

Once Again 811

Chapter 811. Sequence 8

Maru met the rabbit in the middle of darkness. The darkness crept up his body to swallow him as it always did. Humans were animals of adaptation, and he now felt cozy here like it was the attic in the house in his homeland. He didn't do anything much and kept staring at the rabbit. There was no way she jumped into his dream just to say hello, so she would probably say what she was here for if he waited long enough. When the darkness crept up his waist and reached his chest, the rabbit spoke,

"Are you happy?"

He smiled and nodded. There were many things he wanted to ask her: whether she was talking with the current, living Gaeul or not, if she was planning to drive herself to death again, why it had to be a rabbit of all things, and above all, how long she had been enduring this terrifyingly long period of time by herself. She might be more liberal than the masked man, but she probably wouldn't be able to say any crucial information either.

"How about you?"

"I'm as always."

"Shall we talk?"

"You know there aren't many things I can tell you."

"Not that. I was wondering if you were getting enough sleep, whether you are hurt anywhere, and whether your appetite has changed or not. You know, things like that."

The darkness crept up to his neck. Soon, it would become difficult to even talk. The rabbit approached him. Her white body also started being stained black.

"Sorry," the rabbit said.

"For what?"

"For everything; that I made you like this, that I made myself like that. Everything is my fault. I didn't believe in god. I should have stayed that way. When god appeared before me, I should have denied him or her. I knew that there was no such thing as god, that there are no such things as miracles. I knew that everything going the way it should was for the best, but I ended up wishing for it. Please let him live; please let him live this once. I'll do anything so that he can live. You can take my life, so please, just let me meet him once more."

"Thanks to that, we met again."

"And hell was let loose."

"Hey, this is a hotel for hell, don't you think?"

He wanted to reach out to her and put her in his arms, but the sensation in his body had already disappeared. She must have spent an unspeakable length of time with that small body of hers. She must

have experienced things that he wouldn't dare imagine before finally reaching here. Maru couldn't say anything to her as it would devalue what she had done.

"Thanks for being next to me."

He uttered those words before his mouth was covered in darkness. The darkness covered the rabbit's eyes then his own.

Maru opened his eyes while listening to the alarm. In front of his eyes was her, who had fallen asleep. The corner of her lips had curved upwards as though she was having a good dream or something. He turned off his phone alarm and tried touching her lips. He wondered where the rabbit was right now. Inside her dream? Or by herself in a place where no one can find? After rolling around a little, she opened her eyes.

"Sorry, did I wake you up?"

When Maru took his hand off and spoke, she grabbed his hand and put it on her head as though she wanted him to pat her.

"Do you always wake up at this hour?"

"When I don't have any work to do. It became a habit of mine."

"You should get some more sleep."

"I usually don't feel sleepy once I wake up."

As he patted her head, she grabbed his hand.

"Did you have a bad dream? You don't look good."

Hearing her question, he just replied with a smile. He pulled up the duvet to cover her shoulders and got out of the bed. He opened the drawers and was looking for pants and socks when he heard some rustling noise behind him. She was getting up as well.

"You should lie down some more."

"I wanna go with you."

"But you must be tired."

"It's okay. Where do you go for morning exercises?"

"Hangang park."

She yawned and stood next to him. Two days ago, she brought some light clothes that she could wear. Some training clothes, a hoodie, some shorts, underwear, and socks. The third row of the dresser, which had been empty until now, became hers.

After getting clothed, they left the house. The moist air and the chilly weather signified that autumn was not far away.

"It's been a really long time since I jogged outside like this instead of in a gym."

After warming up lightly, she started running even though she didn't know where to go. After running forward without stopping for a while, she turned around and returned.

"Where do we go?"

"Lady, please follow me."

They switched places to the moonlit plaza under Banpo bridge. He ran slower than usual to keep in pace with her. There was no one who recognized her as she was wearing training clothes that didn't reveal her figure as well as a cap. Sometimes, there were some people who would give her a long stare when they went past her, but when he gave them a glance back, everyone turned their heads away.

"You don't have to glare at them so fiercely. You have a pretty vicious expression, so people will get scared if you glare at them, you know?" she said as she poked his arm from the side.

Usually, Maru would run for about an hour and go home, but she started getting tired after 30 minutes, so Maru stopped running.

"It's hard to run after not running in the morning for so long."

"Let's go back. I'm hungry too."

"I saw toast sandwiches being sold on the street. How about we get that?"

"I thought you were managing your diet?"

"I ran for half an hour, so it should be fine."

"I don't think so."

She sealed her lips and shook her head. She dragged him, saying that it was fine to eat sugared toast since she ran so much in the morning. It was hard to hold her back. They returned home with toasts in their mouths.

"Shall we get washed together?" he playfully asked.

What he got in return was a gaze that looked like she had found a cockroach on the ceiling. I'm joking – he tried to laugh it off, but she glared at him, saying that it would be 'over' for him if he approached her. From how there was her phone in her hands, it looked as though she meant that he would be socially buried. Having no choice, he got washed obediently by himself. While she got washed, he prepared some coffee. Having breakfast and drinking coffee in front of the blacked-out TV screen had become a procedure of sorts. Something that she did when she visited Han Maru's house.

While she was drinking, she suddenly smiled and put down the mug. It was a rather sudden smile, so he quietly stared at her.

"It just feels so natural. I mean, coming here, sleeping together, eating together, and resting like this."

"Feeling natural is a good thing."

"I think it would've been better if it became like this earlier. I feel like I wasted the previous 5 years. If we were together, we would have gone to the sea in the summer and gone skiing in the winter many times."

"We can do it starting now. There's plenty of time."

"The fact that there's plenty of time doesn't mean that the past will come back to us."

He reached out to her and wrapped his arm around her neck before pulling her over.

"Should we go to the beach? It's the last week of September, but it still feels a little like summer."

"As much as I want to, my schedule is filled with shoots. Next week, I'll be going to Gwangju, Busan, and Daegu. I'm going to miss the set in Seoul."

She sighed.

"My dear Gaeul, you must be having a hard time."

"I should have a hard time while I still can. They say having any work to do at all is when you're happiest. I should feel thankful."

"You're all grown up too. I guess a lot of time has passed."

"I was grown up a long time ago."

She pushed his chest and stood up.

"Let's go shopping. I want to go to the Namdaemun market."

"It must be crowded there since it's Saturday."

"I don't care. It's fun to walk around there. I think the glasses there fit my tastes too."

"Then we should go. When are people coming over again?"

"I told them to come by five. Haewon said he was going to buy some ingredients and cook here."

"Then we should go out. eat lunch in the market, and return with groceries. You put on your cap and sunglasses. We're going to a place with many people."

"Okay."

She hummed as she went inside the room.

Ordinary times, as it were. It was a series of ordinary events: they would fight because of ordinary reasons, and then makeup ordinarily. Sometimes, miraculous events might happen, but everything would occur within the scope of common sense. He looked at the remaining coffee. What did he have to do in order to protect this ordinary life? The train was already rushing towards a set ending. The switch that changed lanes had been broken, and it was impossible to jump off as well. Did he have to pray to god after all? The rabbit told him that she should not have prayed. What did he have to do when god gave him a choice where her life was put in danger? He emptied the remaining coffee into his mouth. Even though it was sweet before, it tasted bitter now.

“I’m changed now.”

She stood in front of him while wearing a t-shirt with a cute rabbit on it. The sunlight that seeped in through the window scattered after hitting her hair. Maru reached out to her. She pulled him up, telling him to get up quickly.

“The answer is already set in stone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just talking to myself. Should we go eat tteokbokki? I’m craving something spicy.”

“I’ve already eaten more than the carb quota for the day, but I guess today’s fine, right? We’re going to be drinking at night anyway.”

She pushed his back. He got his car keys and left the house.

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“Haewon, was it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re good at cooking. Who did you learn from?”

“When I was young, I learned through books, but these days, I use the internet. There are a lot of blogs with good recipes. Do you want to taste this as well?”

On the sofa, Gaeul looked at Haewon and Chaerim, who were chatting in the kitchen. Having found the common topic of cooking, the two seemed to get along and were together the whole time.

“Hyung, stop eating. You’re going to eat them all.”

“But you’re giving this noona things to eat. Why are you nagging me?”

“Because you just don’t stop. And Chaerim-noona is just tasting it for me from the side.”

“Gosh, I can’t take this anymore.”

Even while grumbling, Heewon managed to take a rib to eat before turning around. When Heewon and Haewon just arrived, Chaerim and Yuna, who had arrived earlier, showed interest in Heewon, but their focus soon shifted to Haewon. Rather than Heewon, who lay down as soon as he got inside, they probably liked Haewon better as a conversation partner since he was good at cooking and acted kindly too.

“Maru-seonbae. Your house is really good.”

“Yuna, this is the third time you’re saying that.”

“I’m going to say it at least four times more.”

Yuna, who was sitting next to her, smiled while hugging the dog. Yuna, who had arrived first, started crying as soon as she saw Maru’s face. Gaeul also felt a tinge in her nose and hugged Yuan for a while. It was only when Chaerim arrived that Yuna stopped saying ‘I’m glad’ and calmed down a little.

“Unni, as a gift for you two getting back together, I’ll send you some movie tickets. I want to send you something more expensive, but I’m living off part-time jobs right now, so.”

“Forget it. You should use that money for yourself.”

“No, I’m going to give them to you.”

Yuna lifted the dog up and headed to the kitchen. Gaeul was at first worried that they might not get along, but the four of them became friends as soon as they met. It was good that they weren’t picky people.

“It’s good to be a little bustling.”

Maru sat down next to her. Haewon proudly told everyone to leave the cooking to him, so there was nothing else to prepare.

“I feel like everything’s finally the way it should be now. I’m glad that Yuna came.”

“You did well calling her. I feel relieved to see her too.”

“Don’t you ever act coldly to people like that again. And make sure to keep in touch.”

“Okay.”

“Of course, I won’t do that again either.”

She grabbed his hand and smiled. Just then, an ‘Oh!’ exclamation sounded from the kitchen. When she turned around, the four of them were all staring at them.

“Why don’t you have a deep kiss?”

Chaerim grabbed Yuna, who was next to her, before jutting her lips out. Yuna also played along. Gaeul burst into laughter when she saw that the two girls became close like sisters in just two hours.

“Stop minding us and get along, the four of you.”

“Alright. You two are the main characters for today, so get some good rest. Haewon, let’s finish things off.”

“Okay.”

The quiet kitchen became bustling again.

Chapter 812. Sequence 8

“Rejecting ‘Flaming Lady’ was just absurd. Were you really sane back then? No, you weren’t sane back then, so that’s why you rejected something like that and fled to the military, leaving behind our poor Gaeul-unni. You’re such a bad guy.”

Yuna, whose cheeks were flushed red, stuck onto Gaeul like a cicada to a tree. Yuna said that she usually didn’t drink more than one glass because she would easily get drunk, but she declared that she would be drinking to her heart’s content today, and consequently, her mouth practically became an automatic

door after an hour. Whether it was in the past or now, it didn't change that the filter in her brain disappeared once she was drunk. Her address of Gaeul also changed from 'seonbae' to 'unni.'

"Fine, I'm the condemnable sinner. I get it, so stop drinking. I can allow everything else but not cooking pancakes on the floor^[1]."

"No. I'm going to cook a big one," Yuna said as she grabbed Gaeul's arm.

She looked like she was going to declare war with Gaeul as her weapon if he kept picking a fight with her. He hoped for Gaeul to stop her, but she was also glaring at him while grabbing Yuna's hand tightly. You don't dare touch my little sister – her eyes said.

"Looks like there's no one on your side today."

"Why don't you come to mine?"

"Looking at the atmosphere, I think I will have to side with the ladies."

"You're good at knowing which side to join."

"It's a life technique of mine I learned while I took care of my brother. Should I give you another glass?"

Haewon shook a bottle of soju in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. Even though this was supposed to be a cocktail party, the colorful drinks were dismissed just ten minutes in. It was beer and soju that replaced those colorful bottles.

"There are a lot of snacks, so I might as well."

People, who were chatting wildly about 'what is Han Maru's fault?' around the island table, started pairing up in twos as they continued their conversation. Maru tilted his glass and looked at Heewon and Chaerim. They were fighting about what life is an easier life. Heewon, who was a believer in laziness, and Chaerim, who was a believer in following rules, looked like their argument wasn't going to end anytime soon. At that rate, they might even become attached to each other.

"The two of them look good together, don't they?" Haewon said.

It seemed that he was paying close attention as well.

"Does Heewon not have a girl he's dating?"

"I believe there are quite a few women who asked for his number, but he doesn't care that much. He's of the mind that he might be exhausted to death if he has to start caring about dating when he's busy enough as it is with his schedule. But I think he's getting along pretty well with Chaerim-noona. I've never seen him talk for so long even he was mad."

