man kept getting on his nerves? He was now living a completely different life from Maru. Whether it was their careers as actors or their backgrounds, the two were incomparable. While he was under the spotlight, rolling in a bed made of money, this guy would keep doing minor and supporting roles and live on chump change. This guy was merely trash that had to be cleaned out of his sight, and all he had to do was to sweep the trash with his feet, but his senses, which were beyond the realm of his head, kept shouting at him to be wary of him.

The reason he felt a meaningless competitive spirit towards him, and the reason he was so kind to him was the identity of this guy known as Han Maru was so mysterious for not getting out of his sight. The beast he saw during their 3rd year of high school had died. He had experienced for himself countless times in the past year that this man was just like a meaningless reed that just swayed in the wind. Strictly speaking, this guy had completely become an ordinary ‘just so-so guy’. He thought something every time; that he would shake his hand like chasing away a fly and get rid of this guy from his life. Also, it was always Giwoo himself that became wary.

“Perhaps we’ll become competitors this time,” Maru said.

Giwoo slowly looked into his eyes. He didn’t look like he was joking. The word ‘competitor’ was laughable in his opinion, but his mouth was already asking a question back,

“Competitor?”

“I heard you were doing that KBS medical drama.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m in YBS. You know that we’re doing a medical drama too right? Around the same time slot.”

Giwoo felt a lump of something unpleasant squirming inside his throat.

“You’re shooting a drama?”

“I wanted to keep playing around, but I couldn’t. The president keeps pushing my back telling me that I should be earning money. Even wild beast cubs would start hunting in due time, so it kinda felt wrong of me to keep playing around as a human being.”

Maru stood up with the supplements in hand.

“There should be a press meeting today; you should look it up on the internet. Though, I probably won’t show up because I’m just a nobody.”

“Didn’t you give up on doing dramas?”

“Me? Did I ever tell you something like that?”

“You didn’t, but from the way you acted, it didn’t look like you were ever going to return to the TV scene.”

“I might have come off like that, I guess.”

Maru winked as he smiled. That smile increased Giwoo’s displeasure index.

“I also want to live an easy life. I no longer need to analyze carefully before I do something.”

“Really? Congratulations. I don’t know what role you’re playing but do your best. I’m sure you’ll become well-known in no time with your skills.”

“Kang Giwoo, you’re a great guy after all. You’re encouraging me like this, on top of giving me supplements.”

“It’s nothing.”

“You’re a big-hearted man. No wonder you’re popular with the ladies.”

He was no beast. But those eyes weren’t those that belonged to someone who had given up. Although he was still dead, he looked like he was going to move. Giwoo was suddenly reminded of the expression: ‘a sociable corpse’. Or maybe, a smiling zombie.

“But if you want an easy life, I can always introduce you to a good place. Something much more stable than just acting.”

A sense of indescribable crisis made his mouth move. He felt like he could not afford to let this guy into the field that was known as acting.

“Really? Are you putting me in YM?”

“If you want.”

The guy, who looked like he was going to accept it in a heartbeat, suddenly shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m really thankful for the offer, but old dogs can’t learn new tricks, so I should just keep acting; whether it’s for the quiet fellow that lives with me or for those meaningless memories.”

Thanks for the supplements - Maru hummed as he walked. Giwoo almost stopped him. He realized that he had been too emotional. That feeling was just a feeling. What could a corpse do after it escaped to the military when it was supposed to spread its wings out wide? Even if he returned, his life would end at the bottom of the ladder.

“But I think I heard that hum somewhere before.”

Giwoo stared at Maru’s back which was getting distant.

Chapter 772. Sequence 4

What is the probability of an opportunity that once escaped your hands landing in your hands again? Maru thought that it would be lower than what people commonly thought of as ‘extremely low’. It

probably had around the same chances of a leaf on the ground suddenly flying up due to a gust of wind and landing on the same spot again.

When he let go of the opportunity in his hands, he had no regrets. He knew that it was an opportunity that wouldn't return to him again, but he choose to have more time to look after himself rather than becoming successful through that opportunity. He tried his best to find his reason for living in the military and had become quite successful. He couldn't gouge out Han Gaeul from his life entirely, but he managed to put some distance. His effort to become just an 'acquaintance' from being in a close relationship and to make her accept that Han Maru was not a part of her life was quite successful. He was now able to imagine a life without her.

Although he was empty-handed, he felt refreshed. The crux of his life, which had been swaying until now, had been set upright again. The gap that was his purpose in life remained empty after becoming vacant due to removing her from his life, but he gained the strength to proceed forward. He realized that he could still breathe in a life without a purpose. As he had talent, he managed to return to the field of acting quite soon, but he thought that he would never encounter a proper opportunity until he became 30. However, he had forgotten; there was a person who was willing to move the leaf that flew up due to a gust of win back to its original spot.

"You should earn your rent at least."

Junmin's words echoed in his ears. They were the words of a father that was worried for his unemployed son.

Maru put down his script. Thanks to Junmin's introduction, he managed to land a drama supporting role without an audition. Although he didn't appear that much per episode, he played someone who would release the dramatic tension and appeared every now and then. Unlike the characters he played until now, the role he was going to play was a frivolous guy who made others feel uneasy. He would jump around with coffee for his seniors and fall down, try to hit on a colleague but then get kicked in the knee, and causes a ruckus saying that he wants to hold a party. It was the prankster character who was hateful yet someone who people couldn't help but look out for.

He picked up an empty cup and ran around the living room. He tried stepping the wrong way, tried stepping on his foot, and tried falling down quickly but then thought that it wasn't right and fell down on his side. He rushed around for a while before looking at the mirror. A twenty-five-year-old kid, who was happy beyond comparison, was sweating. When he looked at his own expression during acting, he couldn't help but admit that he had been swallowed up by acting ages ago. The ghost of Daehak-ro only smiled when he was acting.

He washed himself up and got ready to leave. There was half an hour until his appointment. Before he pressed the call button, he got a call at a precise time which made him wonder if the person on the other side was watching the clock before making the call.

-Hyung-nim, you're coming, right?

"I just put my trainers on. You're as spot on as ever."

-That's the only thing I'm good at. I just woke my brother up and am on the way there. I think I might be a little late.

“Okay. He’s a famous actor and all. It’s fine even if you take it slow, so watch out while driving.”

-Yes, hyung-nim. See you later.

He left his house and grabbed a taxi. He arrived at the bar near Yeoui-naru station, where they promised to meet up at, and ordered some food beforehand. He ordered the things that had an extra zero on the price tag at the very end of the menu. They were precious items that he could only choose when he was being treated by someone else, or when it was on the company card.

“Sorry, I’m late.”

“You’re not late. I’ve only been here for five minutes. But where’s the one paying for all this?”

“He’s in the toilet. Anyway, it’s been a long time, hyung-nim.”

“Yeah, long time no see.”

Maru shook hands with Lee Haewon.

“You’re having a hard time. You have to do everything from A to Z to be a manager for that guy, don’t you?”

“I’ve been doing it since middle school, so it’s not that difficult. Though, it’s quite a pain when he gets all naggy about not wanting to do it.”

“Whenever that happens, smack him on the back of the head. You are definitely qualified to do so.”

Just as they opened the lid to the drinks, Lee Heewon came in. Maru waved his hand along with the bottle.

“You’re not a good person either. We were just talking behind your back and you just had to come in.”

“Talking behind my back?”

Heewon looked at Haewon. Haewon looked away and fidgeted.

“Stop overworking your brother. 3 years is enough, isn’t it?”

“The day Haewon quits as my manager is the day I quit my acting career. But hey, you look like you’ve gained some weight in the past year.”

“I’ve had good food and good sleep. The role I was playing in the play was also a rather chubby one, so I gained some weight. Thanks to that, I feel like I’ve been dying for the past month.”

“Losing weight? I hate that too. I wonder why there aren’t any roles that require a fat man. Sleeping and eating, sleeping and eating. That sounds like a dream.”

“Hey, imagine getting fat with your face. Who would let you play the main character?”

“My face is better than yours. You look way too dry. I at least hear that I’m cute quite often.”

Heewon lost his posture as soon as he sat down. Putting a squid down on a chair might look like that. Haewon nagged him to sit upright.

"I was totally surprised when I saw your face during the get-together."

Haewon mentioned something that happened a while ago. It was a small get-together with the director, the writer, and the important actors. Maru also sat in the very corner.

"I also didn't know you two would be there either. I just happened to show up at the last minute without any information."

"When did you decide to participate in the drama?"

"Well, it's kinda funny for me to say this since I was given the role, but I don't know when my role was decided either. It was the president's power after all."

"I see. Anyway, I'm happy for you. When I heard that you were going to the military after not hearing news of you for a long while, I honestly thought that you were going to leave the industry. I was worried and slightly disappointed too."

"Back then, I wasn't entirely right in my mind."

"And now you are?"

"I'm not an idiot who would reject an opportunity that landed in my hands for the second time. So I should do it to the death. If I don't do what I get paid for, I feel like I might really become an unemployed man."

Heewon spoke as he put a large piece of peach in his mouth,

"Being unemployed is the best. My dream is to become a rich unemployed man."

"Hey, didn't you save up quite a lot of money?"

"I did, for the past 4 years. I bought a building as well."

"Owning a building at 25, huh. You won't have a problem living the rest of your life even if you quit right now."

"I want to do that too, but a certain someone keeps nagging me about how humans have to do labor."

Heewon glanced at Haewon.

"Why are you using me as an excuse? I'm of the opinion that you can quit right now if you want to quit. But instead, I would lose my job and live every single day in despair."

"See that? He keeps lashing out at me like this. How can I quit? This guy changed after he tasted what money was. No wait, he's been writing the accounting book since he was young, so he hasn't entirely changed. He just became more tenacious."

"What are you saying? I'm always on your side."

Heewon looked for drinks saying that he wouldn't be able to win with words, but Haewon told him that he could only have three glasses. When he grumbled that he couldn't drink or eat how much he wanted, Haewon just told him that he could do so as long as he could exercise to compensate for the part he ate.

Heewon looked at the glass hesitantly for a while before putting his hands under the table. That sloth found more joy in not doing anything than the joy of eating.

“You two haven’t changed at all.”

“What do you mean we haven’t changed? You don’t know how frivolous this guy became.”

Heewon protested like someone who received an unjust sentence. His voice sounded like he was really wronged. Haewon just smiled, saying that such a thing never happened. In Maru’s eyes, that was a business smile that he could rate 15 points out of 10. The innocent brother that wished for his bigger brother’s well-being above anyone else, had now become a tow truck that dragged his brother to the field of labor when the brother’s wish was to play around for all his life.

Heewon, who was grumbling by himself, reached out for the drink bottle before sighing and pouring water into his glass instead. Unlike the protest on his face, he was listening to his little brother’s words to the tee. Maru thought that the creation of the actor Lee Heewon was more thanks to Haewon’s management rather than Heewon’s natural talent at acting.

“Let me go to the toilet for a bit.”

Heewon, who ate like he had been starving for a few days, got up.

“Isn’t he supposed to be on a diet?”

“He just has to quit his snacks. He doesn’t eat proper food and always looks for snacks. That’s the problem.”

“I wonder if he can get married.”

“If I ever meet my sister-in-law-to-be, I am going to grab her hands and thank her. I would also tell her not to abandon him.”

Maru grabbed the drink bottle before letting go and pouring soda in Haewon’s glass instead.

“It must have been a while since you drank.”

“I drank on my high school graduation day and never after that. I thought that I would definitely regret it if I become unable to do something when I absolutely have to, so I thought that I might as well not drink in the first place.”

“How can you brothers be so different?”

“Maybe because we’re not related by blood.”

“Blood isn’t important. The fact that you are brothers is. But hey, did you give up on college entirely? Heewon told me when we met a year ago. You apparently passed into Seoul University but didn’t get admitted.”

Haewon, who looked like he wouldn’t flinch no matter what he heard, trembled for the first time today, to the point that he almost misplaced his glass on the table.

“Did he say something like that?”

“When you weren’t here. Do you remember how he started wailing after drinking back then?”