"They say opposites attract."

"Maybe he'll change if he gets a lover. He's someone with deep thinking. He has beliefs when he acts. I tend to think of him as someone who saves up energy for the necessary moment when he acts lazy like that. Though, sometimes he just comes to a complete stop once he goes overboard with that."

"So you're saying he'll stop saving up energy if he gets a girlfriend and become more active?"

“He’s someone who does what he feels is necessary. Though, the threshold is high, and it’s hard to reach that stage. Above all, once he becomes a little more active, I’ll get more free time, so this is an important matter to me as well.”

“What are you going to do once you get some free time?”

“Until a few years ago, I really wanted to study, but ever since I got a taste of money, I’ve wanted to start my own business. For studying, I can just do it as a hobby.”

“There aren’t many people who consider studying a hobby in this country. So, what’s your business idea?”

“At the top of the list is an entertainment agency. I’ve been doing this for a long time, so I can make use of my experiences or the connections I’ve made. Our president also said she would help us work in this area, so I’m going to learn under her for the time being.”

“‘Hwan’ is a pretty big company, so I’m sure it will help a lot.”

“Will you sign a contract with me once I become independent? I’ll pay you a lot for the contract deposit.”

“For that, you need to go consult our JA president.”

“He’s a little too difficult to deal with. I met him last time, and I felt like he was reading everything I was thinking.”

“He must have done that with room to spare.”

Just as he put his glass against his mouth, the bell started ringing. Everyone’s conversations stopped for a moment. Maru put down the glass and stood up. He didn’t order any deliveries or packages, so he didn’t know who was at the door. He unlocked the door and opened it.

“So you’re here, thank goodness.”

Maru’s eyes twitched. Outside was Suyeon, holding a lot of things in both of her hands. He quickly pulled the door back in again, but Suyeon was faster than him. She poked her foot in between the door and the door frame and put on a victorious smile.

“That’s not happening.”

“What brings you here at this hour?”

“Don’t you understand already since I’m here at this hour? But it sounds noisy inside, unlike usual.”

“I have guests over.”

“Really? What happened to you? You always only had us as guests.”

Hearing the word ‘us’, Maru opened the door wide.

“Are the men here as well?”

“They’re on their way. But how long are you going to keep making me wait here? This is pretty heavy, you know?”

Maru picked up the paper bag that Suyeon was holding. Inside were cans of beer as well as various snacks.

“The ones you left behind are still here from last time.”

“It’s always good to have more for next time. But hey, looks like there are a lot of guests, huh? That’s a lot of shoes.”

Suyeon commented that as she took off her heels. For Geunsoo, Ganghwan, and Suyeon – this trio – this place was like a personal bar that they could visit whenever they felt like it. Most of the time, they would give a call before coming, but occasionally, they would just barge in in the middle of the night like this. These were also the days when they drank until they fell.

“Oh my word, look who’s this!” Suyeon shouted as she lifted her coat in one hand.

Everyone in the kitchen looked at Suyeon in surprise.

“I never thought I’d get to see Mr. Heewon here when I didn’t have any opportunity until now. Also, aren’t you Chaerim? From ‘Blue’ from before.”

Suyeon snuggled amidst the dazed people and grabbed their hands before shaking them. One of Suyeon’s advantages was that she didn’t look spiteful even if she didn’t put up any courtesy on her first meeting with others. Amidst the chaos, Suyeon smiled and greeted everyone until she looked at Gaeul.

“Miss Han Gaeul, right?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve seen each other before, right? In the hospital when Maru was injured. I had my doubts when I saw you on TV, but now I get it. You said you were his girlfriend back then too. Are you two still dating?”

Gaeul asked for help with her eyes. She seemed to be asking if it was okay to reveal it here.

“We’re dating,” Maru said after going to stand next to her.

“You didn’t tell me anything about it. I’m disappointed.”

“It hasn’t been that long since we got back together.”

“Is that how it is? Then is this occasion a celebratory one?”

“Something like that.”

“That’s good. Miss Gaeul, I can join, can’t I? Tell me about it. How good he is, and even better, you can tell me about his weaknesses.”

With Yuna, who was hesitating next to Gaeul, declaring that she was a fan of Suyeon, the kitchen started becoming noisy again. Suyeon joined in on the conversation like she was there from the beginning. Her social skills were fearsome. A list of names who were toppled by her verbal skills and smile flashed past his mind.

“Mr. Heewon, pour me a glass too.”

“Yes. Please allow me to pour you a drink.”

“You’re being way too stiff. Is it because I’m older than you?”

“No, I just think you’re a little scary.”

“That’s a bit of a strong joke for our first meeting, isn’t it?”

“I don’t joke around a lot.”

It seemed that Heewon, who looked at the world in a different way from the others, had seen through Suyeon’s true nature and acted politely but still maintained distance. It wasn’t that he was hostile, but it looked as though it would take quite a bit of time for the two to get close. As for Suyeon, she seemed to find even that quite interesting as she kept smiling. A snake had appeared amidst herbivores. Maru had to watch that snake so that she didn’t devour the others.

“Oh, the door’s open. Coming in.”

“Maru, hyung-nim’s here. We’re going to drink to the death toni.... Huh? There are quite a lot of people here.”

Following those words, Geunsoo and Ganghwan came in. Ganghwan poked his head into the kitchen first and only Yuna responded with the word ‘senior.’ When Geunsoo came in, everyone in this place stood up. Gaeul also looked at Geunsoo with surprise and admiration. Maru wanted to signal to her that he was jealous, but he also thought that it couldn’t be helped since a super actor was here.

The silence continued in the kitchen for a while. As for Suyeon, she had approached the others without any time to feel awkward, but Geunsoo had a confused expression on his face as he looked at the unfamiliar group of people.

“Let me clear things up for now. Hyung-nim, give that to me.”

Maru placed the luggage in front of the refrigerator before placing Geunsoo and Ganghwan in front of everyone.

“To your left is the actor Hong Geunsoo, as you all probably know. I won’t introduce what kind of pieces he has done since he has so many hits. The one next to him is actor Yang Ganghwan. He’s a super popular musical actor, and directors love him because having his name on the poster will mean that the tickets will sell out. That’s enough of an introduction, right?”

Maru started clapping first. The people in the kitchen started applauding as well. Following that, he introduced the people in the kitchen, who were standing there awkwardly. Actors Lee Heewon and Han Gaeul; ex-idol, now-café owner Lee Chaerim; and then Lee Haewon, who was Heewon’s little brother and mental support.

“How about me?”

Suyeon raised her hand. She even crossed her legs and looked at him expectantly.

“Don’t mind the person over there. She’s dangerous.”

“You’re being too harsh. I’m Kim Suyeon, an actress at the peak of beauty. Let’s have a great night tonight.”

Suyeon started shaking the can of beer on the floor. Only then did something click in Maru’s mind, but it was too late. Along with a screech, the canned beer burst. Beer foam colored the kitchen. Yuna, who was almost caught up in it, kept blinking in a daze.

“Is this what this place is supposed to be?”

Following that, Chaerim lifted her can as well. Maru freaked out and went to stop her, only to be stopped by Suyeon. The kitchen he had painstakingly cleaned, the kitchen wallpaper he had just attached last week, and the mat that he changed out to celebrate Gaeul’s return, were all covered in beer foam.

“This is karma from your last life,” Geunsoo said as he placed his hand on his shoulder.

Maru just chuckled in vain.

“Then me too!”

Yuna joined in as well. Two were manageable but three.... Maru looked at the drenched floor and tried to hold back his intense urge to clean. Even if he cleaned now, Suyeon was the type of person who would say ‘oh, you cleaned it?’ and pour another batch. This must be the consequence of not greeting her properly when he opened the door. Suyeon winked at him. You should’ve welcomed me – she seemed to be saying.

“I’m not sure what is going on, but let’s join in, shall we?” Ganghwan said as he lifted up his glass.

[1] Vomiting (because vomit looks like pancake mix.)

Chapter 813. Sequence 8

“I guess I can’t come over any time now, huh.”

Geunsoo went to the balcony with a can of beer. The way he brushed his hair backwards as he faced the wind reminded Maru of that beer ad. The production of that ad looked just like reality.

“I’m sure the director must have loved it when you shot that beer ad. Just shooting normally would have produced great results,” Maru said as he waved the beer in his hand.

Who would be able to hold back from putting some beer in their grocery basket after seeing a man with a great figure and a handsome face drinking beer at a restaurant with two of his top buttons undone? There were several versions as well: drinking at a restaurant, drinking at a noraebang, and drinking at a nightclub.

“Don’t even start. Just thinking about the amount of barley tea I drank back then makes me want to go to the bathroom even now. I repeatedly drank and spat it out, but I still ended up drinking a huge amount.”

“I’m fine with drinking an enormous amount, so I wish I could shoot an ad like that. Did you know? Whenever I try to watch something like youtube, the ad is always you dancing around while holding this beer. Where did you learn to dance like that? Your techniques were extraordinary.”

“The writer for the ad taught it to me. She said she used to be a regular at nightclubs and taught me various things, and boy was it hard. The one in the ad was just the one decent attempt out of hours of footage. Someone told me that I couldn’t be more terrible at dancing.”

“I guess the heavens are fair. They gave you everything but not dancing skills.”

Maru held out his can of beer. The cans made a clanging sound as they clashed. He took a sip of the beer before leaning against the rails. An ambulance was leaving the parking lot.

“Was there an accident?”

“I wonder too.”

“Didn’t Miss Gaeul collapse too? I didn’t see the news properly, so I’m not entirely sure about this.”

Geunsoo turned around to see inside.

“From her words, it wasn’t that there was a big problem with her body. Apparently, it’s just light fatigue. But then again, if she passed out from it, you can’t really call that ‘light.’”

“Looks like she’s down to Earth.”

“Down to Earth? She’s more like a general. She’s managing her body according to the prescription, so it should be fine in the future, but I am still worried.”

“I’m sure you are. Look after her from the side. If you look out for her, you will be able to avoid the worst scenario even if something happens.”

“That’s the plan. How about you, have you got any news?”

“News?”

“I was thinking that thirty-seven is a suitable age to get married.”

“Why don’t you say that after you introduce me to a good person?”

“There’s a good person over there, you know?”

Maru pointed at Suyeon, who was chatting among the other ladies. He didn’t know what they were talking about, but the ladies looked pretty serious as they listened to her.

“Shall I do it?”

“I was just joking though.”

“You know the story of Princess Pyeonggang and the idiot Ondal^[1], right?”

“So you were actually moved because she kept wooing you?”

“There’s that too. There’s also the fact that I got attached to her since we hung out together for so long.”

“I don’t plan to stop you if that’s how you feel, but it sure feels strange.”

“I’m just saying that I’m open to the possibility. I’m not saying that I would share the same bed with her immediately. My feelings are one thing but hers are important too.”

“Well, I think that Suyeon-noona would be willing to write a registration of marriage the moment you tell her that.”

“You know better than me that she’s not someone like that. You know? Sometimes, it makes me wonder if there will ever be a man that Suyeon truly likes in the future.”

Geunsoo’s gaze towards Suyeon was rather complicated. Compassion for a wounded animal, pity for someone riddled with distrust, as well as admiration for the woman who kept her smile. Maru sipped on the beer. Geunsoo’s eyes looked like he was looking at someone that was between ‘a colleague from the same line of work’, ‘a close little sister’, and ‘a woman’.

“Relationships sure are incomprehensible, huh.”

“If I knew how they worked, I would be doing something else instead of acting.”

“Did Suyeon-noona ever tell you about her past?”

“About her first love, you mean?”

“If you know about that, I guess you must have heard everything.”

“I heard not too long ago. We’ve known each other for so long, but that was the first time I saw a facet of her that was hidden from the rest of the world.”

“Suyeon-noona must be serious then. You’re hesitant because you felt that too, aren’t you?”

“I can’t say no to that.”

“I will be rooting for you regardless of your decision.”

While they were talking, Suyeon turned around to look at the balcony as though she felt their gaze. Maru, who met eyes with her, smiled and waved back at her. Suyeon also raised her hand and waved before looking at Geunsoo and putting her hand down again with a faint smile.

“Is she shy? Or is she acting shy?”

“Well, she’s kind of a master in that area. What do you think?”

“I can’t tell either.”

Maru smiled and turned around. He could see the Hangang Park where lights were on. There were people on bicycles, and next to them were couples out for a walk. Geunsoo rested his chin on the hand holding the can.

“When I first got a bicycle, it had training wheels. It was my first time riding, so I didn’t mind it at all and had fun riding it. But then, I found out that the bikes that the neighborhood big brothers are riding don’t have any training wheels. They told me that training wheels were shameful.”

Geunsoo followed the group of bicycle riders riding in a line. Maru put his hand on the rails and listened to him.