“I kinda found it suspicious because he kept apologizing to me, but I guess he knew.”

“You should’ve gone to college. The title of Seoul University isn’t like a business card you see thrown around a lot.”

“It was an important period for him. Of course, it was an important period for me as well. I don’t regret it. Prestigious colleges are nothing compared to my family members doing well. Also, I’m not someone who makes losses. I know that him doing well means me doing well; that having a famous brother is much better than going to Seoul University. That’s why I gave up.”

“Haewon.”

“Yes?”

“When you lie, you should look in the other person’s eyes. Only then would you sound believable. Who would be fooled if you look uneasy like that?”

Haewon brushed his bangs with his hand and spoke,

“My brother did.”

“He’s just pretending. He’s damn good at acting after all.”

“That might be true.”

“You should rip a lot off him in the future. Get about half of what he owns and do what you want with it. Being a late college student is good but being a store owner is good as well.”

“I like being my brother’s manager. About this, I’m not lying.”

Maru nodded.

“Uhm, hyung-nim. Can I also ask you a question?”

“What is it?”

“Why did you break up with Gaeul-noona?”

“This is unexpected. Do you like gossip?”

“No, I’m just purely curious. Back then, Gaeul-noona looked like she was half out of it. I only found out later that you two broke up. It was to the point that even my brother, who rarely gets worried about others, came to me for consultation about her.”

“Haewon, do you have a girlfriend?”

“No, I don’t have one right now.”

“So you had one before?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you break up?”

“Things happened and....”

“That’s the same with me too. Things just happened and we just happened to break up. There is no grand reason for it.”

“Well, I guess that must be true.”

“Do you still see Han Gaeul these days?”

“Yes. The president loves to hold meetups with the people at the company. Even if it’s not for that, Gaeul-noona calls from time to time, so we see each other quite a lot. Though, most of the time, I’d be listening to her worries.”

“So you became famous as a consultant. I guess it’s not surprising since you’re looking after Heewon.”

Maru spun the drink in his glass. Why was it that that name kept popping out in unexpected places when he tried so hard to become distant? Was the force of attraction that the curse of reincarnation applied to him still forcing him closer to her? Even after distancing himself so much?

“Anyway, did this dude drown in the toilet or something? Why isn’t he coming back?”

“I’ll go have a look. I found him sleeping on the toilet during the last get-together before.”

“Bring him back quickly.”

He emptied the alcohol while looking at Heewon getting up from his seat. When the door closed and he heard footsteps becoming distant, he barely muttered in a quiet voice,

“So, does Gaeul look okay now? Does she look hurt anywhere? Doesn’t she cry?”

After saying those words, he waved his hand in the air in a flurry so that no traces of his question remained.

Chapter 773. Sequence 4

She put the boiling pot of doenjang soup on the table. She also put the tofu which was being braised in a gochujang-based sauce onto a plate. Rice made from soaked rice as well as hand-made food. Cooking had become a luxury that she could only do when she had the time. She took a photo of the well-made food on the table and sent it to her mother. She didn’t get a reply back as it seemed that her mother was still working.

She put on a youtube video on her laptop and picked up her spoon. The woman on the monitor was eating fried chicken with a happy face. Foods made by frying in oil started a process inside her head. She tasted them in her imagination before eating the rice and doenjang soup. The rice was half-cooked and the soup was bland. The price of challenging cooking when she was just a beginner was quite big. She had no choice but to put the rice in the microwave and cook a fried egg. She wanted to put some salt or soy sauce into the doenjang soup, but from her experience, adding something would always make the outcome worse. She had to prevent the catastrophe of the edible becoming inedible.

She put the fried egg on top of the rice that had become caked all over and put some sesame seeds and sesame oil. With some simple ingredients, she created food that didn’t lose out to food at a three-star

Michelin restaurant. Gaeul put the fried egg and rice in her mouth while thinking that it was fried chicken. When she ate about half of the rice, she suddenly found herself feeling quite curious as to why she knew the recipe for this in the first place. She did eat it a few times during primary school when her mother made it for her, but she never ate it after that. A quarter-spoon of soy sauce, a little more sesame oil than that, and as many sesame seeds as she wanted. She couldn't remember the source of the recipe that she could remember like she did a mathematical formula. She tilted her head before continuing to move her spoon. Who cares? If it's good, then that was all that she needed.

She washed the dishes that she had emptied. The woman on the laptop started boiling some ramyun as though she wasn't satisfied with just the fried chicken. She was so thin despite eating all that. Gaeul found herself admiring that woman due to all the exercise she must be doing after shooting that video.

She washed the dishes that had soap bubbles on them and did some squats. The late-night snacks that she ate with the excuse that she should keep herself energized and as a last guilty pleasure before she started her piece had turned into assassins, hiding in various corners of her body. Thanks to the diet she did to the death, she didn't gain any weight, but she couldn't feel at ease as she felt like she had lost a lot of stamina. The TV screen was a ruthless device that put people on their sides after all.

She picked up her phone when she heard the Kakaotalk notification bell. There was a photo of her mother smiling joyfully with jjajang-myun, jjampong, and tangsuyuk in the background. That's how you wanna play this, Mrs. Choi Haesoo, huh? - Gaeul sent her a text along with an angry emoji after thinking that.

-Your daughter is trying desperately to lose weight here. You're going too far.

-I thought you should fill the stomach of your heart. This mother will eat the portion that you can't eat.

-You're eating without doing any work again? I heard that people have a hard time writing when they're full.

-Clearly not me. I can write perfectly even when I'm full.

Her mother sent a photo of a pig's foot after that.

-How's the air in Haenam?

-It's good. We should come together next time. The air's good and the sea is pretty.

-I want to go too. Maybe I should go traveling with you, mom, after I do this drama.

-I'll look forward to it. Let me feel what it's like to have a successful daughter.

-But you earn more than me. You should be the one treating me.

A cute mascot character with hearts for eyes kept appearing on her phone. After looking at the photo of her mother for a while, Gaeul walked over to a shelf and took out a book. It was the script of 'Flaming Lady' made into a hardcover. The story of the drama that changed the life of her mother, writer Choi Haesoo, in its entirety was inside this book. When she was in her 3rd year of high school, her mother was writing a script for a drama while keeping it secret from her, the daughter. She found out that her mother was writing a drama script instead of a romance novel through producer Park Hoon. Producer Park Hoon called her out of nowhere and offered her an audition. She also got a call from her agency as

well. Gaeul took the audition, and she passed on the spot. It was a week later that she found out that it was her mother who wrote the script for the drama.

Gaeul slowly flipped over the pages. Whenever she flipped each page, she could remember each part vividly. Acting as a girl that resolved to take revenge was quite tricky. Without the practice she did with the 'rabbit', she would have given up midway. The rabbit became her exclusive teacher and taught her the A to Z of acting. Whenever she thought about the things the rabbit said and put them into action, she started escaping her shell. When she finished the scene where she became an adult actor and got off the drama, Gaeul received attention from the public for the first time. The amount of attention she received was on a completely different level than when she played her role in 'Building'. There was no end to the list of interviews that her manager told her about, and the list of magazine shoots would only make the list longer. Also, she was given the happy dilemma of having to choose between scripts that came from various places. It was also back then that she found out that the people that liked her had created a fan café for her.

'Flaming Lady' was a precious drama that changed both her and her mother's lives. The actress Han Gaeul was only able to become big thanks to this drama. Gaeul read the book until the last page before closing the book. What would have happened if the role in this drama went to someone else? She would probably have a very different-looking acting career than now. That call from producer Park Hoon practically created the current her. Had she not received the call, had producer Park Hoon not chosen her....

Just as the book was about to be placed right on the shelf, it stopped midway. Her thoughts also couldn't proceed forward as though they got stuck on something. Why did producer Park Hoon contact her? She was so absorbed in practicing back then due to the sudden opportunity that she had no time to think about it. Producer Park Hoon said in passing that he was impressed with her acting in 'Building', but how many producers would actually bother looking up the contact number of a nameless actress to cast? While she might be overthinking things, it kept tugging on her mind like the slight skin peel right next to the fingernail on her index finger. Based on her mother's personality, there was no way that it was her who recommended her. In truth, her mother never mentioned anything about having a daughter in the acting industry.

She pushed the book back in with force. Just then, her phone which she left on the sofa started ringing, begging for attention. She picked up the phone after checking the caller's name on the screen.

"What's up? You're calling me first."

-I'm calling because I have something to tell you. What are you doing right now?

"What else? I'm just at home. I'm on a diet because of the shoot. How about you?"

-I'm eating dinner.

"What happened during dinner for you to be calling me?" she asked as she sat down on the sofa.

-Let me ask you something.

"What is it?"

-Did you break up with Han Maru in a bad way?

Gaeul took the phone off her ear. The ear and cheek that touched the phone suddenly felt scalding hot. The name of an awkward person popped out from the person she didn't expect would mention at an unexpected hour. How should she reply to this? Should she honestly say that she was rejected? It then dawned on her that she didn't have to answer such a question in the first place. She wetted her lips a little and asked back,

"What are you talking about so suddenly?"

-I'm with Maru right now. We met because we're going to be shooting a drama together.

"I see. So Maru is in that drama."

-You didn't know?

"We haven't been keeping in touch."

-Is that so? Alright then. I went to the bathroom, and I called you because you suddenly came to mind. If you were doing well together, I was thinking maybe we should eat together.

"What's up with you? Lee Heewon being considerate? Is the world going to end?"

-You can't blame me for it. I was reminded of you when I looked at Maru's face. I'm only saying this now, but you looked seriously bad back then. You were working like mad. Well, you did like working before that, but back then, you looked like you were crazy for work. When you took a break, you stayed dead still to the point that it made me worry.

"That happened a long time ago. I'm surprised you still remember."

-This is what's good about having colleagues in the same workplace. Anyway, get some rest. Sorry I called you.

She hurriedly called out to Heewon in an urgent voice as he was about to hang up.

"Did Maru perhaps talk about me?"

-No.

No - this answer felt rather refreshing and yet disappointing at the same time. She thought that she didn't have any residual emotions left after three years had passed, but whether it was now or back when she visited the theater, it seemed as though she still had some unresolved residue.

Back when they just broke up, she had a hard time. It was her who told him that they should put some distance, and she knew that it was her who provided the reason for the breakup, but actually breaking up stirred up her heart violently despite knowing that it was her fault.

A year before they broke up, while she was shooting 'Flaming Lady', she tried to approach Maru first, but back then, Maru was the one who told her that they should keep their distance. The distance never shrank and like that, they broke up 3 years ago. In the place she was informed of the breakup, she would have accepted it with ease of mind if he told her that he was fed up, that he started to hate her, or things like that, but instead, Maru notified her of the breakup along with an apology. Gaeul only grasped empty air after seeing the firm resolution in his eyes which told her that he was not going to tell her the

reason no matter what. She thought that she should contact him and have a proper talk with him after calming down a little, but as though he predicted her actions, Maru went to his military service the next day. Although she wrote letters, the only reply was a simple line telling her to 'do her best'. There was no indication of a 'relationship' anywhere in the exchange.

-Han Gaeul?

Gaeul gripped her phone.

"Lee Heewon, I'm sorry, but you gotta run an errand for me."

-What is it?

"Go ask Maru if I can go right now."

-Ask Maru?

"Yes. Please ask him that."

-Okay, alright. I'll ask him and give you a call.

"Please."

Gaeul put down her phone and went into the bathroom. She washed her face and hair. It would be too late if she started getting prepared after hearing a confirmation. Playing a character with short hair was quite helpful at a time like this. She looked at her phone while drying her hair. There was no reply yet, even though around 10 minutes had passed.

She was dusting water droplets off her hair when she made eye contact with herself through the mirror. Gaeul chuckled. She wondered what she was doing. It would have been a lot easier if she talked to him back at the theater. It felt like Maru didn't feel distant and that the gentle him was still there, resulting in her boomeranging back to him. In the end, it was fate that they had to meet at least once.

She got a call. She was surprised at her reaction speed in picking it up.

"What did Maru say?"

She froze up immediately after asking. The faint breathing sounds didn't belong to Heewon. The owner of the voice that she still remembered after all these years, spoke,

-Come. Let me see you.

It was Han Maru.

Chapter 774. Sequence 4

Gaeul touched the part of her face that touched her phone. She felt as though she felt his breath. Maru's voice hadn't changed at all. It neither became higher nor lower. The only thing she could feel in the word 'come' was a sense of welcome. She thought about what sense of welcome that was; as a friend? Or as a former lover?

She dried her hair with the hairdryer and chucked the towel into the laundry basket. A bottle of facial essence caught her eyes, but she lacked time. She sat in front of the makeup desk and moved around busily. She had to admit it. She was in a hurry right now.

She put on her clothes and got in her car. She started driving towards the place that Heewon told her about. She felt like she had ignored some traffic lights on her way there, but she couldn't remember clearly. Only when she parked in front of the restaurant did she realize that she had been speeding. Before she got off, she saw the reflection of her lips through the rearview mirror. It looked paler than usual. She hurriedly took out some lipstick and applied it to her lips. This time, it looked too thick. She sighed and got out of the car. She realized that nothing she did would satisfy her.

She could feel her heartbeat from her soles as she stepped on the stairs. She felt as though her entire body had become one giant heart. She felt a little dizzy as the blood vessels throughout her body sent all the blood to her head. She even became worried that she might look a little too red right now.

She opened the door and went inside. The restaurant was pretty quiet. Recalling that they were in a room towards the inside, she started moving. Some of the customers who were drinking seemed to have noticed who she was, but they didn't follow her. She lowered her head a little and entered the corridor where there were doors placed throughout. After checking through the small window on the door, she found Heewon and Haewon. She looked over to the other side. She saw Maru, with a cup in hand.

"You called for me and didn't even come out to get me?" she said as she went inside.

She felt more nervous than when she first started playing the role of a lead character in a drama. She tried her best not to look nervous. She curled up her toes and sat next to Maru.

"It's been a long time," Maru said.

"True, it has," she replied as she looked into his eyes.

She was nervous to the point that her neck became tense when she made eye contact with him, but she soon felt okay. The ballooning sense of nervousness that she had when she arrived at the restaurant had popped and disappeared all at once.

"How have you been doing?" Gaeul asked.

Maru crossed his arms as though in deep thought before slowly replying 'so-so'.

"Sorry for calling you out so suddenly, Gaeul-noona."

There was a different perpetrator, but it was Haewon who apologized instead.

"I was just about to eat, so it's fine. It's boring to eat by myself. Did you order everything?"

"We only ate a little so that we could eat with you when you come. Oh, here's the menu. You can order what you want. Today, it's on my brother."

"Looking at the menu, I see that all the expensive stuff has been ordered already."

Gaeul looked at the food on the table. They were all the expensive foods at the bottom of the menu.

“Someone’s treating me, so I might as well get something expensive,” Maru said.

Gaeul only ordered a bowl of salmon salad.

“Here.”

She reached out for the chopsticks in front of her. When she tried to grab it, Maru pulled back one of the chopsticks. What entered her hand was a small wooden stick that had lost its pair.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” Maru said as he waved the other chopstick around.

Gaeul felt like time was going backwards when she looked at him smiling like a child. He would often give her just one single chopstick like a child and then act like she should try stealing the other one from him in an unknown restaurant, in a bunsik restaurant, and even an expensive-looking restaurant. When he did, she would grumble but still play along. Sometimes, she would sometimes hit him. Gaeul reached out for the chopstick in joy as though she had found her graduation album covered in dust. Maru would pull back again in a prankster manner, and she would complain....

The chopstick that should not be within her reach entered her hand so easily. He did not pull back the chopstick. He put it on his palm and started talking to Heewon as though nothing had happened. Gaeul gathered the two chopsticks together and put them down. Good memories were probably called ‘good’ because they were meaningless. The ‘he’ and ‘she’ who played around in the past had become a different ‘he’ and ‘she’ with the passage of time. What did she expect? She was such a fool.

They chatted as they ate. The man next to her got on her nerves like a gas stove she had forgotten to turn off at home, but she didn’t show it on her face. When they made eye contact, she made a clueless smile and looked at him for about 2 seconds before turning to look at the brothers on the other side or at the food. I don’t feel anything either, she wanted to express that with her body.

“I’ll go make a call for a minute.”

Haewon took out his phone and stood up. He looked cautious as though he was about to call someone high up.

“I’m off to the bathroom. Maybe it’s the food, but it keeps gurgling in my stomach.”

Even Heewon left.

Gaeul put the salmon salad she ordered in her mouth. The salmon was mushy and the dressing was sour. It didn’t fit her tastes. Although the salad wasn’t to her taste, she kept stuffing it down her throat, begging for Heewon or Haewon to come back.

“Aren’t you eating too much?”

Just as she was reaching out to the beef tataki, she had to stop. Gaeul looked next to her. Maru’s face, which she proactively tried to push outside her vision, could be seen clearly. Her lips fell apart slightly before sticking again. She stayed still, not knowing what to do, before realizing that she had to do something and so spoke whatever was on her mind,

“I’m going to put on some weight.”

“What a tremendous amount of confidence you have. I’m dying here trying to lose weight. I gained some weight because I went on an eating spree.”

“I see. I didn’t know because I wasn’t that interested.”

The part of her ego that wanted to cut off this conversation generated some unnecessary words. She had no talent to unspill the spilt milk. She just placidly moved her chopsticks. Should I just stand up and leave right now? Would it be strange to put a phone against my ear when it didn’t ring? Why am I so uneasy right now? She had all kinds of thoughts.

“It’s been three years, hasn’t it?”

“It has been three years.”

“I did plays after getting discharged in Daehak-ro. I became pretty popular, and the tickets sold well too.”

“Really? You should’ve told me about it. I should have gone to watch you.”

She knew the plot of the story and all the characters in it, but she put up a pretense of cluelessness. For a brief instant, she wondered what kind of expression he would put on if she told him that she made a visit on the last day of his performance, but she didn’t put it into words.

“I watched the drama you were in in the military. It was pretty good. You even received a prize, didn’t you?”

“Yes. The rookie actor award.”

“How was it?”

“It was good. It’s something that I can only get once in my acting career. I was grateful.”

“Man, it’s pretty amazing. Someone who used to do plays like me is so far ahead of me. Not only are you on TV, you even got a prize. I should do my best to catch up.”

“Catch up to what?”

Gaeul snapped the chopsticks down on the table. Maru, who was leaning on the desk with his hands locked, glanced at her once before looking up at the ceiling.

“It’s the duty of an actor to chase the actors they admire. I should do my best to become like you or Heewon.”

“Do your best? At this point?”

Her words kept containing thorns. She couldn’t calm down. He was in Daehak-ro in the year leading up to his military service. Although he said that he wanted to consolidate his foundation, to Gaeul’s eyes, he was wasting time not doing anything back then. Even when she asked why, he did not reply. Around that time, she started the shoot for ‘Flaming Lady’, and Maru practically cut off all contact. The only news she got of him was the day before he went to his military service; the news being the breakup announcement.

"I have an advantage since I went to the military early. I just need to keep going forward now. I got an opportunity too."

"So what, that's why you went to the military without telling me anything? Because of that meager advantage?"

"Hey, the military is nothing much. Also, I just told you that we should break up the day before, so how am I supposed to tell you that I'm going to the military right after that?"

"Nothing much? Going to the military for two years is 'nothing much' to you?"

"Why are you so angry? It's all in the past."

Maru smiled as though he was clueless. Gaeul could feel the lump in her head cool down in an instant. Having turned into a block of ice from a lump of fire, her feelings that were boiling with rage, disappointment, and longing decreased to the extreme lows.

"Let me ask you something since it's all in the past. Why did we break up?"

"I think it was just a natural order of things. We each needed some time to think, but that time just became longer than necessary."

"Is it because I stayed distant from you?"

"No, it's not like that."

"Then what? If it's not that, why did you not look at me again when I approached you again?"

"Just like you had your own reasons for staying distant from me, I probably had my reasons as well. I don't remember the reason anymore though. Maybe I was just immature."

"Immature? Han Maru was?"

"We were both children. Maybe that's why we broke up: because we were kids."

"Can't you... can't you just tell me that you got fed up with me?"

She felt incredibly calm. She didn't know where all the fear she had before she asked had gone. Like she was right now, she felt like she could calmly walk into a lion's cage in a zoo. Gaeul wanted to know what Maru was feeling. More so than the reason they broke up; more so than the reason why he didn't reply when he was in the military; and more so than the reason he didn't look for her after getting discharged, she wanted to know what Maru felt when he announced the breakup.

Maru wordlessly gave her a napkin. She didn't know what that meant until she looked down. A teardrop fell onto her hand. Only then did Gaeul realize that she was crying and that she was claspng her hands so tightly that her veins had popped out on both of her hands. Her head felt clear was because the heated emotions escaped through her tears. She tried to grab the napkin with shaking hands, but she couldn't do as she wished.

It was then that Maru's hand approached her face.

Maru's head slowly touched her face.

“You haven’t changed; your tears react faster than your words.”

Maru put the napkin on the table.

“What kind of answer do you want from me?”

“The reason we really broke up.”

“If God told me not to meet you, would you believe it?”

“Just tell me you got fed up with me instead.”

“Let’s stop. You’re going to cry again.”

“Tell me you broke up with me because you got fed up with me. Or tell me you got another girl instead. Tell me, SOMETHING... so that I can accept... so that I can hate you... so that I can no longer think of you.”

Maru smiled awkwardly and scratched around his eyes. His smile was gentle yet iron-hard. He opened up possibilities but did not tell her the truth.

“You’re not telling me anything.”

“...Because I don’t have anything to tell you.”

“I see. That’s how it is. That’s what happened.”

Gaeul picked up the napkin that Maru put down and wiped her tears. She wiped her lips with the wetness until all the red on her lips was wiped away.

“Thanks for the food today.”

“Heewon’s the one buying, so tell him.”

“True, I should do that. I’m leaving.”

“Alright.”

“I’ll greet you warmly when we meet next time.”

“I’ll reply warmly too.”

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” Maru said as he turned his face away.

Gaeul pulled on the doorknob with all of her might.

Chapter 775. Sequence 4

The door slammed shut. It was the sound that severed the space physically as well as the sound that snapped the thin thread of emotions he had barely maintained until now. Maru pressed down on his knees to suppress his urge to follow her.

The meeting was not that shocking. She brought herself from three years ago right to this place as though the three years hadn't passed at all. It felt as though the separation of space and time didn't mean anything between them. He kept glancing at her like he was some thief. The forehead that symbolized her bold personality, the nose that represented her signature pride, the philtrum that was a symbol of her stubbornness, and lastly the lips that whispered loveliness. He was enraptured by every single line that was on her face. The urge to have her and steal her for himself kept pushing his back. Had he not recalled the regret that would come as a result of his decision, he would have reached out to her, both verbally and physically.

Only after controlling his impulse by giving her the chopstick obediently could he look her in the eyes. The reason he called her here was to put an end to the relationship he wasn't able to finish properly three years ago.

Using the ability that he gained by returning to the past was something dangerous, but he could only resolve their relationship cleanly by finding out what she thought within her and then deriving an answer from that. Maru wished to be her long-time friend. He wished to become someone who would listen to her worries, congratulate her on her wedding, and give her cute gifts when she conceives a child. As long as he looked inside her heart and found out what she thought about the man known as 'Han Maru', it would be easy for him to straighten out this twisted relationship and lead it in the direction he wanted. Just this last once - he believed that with this, he would be able to untangle everything.

Maru poured some soju into his cup used for drinking water and gulped it down all at once. The alcohol, which was supposed to heat everything up as it went down the throat, disappeared without giving him any feelings. Only the bitter scent of alcohol lingered around his mouth.

"Why couldn't I see it? No, was it good that I didn't see it?"