“That day, I, along with a couple friends, went to the only bicycle store in town and had the training wheels removed. I can still vividly remember the feeling I had when I dragged my streamlined bicycle to the school field. I took the first step with the mind that I would show off my cool side to the big brothers of the neighborhood.”

“You must have put on a show and fell over.”

“Yeah, I fell over big time. The bike wasn’t the bike I knew of. It didn’t go forward like I expected it to, and it swayed all the time. Although many people have their fathers help them out the first time they ride a two-wheeled bike, I couldn’t expect that to happen even in my dreams due to our family circumstances, which you probably know already. Though, I might have helped my brother out if he wanted.”

“But you’re the type of guy who would do it by yourself even if your father says he wants to help you.”

“I’m not that stubborn. If he was willing to help, I would have let him.”

“From the things you did until now, definitely not. You weren’t nicknamed the lunatic for nothing. You single-handedly founded the acting club that other people weren’t willing to make, so riding a bike must be nothing.”

“That’s a nickname that Yang Miso forced on me. I’m actually quite an intellectual.”

“Lunacy and intellect are two separate things.”

“What else can I say? Anyway, I kept falling over for the entire day and thought: how can I ride the bike coolly without falling over? The next day, I went to the school field and got on the bike again. I was fully prepared to fall over for the whole day too.”

“And it ended up being a smooth ride?”

“Sure. The number of times I fell over had decreased considerably. That was the result of pedaling like hell since I thought that falling over is something natural. The experience I’ve learned then still lies at the core of my life to this day. It is fine to fall over, and it is fine to fail, as long as you have the will to go forward.”

Geunsoo told him to wait before leaving the balcony. When he returned, he was holding two cans of beer. Maru placed the empty cans on the ground. Grabbing the cold can of beer sobered him up in an instant.

“But sometimes, timing is more important than willpower. Falling over, and going forward all have their designated times. If you didn’t fall over when you had to and kept going forward, you wouldn’t have learned how to get up when you actually do fall over, and if you kept falling over without going forward, you would have either lost interest or been injured to the point that you lose the will power.”

“You think I fell over enough?”

“Five years is a seriously long period to be falling over. What’s fortunate is that you went to the military during that period. If you didn’t even do that and kept delaying it, I wouldn’t have said this: I would keep in touch with you as a good brother, but we will never meet each other as actors.”

“I’m always grateful to you. It’s thanks to your words that day on the roof that I chased the path of acting.”

“My words don’t have any power. Like I said that day, those who are going to do it are bound to do it. The people who have become phantoms of Daehak-ro were dragged there against their will. That includes me as well as the actors over there.”

“But still, it was a trigger.”

He opened the can and drank it in one go. Everything became clear now. The destination was death, and after death would come a new life and the start of a new, boring cycle, but he still chose that path. There were no regrets. Just seeing Gaeul’s smiling face made him feel satisfied. If men cannot go against god’s providence then they could only strive to find the best happiness within it. He wanted to proceed forward while striving to be with her. If there was one wish, it was for god to fall over and slip up.

“There are other things I wanted to tell you, but it looks like I don’t need to after seeing your expression.”

“Please say something when I live like a snob again.”

“I don’t think that will happen though?”

“You never know. What’s Geunseok up to recently?”

“An intern. He’s great at living in an organization. He’s also smart unlike me, so I think he’ll get employment as soon as he graduates.”

“He’s a clever one. I’m sure it must have made you feel relieved.”

“These days, I just leave him to his own devices, thinking that he can take care of himself now. What’s funny is that he talks about you from time to time. Though, he’s a guy with pride, so he never says that he feels sorry.”

“Looks like I should meet up with him one time.”

The people who left in groups to talk returned to the living room. They sat in a circle with an empty bottle in the middle. The spinning bottle eventually stopped and people’s eyes fell on the person that the bottleneck was pointing at. It seemed that they were playing truth or dare.

“They’re getting along. From the looks of it, I think they’ll meet up quite frequently.”

“I can’t stand getting my place dirty anymore.”

“Can you handle Ganghwan and Suyeon? If you block them, they’ll start crying and making a mess outside your door.”

“You must help me.”

“I’m sorry, but I like this place too.”

“Sheesh, you’re too harsh.”

“Why don’t you change the interior layout at this opportunity? You know, make it like a bar. I’ll pay for the expenses.”

“Why don’t you just buy a bar? You have the money.”

“I like this place.”

Geunsoo, who had a thick smile on his face, flicked his finger before going to the corner of the balcony. Maru gave the living room a glance before moving.

“You ate with Dongwook-hyung last time, right?”

“Yes.”

“Did you hear anything back then?”

“I’ve only heard him complain that he was getting overworked to death ever since he became editor-in-chief. There was nothing special though. Why do you ask?”

“He seemed to be smoking again. He had a pretty serious face too.”

“It’s been like three years since he quit though. He told me that he would never smoke again even if he dies.”

“I can understand smoking but his expression was way too grim. Even when I asked him what was happening, he didn’t say anything. I’m asking you this because you’re the only one he opens his heart to.”

“I’ll ask when I have the opportunity. But if he didn’t tell you anything about it, it might actually not be anything serious.”

“I hope that’s the case.”

When they ate together, Dongwook just complained like usual and didn’t look like he was hiding anything. Maru would have noticed if there were signs. Or maybe, he might have hidden it from Maru really well.

“What are you two doing over there? Come inside. We’re playing truth or dare,” Suyeon said as she opened the door to the balcony.

Maru went to the living room after picking up the empty cans.

[1] The story of a princess and a (presumed) beggar from 6th century Goguryeo. King Pyeongwon always threatened his daughter Pyeonggang that he would marry her to the idiot Ondal because of her crybaby nature (empty threats to fix her behavior). Little did he know, she actually runs away and did end up marrying Ondal and in fact, raised him to be one of the greatest generals of that time, until he eventually died in battle.

In this specific case though, the King(Suyeon) kept brainwashing threatening(wooing) the princess(Geunsoo) and the princess(Geunsoo) (might) end up marrying Ondal(Suyeon).

Chapter 814. Sequence 8

The first thing he did when he woke up from sleep was open the windows. The first thing that he saw was 'Woofie' biting and causing a mess with a roll of toilet paper. She was practically a rhythm gymnast with a ribbon. When they met eyes, the dog whimpered in a low voice before letting go of the roll from her mouth. Her eyes and gestures strongly claimed that she did nothing wrong. The toilet paper rolled until it hit an empty beer can. There were bowls with leftover food wrapped in plastic bags as well as empty glasses and empty cans lined up like an orchestra. If any music was played it would be a pathetic symphony, and the bottle of champagne that was standing up would be Tchaikovsky.

The culprits that caused this mess left during the night. Those who left were probably sleeping in satisfaction by now. Even Gaeul, who was going to stay with him, left at midnight after being contacted by her manager. She said that her schedule had changed.

"Hey, come here."

He had Woofie sit down and placed the roll of toilet paper she was just playing with in front of him. She declared her innocence as she rolled her big eyes around, but when Maru stared at her, she rolled onto her back and started acting cute. It seemed that she had switched lanes after seeing that her right to stay silent didn't work. Maru couldn't exactly vent his anger on an animal he couldn't get through to. Maru showed her the toilet roll once again and told her not to bite on it. Whether the dog understood was a mystery though.

He opened the door to the balcony and started cleaning. After cleaning the living room and the kitchen that made his heart feel unsettled, he felt a lot more relieved. He sprayed Febreeze everywhere in his house while seriously considering a no-entry rule. As for breakfast, he just ate some cereal. Woofie changed her expression as soon as she heard cereal being poured and quickly approached Maru before wagging her tail. She was incredibly quick at times like this that it was to the point that it made Maru wonder whether she really had an injured leg.

"Yeah, you need to eat too, don't you?"

Her name became 'Woofie' yesterday. When Chaerim asked what the dog's name was, he replied that there wasn't one yet, and suddenly, the game turned into a name-the-dog. As they were all drunk, they each came up with a name, but there was nothing suitable. James Bond, Dog Meat, Ssamjang, Nameless, Smartie; there was even a Han Maru among them. For about thirty minutes, everyone used 'Han Maru.' If Maru didn't interrupt midway by telling them that it was absolutely not happening, the dog's name would have become 'Han Maru.' After a bout of conversation, they decided on Woofie. They couldn't care less at that point. For Maru, Woofie was much better than 'Han Maru,' and that was selected. He didn't want to hear 'Han Maru's peeing' whenever the dog did.

"They thought a lot about it, so don't be too disappointed."

Woofie didn't even seem interested in what Maru was saying because she was too absorbed in eating. After petting her head once, Maru brewed some coffee. He enjoyed his leisure after embracing the peace that came to his house. It was a peaceful Sunday only allowed to an actor who had one official

schedule. The film that featured Geunsoo was introduced in a movie critic program that played in the morning. While watching the host introduce the movie with great talking skills, he grabbed his phone. He remembered the conversation he had with Geunsoo yesterday. He looked for Dongwook's name and pressed the call button. The signal didn't last that long.

-Hello?

"Hyung-nim. It's Maru."

-A call from you on Sunday morning, huh. That's a first.

"Sometimes, I should try to switch things up. Are you busy?"

-If I was busy on a Sunday, I wouldn't be able to live. What are you doing?

"I just finished cleaning and was watching TV."

-You're too much of a clean freak for a guy living alone. Is it still as desolate as before? I mean, with a single sofa in the living room.

"There are a couple vases now. Though, they aren't mine."

-What do you mean they aren't yours?

"It belongs to the one who warms my side."

-Did you finally get a girl?

"Yes, I finally got one."

-Congratulations. If you don't want to grow old alone like me, you should date early and get married. If you have time later, introduce her to me.

"I think you saw her once at least."

-Really?

"I'll tell you the specifics when we meet up."

-Does that mean you're coming to see me?

"As long as you aren't busy and have the time to hang out with a free young man like me."

-I thought you just got a girlfriend. Why would you meet me on a golden Sunday like this?

"Because she's busy with work. How about it? Let's go fishing together after a long time. The last time we went fishing was when I just finished my military service, and we haven't gone since then, did we?"

-This is why I can't help but like you. Shall we go to Daebudo^[1]?

"I'll bring the car, so lend me some gear."

-I'll give you the one I bought last time. I tamed it, so it should be easy to use.

"I'll go over to your house after getting some ramyun and a portable stove."

He loaded the luggage in his car and headed to Dongwook's house. He saw Dongwook wearing a backpack in front of the apartment complex.

"I wanted to get a breather too. I was almost getting fed up with going by myself."

"Is the celibacy you were praising so much finally coming to an end?"

"It's just a figure of expression. If I get married, I won't even be able to go fishing. Heck, I found my friends pitiful when they were dragged to theme parks and whatnot every weekend looking like zombies."

When Dongwook got in the passenger seat, Maru could smell a faint scent of cigarettes. He didn't say anything and just started the car. The car eventually left Gangnam expressway and entered Western Coast expressway.

"Are you smoking again?"

He brought up the topic. Dongwook, who was boasting about his fishing photo, brushed up his hair in an awkward fashion.

"Do I smell?"

"A little. You didn't smoke at all after you quit."

"Things happened. I tried not to smoke, but my mouth kept feeling itchy."

"Did something happen?"

"Nothing much. I just missed smoking."

Maru no longer brought up the topic of smoking until they arrived at Daebudo. The way he looked down at his hand before throwing his gaze outside the window made it look as though Dongwook was trying to hide the reason he started smoking again. Urging a person who was trying to hide the reason was practically asking them to keep it even more of a secret. He brought up the topic, so Dongwook would probably talk about it once he felt that it was necessary. If he kept his silence, they could just have a blast fishing together and return home.

"There's quite a lot of people."

He parked his car in the port of Heungseon-ri and got out. Dongwook, who was looking around, found a spot a little away from the port. There was a wave of salty smell from the sea. They opened their portable chairs and set up their fishing rods.

"I'm getting hungry. Let's cook the ramyun."

"We just sat down together. We should put a fish in the ramyun at least. I mean, we came all the way here."

"Ramyun tastes the best when it's cooked by itself."

They cooked some ramyun as soon as they grabbed a spot. Although Maru said what he said, his stomach was craving more food as he only ate cereal for breakfast. He also cracked open two eggs that he had brought.

“Fishing is something you do just to eat ramyun.”

“I want to retort to that, but it’s good, so I can’t really say anything.”

They emptied the ramyun in a flash before sitting down again. Dongwook turned the radio on and looked into the distance. He would sometimes sigh as well, but smile whenever they met eyes. Two hours passed like that. Dongwook turned off the radio.

“Do you remember Choi Miyeon?”

“Choi Miyeon?”

Maru probed his memories. He was reminded of a journalist with whom he had an interview long ago. The moment he matched the face and the name, the things she said started appearing in his memories as well.

“Is she the journalist from Sharon?”

“Yes. I’m just asking in case, but did you hear anything from her?”