He didn't tell her to come out of impulse. In fact, he made the resolution of his lifetime. He even decided to use his ability that he could not afford to use, yet he wasn't able to see anything. No matter how much he looked into her tearful eyes, he couldn't see what she thought of Han Maru. It wasn't that his ability had disappeared. Before she arrived, he tested his ability on a passerby. He bumped into that person on purpose and looked into his eyes. A speech bubble appeared above the top of his head, saying 'why is this guy staring at me like this?'

Before he found out that she was the reason for the cycle of lives, he tried using that ability on her. Back then, the ability definitely worked on her. He could clearly see what she thought of him. There was only one case when the speech bubble didn't appear - if the person he was looking in the eyes was thinking about absolutely nothing related to him.

Maru tapped on his knees. There was no way she had no thoughts. In fact, she would have probably felt so hectic that a storm would have been brewing within her. After all, she was so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn't realize that she was crying.

The moment he saw her crying, Maru's thought process also came to a screeching halt. The ability he had so much faith in didn't activate, and she, who he thought would act cold, had kept the feelings from three years ago as though she just woke up from cryosleep. It was hard to endure the incoming wave of

emotions. He believed that he had cleanly wrapped things up after listening to the elder's words, but he soon realized how laughable and imperfect the resolve he had made was.

He had to cut her off, he had to end it here, he had to wrap everything up here - he endlessly thought such to himself, but his hands were already reaching out to her ears. He wiped her tears and moved his hand according to the curvature of her face. It was a near miracle that he had held back the impulse to use his finger to brush away the tears from her face and touch her lips. He could taste blood from his clenched teeth.

He had sent her off several times in his imagination. He pictured her marriage, her children, and the man that would be with her. A perfect life that she would have without him in the equation.

In the dream he had countless times, he was sitting in the darkness, looking towards the light. The light was her, and he himself had given up on approaching that light and just waited until he disappeared as he sat down on the spot humbly. He believed that he would feel satisfied with just watching. Now that he met her today; however, he realized just how foolish he was. There couldn't be a relationship where he could just keep watching her from the side. He was no saint. He was no ascetic who had transcended material and carnal desires. He was just an ordinary person who wanted to sit when he was standing and lie down when he was sitting. If he kept her by his side as a friend, he would eventually end up closing that distance, reach out to her, and eventually have her, regardless of who was by her side.

The moment he once again became cognizant of the fact that he could not have her by his side, his head generated countless words that would make her find him disgusting and contemptuous. The formula that would provide the answer to turn two friends into complete strangers gave a strangely detailed method. It was as though he had prepared all this beforehand.

He uttered words that shook her heart. It was a desperate act. He had to quench the fire burning within him in order to talk to her calmly. He had to hold himself back from reaching out to her and hold his mind back from flying over to where she was. He once again reminded himself that the relationship between the two was nothing. He eventually saw her tears dry and her emotions dry as well.

Maru felt as though his soul was plucked out of his body and dumped into a space of darkness without a speck of light. He felt like the floor beneath him was going to collapse at any moment. The ego that had climbed up to his throat screamed at him to hold her. Maru killed that ego using whatever methods possible.

Just like how she wanted to know the reason for their breakup, Maru wished for her to not be curious about anything. He wished for her to detest him just as much as she wanted the reason for their breakup to be clear. He wished for her to slap him on the cheek, for her to insult him outright, or pour water over him like drama clichés.

She just left after saying goodbye. Maru prayed. He prayed that she would hold him in contempt; that she would despise him; and going forward, treat him as though he was nothing much.

Heewon and Haewon returned to the room. The two asked where Gaeul went in confusion. She left first - he explained simply.

"I'll go get a breather."

It was hot outside the restaurant. He only realized that it was the middle of summer after leaving the restaurant. His body suddenly swayed and his sense of direction disappeared. He sat on the bench in front of the restaurant. The conversations of the passersby felt like the buzzing of a hive of bees. It was a sound that messed up his head. He blocked his ears and curled up. He felt separated from the rest of the world. What was he supposed to live for in a situation where even hope disappeared from Pandora's box?

Her life would no longer contain Han Maru anywhere. Maru had never pictured such a scene. He might have yielded the place of the lover, but he had never thought about a life without her.

So I'm such a weak person - Maru calmed his breathing. It was the worst choice, and yet it was the best choice as well. This was the only method he could choose in order to end this cycle of reincarnation. As this cycle always ended with him marrying her, things would definitely be different this time. If this didn't change anything, he was planning to become the serial killer of the century in his next life. Perhaps he would fall into hell if he did.

The suffocating breathing became smooth again. His mind had half-died, but his body was desiring life. In the end, people just kept living on like this: by compromising and despairing. He could already picture himself locking himself up in his room once he heard about her wedding in the future, but what could he do? He was alive and had to keep living on.

Just as he was about to raise his gaze, a white trainer entered his eyes. The thin ankle, as well as the well-shaped calf, allowed him to tell who they belonged to without raising his head. Maru froze up and stayed still. He didn't have the courage to look up. In the end, the woman in front of him crouched down. He made eye contact with her. Maru hurriedly looked down.

"You said you didn't have a reason, so why are you putting on such an expression?"

"I don't know."

"You said you had nothing to say to me, so why are you so agonized?"

"Well, I don't really know either."

"Look at me in the eyes when you say that."

"I don't have anything to tell you even if I do look."

A pair of cold hands touched his two cheeks. Maru was forced to lift his head. Han Gaeul, drenched in sweat, was in front of him.

"I ran a lap around the area because I felt so upset. I just couldn't understand. I tried to understand why you did that. But I still don't understand. I thought that I was very well aware of the man known as Han Maru, but I must have been wrong. I don't know anything, absolutely nothing."

Her eyes sucked in everything. Maru tried to turn his head away because he felt like she could draw out the true feelings that he had locked up deep inside his heart. However, Gaeul's hands were strong. Indeed, she was strong before she became the mother of a child. She was a woman who propped him up from behind whenever he was about to collapse.

"Let me ask you just one thing. Do you like me? Or hate me?"

Maru was unable to reply. He felt as though he would confess his deep love if he spoke right now, which would put the word 'like' to shame.

"Alright, you're planning on staying silent until the end, huh? Do you remember what you told me before? 'It doesn't matter even if you meet another man. I will make you love me again'."

She recited his words in a meaningful way.

"I actually lied. I went to your last performance. I saw you on stage as well. I was planning on saying hello, but I just left. Do you know why? It was because you felt so close to me. It felt like breaking up was nothing. You dumped me, but if I keep liking you, it would hurt my pride, wouldn't it? No, this is a lie too. I was afraid that you might not like me. I was scared of confirming that I held no meaning to you. Let me ask you again. Do you love me?"

"Don't do this. Everything's over between us."

"Answer my question. Do you love me or not?"

"I don't. I don't like you. Done now?"

"Yes, I'm done now."

Gaeul stood up. Was she going to leave now? He raised his head slowly. He could see Gaeul's face faintly smiling.

"I found out for the first time today that there are times you can't lie."

Gaeul kissed her palm. Then, she put her palm against Maru's forehead.

"Look forward to it. I will make you say that you like me with your lips again. Phew, that makes me feel refreshed. I'm going now. I'm leaving for real, okay?"

"Han Gaeul."

He tried calling out to her, but she walked away without looking back. Maru raised his hand and caressed his forehead. A faint red substance rubbed off his forehead.

It was a night that was mixed with despair and glee. It was a hot night.

Chapter 776. Sequence 5

"Hey, over there. Come here for a sec."

Yoon Hyungseok pointed at himself and asked 'me?' The leader gestured for him to come without asking questions.

"Do you have something to do after this?"

"After this?"

"If you have some time, I was going to have you do some other character. I'll pay you the wage."

"What role is it? Does he have a line?"

The leader scanned him from top to bottom.

“Hey, are you interested in this area?”

“My dream is to become an actor. I came here to get some experience today so that I can see what it’s actually like at the scene.”

“Good. Come over when I call for you later. It’ll be a thug role, and you’ll have to undergo some makeup. There aren’t many lines, but you have to cringe a little.”

“If I can get on camera, I’ll do anything. Where should I wait?”

“Go sit over there. I’ll call you as soon as things are taken care of. Yoon Hyungseok, right? And your number is this?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

Hyungseok sat on a chair placed in the corner of the set.

“Aren’t you going?”

A man who played the role of a patient with him came over and asked.

“I was told to stay behind.”

“That’s great. The leader seems to like you before. Then do your best.”

The man said goodbye before leaving. Hyungseok took off the patient outfit. When he just arrived at the shooting set and received a patient outfit, he was excited because of the unfamiliar scenery, but when the shoot lasted for about five hours, it felt like nothing as though it was his own neighborhood. He did see famous actors from afar, but that only lasted a brief instant. The background actor part-timers couldn’t even get near the noble actors. The leader roared at them to not ask for autographs or photos without their permission.

“Damn, I should become as successful as possible.”

Ever since he received a shock after seeing Maru’s acting, Hyungseok had fixed his life plans. He stopped going to the acting school that he went to like he was receiving compulsory education and looked for jobs on the scene. He did this in order to learn what it’s like at the scene and what could not be learned from textbooks. The simplest method to get onto the scene was the background actor part-time job. As soon as he registered himself in the association, he got a call, and Hyungseok ended up going all over the country because he landed himself a job in a historical drama. Unlike his expectations of being able to watch the acting of the actors from up close, Hyungseok had to stand guard in front of the palace gates while wearing thick padded clothes. Although he had tried all sorts of harsh part-time jobs, this was the first time he felt like he was actually going to die. If he could watch the acting of the actors, he would at least have felt a little good about it.

After failing his first attempt, Hyungseok looked into part-time jobs excluding historical dramas. It wasn’t as though he was short on money, so he didn’t have a problem with choosing. After that, he had done a few more background actor jobs, but every single time, he was just a passerby 1. He couldn’t easily find an opportunity to watch the acting of the good actors for real.

It was around that time that he first got a job in a proper set. It looked like a warehouse from the outside, but inside was a splendid-looking hospital set. The role he played was also a patient, so he thought that he may be able to watch the actors playing the doctor. His expectations were betrayed without fail. The only thing he did for the past 5 hours was walking around the corridor with ringer solution attached to his body. Over there, come here, over there, go there, there, stop.

“You there, come over here.”

He followed the leader to the back of the set. He saw a sign that said ‘makeup room’. The scenery behind the door was nothing like what a ‘makeup room’ would look like. There were clothes strewn everywhere, piles of empty bowls, and even leftover food. This looked more like a living room than a makeup room.

“You have to get your makeup done here.”

“Yes.”

The leader picked up a call as he left the makeup room. Hyungseok followed the woman’s instructions to close his eyes.

“Change your top into this.”

“Right here?”

“Where else? Should I close your eyes for you then?”

She seemed annoyed and told him to do it fast. Hyungseok changed his clothes. It was a peculiar experience to change in front of a woman that looked at him like he was some object. As soon as he sat down on the chair, the makeup room opened again and another woman came in. One of them took care of his face and hair, while the other one got close to his flank. The perfectly fine shirt turned red. It was ripped with some scissors, rubbed, and even slightly burnt with a lighter.

“Don’t touch the makeup, and your clothes too for that matter.”

Hyungseok left the makeup room and took a photo of himself with his phone. The left part of his face was covered with blood. He was about to touch his hair caked in blood but stopped when he recalled the warning.

“Emergency patients, please gather round.”

The leader gestured at him to go over. The patients gathered in front of the counter. It seemed that a large-scaled accident had occurred within the drama. There was a patient that joined them a little later than other people, and he had a long wound on his thigh. It was the special makeup room. Hyungseok was put off by the fat and the bones.

Listening to the explanation of the assistant director, they each moved to their places. Hyungseok played the role of a patient who was being carried into the emergency room on a stretcher. Just as the leader said, he didn’t have any lines. The only thing the assistant director told him to do was groan.

“But don’t make the sound too big. You have all seen what patients look like in dramas right? You just have to cringe and act like you’re hurt. You’ll be lying down most of the time, so it’ll be quite comfortable. Since you’re comfortable, please do your best.”

The assistant director ran over to another team of patients. Hyungseok greeted the background actors who played the role of the 119 agents.