“About what, exactly?”

“Lee Miyoon. Miyeon said that she mentioned it to you once.”

“I did hear about it. It was a long time ago though.”

“How much did she tell you?”

“She told me that Lee Miyoon is suspected to be a broker who sets up prostitution.”

“So you know almost everything.”

“Did that become a problem? I thought that things were resolved well since I didn’t hear anything much after ‘The Five’ became an issue.”

“One of two things happen when an accident occurs: it’s gouged out, or it is covered up so that it couldn’t be seen.”

“So that one seems to be the well covered up case then.”

“It was covered up cleanly. Usually, common sense dictates that you shouldn’t touch something that was operated as cleanly as that. It was the doing of an expert. Even if you do poke around it, it would be hard to find a flaw, and even if you do find a flaw, it’s hard to make an issue out of it, so it just ends with a lot of suffering.”

“I see. Journalist Choi Miyeon dug into it, huh?”

“She did.”

After saying that, Dongwook waved his hand in the air as though to chase off a fly.

“No. This is nothing much, so forget about it.”

“If you say that it’s nothing much after telling me all that, I wouldn’t be able to sleep in peace.”

“It’s because you don’t need to know about it. Knowing won’t do you any good either. Above all, it’s not like you can do anything.”

Dongwook took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. He lit it up and puffed it deeply.

“Hyung-nim.”

“Yeah?”

“You know? If it was before, I would have just ended on that note. It’s just as you said; if I can’t help you with it, I would think that there’s no need to hear about it. To put it bluntly, there’s nothing in it for me either.”

“So you should stay out of it.”

“But you know? I’ve currently given up on something big right now. You know that feeling, don’t you? When you face a really big problem, you tend to treat anything else as trivial. That’s how I feel right now.”

“What problems do you have when you just found a girlfriend and must be feeling good?”

Maru didn’t say anything and just stared at Dongwook. As he was once a journalist who ran among the front lines in order to reveal the truth and fight for the transparency of the media, he should be able to recognize the meaning behind Maru’s eyes. Dongwook rubbed the cigarette on the ground to put it out.

“I don’t know what it is, but I can tell you’re serious.”

“Tell me about it. Also, I’m not entirely irrelevant to this case. My girlfriend is working close to that person.”

“Is she an actress?”

“Yes. It’s Han Gaeul.”

“So that’s what you meant when you said that I must have seen her at least once. Well, first, congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“But did Lee Miyeon approach Han Gaeul before?”

“No, in fact, they’re enemies. Apparently, it’s pretty famous that the two are at odds against each other.”

“That’s good. It would be hard for that hag to trample someone on Han Gaeul’s level. No, wait, it might be a different story if she sets her mind to it.”

Dongwook kept rubbing the cigarette on the ground as he continued,

“Miyeon found something new as she dug into Lee Miyeon’s back.”

“Something new?”

“Her connection to Soul or to be precise, Hong Janghae.”

“Soul is where the member that left ‘The Five’ joined, right?”

“Yes. I talked to Geunsoo about this in the past as well. I told him that Lee Miyoong was doing something shady. But I couldn’t tell him anything this time since Hong Janghae was involved in it as well. Even I couldn’t easily tell him that his father might be involved in bad business.”

“You should have. Geunsoo-hyung would gladly step in to help you.”

“He did say something similar before. He called his father ‘that man’ and told me that I should tell him if he’s ever up to no good and that he was willing to become bait.”

“That household is in a pretty complex situation.”

“And you know what the situation is?”

“Yes, by coincidence.”

“You’re involved in a lot of things huh. You won’t end up good if you keep sticking your nose into other people’s business.”

“I’ve already seen every bad thing there can be. I probably won’t be able to find anything worse.”

Maru wasn’t exactly lying since there was no one who lived more repeated lives than him. Dongwook just sighed.

“Do you know who the parent company of Soul is?”

“It’s YM Group.”

“Miyeon believed that Lee Miyoong’s connection reached all the way to YM through Hong Janghae.”

“Believed, you say. That means that she hadn’t found clear evidence.”

“Maybe she did.”

“Eh?”

Dongwook turned around to the fishing rod.

“Are you going to do more fishing?”

“We ate ramyun, so I think we did enough.”

“Then wanna go somewhere with me?”

“I’ll wrap this place up for now.”

Maru got the fishing rod, the stove, and the pot and returned to the car. Dongwook said that they should return to Seoul first.

[1] An island in Ansan. 50km away from Seoul.

Chapter 815. Sequence 8

"It's that one," Dongwook said as he pointed at the flower shop across from them.

Before they departed from Daebudo, Dongwook made a phone call somewhere. From the looks of it, he seemed to be calling Choi Miyeon. After that, he told Maru the address of this store, so it was probably safe to assume that Choi Miyeon was inside.

He got out of the car and entered the store. Choi Miyeon, who was cutting off branches with a pair of floral shears, greeted him warmly,

"Long time no see."

"Yes. How have you been?"

She did not reply and turned around instead, saying that she was going to clean up. Did she not reply because the question was just a formal one? Or was she expressing that she had not been doing well? She put away the flower vase on the desk before bringing some tomato juice.

"Nice interior, by the way."

"I put quite a lot of effort into it. My aim is not wholesale, so the atmosphere is pretty important."

"Do you usually deal with flowers or vases usually given as presents?" Maru asked as he looked at the vases.

Most of them were cacti, which were considered easy to raise. There were a few herbs as well, and they seemed to be reserved for people as they had names in front of them.

"I'll give you one as a present."

"I'll buy it. I have someone to give it to. Also, you don't need to be so formal with me."

Maru stood up with the glass cup. It didn't look like she was going to spit out the things she experienced during the past five years. He looked around the store until she spoke,

"You want to hear about Lee Miyeon?" she asked after rubbing her glass for a long time.

Dongwook, who sat next to him, looked at her worriedly. He seemed like he knew how hard of a time she was going to have by talking about it.

"If you find it difficult then it is okay if you don't. It's not like there's an immediate problem."

"No, this is a good thing. I thought it was about time I spoke about it properly."

To whom, it was probably Dongwook. Maru sat down. It was time to listen to why she, who was more eager to dig up the truth behind this matter than anyone, was running this flower store now.

"I should have told you about it before; I told you about how Lee Miyeon is acting as a broker for prostitution."

"I remember."

“I kept investigating that. There was a sense of duty in me as well, but it was more to do with how I couldn’t look away from the pain one person has experienced.”

She took her hands off the glass and sat up.

“Five years ago, I was having a deep talk with an actress who sold her body through Lee Miyoon. Let’s call her A for now. A was an actress in her forties at the time. A long time ago, when A was in her twenties, she gets into prostitution. She was threatened that she would not be able to debut if she didn’t accept, and although she tried to refuse, she ended up doing it due to pressure from people around her as well as verbal and physical violence. Back then, I was an idiot and asked why she didn’t report them to the police. A told me that she didn’t dare to report when she thought about what would happen to her afterwards, especially after she got involved in it. She was well aware that her acting career would be finished if she did report. Strictly speaking, she was the victim, but the fact that she involved herself in it seeking compensation haunted her a lot.”

“It’s hard. It might decide her life after all.”

Even if she was threatened into doing it, A must have known that there was an opportunity to wash herself of it, but the sense of guilt, because she chose to do something shady for compensation, must have sealed her mouth shut. The sense of shame must have restrained her from taking action as well. It wasn’t that she was foolish. It was the reaction of a normal person. It would instead be rather special if a person clashed head-on in order to win the thing they wanted.

“Despite doing such a thing, the role she was promised was not given to her, and although she played one of the lead roles in a drama after that, the reaction wasn’t that good. In the end, A retired and lived an ordinary life until she eventually got married and had a child. However, she soon got divorced and was living with her child until she eventually committed suicide five years ago due to hardships in life. I thought about a lot of things: Why did A’s life have to end so sadly like that?, where did the problem all start?, and above all, why did I not listen to her more back then?”

Maru had a look at her hands. Her interlocked hands had turned blue from gripping too hard.

“Do you remember that an actress’ prostitution matter was buried under the rug due to the commotion caused by The Five’s slave contract?”

“Yes, I remember. I also know that it disappeared without a sound.”

“A’s suicide pushed me forward. I couldn’t stay still, so I decided to take the deeply rooted problem of the entertainment industry into my own hands. Back then, I approached that young actress and asked many things, but I wasn’t able to hear the answer to most of the things. That girl was afraid of things becoming public, and above all, she had already come to a deal with the offenders. I couldn’t blame her. The things she experienced were too terrible for me to tell her that we should pull out this dirty problem by the roots. I didn’t dare ask for her help when she told me that she wanted to lay low. So I acted by myself. I invested all the time left after writing my articles for the magazine. Back then, I felt like I was something. I thought that it might be hard for now, but if I tell the truth to the world, it would be a small consolation to the ones who suffered and be the trigger to erase that evil cycle. It was meager heroism and journalism but they were the motivation that moved me.”

“It’s not meager at all. Generally, people flee when they’re faced with such a thing.”

“No, I’m a meager person. No, perhaps calling me ‘meager’ is an overstatement.”

She laughed self-mockingly. She reached out for the juice, saying that she needed something to drink. It was at that time that Maru noticed the thin scars on her wrist. Maru averted his eyes away and drank the juice. The position of those scars didn’t allow him to ask. After taking a deep breath, she continued to speak,

“I did achieve something. Perhaps it was luck, but I found out that there was some sort of a deal between Hong Janghae and Lee Miyoon. I also knew that the colossal company known as YM was involved in it.”

“Did you have physical evidence?”

“I did.”

She ‘did.’ Did that mean that she didn’t have it now? She paused just as she was about to speak before placing her hand on her chest and breathing heavily. Next to her, Dongwook told her to stop if it was too hard for her. Her peach-colored expression paled, just like her hands.

“Wait a sec.”

She went to the counter before taking out a long plastic container. It was a container with medicine in it, divided into weekdays. She took out some medicine and put them in her mouth before gulping down some water. She then breathed calmly before returning to her seat and sitting down. Her eyelids twitched minutely.

“Sorry. It’s stress-induced dyspnea. I’m also taking antidepressants.”

“If it’s too difficult for you, you can stop here.”

“No, I have to do it. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to talk about it again if I don’t do it today. Above all, Dongwook-seonbae has to listen to this until the end.”

Dongwook crossed his arms as though he understood and looked at her.

“I looked everywhere in order to find the connection between YM and Lee Miyoon. As with the victims of all cases, they are afraid of being exposed to the surface. Not only that, this was about prostitution. I knew that I would not have any hopes of winning against a big company, so I gathered information as carefully as possible. However, everything I got was circumstantial evidence or predictions. The women who secretly told me that they were involved in prostitution all cut off contact with me when I asked them if they can reveal their names and testify. I felt stuck. I was just thinking that I reached my limit when I was contacted.”

“Did that person say she would testify?”

Hearing Maru’s question, she nodded.

“It was that young girl who was swept under the rug five years ago thanks to ‘The Five.’ She called me and told me that she gained the courage to speak and that she wanted to take revenge against those people who tried to do as they wished with her. It felt like a dream. I finally felt like I found a path forward. She told me that she had a recording that she kept secret. She said that she recorded it during

her call with Lee Miyeon five years ago. She said that she had it on her phone and told me that we should sue her first.”

“She’s pretty knowledgeable about what you were up to considering that she hadn’t contacted you for five years as well as the fact that you haven’t given up and were still investigating.”

Choi Miyeon faintly smiled. That smile seemed to disdain herself.

“It was my mistake as I was exhausted because of not being able to gain anything for five years. I’m supposed to be a journalist, but I only confirmed the source of the evidence, not the feelings of the person who had it.”

“When you said you had the evidence, does that mean that the recording existed?”

“Yes, it did exist. I wasn’t an idiot, so I checked for myself the next day. That was a year ago. I heard Lee Miyeon make threats before trying to coax her inside a café. It was definitely recorded on the phone. When I asked if I could get a copy on the spot, she said she was too afraid. She said that she couldn’t trust me fully. I was persuaded when she said that I might make her testify after I revealed that evidence. I could understand where she was coming from, and I was in a hurry as well, which was a problem. I should have confirmed everything before I started it.”

She bit her lips.

“Back then, I thought that we should cause a ripple first. There was no way to topple a sturdy castle in one go, so we decided to strike the surface of the moat first to see their reaction. I thought that if Lee Miyeon’s recording is exposed, Lee Miyeon herself would have to stand in public and that Hong Janghae or YM, who she had connections with, might help her out. I was under the dream that I would not only be able to take Lee Miyeon out but everyone above her as well if I managed to observe her and prove her connections with YM.”

“Did that actress cut off all contact at the most important moment?”

She nodded heavily.

“All of my hypotheses were grounded on the physical evidence in her possession. With that out of the equation, my articles were nothing more than speculations, and the result was pretty obvious. There wasn’t even a mention of my article. No one knew about that matter. However, I received a letter requiring my attendance very quickly. I got one lawsuit after another.”

“Does that mean that people other than Lee Miyeon sued you?”

“The magazine company I worked for as well as the businesses I did interviews with. The main reason for the lawsuits was that I wrote malicious articles in order to wrongfully harm perfectly fine businesses and a capable actress. The people who were helping me changed their attitudes in an instant. My social life came to a complete halt. The human known as Choi Miyeon, who was alive and fine until just yesterday, was socially buried, quickly and easily.”

Her lips trembled. She seemed like she was still buried underground; she was buried underneath the gloomy depths of society where even breathing was difficult.

Chapter 816. Sequence 8

(WARNING: Self-Harm)

“I knew what lawsuits were like because there were people who were sued around me but experiencing it for myself was a completely different thing. Being asked to show up once throws a wrench in your lifestyle. But once or twice, it was endurable. It was because I kept getting asked to show up that I became both mentally and physically exhausted. I couldn’t delay my appearance forever, so I eventually had to go, and whenever I did, it was the same boring old investigation again. At first, I was firm. I didn’t have any physical evidence, but I had circumstantial evidence, so I believed that I would be able to change the heart of the investigators. Of course, it didn’t take long for me to realize that it was a vain dream.”

She used her right hand to slowly massage her left wrist down to her elbow. She looked as though she was consoling a stubborn child.

“People there are very knowledgeable about how to socially, physically, and mentally kill a person. They kept sending me lawsuits, each time under a different name so that they couldn't be classified together. Among them, there were things that ended on the investigator’s level but there were things I was fined for. That was the beginning. People started nitpicking the articles I wrote while I worked as a journalist. I was fired from my job and everyone I knew turned their backs on me, and there was no end to the lawsuits. I couldn’t go to anyone for help. They attacked me within the scope of the law after all.”

“Those people are meticulous.”

“I was blinded by my meager sense of justice. I was an individual while my opponent was a colossal business company with a huge law firm protecting them. No, it would probably have been the same if I fought Lee Miyeon as an individual. That woman’s background is huge after all. After that, I frequented the police station and frequently met with free attorneys. Every day was hell. I wished everything would come to an end, regardless of how it ended.”

She put out her left wrist. Those were the scars that Maru intentionally averted his gaze from. There was only one thing those thin horizontal lines signified.

“I didn’t even know I had depression. I thought it was because of stress that I kept waking up at night. It was the day after rain. The sky was really clear, I felt really refreshed, and it was also the day I gained the courage to pick up a razor. Regarding actress A, who I talked about earlier, I was wondering what kind of hardships must have driven her to give up on life and choose suicide, but I realized it wasn’t like that. Like in my case, it was way too impulsive. Slicing a line was hard, yet at the same time, it felt so charming. It was one of the methods of ending this whole thing. I was drunk on the feeling that I was choosing how I was living my life until the end and that I was not giving up.”

She put on a twisted smile. Maru felt that it was about time to stop her. Her words were driving herself into a corner.

“It’s okay if you don’t talk about it anymore.”

“No, hear me out until the end. Whether it’s you or Dongwook-seonbae, I don’t think I’ll be able to say it if not today. It’s difficult to even talk about it after all. That’s why I’m going to say what happened to me very clearly.”

She kept massaging her left arm. Just as her pain deepened as she continued to talk, Dongwook, who was listening from the side, was unable to keep his fingers still. He looked like he was in dire need of some cigarettes.

“But I found out that not anyone can just slit their wrists. Before I put it against my wrist, it felt like nothing, but the moment the blade touched me, I felt like I was flipped over. This is the result. I was neither able to go forward nor run away and was only left with this wound. I heard before that if you really want to die, you have to slit it vertically, not horizontally. I knew that yet I slit myself horizontally. I was hesitating until the very end.”

“You gained courage. The courage to keep on living.”

“Thanks for telling me that. Like that, a few months passed. The lawsuits disappeared as though they never happened. The people who were out to devour me before all suddenly started smiling at me and told me that it was all part of the experience. They probably thought that they tamed me. I had nothing left. I lost my job and my health. The money I had saved up had halved when I paid all those fines. When I saw the people I trusted turn their backs on me once, I lost all faith in humanity. I was really unable to do anything. I stayed at home by myself without even turning the lights on. I couldn’t die, and I couldn’t fight back properly. So what in the world could I do? I spent a week like that. After a period of despair came the period of acceptance, and after even that passed, I just gave up on everything. I had nothing to lose, so I might as well cause a scene – that thought suddenly came to me.”

She drank a sip of the juice. After taking a breather, she put on a vain smile and continued speaking,

“I was contacted by the actress who ran away. I know I shouldn’t say this, but I wanted to kill her. I couldn’t forgive the woman who deceived me and turned me into who I became. But you know what’s funny? I ended up negotiating with her and said that nothing happened between us. After settling the deal that we will not get involved in each other’s lives, I received this store. It was a strange thing. I thought about trying to make everything public with the power of the internet and just forget about it, but they approached me right at that time. I’m pathetic, aren’t I? In the end, I’m just the same as that girl.”

“Anyone would’ve done the same.”

Choi Miyeon heaved a deep sigh before looking at Dongwook. Dongwook was staring at the table while pressing on his forehead. It looked as though he was having a hard time meeting her eyes.

“Senior. Don’t you dare do it. You were right back then. That wasn’t something I should have challenged myself with my meager journalist spirit. It wasn’t something that anyone could do. It would’ve been better if I listened to you five years ago and gave up on it.”

She looked like she didn’t even have any energy to cry. She stood up, saying that she was done talking. After watching her trim a bouquet as though nothing had happened, Maru stood up.

“I’ll come again later to buy flowers. Please recommend a pretty one to me.”

“Alright. Come anytime. I’ll probably stay here. It’s not like I have anywhere to go now.”

Those words sounded sad. After leaving a short goodbye greeting, Maru left the store first. It was a complex thing. He even wanted to applaud those people for so cleanly using social infrastructure to

trample on a person's life. This didn't seem to be the doing of Lee Miyoon, who tended to look down on people up front. Hong Janghae popped up in his mind. The face he only saw through magazines had a fishy smile on his face in his imagination. Was that person, who possessed the meticulousness of being indiscriminately violent to the second son he had perfect control over while not touching a single hair on the first son that had left, the perpetrator behind this incident?

Maru looked at the store sign. When the rat driven into a corner started showing signs of biting back, they immediately opened up a hole in the flawless siege for her to escape so that she had no choice but to leave through that opening even while shuddering in a sense of tragedy. Hong Janghae should know from experience that those who were snapped once would not be able to lift their heads up again, just like his son. If Hong Janghae was truly the perpetrator behind this incident, it went to show that he was an incredibly hard man to oppose indeed. Those with both political and financial power as well as the ability to abandon things at the right time will never show their tail after all.

Dongwook left the store about 10 minutes later. It seemed that there were things he had to talk about with his junior. He saw Choi Miyeon clasping her hands into a praying position and putting her face against her hands in front of the window.

He got into the car. Dongwook said that he was going to smoke before they departed.

"Looks like this is the first time you heard about it as well."

"Yes. She didn't say anything until now. The only thing I knew was that she attempted to commit suicide because of severe depression. I thought that digging YM's back must have put her in that state, but she denied it until the end. It seems she was afraid that I would get myself involved."

"Do you think she's going to be okay? She still looks rather uneasy."

"She has gotten okay now. Three months ago, she wasn't even willing to see other people. I barely managed to see her too. The only solution is time, I guess. She's also undergoing psychotherapy and medical treatment, so I believe she's going to get well. I'll look out for her, so the things that happened before will not occur again."

Dongwook stuck his head out the window and spat out some smoke.

"If she got paid through the runaway actress then it would be hard to find any connections to Lee Miyoon or Hong Janghae too."

"Right. If we can find that actress, I would look for a way, but she probably disappeared. Thinking about it now, I think that actress revealed herself on purpose. She probably struck a deal with Lee Miyoon or Hong Janghae or any other parties that I don't know of and aimed for journalists that approached her or those who can't keep secrets. She's in charge of cutting off anyone so that that matter doesn't get exposed to the public."

"That's true. The fact that she was aware of journalist Choi's situation as well as the fact that she contacted her at the most crucial time all point towards that."

"I should have stopped her more thoroughly. Journalists with a solid background are fully capable of protecting themselves even if they get deeply involved but individuals who leave the TV stations to work as freelance journalists for magazines can do nothing but become prey. I was too complacent. I

underestimated her. I thought she'd take her hands off it once she realized that what she was dealing with was explosive. I didn't think she'd look directly into it."

"You can't look into a person's heart. Even if you tried to stop her, she probably would have gone as far as she did. She's the kind of person who had to check for herself that she would reach a cliff."

Dongwook threw the cigarette filter in his mouth out the window. After watching the store for a while, Dongwook reached inside his pocket and took out his pack of cigarettes and his lighter.

"Hey, can I feed your trash can?"

"Are you going to throw them away?"

"Yeah. My mouth doesn't feel itchy anymore. I should throw away things I don't need."

"You aren't going to try to investigate, are you?"

"I'm someone who writes on a chair for money. It's been a long time since I used my own feet to go around looking for materials. Above all, I'm a self-preservationist, so I will never do something dangerous. Even if I was paid all the money in the world, I have the iron rule of not getting involved with dangerous stuff."

Dongwook crushed the pack of cigarettes.

"Be careful."

"I told you I'm not going to do anything."

"I didn't mean anything when I said that either."

Dongwook fixed his gaze on the flower store and spoke,

"She was an annoyingly bold junior. She looked like she would be able to win against anything she experienced. But the Choi Miyeon I met three months ago wasn't the one I knew. She tensed up at the sound of the glass hitting the table, and her shoulder shivered up just by someone walking past her. She was someone who never stayed low in front of senior journalists... she was someone who would smile even while getting insults...."

Maru wasn't able to say anything to Dongwoo, who stayed quiet with a faint smile on his face.

"Shall we go for a drink?"

"Yes. I think we should."

Maru started the car.

Chapter 817. Sequence 9

"Phew, I was almost late."

"You should've headed out early," Giwoo scolded her.

She was about to tell him about how her elevator suddenly stopped working just as she left her house, and how the credit card machine suddenly stopped working when she was refueling her car, but she just

responded by drinking a glass of water instead. Today was the day the first episode aired, but things weren't looking good. Everything was not going well since morning. Even though she had turned the alarm on, it did not ring. The whole grain bread that she had left out on her table to eat had turned bad overnight, and her hairdryer kept turning off as though it had bad contacts somewhere inside. Looking back at everything that happened until she got to this restaurant made her wonder if one of the three disasters of her life had struck. Although she did not believe in religion or any other deities for that matter, all these bad things happening made her pick up the newspaper, and the first thing she saw on it was 'the three disasters of life.'

"Is something on your mind? You don't look good," Giwoo said as he filled her glass.

"It's because I'm having a bad day. Usually, I don't believe in things like fortune-telling, but what happened today made me seriously think about going to one."

"Should I introduce you to someone who's known to be accurate?"

"If it's like this tomorrow too, then sure."

The senior actors, the director, and the writer all arrived. The people seated around the table, eating lightly, all stood up and started applauding.

"Eat as much as you wish and have a great time. In two days, we'll be starting the marathon again."

The director raised his glass and shouted "Doctor's Office, Fighting!" Gaeul also raised her voice. The main writer of 'Doctor's Office' said that they would overtake the KBS crown. A round of applause was followed by the toasting of glass. It only started getting quiet around 10. People, who had been checking the time on their phones, all became quiet and looked at the large TV on one wall of the store. The first episode, which would be the deciding factor of the whole series, was going to air at any moment.

Gaeul put a dried squid leg in her mouth. This was her third drama already yet the excitement of the first episode never changed. With both 'Flaming Lady', in which she appeared as a minor character, and 'Diary of Migrating to Seoul', where she played her first lead role, she watched the first episode with a sense of nervousness and excitement. Both of them were Monday-Tuesday series, and both of them were far ahead of the programs that aired on other channels. In terms of archery, the difference was about 10 points to 3. The two dramas that she shot before all shot 10 points and ended without relenting the crown to any other series.

"I wish we are the ones to break that jinx," Giwoo said in a small voice.

KBS mini-dramas had two large jinxes. One was that the 'Monday-Tuesday series will always take the crown' and the other one was that 'Wednesday-Thursday series will come last no matter what.'

'Doctor's office' was scheduled to air in the Wednesday-Thursday slot. RBS was the one holding the crown of the Wednesday-Thursday series. KBS had never won against RBS when it came to this slot.

"I looked up the viewing rate of the last episode of 'Man in the Dream,' would you like to have a look?" Giwoo said as he turned his phone around.