“I’m a little heavy.”

“It’s fine. We can lift palanquins, this is nothing.”

The assistant director, who was explaining the line of movement while pushing the portable bed, returned to them.

“The stretcher should turn left at the entrance and come here. This is a scene where all the patients are coming in at once, so watch out to not get into an accident. As long as you do this scene well, you’ll be lying down for most of the time just like I said before, so you’ll have to suffer just a little.”

The assistant director was the busiest on the shooting set. When the rowdy atmosphere died down a little, the director and the actors appeared. Hyungseok lifted his head a little. Here came the lead actors who he couldn’t see a wink of for the past 5 hours. The actors and the director were right in front of him. Wearing white gowns and surgery uniforms, the actors definitely looked different from the rest. Their appearances alone screamed ‘I’m an actor’.

The first person he saw was Kang Giwoo, who was talking to the director seriously. When the media portrayed him as a sculpture-like handsome man, Hyungseok just scoffed, but now that he actually met him in person, he felt like that description didn’t do enough justice. Hyungseok could understand what it meant for a person’s face to shine. Even though they were the same age, one was a top star, while the other one was a background actor. He thought to himself that he must not waste any time.

“Okay, director. I’ll do that for now.”

Even his voice was cool. There were rumors that he was the grandson of a chaebol, and if that was true, it seemed that God had made a mistake. A person must at least have one flaw, no? Behind him, a background actress playing the role of a nurse was staring at Kang Giwoo. Her eyes looked loose, and it looked like she had fallen for him at first sight. Well, it wasn’t surprising with his face and his popularity.

“Gaeul, you’ll take over the stretcher from here. Also, patient, when Gaeul says something, just say ‘yes’ and act like you’re in pain, okay?”

Han Gaeul nodded at the director’s explanation. Hyungseok recalled Maru as soon as he saw her face. From the way he was smiling in satisfaction while looking at the screen, it was clear that he was a big fan of hers. Maybe he would kowtow to him if he got an autograph from her.

“Patient, okay?”

“Yes, got it.”

“It’ll be troublesome if you daze out during the real shoot.”

The rehearsal began. The emergency responders started walking towards the entrance of the set while carrying the stretcher. Hyungseok tried to balance himself on the shaking stretcher. As they weren't professionals, the two people carrying the stretcher weren't in sync, so he felt like he would be flipped over if he just stayed still. As soon as he passed the entrance of the hospital, the camera followed him.

"Interns! What are you doing, staying still like that!"

A middle-aged actor shouted as though it was the real shoot. At the same time, Han Gaeul rushed over to the stretcher. From the conversation that was occurring, Hyungseok found out that he was a patient found in a capsized bus.

"His blood pressure and heart rate are normal, but he's having a hard time breathing because of the pressure applied to his chest."

The emergency responder said his line proficiently. It seemed that his experience with this part-time job was above the others. Han Gaeul approached and spoke to him,

"Sir, is the pain here?"

"Yes."

He groaned and replied in a daze just like he was instructed to.

"Doctor Choi! I think we need to take a chest shot of this patient!"

After Han Gaeul went away, another actor in a doctor's gown approached him. The actors moved around like they were dancing even in this cramped space. Hyungseok watched all that happen from the bed. He could feel pressure from just the rehearsal. The mood of the chaotic emergency unit immediately turned into a quiet shooting set with a clap from the director.

"We'll do the shoot right away. Remember your movement lines, and make it look urgent."

Having returned to the entrance, Hyungseok sat up a little. He looked at the actors who were saying their lines while looking at each other. The actors became doctors as though a magic spell was cast after the director's cue and they moved around the corridor. Even though they knew that a bunch of emergency patients would be arriving at the unit, they were laughing and joking around. They felt like true pros. Details that couldn't be seen from just the screen were hidden throughout the scene. Even in places where the camera didn't reach, their acting did not miss a beat. Hyungseok captured everything with his eyes. This was the kind of scene he wanted to see by coming to the scene like this. Though, the only problem was that he wasn't able to listen to their voices since he was so far away.

"Doctor! We've got incoming patients! It's from a capsized bus."

Hyungseok lay down and calmed his breath. It was time for him to play his part.

Chapter 777. Sequence 5

A wall had formed between the signature white tiles of the hospital and the rough flooring of the warehouse. This was the first time he felt the fourth wall from up close. Hyungseok glimpsed at the urgently shouting Han Gaeul before taking a glance at the staff who were looking at the actors from outside the set. He could see over fifty people in the group of staff at a glance, but he could not hear a

breathing sound from them. The actors, who had been joking around just 3 minutes ago, had turned into doctors and nurses who were doing their best to give the patients emergency treatment while walking around the emergency unit everywhere. The staff also maintained their tension as they did their work. Actors did what actors had to do, and the staff did the same. Watching the two entirely separate workspaces fit each other like two neighboring puzzle pieces to complete this scene gave him a sense of surprise. Although this feeling would disappear due to simple labor once NGs started flying everywhere, this first shot felt very special. Hyungseok watched the actors that moved according to the lines that the director showed them during the rehearsal and he too became immersed in his own acting. He wanted to become a seriously urgent patient rather than one that didn't look hurt. He recalled that he should not go overboard as well as Maru's words that he had to do 'his own act'.

"Hey, intern! Aren't you going to get yourself together? You were all high and mighty because you graduated in first place. How can you turn stiff in the emergency unit!"

"I'm sorry."

"If we send a person to the ICU when we could have taken care of them in the ER, are you going to take responsibility for that? Is it your job to make the patients worse?"

"I'll get myself together."

"You'd better do that if you want to look the patients in the face later. Check the patient's abdomen and tell doctor Choi. Don't space out this time, punk. Got it?"

Hyungseok could see Giwoo clenching his hand after hearing the middle-aged actor's scolding. From the looks of things, it seemed like he was getting scolded as he was the lowest rank here, and since he was dazing out. Hyungseok looked at the middle-aged actor's back as he left the emergency room. He didn't know the name of that actor. He didn't know how this would look in real life, but in his opinion, that middle-aged actor was the one who bestowed a sense of realism to this place. If Giwoo, the main character, was emphasized on the TV screen, it would probably be thanks to the middle-aged actor who set up everything for him.

The shoot paused for a moment. Circular rails were installed around Giwoo, who was standing in the middle of the emergency room, and a camera was placed on top of it. The camera slowly turned and shot Giwoo. While the camera moved around, Giwoo looked around the ER as though he was resolving himself.

"Giwoo. You're doing well, but it's a little too clear where you're looking. You're looking here, then there, then here again. I can clearly tell where you're looking, so it doesn't look that good."

"I'll try to make it as soft as possible."

"Alright, let's leave that to when we do the shoot."

The shoot resumed. As the scene was mostly composed of actions without difficult lines, Hyungseok thought that it was going to end quite soon, but there was an unexpectedly large number of NGs. Sometimes, it was Giwoo who made a mistake, and other times, a staff member got caught on camera which made them have to reshoot. This was the first time that the smooth shoot hit a wall. It seemed

that a still and gentle scene was more difficult to Kang Giwoo than moving around busily and shouting medical jargon.

“Director, I think he’s nervous.”

Just as the atmosphere of the set was freezing up like it was dunked into an ice bath, Han Gaeul spoke while laughing. Kang Giwoo, standing in front of the camera, replied to her with an ‘is that so?’ Following that, the director jokingly told him to loosen up a little. They took a small break. Hyungseok, who was outside the center of the shoot, inwardly applauded Han Gaeul for the precise timing of her words. From the way the director was opening his mouth, the director also seemed to have realized that it was about time for a refresh, but Han Gaeul was a step ahead of him. The taut atmosphere loosened up a lot.

The following shoot was smooth. Kang Giwoo showed the arrogance of the top seat intern as well as the shame of an intern who made a mistake, and next to him, Han Gaeul expressed an intern with great companionship. Hyungseok’s gaze was fixed on Han Gaeul from one point onwards. Just like the middle-aged man who imbued a breath of life into this artificially created ER, she was also breathing life into this inorganic object that was the set. She was running around to the point that the nametag around her neck was flying everywhere, and it was truly like she was a real intern in the ER, not an actress. It was to the point that what caught Hyungseok’s eyes were not her pretty face but her hands as she looked after the patients. When he looked at her and then at the new actor next to her, the dream broke and Hyungseok could feel that this was a set. It wasn’t that the new actor was bad at acting. The serious eyes, the urgent hands that reached out to the patients - it looked very neat, but when he watched him, he could realize that this was a shoot. What was so different about them? Hyungseok believed that identifying that difference was the path to improving his own acting skill.

“Okay. Let’s stop here for today.”

The background actors, who were, like him, lying down on the bed, groaned as they stood up. ‘Staying still’ was unexpectedly something quite hard. Hyungseok also straightened out his stiff back. He could hear snapping noises continuously. The ones that left the shoot first were the ones that came last. Hyungseok looked at Kang Giwoo, who thanked everyone for their work as he left, and realized why popular actors were popular. Who would hate people that were polite in this hierarchical society?

“Erase your makeup and get changed.”

Background actors flocked to the bathroom. People gathered around a man with special makeup on and took a photo together. Just as he put up a v with his fingers while putting his face against the wound, Hyungseok heard someone shout ‘let’s wrap things up quickly’ from afar.

He erased his makeup and changed into the clothes he came in. The lights in the set were also being turned off one by one. After leader did his roll call, he was about to get onto the bus back to Seoul. At that moment, he saw Han Gaeul giving out autographs to people in front of her van. Hyungseok also rushed over. After taking a photo with a staff member, Han Gaeul looked at him.

“Oh, you’re the patient who was next to me back then, right?”

“Yes. I’m surprised you remember me.”

“I remember you because you were good at acting. You looked like you were really in pain.”

“Was my acting that decent?”

“It was good. I don’t flatter people, so you can believe me.”

Han Gaeul held a pen in one hand and a phone in the other. A photo or an autograph; she seemed to be asking which one he wanted.

“Can I take both? The photo is going to be for me, and I’m going to give the autograph to someone else.”

“We worked together, so that’s nothing. But you’re going to give the autograph to someone else? I don’t think my autograph is that valuable.”

“I have a fan who’s a friend of yours, Miss Han Gaeul. I didn’t hear it from the person himself, but I saw him grinning in satisfaction when he watched your acting before.”

“Really? Then I guess I must do it. I’m acting thanks to the fans as well.”

Hyungseok raised his phone up high. When he awkwardly stood next to her, Han Gaeul said that he could come closer. After taking a photo, he took a look at the result. Even though they were standing side by side, the difference in their head size was quite big. He thought that actresses sure were different.

“What’s the name of the person receiving the autograph?”

“Before that, I don’t have paper with me right now, so can I come back after going to the bus?”

“That’s okay. I have some paper in the car. Though it’s nothing that good.”

Han Gaeul opened the door of her van and took out some paper that was a little larger than his palm. It was laminated as well.

“Sorry, I haven’t even prepared even though I came to get an autograph.”

“Don’t say that. What’s the name of this person?”

“It’s Han Maru. It’ll be even better if you can write that you wish him luck with his work. I’m the same age as him, but I’ve learned a lot from him. So I hope he does well in what he does.”

Hyunseok thought about how Maru would rejoice after receiving the autograph before lifting his head after seeing that Han Gaeul’s hands had stopped. Her widened eyes were looking directly at him. Hyungseok flinched and looked around; was there a fire behind him or something? He looked at the progression of staff who were pulling out before looking forward again. He saw Han Gaeul still looking at him while frozen stiff.

“What’s the name again?”

“My name? I’m Yoon Hyungseok.”

“No, I meant the person getting the autograph.”

“Han Maru. A pretty weird name, right? I thought of popsicles when I first heard his name in the military.”

Her leisurely face turned into that of an urgent one. Hyungseok didn't flinch anymore; he was panicking now. He was worried that she had a sickness or something. He gave a glance to the manager. He had his face buried in the phone as though he was playing a phone game.

“Is there a problem?”

“No, it's not like that.”

“If you don't feel fine, you don't have to do it. I must have taken too much of your time.”

“No, it's not that. I was just a little startled.”

“What?”

He wanted to ask what made her startled, but he decided not to, thinking that he would be too nosy. Her expression went through a series of panic, a little unease, then a little confusion, and finally a strange sense of joy. Looking at the change in her expressions from up close, Hyungseok was reminded of fireworks. Hyungseok could feel the back of his ears burning up. He had forgotten for a while, but Han Gaeul was a beauty, and she was his type.

Perhaps this encounter in this drama might lead them into a romantic relationship in the future - he thought such but the delusion didn't last more than 3 seconds. The sense of realism he had built up while running a clothes sales business had folded the wings of delusion before they could span out. If life went as one dreamed, he would have become the president of a company as large as SC right now.

“What does this Han Maru do for work?”

“What? Work?”

“Rather than wishing him well for what he does, I think it'll be better to write what that is clearly.”

When he looked at Han Gaeul saying those words, he was reminded of a documentary he watched in the military, where a white fox played around with a rabbit while hunting it. The smile in her eyes felt like feelings beyond just goodwill towards a stranger. This woman, was she always such a prankster?

“He does acting. He's quite a popular actor in Daehak-ro. I watched his play once, and it was full of people.”

“So he has the same occupation as me. Alright.”

Han Maru was just a play-actor, but Han Gaeul seemed strangely overjoyed by it. Han Gaeul put a pen against the paper. She quickly moved her hand and completed the autograph.

“Wait a sec.”

She curled up her lips before kissing the corner of the sign paper.

“That friend of yours must like it if I do this, right?”

“Of course, I'm sure he will be overjoyed to death.”

“Please give it to him, and I said please.”

“Of course, I will. Thanks for the autograph. I wish you luck in your activities.”

“You too, Mr. Hyungseok.”

She got in her van and left.

“She remembered my name.”

The wings of delusion that had folded up started squirming again. Hyungseok got on the bus with the signed paper. He sat down and checked what she wrote on it.

-Mr. Han Maru, I hope I see you on the same stage as me.

“A popular actress is cheering for him. He must feel great.”

Hyungseok looked at the hickey in the corner before quickly covering it up. He found his lips protruding out.

“Yoon Hyungseok, you can’t do that. That’s inhumane.”

He put the sign paper in the bag.

Chapter 778. Sequence 5

“Sarge Han, it’s me, open the door,” Hyungseok said into the interphone.

Maru replied that the door was open. He opened the door and went inside. The desolate-looking living room had not changed. There were only simple pieces of furniture and some books placed throughout. It was when he took his shoes off and took a step inside that he found something that was different. There was a sound of something scratching against wood before a dog popped out into the living room. The dog that came over to his feet with its tail rotating around like a propeller started rubbing its body against him as though it had missed human interaction for a long time. He was slightly confused but still reached out his hand. As he was patting the dog’s round head, he saw more dogs rushing out. One, two, three... there were four dogs in total. He wasn’t that well-versed in dogs, so he didn’t know what species they were, but he knew the one that rushed over to him first: Border Collie. He recalled having seen on TV that they were smart dogs. These dogs ranged from tiny ones the size of his forearm to large ones that would be taller than him when they stood up.

“What’s up with all the dogs?”

Hyungseok looked at Maru, who was sitting on a chair in the living room. He was eating with dark patches under his eyes as though he was a salaryman who had stayed up for three nights.

“Unrejectable guests.”

“Guests?”

“My president’s dogs. Things happened and I’ve been taking care of them.”

Hyungseok threw his bag on the sofa and started playing around with the dogs after sitting down. There was one that bit his pants and shook its head, one that sat on his lap, as well as one that was chasing its

own tail on the spot round and round. When he tickled the chin of the dog that was sitting obediently in front of him, he saw that his pants were now covered in fur. In less than five minutes, the black pants had turned into fur pants. Maru, who was eating lifelessly, stood up and walked into a room before coming back out again with tools in both hands. He came back out with a hairbrush and a tape cleaner, also known as a sticky mop.

Here - Maru said as he handed him the brush and the sticky mop. He accepted it for now. He couldn't exactly reject something from a man who looked like he was about to collapse at any moment.

"Please take care."

Of what, he didn't need to ask to know. Maru staggered over to the dining table and picked up his spoon. Hyungseok could already picture what happened in this house for the past few days. The tireless dogs must have dashed around everywhere, scattering fur, and Maru would have chased after them in shock. Han Maru was known for his cleanliness even in the military. There was no way he could have accepted dog fur scattered across his house.

"I'm surprised you're still alive. You should have been at war with fur the whole day, right?"

"Rather than a war, it was a one-sided massacre, and I was on the losing end."

Woof - one dog proudly boasted its voice. It was a large one with a lot of white fur, and it seemed to be saying that it was the general responsible for that massacre. Having heard the brave cry of the general, Maru sighed.

"I should have asked about the meaning behind his ominous smile when he left the dogs to me. I'm to blame for accepting."

"It's not like you can reject. But these ones are so cute, it must be worth living with them. What's the species of this one?" Hyungseok asked as he pointed at the large dog that kept raising its front feet and attacking him.

The eyes that were large enough to capture the entire scenery of the living room were full of mischief. This thing was asking for a hug with its huge body, and the amount of attention it wanted was seriously no joke.

"Samoyed."

"Samoyed? What a cool name. It's cute too. The large snout makes it look like a wolf. Does it howl?"

He grabbed the flesh on its stomach and shook it from side to side. The dog opened its mouth wide as though it felt good.

"It's a cute and proud fur generator. It makes as much fur as its own body size, and honestly, I can't understand how that works. Even after all that fur fell out, it still gives out fur. I wonder if all the food it ate went to its fur."

Listening to Maru's grumbles, Hyungseok stroked the samoyed with a brush. Even though he just stroked the dog from head to toe once, a bunch of fur fell out. He wondered if that was it and tried brushing again. A bunch of fur fell out again, making him worried that the dog might be balding. In just

two brush strokes, he became afraid of brushing it again. Maybe this thing was shedding its fur just like snakes shedding their skin.

“I guess not just anyone can raise big dogs, huh.”

“Brush them while you’re still here. That one’s quite obedient in your hands. It keeps biting me when it’s in my arms, so I can’t even brush it properly.”

“I was wondering why you sounded so delightful when I called you. So you needed someone to look after them?”

“If I get work from someone else, the best thing to do is to hand it over to someone else. I’ll listen to one thing that you ask from me. Please take the dogs out for a stroll. I’ll clean my house in the meantime.”

Hyungseok took the dogs outside. When he walked to the Han river with two large dogs and two small dogs, he was at the center of attention. The popularity of the samoyed was unparalleled. Children and adults alike approached him and asked if he could touch the dog.

“They’re not my dogs. They might look docile, but they might bite you, so I don’t think you can touch them.”

He had to treat them preciously since they were JA Production president’s dogs. He was led, and sometimes dragged, by the dogs for around two hours before they managed to return to the house. Although he had confidence in his stamina, it definitely wasn’t comparable to the four energetic dogs. As soon as he opened the door, he lay down on the sofa. The dogs didn’t seem satisfied with the stroll and dashed around tirelessly. In fact, the stroll seemed to have stimulated their wild nature within, and they ran around even more energetically than before.

Hyungseok looked at Maru standing there in a daze with a duster in one hand. The dogs that jumped around while smiling were a stark contrast to the sighing Maru. It looked like a scene out of a sitcom.

“Why did you bother cleaning? You knew it was going to be like this.”

“For the ease of my heart.”

Maru closed all the doors. Hyungseok could see a sense of tenacity from the fact that even though he might have given up on the living room, he could not give up on the other rooms. He put on an apron that had fabric on the front and started brushing them. He seemed like a housewife looking after mischievous children.

“Mr. Han Maru, I’m sure you will be loved by your wife when you get married.”

“If you have the energy to talk, come and brush them with me. They’re in their molting season, so I must keep brushing them.”

“I brushed them so much before, do I have to do it again?”

“Don’t underestimate the amount of dog fur.”

Maru's words contained a sense of tragic beauty. So he has been fighting desperately - Hyungseok thought as he put the border collie on his lap and picked up a brush. He wordlessly brushed its fur before remembering the reason he came here.

"Oh yeah, I came here to give you a present. Why am I working?"

"Brushing them is already a present. You don't have to give me the present you brought, so just brush those guys well. My president is quite picky when it comes to all things, but he's unforgiving when it comes to dogs."

"Looks like your president loves dogs."

"Rather than the dogs themselves, I'm sure it's because of a certain someone he's reminded of."

"A certain someone?"

"Something like that. Don't stop brushing. They're more valuable than us."

Hyungseok pulled out the patch of white hair stuck in the brush and put it on the side as he spoke,

"Hey, which celebrity, women I mean, do you like the most?"

"I don't have one."

"Don't give me that. How about Lee Younghwa? The symbol of sexiness."

"Nah."

"How about Lim Jungyeon?"

"Not really."

"How about Kim Suyeon?"

"Oh, she's the worst."

"Why is Kim Suyeon the worst? That noonim is pure, daring, innocent, and even intellectual. She's one of my ideal women."

"I can admit that she's daring and intellectual, but calling her pure and innocent is an insult to those words."

"Hey, do you have something against her?"

"Stop asking and keep brushing. I'm going to pull out all of their hair since you're here."

Maru's eyes had flipped. The samoyed kept biting the hand that brushed it without knowing what its temporary owner was going through. After watching the confrontation between the desperate man and the mischievous dog, Hyungseok spoke again,

"Then how about Han Gaeul?"

Maru, who always answered immediately until now, stayed silent for the first time. His actions turned unnatural like a robot that had encountered a calculation error. The samoyed on his lap twitched its nose. Brush me properly, its eyes seemed to say.

“Not bad.”

For an answer that took ages, it was a little too lukewarm. Hyungseok believed himself to be more well-versed in women than most people. When it came down to romantic relationships, he was knowledgeable enough to give other people consultations. Maru, who looked like the forever-reliable big brother from the time he was in the military, looked like a person of his age for the first time. Oh? Hyungseok put down the border collie and took out the autograph from his bag.

“Do you know what this is?”

“What is it?”

The autograph of the celebrity that’s not bad.”

Maru’s pupils widened. Hyungseok smiled at the obvious response. He didn’t know Maru would be so flustered.

“You met her?”

“I only met her. I also got an autograph from her. With your name on it, too.”

“My name?”

He gave him the autograph paper that had Han Gaeul’s hickey on it. Having received the autograph paper, Han Maru turned into a dinosaur that had just come across the ice age. He didn’t budge even when the samoyed bit his arm. Hyungseok thought that even if an earthquake occurred or the floor suddenly caved in, he would fall in that posture.

“Do you like her that much?”

“What did Han Gaeul say after hearing my name?”

“She asked what you did, saying that she can write a proper word of encouragement if she knew it. She’s such a kind woman. Not only is she pretty, she’s also pretty at heart.”

“So, did you tell her that I was acting?”

“I did. I even promoted you, saying that you were quite popular in Daehak-ro. There’s a reason why Han Gaeul wrote those words on it. ‘Let’s act on the same stage,’ isn’t that good?”

“So you told Han Gaeul that Han Maru is a fan, did you?”

“Yep. You were smiling so delightfully when you were watching that video before. Oh, was it someone other than Han Gaeul?”

After staring at the autograph for a long while, Maru spat out a sigh. He looked pretty serious.

“What is it? Did I do something wrong?”

“Nope, you did nothing wrong.”

“Then what is it? Did I go overboard?”

“It’s not like that. I just... I just thought that this God is pretty nasty.”

“God? What are you talking about all of a sudden?”

“There’s someone like that. A damned God.”

Maru, who was looking at the autograph like a vassal in the middle ages who was just given a poison pill to swallow, suddenly stood up from the spot. He inserted the autograph on the frame of his family photo behind the TV.

“The present... you like it, right?” He asked carefully.

“It’s a terrible present. And the best one.”

“Which one is right?”

“Both of them are right.”