Man in the Dream was the KBS Wednesday-Thursday drama that ended last week. Gaeul had a look at the screen. The viewing rate of the last episode was 4%. It was a good drama that started off in the 7% region, but it ended without being able to climb up. The drama was a cool one where the story, actors,

and production quality were good too. Gaeul thought about the jinx of the KBS Wednesday-Thursday series again.

“Like what the writer said, I hope we can take the crown.”

“Did KBS ever take 1st place?”

“Yes, apparently. Ten years ago.”

“Ten years ago, huh.”

Gaeul bit the squid leg with her molars and pulled it out. She had heard multiple times that actors would never become big if they were concerned about viewing rates, but she couldn't help but be concerned. No matter how well it was received, the drama would be considered to have flunked if that didn't show some good stats. There were no actors who would want to be the leading roles of a flunked drama.

“It's starting,” the director shouted.

Gaeul turned around to the TV. Due to the production environment of dramas, where time would be of the essence towards the end, it couldn't be helped that the quality of a drama would fall down towards the end. In other words, if the viewers thought that the quality of the first episode was below their expectations, they would change the channel without giving it a second thought. Back in the days when they would have to wait until the rebroadcast if they didn't have videotape recorders, many people would endure and watch the first episode, but these days, when they could rewatch the episode whenever they wanted, there were very few people who would patiently watch until the very end. If it was bad, they would change their channel within the first 10 or even 5 minutes. It wasn't like they could plead with the audience to keep watching until the end. Since they put a lot of effort into it, the best method was to attract as much attention as possible in the beginning so that the channel wasn't changed. She did her best for the best possible outcome. When she shot the last scene in the first episode, she pushed herself so hard that she wondered if she might fall ill. There was a sense of responsibility to show good acting, but she also had the desire to break the Wednesday-Thursday series jinx. There was nothing more desirable than that title as an actor. You can use that actor/actress to break that jinx – anyone would want that label on them.

The scenes she had repeated several times became a video and were projected on the TV screen. The rain was terrible that day, the airplane ruined the audio, there was a big problem with the shooting set – many events related to those scenes popped up in her mind.

“The quality's good.”

“The director must have worked hard.”

Then came the scene where Giwoo started crying. This was the scene that also made Gaeul's heart tighten when she watched from the side. As this was the middle part of the first episode, the director did not relent and kept shouting 'cut' and 'action' repeatedly in order to bring out the best quality. The good atmosphere at the set also gradually stiffened up due to the repeated NGs before the okay sign fell just as the mood was about to go bad. After that scene, Giwoo fell to the floor as though he was collapsing. He had been exhausted. Gaeul applauded him as an actress. There were some bad rumors circulating around the staff about Giwoo's background, but those rumors disappeared with that act

alone. An actor who possessed that amount of skill coming in through the back door was not even funny after all.

“Good, really good. I was even worried that Giwoo would slap me after that.”

“You went too far back then. I wasn’t crying because I’m acting; I was crying because I was really frustrated, you know?”

“Really?”

“Did you forget how much you scolded me back then? I even thought about fleeing, you know?”

“I did it because I knew our dear Giwoo would be able to do it. Here, have a drink.”

The director poured some drinks for Giwoo. The staff around them started raising their phones high and taking photos. Everyone had social network accounts these days, so they were probably taking photos for that. Giwoo got on top of a chair and raised his phone high. The staff and the actors all gathered into one group and made a V with their fingers.

“Let’s get back to watching. The climax has yet to come.”

The director refreshed the atmosphere before sitting down.

“Hey, this is pretty good.”

Giwoo showed her the photo he had just taken. Underneath the photo that was about to be uploaded to social media were the hashtags ‘#first_episode’, ‘#doctors_office’, ‘#watchit’.

“Han Gaeul, let’s take one together. I’ll upload it with this.”

“You go forward, so I can look smaller.”

“You are plenty small already, you’re way too greedy.”

Gaeul also took out her phone. When she uploaded the photo she took with Giwoo on Instagram, she immediately got responses. Half of them were cheering her on, and half of them were asking why she was taking a photo with Kang Giwoo. She had become resistant to malicious comments now and could just chuckle at them, but she did feel quite wronged that she was getting insulted for nothing much. She also added the ‘watchit’ tag. It would be great if the people who pressed like on Instagram went to the TVs after that. Just as she turned off her phone and was about to focus on the drama, a name flashed across her mind. Gaeul put her phone below the table and searched for #Hanmaru. There wasn’t an account page as though he didn’t have an account, but there were photos related to the hashtag. There were photos where he was smiling on a stage as well as photos where he was crying with fellow actors. When she saw the photo where he raised his arms into the air as though he had everything in the world, it made her smile. The Maru that she did not know of for the past five years was there. There were quite a lot of photos he took with the JA family: Hong Geunsoo, Yang Ganghwan, Kim Suyeon, and Yang Miso. Among these four, two of them were hugely popular stars, and the remaining two were also considered top-tier in their fields. There were quite a lot of photos he took with Ahn Joohyun as well.

Now that she thought about it, she hadn’t taken any photos with him. Gaeul pouted. There were so many photos he took with actresses that she wanted to give him a call immediately and grumble about

it. Why didn't you take one with me? – if she grumbled with nonsensical stuff like that, how would he react?

"Han Maru?" Giwoo questioned.

Gaeul turned her phone over.

"I wasn't intending on peeking, I just happened to see. Do you know him?"

"Yeah. You got to know him during New Semester, didn't you?"

"Rather than New Semester, we met in Apgu before that."

"Really?"

Giwoo showed her his phone. It was a photo he took in the gym and Maru was next to him.

"You two go to the same gym?"

"I think it's been about a year. I found out that we went to the same gym. We talk about acting and private stuff too. He's a good friend."

"You two are close, huh. I didn't know that."

"How did you get to know him?"

"Through acting, during high school."

"Did you two go to the same school?"

"No. We got to know when the acting clubs interacted."

"So you're long-time friends huh."

She didn't bother correcting the word 'friend'. Things might become awry if her relationship was revealed after all. While she did want to reveal her relationship to the public, she had to listen to Maru's opinion as well as both of their agency's opinions. As she was bound by contracts, she couldn't act impulsively.

"Let's eat together some time. It'd be fun with the three of us."

Giwoo said that he would introduce them to a nabe restaurant that gourmets went crazy for.

"Sounds good, if we have time."

Gaeul put her phone in her pocket and stopped looking at the photo. While they were talking, the first episode was already reaching its climax. The people who were talking while drinking all let go of everything from their hands and focused.

"It's this spot right here."

"We had a lot of trouble shooting this one. I hope people can become absorbed in it."

"They will. Han Gaeul's acting skill was incredible."

“No way. Kang Giwoo’s acting was much better, you know?”

“My acting was pretty good.”

“Hey, you can’t just do that. You need to flatter me too!”

“I’ll do it after watching that.”

Giwoo pointed at the screen. Doctors in white gowns were flocking towards the doctor’s office. This was the scene where the conflict between the characters emphasized the tension in the drama. The camera scanned across Giwoo’s face and then to a senior actor’s. The background music changed just as it looked like a fight was going to break out. The OST started flowing out and the camera captured all of the doctors’ faces. Gaeul looked at herself standing on the left. She was satisfied with the expression she made. Following that, she felt relieved that she was satisfied with her own acting.

“Maybe I’m a little lacking here?” Giwoo said with a smile.

Chapter 818. Sequence 9

The first episode of Doctor’s Office ended with Giwoo’s intense gaze. Maru uncrossed his legs and got up from the sofa. To evaluate it, 'he wanted to go to the bathroom but couldn't because it was so immersive.' The first episode was just that well-made. The director distributed the emphasis throughout so well that the viewers wouldn't get distracted, and the writer showed the audience the spiderweb-like plot at the end of the first episode to threaten them to watch the next episode. Are you still not going to watch the next episode? — the writer's voice seemed to say. The faction war within the doctor's office and the large-scale traffic accident were tangled with each other like it was Jenga, and so, neither of them could be resolved easily, and it just went to show how skilled the writer was. After all, she was someone who was considered to have written a line in history through her suspense drama. Maru recalled how the writer said that she could not do without romance but would not make the romance boring. It interested him to see how she was going to write about love within the rapid political struggles in the hospital.

-Did you watch it?

When the teaser for episode 2 started airing, he got a call from Gaeul. He picked up the call and went to the kitchen.

“I did. I would be in big trouble otherwise after all.”

It was noisy over the phone. She said that she was going to watch the first episode, so she was probably at a bar or a restaurant. From the way he could hear cheers, it seemed that the staff was satisfied with the quality of the first episode. He brewed some ceylon tea and went back to the sofa.

-Shall I hear your review of it, then?

“First, if I have to score it, it would be 9 out of 10.”

-Why is it not 10?

“Because you show up too little.”

-That's an extremely personal review.

"That's how reviews are supposed to be."

-So it's 10 out of 10 if you exclude my screen time?

"Sure. It was really good. I wanted to go to the bathroom midway, but I even crossed my legs to hold myself back because I was so curious about what was going to happen next."

-Really?

"You know I don't lie."

-Well, I can't be sure about that.

At that moment, someone shouted at Gaeul, telling her to have a drink. Gaeul told that person to wait. It seemed that she was moving away from the drinking occasion.

-The camera director is really drunk right now. He started drinking before it even began. Geez, I knew he'd turn out like this.

"I'm sure he felt really good. The production quality was great after all."

-I was really impressed too. Especially that scene in Cheonggyecheon. I didn't realize when we were shooting it, but it looked really pretty on screen.

"The CG team must have worked really hard. It will take more than just a day or two to keep up that kind of quality."

-They'll have an even harder time near the end. That goes for us too.

"Dramas are more like live-action near the end. How are things over there? It definitely sounds pretty cheerful."

-Everyone's in an uproar. We might be optimistic, but we are even thinking about how we might take the crown for the Wednesday-Thursday series. The reactions are good on social media as well.

"That's not surprising. The effort was clearly visible."

He took a sip of the tea before bringing his laptop. He placed it on the table in front of his sofa and searched 'Doctor's Office' on it. Doctor's Office was first on the real-time search rankings provided by the web portal. There were many related articles on Twitter and Facebook as well. On large community sites where feedback was the quickest, a 'meme room' had already been created, and people were using a portion of the newly posted articles. Most of the used scenes was the one of Kang Giwoo walking down Cheonggyecheon and suddenly starting to weep. Both the story and the production was targeted at taking down women's hearts, so the reactions were to be expected.

"The cafés are in a rave too, about how Doctor's Office is so good."

-Anything else?

"Kang Giwoo's cool, pretty, he's my man, I already wrote our marriage documents, et cetera."

-A popular man sure is different alright.

“There are things about you too: ‘Han Gaeul is cute’, ‘she looks innocent unlike the ones she did before’, ‘her acting skills are good’.”

-You’re just reading the good ones, aren’t you?

“There are only good words about you.”

‘That slut’, ‘Terrible acting’, ‘She’s clearly tempting Giwoo’ – he didn’t even click on such comments. He lived in an era where even God received insults, and Marlon Brando would get mocked for terrible acting. Bad comments were best interpreted as a measure of interest. Among them, some devalued Gaeul with words that he could not even speak of, but he didn’t find any value in going against them. People were supposed to speak to people. He just pressed the ‘report foul language’ button provided by the web portal. If things became bad, her agency would step in. ‘Hwan’ was known for looking after its actors quite well.

-I can see that my acting is terrible.

“Did you look that up?”

-I should. This is a form of monitoring.

“Don’t worry too much about it. Your acting was clean. It was neither overboard nor lacking. It was just the way I like it.”

-Didn’t I look a little too out of energy?

“That’s a skill too. You didn’t look out of place and managed to dissolve in with the rest. You were comfortable to watch. I think you did everything that you can do through acting. The rest is up to the writer to portray your character. There’s a limit to how much you can make a bland character look good through acting.”

-What do you feel about my character then?

“For now, 7 out of 10.”

-That’s way too low. Can’t you give me more?

“Are you going to feel happy if I generously gave you 10 points?”

-No. If you say that, I’m going to hang up, go inside, and drink a whole lot.

“That’s why it’s a 7. It’s the highest point you can get with your own effort alone, so don’t feel so bad about it. Aren’t you getting more action starting in the next episode? From the looks of it, I could tell that there’s going to be a romantic plot between you and Giwoo.”

-It does look like that from looking at the script, but I’m not sure yet. Anyway, have you always known Giwoo? He told me before that you two were close friends who met in the gym all the time.

“He introduced me as a close friend?”

He smiled as he drank the cooled tea. If his relationship with Giwoo could be called 'close friends', he would be best friends with a stranger on the street or maybe even lifelong buddies. He probably didn't tell Gaeul that they were close friends because he was scheming something. It was probably the bone-deep social facade he always put up.

-Why? Are you two actually on bad terms?

"We're neither on good terms nor bad terms. Aren't friends all like that?"

-He even told me that the three of us should eat out sometimes.

"Three? Including you?"

-Yes.

"Tell him to go ahead."

-You sound pretty strange. Did you get into a fight with him? Or are you actually not close at all?

"We aren't kids. We aren't at the age where bad relationships can make or break a dining occasion. Above all, my very close friend Kang Giwoo has an amazing background, so knowing him won't do me harm."

-So you definitely don't like him huh. Should I put some distance as well?

"You decide for yourself. You aren't someone who would listen to other people's words, are you? If you feel like he's a good person then stay close to him, and if you don't, then just put some distance. Oh, do act kind to him like a lover throughout this drama. It's highly likely that you two will be put in a romantic plot, so it won't be that good for you two to be on bad terms in reality, right?"

-How can you say that as my boyfriend?

"I should keep my public and private affairs separate."

-Maybe I should do a deep kiss scene with him.

"That won't be enough to cause me to become jealous. I know what comes after that after all."

-I wonder if you know that you're sounding more and more like a pervert?

"I have been a gentleman since I was born. How can you possibly call me a pervert?"

He could hear her giggle on the other side.

-Are you on Instagram?

"There's no one to look at it. That thing is for popular people."

-Try it out. Who knows? Your fans might make a visit and leave behind a comment.

"I was never able to bring myself to do something like that."

-What about the fan café from before?

Hearing the word fan café, Maru recalled the memory from five years ago. He searched Han Maru on his laptop. When he went to the cafés section of the web portal, he saw that it was still there.

“I completely forgot about it; it’s still here.”

-You’re such a bad guy. That café was created when you were in high school, wasn’t it? You should have kept watch.

“I thought it would disappear soon. It looked like a friend of my sister made it for fun anyway.”

He clicked on the link to the café. He was greeted with a popup, saying that he was promoted to admin level. He had forgotten about this place for the past five years after visiting on the first day, so he felt like he had returned to the alleyways he always walked around during his childhood. There was a notification saying that there was a new post. Thinking that it was probably an ad, he went to the bulletin board. Unlike what he expected, it wasn’t an ad for an illegal gambling site. It was an article that announced that Han Maru, the subject of this café, was cast in the drama ‘Doctors’. He was surprised that there were still active people here. He had a look at all the poster IDs. There were about thirty active posters. They even called each other by nicknames as though they had met up once in real life. It seemed as though the café had turned into a social thing because the actor himself didn’t have that many activities even though this started off as a fan café.

“These people are having fun by themselves.”

-You should write them something.

“Should I?”

-Also, take some photos and upload them. You’re way too ignorant when it comes to things like that. Aside from showing your performance in public, I think such activities are important. I mean, it’s a connected era we live in.

“Alright. I’ll listen to your words.”

-Don’t forget to create Instagram.

“I don’t take photos that much though.”

-Get into a habit of taking them. Do you think other people take them because they don’t have anything better to do? They’re all trying to get close to their fans.

“I’ll make one and tell you the ID.”

-You should be able to find me if you look up Han Gaeul.

“You have a lot of viewers, don’t you?”

-About ten thousand followers, I guess? There aren’t many people from our country using that platform, so it’s quite small compared to Twitter, but my manager told me that I should take care of it since it should explode in popularity soon. She said something about how pictures are better than words.

“Ten thousand sounds like a lot already, but it’s going to increase? Damn.”

-There are artists who have hundreds of thousands to millions of followers overseas. I'll probably get just as many once the people in our country start showing more interest in Instagram. Everyone has a smartphone nowadays after all.

He looked up Han Gaeul on Instagram. He saw photos that she just uploaded. Above the photo she took with members of the staff, he saw a photo that she took with Giwoo alone.

"I see you took a photo with Giwoo."

-What? Finally feel jealous now?

"Are you going to stay away from him if I say I am?"

-If you want.

Maru smiled and closed the window. She was a wise woman who knew how to be considerate. Even without him having to tell her anything, she would probably never cross the line. If he was going to nitpick about every single man she encountered, he wouldn't have whispered love into her ears in the first place. Just because obsession and control were elements of love, it was a foolish thing to actually enforce it upon someone.

"Don't drink too much."

-That's the plan. I want to drink at ease only at home.

"Which home?"

-The home with the dog, I guess?

"I want to see you."

-Me too. Should I just go right now?

"You should take care of your social life. If you disappear without a word when the director and the writer are present, your character might disappear in the next script you get."

-If I become unemployed, I'll just switch to being a housewife.

"Are you serious?"

-Maybe I will be in a few years, don't you think? I should save up while I can if we want to live a cozy life.

"Then I'll leave everything to you and go on full breakdown mode starting today, okay?"

-Try me. Housing costs will be split half-half, and the same goes for living expenses. I will not open the door for you if you don't have any money, so it's up to you.

"How merciless. But hey, can I take that as you are proposing to me?"

-Well, probably not? Proposing over the phone during the middle of a get-together sounds terrible even when I think about it.

"I'll be waiting, so go for it when you're ready to propose. I'm willing to accept it with a benevolent heart."

-You sound very overconfident. Oh, I should hang up. They're looking for me inside.

"Have fun."

-Okay.

He put down his phone.

Chapter 819. Sequence 9

- 'Doctors' will get better views than 'Doctor's Office', right?

"We'll have to see about that."

-What do I do if it does bad?

"And why are you worried about that?"

-Because I'm one of the cast. I might be one of the minor ones, but I'll still be on the screen. Moreover, I have a line too.

"You'll see the results if you show up on TV next Wednesday, so just wait for it. You are not the one who's going to write apologies if the viewing rates are low, so don't overreact."

-You don't feel nervous at all since you shot a few dramas already, Mr. Han Maru?

"Bluntly speaking, I'm just a minor character. Rather than that, why did you call me? You didn't call me just to complain, did you?"

There was no way that Hyungseok called just to chat early in the morning.

-You haven't heard from Sora?

"Sora?"

-There's no way she told me about it first, though.

Hyungseok seemed hesitant about whether he should talk about it or not. Just then, his front door started thudding. Not only did he get an uninvited call in the morning, but there was also an uninvited guest now as well.

"Seonbae! Open the door!"

Before he even opened the door, the guest outside revealed her identity. Maru hung up the call and opened the door. Sora, wearing a gray two-buttoned coat, was glaring up at him. Before he could ask why, she barged inside.

"This looks a lot more habitable than before. They say that being in love will change their environment and sure enough it seems to be true. Oh? There's even a cactus. Are you raising it?"

"I'm not raising a cactus to eat it, so probably."

"Woofie, noona's here."

"She's a girl."

“Then unni’s here.”

Woofie tried to get away from Sora while limping due to one of her legs; however, she soon got caught. Woofie would even react joyously to a thief entering the house, but from how she was rolling her eyes nervously, she seemed to remember that the woman who was holding her was a strange prankster. After all, she had to offer her cheeks until they became mushy paste the last time Sora made a visit. Even now, Sora was pulling on her cheeks and twisting them from side to side.

“Hyungseok called me just now, asking if I heard anything from you.”

“That’s what I’m here to tell you.”

“Err, it looks like you forgot, but there’s something called a phone, you know? Showing up to someone’s house like this unnoticed doesn’t seem to fit with the times.”

“Affection disappears because of those selfish products of civilization. If I have something to say, I will say it in person. It’s a warm expression of affection in the modern age. Isn’t that right Woofie?”

“What were you going to do if I wasn’t at home?”

“There’s no way you aren’t at home. You’re someone who cleans your house if you don’t have any appointments. If you weren’t here, I would have used that new product of civilization known as a phone but here you are,” Sora said as she grabbed Woofie’s front paw.

“So? Why are you here? Rather than that, don’t you have work? It’s Thursday morning.”

“I applied for a vacation. I had to use my vacation early when I originally planned to use it all at once in the winter. Rather than that, get changed quickly. I can’t have the main actor appear like that in front of the audience.”

“In front of the audience? What do you mean?”

“You didn’t know? There’s a GV^[1] of our film today. It’ll première at 3 for 25 minutes, and after that, there are 40 minutes of GV.”

“And why haven’t I heard of this before?”

“Because I haven’t told you about it?”

Sora took out a leaflet from her bag and tossed it to him. It was a guide leaflet to the Ttukseom Indie Film Festival. When he opened it, he saw a film titled ‘Starting Point’ among the ‘short film’ lineup. Directed by Kang Sora, cast: Han Maru, Yoo Sooil. He hadn’t even heard that it was finished, yet he was being notified that it was ready to be released.

“I was going to send it to the Seoul Indie Film Festival, but I sent it here because I thought it would be more fun, and I got contacted saying that they want to promote this to the regular works from the competition. It would have been even better if it was promoted to the released works, but that’s for directors who have proven themselves, so I can’t really help it.”

“Regular works?”

“They’re saying that this would become a hot topic. I mean, Yoo Sooil is in it. There’s nothing better than this in order to attract interest to an indie film festival. It would be great if they could focus on the film itself, but well, I’m not too worried. This is the first step after all. Whether it’s for the film festival or us.”

Sora ran around the kitchen with Woofie held high. He looked at the outline of the film festival leaflet to see the works being featured. It was a new film festival that began this year, and it was sponsored by Seoul’s City Hall as well as some film distributors. As this was the first year, they would want to attract attention just like Sora said, and the name Yoo Sooil must have sounded tempting to them.

“How about Sooil?”

“I gave him a call, but he said he doesn’t think he’ll make it because of the schedule. He’s busy, so I can’t help it. Him being here would flip the festival upside down. What a pity.”

“If he comes, it won’t be a film festival anymore; it will become Yoo Sooil’s fan meetup. But hey, what were you going to do if I had something to do? Though, there are a lot of cases where directors participate in the GV by themselves.”

“I’ll say this again; there’s no way that could have happened. I can’t imagine you scheduling an appointment early in the morning. If it was work, then maybe.”

As much as he wanted to retort, Sora was probably aware of the schedule of a semi-unemployed man.

“What about the others?”

“Jiyoon-uni said she won’t make it because of work, and the others all said they would participate. But hey, why are you standing still? Go get changed.”

He changed his clothes because of the urging. When he came back out wearing a knitted shirt and a pair of jeans, Sora scanned him from top to bottom and nodded, saying that he didn’t look bad.

“Isn’t it a little too early considering that it starts at 3?”

It was just past 10. If the film festival occurred in Busan then it was understandable, but Ttukseom was in the middle of Seoul. It was 30 minutes by car from Banpo, where he lived.

“I took the day off, so it’s somewhat awkward for me to stay at home.”

“That’s why you barged in here? In order to kill time?”

“Do you think I’m such a free person? Woofie, your daddy really looks down on people, doesn’t he?”

Woofie, who was in Sora’s arms, seemed to have gotten exhausted after struggling as all of her four arms were drooping. He grabbed the dog by her neck and took her away from Sora before putting her down on the floor. He was supposed to be the owner, so he had to help her out at times like this. Sora looked at the running Woofie in pity. Maru wondered how much she wanted to hold her in order to be satisfied.

“Why don’t you raise one yourself?”

“A dog? I don’t want to. There are many things I have to look out for if I want to raise one. I’ll just be satisfied with doting on other people’s pets. Though, I might get one and dote it when I’m wholly able to take responsibility for one.”

Sora took a last glance at Woofie before putting her shoes on, saying that they should depart. He left his house after putting some dog food in the bowl. When he went down to the parking lot, Sora was waiting for him in front of his car.

“Chauffeur, start the car.”

“I’m a slave, aren’t I?”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

As soon as Sora got on the passenger seat, Sora started sniffing.

“I really have to give it to you for being clean. You wash your car pretty often, don’t you?”

“I do it whenever I don’t have anything to do.”

“So you do it every day? No wait, you started a drama, so, once every two days?”

“I’m not saying anything. So, where are we going?”

“I’ll type the address into your map.”

Sora inputted the address into the GPS map. It wasn’t that far away. He thought about asking what place it was before just starting his car. It was obvious that she wouldn’t answer even if he asked.

“Nice of you for not asking. You’ll see when we get there.”

He took a glance at Sora. She would be a great fortune-teller.

The car got stopped by a traffic light. A child, who was waiting by the pedestrian crossing, could be seen raising his hand up in the air as he crossed. Next to him, a woman who seemed to be his mother patted him on the head and grabbed his hand.

“Iseul-unni’s proposal was cool, wasn’t it?” Sora said, her eyes fixed on the mother-son duo on the crossing.

“I could tell that she prepared a lot. It was also fun watching Dojin being dumbfounded. He probably had it hard. I’m sure he must have been anxious because Iseul didn’t reply to his proposal.”

“Dojin-oppa looked like he was crying when she gave him a ring, right?”

“He himself would never admit it though.”

“I thought that proposals were cheesy and meaningless stuff, but it felt really good to watch them prepare and actually execute it. You only live once anyway, plus you’re preparing an event for your once-in-a-lifetime partner.”