Maru reached out for the autograph. He slowly stroked down on the autograph like he was touching a precious piece of pottery.

“Hyungseok.”

“What?”

“What do you think a person feels when they step off the cliff, knowing that it’s a cliff?”

“Why are you walking off a cliff? You shouldn’t be going in the first place.”

“Yeah, that’s a clear answer.”

Maru pulled out the autograph and flipped it around so that only the blank part could be seen.

“I received a present, so I must give you something in return.”

“That was nothing. Just give me some food.”

“Is food all you need?”

Hyungseok was about to reply again but stopped. He saw the seriousness in Maru’s eyes when he asked back. Perhaps this is what it would be like to see the genie of the lamp.

“I heard you were shooting a drama, right? Put me in there. Not something grand, just as a minor character or something. But hey, can I even ask for this?”

He thought that it wasn’t plausible at all. It was just something he said in order to break Maru’s poker face. Naturally, the answer should be a n....

“If you have confidence in your skills, I’ll try telling the producer about you. He’s someone I know. But that’s all I can do. The rest is up to you.”

He got an unexpected reply.

“R-really?”

“I don’t like joking around with things like this. Especially to a dude.”

Hyungseok threw away the brush and ran over to Maru before hugging him.

“Han Maru, no, hyung-nim! I’ll serve you well in the future.”

“Excuse me, stop bullshitting and keep brushing,” Maru said as he hit Hyungseok on the neck.

Chapter 779. Sequence 5

Luck is supposed to appear rather sudden, but he didn’t expect it to be this sudden. When he was asked ‘are you free right now?’ through the phone, he replied that he was free, and he was told to come to the café in the lobby of the YBS building. He complied without asking back any questions. He only became curious about the purpose after he hung up, but his hesitation didn’t last long. He put his clothes on and drove over to YBS.

“Over here.”

Maru was sitting inside the café at the TV station.

“Why’d you call me all the way here?”

“Why else? I’m here to give you your present.”

“Present?”

“There she comes.”

Maru waved his hand at someone. Hyungseok looked behind him. A woman wearing ripped jeans was walking over. The slightly angled short haircut went nicely with her intellectual-looking eyes. If he met her at a nightclub, he might have tried to hit on her.

The woman entered the café, and before she sat down, she asked Maru ‘is this him?’ Maru just nodded in response.

“Hello. I’m Yoo Jayeon.”

The woman put her hand out suddenly. He looked at her in a daze as he grabbed her hand. Unlike how fair she looked, her hands were pretty rough. If he grabbed her hand without looking at her face, he would be convinced that he was grabbing a man’s hand.

“I’m Yoon Hyungseok, but please excuse me, who might you be?”

He hadn’t heard anything, and he didn’t want to wait around for an introduction either.

“It seems you haven’t heard. Well, I’m sure you must have been in a hurry since I told him to tell you to come right away. I produce dramas for a living.”

Present and producing dramas - those two terms combined in his head. He instantly understood what this was about. He straightened up and looked back at Jayeon. This stylish-looking woman was the producer who would decide whether or not he appeared in a drama.

"Is your dream to become an actor?"

"Yes!"

"Don't act so stiff, and don't act nervous. Actually, it might be better if you look at me like you're appraising me like you were doing before. Though, my husband might get angry if he saw you doing that."

"I apologize. You were just my type. But you were married? You don't look like it."

"You're good at flattering people, huh? I don't like such people."

"I'll stay silent."

Just exchanging a few words made him realize that he would not get anything in return if he tried to probe her out. He drank some water and waited for her judgment. Her round eyes centered in the middle of her eyes as though she was done appraising him.

"Your face is definitely the kind type. You must be popular with the ladies."

"I don't lose out wherever I go."

"Since when did you start receiving acting lessons? High school? Middle school?"

"After I got discharged from the military. It's been a little over a year now. Recently, I've stopped going to acting school and instead started looking for part-time jobs as a background actor. I thought I'd learn more at the scene."

"Whether it's your clothes or your watch, they look pretty expensive."

"I ran my own business in the past."

"You must have earned a lot of money then?"

"I've earned enough to be able to challenge myself in other fields without hesitation. But that doesn't mean that I lack desperation."

"I didn't say anything. I'm just trying to find out what kind of person you are. I was wondering just who you were that Maru brought you to me."

"I'll do anything if you order me to do it."

"You sound confident. You haven't done anything particular, have you?"

"No, not yet."

"Can I ask you to do a personal request?"

"Sure."

“Can you stand up right now and shout hurray three times?”

Hyungseok saw Maru stroke down his face with his palm and nod. That meant one thing: do it right now.

He immediately got up from his seat and raised his hands above his head. Hurray, hurray, hurray - the people inside and outside the café all started looking at him. The gazes of the ones looking at him prickled him a little, but Hyungseok acted indifferent. Jayeon, who was looking at him with interest, gestured for him to sit down.

“Why did you do it?”

“Because you told me to.”

“Are you going to die if I tell you to die?”

“That’d be difficult since I only have one life, but I’ll gladly do something else.”

“You look smart, but you’re pure in some areas. Or maybe, there was a silent helper.”

She looked at Maru. Maru went over to the counter, saying that he’d order some coffee.

“I’ll say this beforehand, but I don’t use just anyone just because someone I know introduced them to me.”

“Of course, I would have it no other way.”

“You belong to that ‘just anyone’, Mr. Hyungseok.”

“If you would give me an opportunity, I’ll show you who I am.”

“Can you explain to me what I should see from a person who has never worked in this area before?”

“My potential of course. That’s the only thing I can hold out in front of you. Honestly speaking, I felt confident until a while ago. I thought that I was good at acting. I have both the face and the skills, so I had the confidence that I would do well, even if it’s not in the immediate future.”

“It’s been a while since I last saw someone who thinks so highly of himself.”

“I was just born that way; pride is all I have. But I realized that it’s not that easy. It dawned on me that my acting is just decent-looking counterfeit. That’s why I’m saying that the only thing I can show you is my potential.”

“Even if you tell me something so serious, there’s not much I can do for you. I’m not sure what Maru told you, but minor actors are still actors. If I give a call to Daehak-ro, there will be actors with several years of experience willing to come to play a minor role. Those people are proven actors that I can trust. When it comes to payment, I’ll pay a similar amount to them as I will do to you. Now then, who should I use?”

“I’d love it if you used me, but if that’s not possible, I hope you can watch me at least once. I believe that a current producer’s opinion should be enough for me to decide the direction of my acting career.”

“I hate grand requests like that. Why do I need to become a guidepost to you, Mr. Hyungseok? That’s so much pressure on me.”

“If you don’t like pressure, then you can just use me.”

Maru returned with the coffee. Hyungseok sipped some of the coffee that he was given. Although he was acting calm right now, he was inwardly feeling as nervous as when he was just assigned to his station in the military. Should he have given her a better greeting at first? Should he have talked more gently? Should he have acted more humble? The lucky chance came to him quite easily, but that didn’t mean he wanted to let go of it easily as well.

“Mr. Hyungseok, follow me.”

Jayeon stood up. He received a tag that said ‘visitor’ from the front desk and followed her inside. He took the elevator with her to the 3rd floor and entered an empty office.

“Well then, shall I have a look?”

Hyungseok opened the script that Jayeon gave him. He quickly found where Jayeon was referring and started reading. His armpits were on fire. He said the lines out loud thinking that he must not make a mistake.

“It doesn’t matter even if you do it while looking at the script.”

“I’ll memorize it.”

“As you wish.”

He might only have one opportunity to show himself. Only after he memorized it to the point that he could say the lines out loud with his eyes closed did he let go of the script. The role he was going to play was that of a thug. In this act, he would go rampant in the emergency room and get cornered by a doctor who didn’t get frightened by a fist right in front of his eyes. The doctor would talk back while looking straight at him and he would become docile. He had seen many scenes like this in dramas. Hyungseok decided to put his own colors on top of the base that he knew about. It would be impossible to create a completely original piece, but it should be enough to engrave his own initials on the counterfeit product.

“Where d’you think you’re lookin’at, huh?”

The next line was said by Jayeon.

“This is not a place where you can run rampant. If you’re injured, then show me the injury, and if you aren’t, then leave. This is a place that saves people’s lives.”

“How dare you tell me what’o do! This is the problem with educated people. They need a bea’in’ to get their shit t’gether.”

“If you feel like you’ll feel better after hitting me once, then go ahead. Hit me and then leave. Don’t make this place more chaotic than it already is.”

“You damn punk!”

When he raised his hand in the air, Jayeon told him to stop. Hyungseok stuck his tongue out and wet his lips. His lips had shriveled up in that short amount of time. The amount of tension was different from

acting in front of an instructor to get advice. She stopped midway. Did this mean that she was dissatisfied with his act? He had a lot to show her, so he felt that it was a pity.

"This doesn't suit you. You've never done acts like this, have you?"

"No, this is my first time."

"That's why experience is important for actors. You need to observe well and take what you learned out whenever you need to."

"Then can I try another role?"

"You're quite shameless."

"There's one thing I've learned during my sales business. It's that putting up a thick face doesn't cost money."

"Anything else you learned?"

"That you can't go wrong with trying."

Jayeon looked towards Maru.

"Where did you find a guy like this?"

"If I was going to introduce anyone to you, producer, I can't bring someone ordinary since you'd shower me with curses. So, how is he?"

"I like that he's obedient. But he's definitely not thug material. He has the guts, but he doesn't look like he has a bad nature."

"You make the decision. If you can make use of him, then use him. If not, then oh well."

"You're quite merciless for someone who brought him here."

"You're not someone who would use someone you can't use."

The two people's words felt like the final verdict for him: you're no good, leave. Hyungseok looked at the script on the table. Would he have done better if he was asked to do something else? When she said it didn't suit him, that hurt him more than he thought.

"You seemed to have practiced your pronunciation a lot."

He was given a question. Hyungseok got himself together and responded,

"I heard that my pronunciation becomes blurry if the lines are long, so I practiced."

"What did you bite on to practice?"

"A chopstick. A wooden chopstick."

"Didn't that hurt?"

"I have to do it even if it hurts. I can't become an actor who can't speak."

“But what a pity. The role you’re going to play barely has any lines.”

“The role I’m going to play?”

“The thug was already assigned to someone else, so I never planned on giving it to you in the first place. Not anyone can play thugs. The face is important. Someone with your face can only play a thug with an incredible level of acting skill.”

Jayeon stood up with the script.

“If you’re okay with being an image actor, then let’s work together. You may or may not have lines. You’ll be an actor hired to fill the background. If you do it, you’ll be wearing a doctor gown as an intern.”

“Then I’ll be appearing in the drama?”

“Were you planning not to? How else are you going to show up? Are you going to do it?”

“I will.”

“Try polishing that shameless tone of yours. I might use it depending on the situation.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me already. You never know what will happen on a drama set. I might be saying this now, but don’t come crying to me later if I don’t call you in the future. You come if the assistant director calls you, and if not, then you just have to wait for the next opportunity. Don’t resent me just because you didn’t make it.”

“I won’t.”

“If you do, I’ll kill you. As for your pay, you’ll be paid according to the rules of the TV station, so I’ll tell you the details once it’s decided that you’ll be in it. But you’re in a low grade, so you won’t get much. Don’t expect anything.”

“I don’t care about the money.”

“Oh, you said you earned enough money, huh. That’s good. I’ll call for you if we ever run out of budget, so wait for it.”

Jayeon left the office while picking up a call.

“Good for you.”

“This isn’t a dream, is it?”

“Just as the producer said, don’t have too high hopes. It might not work out.”

“But still, it means that I passed, didn’t I? I was worried that she might reject me instantly.”

Hyungseok opened his arms and rushed towards Maru. He never expected him to actually introduce him to a producer at a real TV station. Did he like Han Gaeul’s autograph that much? Maru turned around, dodged his arms, and then opened the door.

“If you make it, just treat me to food with the money you get.”

Chapter 780. Sequence 5

He opened the back doors of his car and took out the standing wreath that he put on its side. He wanted to gift one that was much taller than an average person, but he changed it to a smaller one when he heard that it was going to get messy. As for the congratulatory message, Bada was the one who thought of it: A gukbap restaurant run by a handsome man and a pretty woman.

“You’re here?”

Dojin, who was gliding across the hall with trays on each hand, pointed at an empty table with his chin, telling him to sit down.

“You look busy.”

“All the regulars from Suwon are here. I told them that they didn’t need to come since it was far too.”

“When else would they give you sales like this? Oh, where should I place the wreath?”

“You bought one? I told you not to.”

“I don’t want to get an earful from Iseul for being empty-handed. Heck, she even told me what size I should bring. I’ll put it in front of the store, okay?”

“Put it next to the entrance.”

The guy who told him that he shouldn’t have brought it even told him where to put it. Maru moved the wreath he placed next to his car next to the entrance. The gukbap restaurant that had four tables attached side to side had now turned into a restaurant with twenty tables. This was the result of a year of hard contemplation about whether to increase the rotation rate of the customers. Maru dusted his hands and looked at the JA building, which was right across the street. He inwardly sent his thanks to the building owner that solved the problem of the monthly rent – which was what Iseul was worried about – in one go. It was a very profitable business on his part since they got to rent the place for nearly half of the usual rent around this area for looking after his dogs for half a month. Though, he did get an earful that he wanted quite a lot for being a leech.

“You here, our savior?”

Iseul rushed out of the kitchen and grabbed his hand. Maru shook her hands off, saying that he felt creeped out.

“I’m not the savior. It’s the building owner.”

“I was introduced to your president through you, so you might as well be the savior. I wanted to move our restaurant to expand it, but I was worried because of the prices around the area. I never knew I would be able to rent such a good place at such a cheap price.”

Iseul told him to wait, saying that she would bring him an extra-large bowl of gukbap. Maru was originally worried about how well this gukbap restaurant – which was in Suwon for all its life – would do in Seoul, but it seemed to be doing okay seeing the crowd here. He probably wouldn’t have to worry about it going out of business as long as they managed to conquer the stomachs of the white-collar workers from the rows of buildings of finance and insurance companies.

“Don’t you think it’s about time you stop being a manservant and become a groom?” he asked Dojin who sat down opposite him while putting down the tray.

He had been helping out with her household business since he was in high school, so he had been doing this for six years, not counting his military service. He had become a splendid pillar that supported the gukbap restaurant from a clumsy part-timer, so the father- and mother-in-law-to-be shouldn’t have any problems either.

“Well, the thing is, I want to do that too, but the timing is a little... vague, you know.”

“What timing do you need between you two? You’ve already seen everything you need to know about each other.”

“That’s true, but I’m missing the important thing.”

“What important thing?”

“A proposal.”

“Buy a ring and ask her to marry you. Kneel down and sing a serenade. Oh, a hundred candles and a guitar are a must.”

“I’m sure Iseul will love that. I’d be surprised if she doesn’t push me over on the spot and run away.”

“I was just joking. Don’t think about it too hard, and don’t go overboard with the event and just go to, you know, a place you two go from time to time. Like a restaurant or the place you went to for your first date. Go to a place like that, set up the mood, and send her signs that you’re going to do a proposal. Iseul needs time to prepare too. After that, you give her the ring and ask her to marry you. That’s it.”

“Did you do it before? Why do you sound so knowledgeable?”

“I did it through acting. Isn’t Iseul waiting for you as well? If you waste your time working, she’ll get you for this later. The wedding is important, yes, but the process before that is important as well. If you don’t want her to nag you for life, then make sure you give her a proper proposal. One that Iseul would like. A ring is a must, though.”

“What the heck is up with your obsession with rings?”

“That’s how important symbolism is, my boy.”

Dojin looked behind him. Iseul was talking to the customers at one table. Dojin’s eyes as he looked at her exuded ‘I’m in love with her’ without holding back.

“I tried to.”

“What?”

“What else? I’m talking about the proposal.”

“If you did it, then you did it. What the heck is ‘you tried to’?”

“I had my plans too. Just like you said, I was planning on proposing to her in a special way in a place that both she and I knew about. I finished preparing and went to the restaurant with her. We had nice food,

talked about this and that, and I brought up the topic of marriage in an indirect way. These days, getting married at twenty-five might be quite early, but as you know, we've been together for a pretty long time, right? Iseul's mother also asked me when we were going to do the wedding, and her father told me that I don't need to worry about housing when we went hiking together."

"So all you need to do is stamp those documents."

"Yes, like you said, I was going to propose to her officially, get her agreement, and get married next year, but I failed."

"What do you mean you failed?"

Dojin looked around before speaking in a small voice.

"I'm not sure if I can call this a failure, but when I tried to propose to her after dinner, Iseul asked me first – don't tell me you're going to propose to me right now? – that's what she told me."

"So?"

"What else could I do when I already made all my preparations? I was going to go forward with it anyway. I've never seen Iseul panicking so much in my life. She suddenly said we should leave and left without me."

"Hey, did you do something wrong? Like you slept with another woman or something?"

"Do you think I'm crazy? I'd never do something like that."

"Then why did things go wrong like that?"

"I have a headache because I don't know the answer to that."

"When did you propose?"

"Two days ago."

"Then maybe it's because she was hectic with the store and all?"

"If it was like that, she would have told me about it. But she hasn't said anything even until today. Even though she's smiling like that."

Dojin sighed. This didn't seem to be something that should be taken lightly. The fact that she left despite knowing that he was going to propose meant that she must have had her reasons for doing so. With Iseul's personality, there was no way she would allow it to be left hanging like that. Why would she feign ignorance despite knowing that Dojin was feeling frustrated? He knew that there was nothing to be gained by jumping into the relationship between a man and a woman, but these two were his friends. Moreover, the number of gukbap he ate until now would probably tally up to a consultation fee. There were plenty of reasons for him to intervene in this romantic drama. Though, he was very skeptical about how helpful he would be when he couldn't even take care of his own life properly.

"So you feel like you've done nothing wrong, huh? If I hear words like cheating or two-timing later, I'm going to strangle you then."

“If I did something like that, I’ll stick my nose into a puddle and drown.”

“Don’t die. It’s cruel to turn her into a widow before you even get married. Get going for now, there are customers coming.”

As soon as Dojin left with the tray, Iseul came over with the gukbap this time. The boiling gukbap soup had the same fragrance as the one he ate in Suwon.

“Try it. It shouldn’t have changed a single bit, you know?”

“I’d be disappointed if it did.”

He had to drink this white soup before he unleashed the sauce into it. He pushed his spoon in it and just as he was about to scoop a spoonful out, Iseul spoke,

“What did you talk about with Dojin?”

“Can I tell you after I eat? You told me to eat it.”

“You can eat it later, so just tell me. What did you two talk about?”

“About how the store is busy and that he’s happy that the interior design is good? You know, and stuff like how he hopes there will be a lot of customers in the future.”

“That’s it?”

“What else would he talk about with me?”

“The proposal.”

Maru felt lucky that he didn’t drop the spoon just like that. He put down the spoon while looking at Iseul. Iseul made secret glances at Dojin behind her just like Dojin did in her place just moments ago.

“Dojin tried to propose to me.”

“Good for you. Twenty-five is the perfect time to get married. And both of you are practically married, aren’t you? It’s already too late for both of you to find another partner.”

“I know. Of course I’m going to get married to him. If I tell my parents that I’m going to meet another man at this point, they’ll beat me to death.”

“Then I don’t see a problem. Did you get proposed to?”

“I didn’t. No, more like I couldn’t accept it.”

“What are you saying after all this time? You just said that you don’t have any other partner than Dojin. Don’t tell me there’s something going on with another man or something? The Kim Iseul I know isn’t like that.”

“Of course, it’s not that. I thought I was having a heart attack when he was getting ready to propose to me. I felt really good.”

“Then you should’ve accepted him.”

"I said I couldn't."

"Like I said, why?"

"Because I'm preparing one!"

She raised her voice before groaning and lowering it again. The customers around looked at her.

"You're preparing one? You mean, a proposal?"

"Yes."

Iseul took out her phone and showed him a video. It was a video of a woman who was the bride-to-be and her friends dancing in front of the husband-to-be. The flower bouquets, the candles laid out by the friends, and the clumsy yet passionate playing of an instrument. It ended with the woman kneeling in front of the man and proposing. Maru asked Iseul with a serious expression,

"You're doing this?"

"Yeah."

"This?"

"Yeah."

"Oh my lord."

"There's no rule saying that the man must do the proposal. It was me who asked him out, so I'm going to do the proposal as well."

"What kind of dogshit stubbornness is this? You should have just accepted him."

"If I say no, then it's a no."

"Oh my lord. Why must I suffer between these two assholes? So what, you prepared a dance, a song, and even an instrument?"

"I even practiced it. If I accepted the proposal like that, what would that make me and my friends? Dowook, Daemyung, and even Jiyeon are helping me out."

"You brought them in?"

"I wished I could bring you into this as well, but...."

Iseul blurred her words for the first time after speaking like she was rapping. Her effort to avoid this next topic showed through her eyes rolling everywhere as well as her lips. After hesitating, Iseul spoke as though she had no choice,

"I couldn't bear to tell you. I felt like I would be touching where it hurts for you. Ever since you broke up, no, before you broke up, you became depressed when we talked about stuff like this. No, wait, you were a lump of depression even before that."

"I was?"

“Yeah. You might not have acted like it, but it was obvious. It was the same when you came out to meet us during military vacation. I’m only saying this now because you look okay, but back then, I couldn’t bear to ask you to help. I thought that it wasn’t right for me as a friend to ask for help from someone who looks sick.”

“Did I look that feeble?”

“Feeble? No, you were in danger.”

“I thought I hid it pretty well.”

“It was obvious because you hid it. How long do you think we’ve known you? We know when you are being cold-headed and when you’re acting cold-headed.”

“I’m quite a bad guy huh. Is it my lack of acting skills?” he said with a smile.

He reached a point where he could talk about it with a smile after all. Iseul tapped on his shoulder, seemingly relieved.

“Anyway, the important thing is that I must be the one proposing. The date is this Sunday, but that means there are still five days. I feel sorry that Dojin looks uneasy all this time, but at the same time, he looks pretty cute.”

“So you’re going to wait without telling him?”

“Since it’s like this, I might as well. It’s kinda cute to see him pretend that he’s okay when he’s anxious inside.”

“Looks like he should be the one nagging you for your entire life, not the other way round. What a pitiful guy. I wonder how he ended up with a girl like this.”

Iseul twitched her nose.

“Don’t ever tell him that I’m preparing for this. And also, ease him up a little. Dojin tends to listen to your words easily. It’s cute to see him anxious, but teasing him too much doesn’t feel right.”

“Doesn’t feel right? All the things that are ‘right’ just died at this moment.”

“Enjoy the gukbap. Also, thanks for the wreath.”

Only then could Maru eat the gukbap.

“It’s all lukewarm now.”

“What did Iseul say?”

These two seemed to be on shifts or something. Maru stared at Dojin, who took Iseul’s seat, and hit him on the forehead with a spoon.

“What are you doing?”

“You deserve a beating. I’m goddamn envious, punk.”

“What? What did she tell you?”

“She told me nothing. Just know that you just have to wait still.”

“So you did hear something. What did Iseul say? Hey, tell me.”

“Why are you being so naggy? Go rub against your wifey, not a single dude like me.”

He put the sauce in and stirred it around. Dojin, who he thought would flap his mouth like a hummingbird flapping its wings, just kept silently looking at him.

“What?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking that you really are okay now. That’s good.”

Maru smiled faintly and shook his head. It seemed that he truly looked terrible for the past five years, from how everyone around him was worried about him without telling him.

“Wait a sec. I’ll bring you some boiled pork.”

“Hey, this is extra-large, so there’s plenty already.”

Dojin stood up without even listening to him. Seeing him shout for a large-sized boiled pork to the kitchen, Maru felt something surging inside him. He pulled out a tissue and wiped his forehead, before brushing the area around his eyes in secret. These irresponsible tears were probably the traces of age.

“Man, life isn’t so bad.”