"I heard that divorce rates are as high as 40% recently. And even worse when you're talking about divorce rates in later years."

"You just have to ruin everything, don't you?"

"It's because I'm starting to feel anxious. I see the destination in front of me."

At the top of the glass wall were colorful letters that said 'Party Supplies.' Sora quickly told him to get off and dragged him inside. There was only one thing if she came to 'Party Supplies' after talking about proposals.

"Is this why you didn't say anything?"

"It's obvious that you won't do it if I mentioned it, so why would I? Come quick. We're already late."

"So the almighty Kang Sora will hold an event and ask Koo Ando out?"

"It's a total surprise, isn't it? A surprise that no one expects."

It would be a big surprise for sure. Maru was even worried that Ando might run away because he was too surprised. What would he do if an event was held for him and he was asked out when he said that dating is a luxury in his current situation? Unlike Sora, who always recklessly charged ahead without a plan, Ando was someone who would worry about things first. The two were on the extreme ends of each other, whether it was their personalities or action patterns, so it might bring about an opposite effect instead.

"Err, Sora. Have you heard that confession is not a challenge but an affirmation?"

"I'm not sure. Isn't confession about guts, courage, and gambling?" Sora said as she opened the door to the party supplies store.

She went inside as though it wasn't even worth mentioning.

"Did you make any progress in the past few weeks?"

"No, Ando-seonbae gets frightened stiff like a rat in front of a snake whenever I give him the slightest hint. Though, that's fun in itself too."

Sora looked at a heart-shaped candle and asked if it wasn't pretty. He wanted to ask her to refrain if she was planning to lay them out on the floor.

"Childish things are good."

"You should think about Ando's feelings too."

"If I keep doing that, I might as well become a granny. He keeps increasing his worries like a loan shark would with interest, so I can't keep watching."

"It's because he has a cautious personality."

"I know that. That's his charm as well as his downside. How about this one? I think the balloon would look pretty nice."

“Where are you going to put it?”

“Now, I wonder where.”

Seeing her smile like a devious fox, Maru was suddenly reminded of Woofie at home. To be precise, he was reminded of Woofie’s house. Sora’s gaze, looking around his house after barging inside in the morning, suddenly made him feel chills as though he just encountered a plot twist in a movie.

“It doesn’t happen to be our house, is it?”

“Seonbae, do you think I’m so shameless?”

“Right? You aren’t so shameless, right?”

“Of course. You can’t call that ‘our’ house. It’s ‘your’ house. I admit to people’s private properties. So I’m going to use your house for a little while.”

“What if I say no?”

“I saw that the space in front of your porch was really wide.”

“Absolutely not.”

“So inside it is, right? We don’t want to cause any inconvenience to the neighbors after all. You have really deep thinking after all. You even love your neighbors. How about this one? I think we need something colorful because your walls are all gray.”

Sora smiled as she picked up a large flag with characters on it like the flags of the world. She seemed like she was thinking about the afterparty, not the confession.

“Now then, I wonder what will look good.”

He shook his head seeing Sora’s expectant face.

[1] Guest visit. A little like a premiere where the director and the main cast may show up.

Chapter 820. Sequence 9

They returned with the party supplies in the back seat. Sora did not speak a word while they returned. Her chatty self had completely disappeared, and she just looked outside the window like a hospital patient waiting for her diagnosis. Whenever he talked to her, she said that she’d surprise Ando with a bright smile on her face, but unlike her excited voice, her hands were neatly piled on top of her lap.

“How do you think we should decorate?” Sora said as she laid out the party supplies on the floor.

Maru sat down on the sofa and quietly stared at her. She was walking around the living room on tiptoes while carrying glittery ropes in each hand until she eventually turned her head his way.

“Help me out.”

“Don’t you have something to tell me before that?”

“What are you talking about? An apology for using your house without permission?”

“For that, I’ve semi-given up, so I don’t care. In the first place, this is not even my house, and there are many people who use this place as they wish. Above all, a friend wants to use my house, so it’s not like I want to stop you from doing it.”

“I never knew you thought of me as a friend. At most, I thought I’d be an annoying girl.”

“Looks like I should update my opinion to an annoying friend.”

“I don’t care. I don’t mind what opinions other people have of me. I only have one life to live, so I might as well live the way I want.”

“I don’t have to tell you that your eyes and mouth are saying totally separate things now, do I?”

Maru placed Woofie, who had come around to his feet, on top of his lap. Sora was no different from usual when she barged in in the morning, but she acted totally differently on their way back from the party supplies store. Her fatiguing high pride had become faint, and her words became washed out like a tea bag that had been brewed two times. While she sometimes acted impulsively, she was very meticulous when it came to important things from the planning to the result. So it was very unlike her to intrude on the place she wanted to confess in on the morning of that day. If she really had the intention of confessing, she would have taken out a tape measure and measured every little thing before going to the party supplies store and looking for the correct items, not scraping anything she saw.

“You never intended to do something like confessing in the first place, did you?”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because you’re someone who knows how to keep things to a moderate level.”

Maru took out the party supplies and laid them out on the floor one by one. A mirror ball for the ceiling, some balloons, small LED lamps, small pop-its used at birthday parties, as well as letter stickers for the wall. The heart-shaped candles that she picked up courageously as soon as she went inside the store were not included among these numerous supplies. Maru had also yet to hear anyone successfully confessing under a mirror ball with pop-its.

“It’ll be fun if I confess while popping these, won’t it?”

Sora said those words as she grabbed the string on the end of one pop-it.

“I know you don’t even intend to.”

Maru pushed the items to one side. She did have the intentions to party, but probably not to confess. He became curious. This girl detested being roundabout more than anyone, yet she was hiding her feelings like this and feigning ignorance. Sora sat in a daze as she looked at the palm-sized teddy bear that the employee at the counter told her to take for 1,000 won. She didn’t even give Woofie a glance even when she came over.

“There’s a lot of time, do you want some coffee?”

There was no reply. Maru thought that she would drink if he made one for her, so he made two cups for now. He placed the coffee cup in front of Sora, who was kneeling down.

“Seonbae.”

“What?”

“You know? I’ve never encountered a situation where things didn’t go my way in my life. Even if the results were a little lacking, they always reached my expectations. I was born into a pretty well-off family, so I was never financially lacking either, and thanks to inheriting my parents’ smart head, I was satisfied academically as well. Did you know? I actually got a scholarship for my third year of high school and even got a partial scholarship for college. With my grades in middle school, I could go to one of the best academic high schools in the area, but I used my head a little. I got money and even went to a good college thanks to our high school. I even got great results on CSAT and got into the college of my choice, though I’m taking a break right now by going to my father’s workplace because I thought that would be for the better. Even I think that I did pretty well until now without falling over.”

“But suddenly, there’s something that doesn’t go the way you want?”

Sora nodded.

“People around me tell me all the time that I should be more considerate of others and that I should stop acting proud. Being humble is good, yes, I admit that, but I don’t want to live like that. If I am committing a huge crime or bringing huge harm to others, I obviously have to fix my attitude, but I’m not that bad. I want to be straightforward. I want to do what I want to do. I hate having to take hints from others’ moods and delay my work.”

“Considering your personality, I’m sure you won’t be able to stand something like that.”

“I admit that my personality is flawed. If someone disdains me, I sometimes feel so angry that I just recklessly go against them. I have to apologize if I turn out to be wrong, but if the other person ignores me, I would recklessly pick a fight with the first. I know that. That’s why I fought a lot with Bada during middle school, but I’m not that young anymore, so I will not do something as foolish as that.”

“Bada caused a ruckus at home back then.”

Maru was reminded of his sister, who suddenly got angry at him when he arrived at his house. Considering how the girl who made his sister cry became his junior and was now even working together with him, life was pretty unpredictable for sure.

“I may sound cocky, but I was able to do everything that I could. Just look at today. I was invited because my work was picked. I’m a director who only shot a film twice, and one got a prize while for the other one, I got an invitation. Shouldn’t I be proud of myself?”

“You should. Your achievements are very good even when considering that it’s beginner’s luck.”

“Right? But why... why can I not do anything about him? I know it’s strange to say I want to do something about him, but it’s so frustrating. It’s not like I’m choosing between many men or giving him vague hints that might make him misunderstand. It’s been a long time since we knew each other. We should start dating together lightheartedly. Is that something he has to worry about so much and put off for later? Someone might think that I’m trying to assault him.”

Sora looked dazed at first but the tips of her eyes started rising as though she was becoming angry.

“Did I tell him to buy a house or something? Or did I tell him to take responsibility for my whole life? I’m not even asking for his undying love nor am I telling him that I’m the only girl he should be with. I know it’s strange for me to say this, but I do hear that I am best buddies with other male friends, you know? I’m just that down to Earth and tomboyish. I don’t hate expressions like that. There are advantages when it comes to work, and I feel less awkward around others. But hey, I do wear skirts, you know? I am someone who goes crazy whenever I’m on my period, you know? I’m a girl whose heart would flutter if I hear something touching, you know?”

“I get it, so calm down a little. You’re going to spill the coffee.”

Sora picked up the cup in front of her before gulping down the coffee. It had to be still hot, but it seemed that she couldn’t feel the heat of the coffee because of the boiling anger inside her.

“I’m a proud girl.”

“I know. I know quite well.”

“But in front of him, I put away all my pride and anything else, just so that I could hear him say that he likes me, just so that he could grab my hand. But like this, he keeps putting distance instead. When I get frustrated and try to grab his hand, he gets startled and runs away. Hear this: the two of us watched a movie together, had a meal together, and then walked in the park; we talked about various things and, I tried to grab his hand naturally after seeing the sunset, but he suddenly turned serious and told me ‘I’m not exactly in the right position right now’. How does that even make sense!”

Sora opened the refrigerator and took out some water as though she was fuming inside. I’m gonna drink some – she said before opening the lid and jerking her head backwards. She shoved water down her throat and it made Maru worry that she might cough. After thumping down the water bottle on the table, she stomped towards Maru.

“Seonbae.”

“Yeah?”

“Am I that uncharming? Do I not look like a girl?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that’s true.”

“Right? I’m not exactly ugly, am I? Honestly speaking, I met a few guys who asked for my number on the streets, you know? I didn’t even give them a second glance. Really, I didn’t even give a handsome guy a single digit of my phone number.”

Sora pouted before putting on a crying expression. She looked frustrated like a child who had been told that she was smart since young but then encountered a problem she could not solve; someone who felt like she would make the people around her disappointed if she said she couldn’t solve it and above all, could not accept the situation herself. Maru looked around before grabbing Woofie, who he made eye contact with. Woofie seemed to have felt her impending fate and started struggling, but it was to no avail. Maru gave Woofie to Sora, who looked dejected. He couldn’t exactly hug her himself, so he needed a replacement. She hugged Woofie and started crying even as she panted in frustration. She seemed to be unable to accept herself crying.

"I'm not crying."

"I didn't say anything."

"Don't tell anyone about it."

"Like I said, I didn't say anything."

Maru turned around to look at the party supplies.

"You bought them for the afterparty, didn't you?"

"Do you think I actually wanted to confess then? If I did, he might not look at me in the face anymore."

"So, how am I supposed to interpret you telling me everything?"

"What else can it be? I want your help. You already noticed it back at the store, didn't you?"

"I did notice it back then."

"But you didn't say a single word about it on our way back. You're such a bad guy."

"I was just wondering why a girl like you would do something like that to me. If you need love consultation, you can always go to someone else."

"Why do you think I came to you? I thought about everything already. Jiyeon-uni told me that it was you who bridged the two together when something went on between the two of them and that you probably could provide me with a proper path. You gave me advice last time too."

"I didn't know people's opinion about me was that good."

"If you know now, then help me out."

"Why don't you go with the easiest choice and give up? Half of the world is men, you know?"

"Do you think I would be doing this if I could do that? That's what I'm most frustrated about as well. I wonder why I like him so much that I'm suffering like this. I find myself the most pathetic. Why did I end up liking him of all people?"

"What about waiting a little more? Since you've been waiting so long already."

"Why don't you tell me to become a nun instead? Or should I shave my head and become a monk?"

Her eyes were glaring at him. Maru shut up. If he threw out another joke, she might as well start dancing with knives.

"My makeup became a mess."

"There's a mirror in the bedroom, so go fix it."

"I didn't bring any makeup because I was so hung up with other things."

"There are some products in there. You can use the new ones, not the ones that are used."

“Why do you have something like that in your house? Don’t tell me, does Gaeul unni actually live here? Did you two actually start living together after you started dating again?”

Sora widened her eyes. He didn’t want to explain, so he just told her to go. She staggered her way into the bedroom.

“There’s more time until 3 o’clock, so should I decorate?”

“Do what you want.”

Maru shrugged and picked up a decorative rope.