

Once Again 831

Chapter 831. Sequence 10

How strange, Gaeul looked at the two men. For them to be friends who have known each other for years, there was too much distance between the two of them. From their words, they were close friends like no other, yet from the way they treated each other, they looked like they had met in a class reunion for the first time in twenty years. That is, the kind where they laugh with each other using their vague memories, ask about recent matters, and shake hands with each other. Her suspicion turned into conviction after they started conversing without looking at each other after having a drink. When one side talked, the other would respond and pretend to listen to the whole thing. The conversation was smooth, but there was no affection in their words. They looked as though they were reciting for an oral exam.

"Did you two fight?"

It was time for her to butt in. Heck, even talking to a wall might sound more affectionate than this.

"What are you talking about? As you see, we're so close."

Maru raised his soju glass. Giwoo also toasted him, saying that Maru was his best friend. Was this a battle of pride between two men? Or did these two have a reason to sit down smiling in this frosty atmosphere?

"Am I an idiot? Kang Giwoo, why did you call us if it's going to be like this? Han Maru, what's up with you? Tell me the reason, and don't make me uncomfortable. I would have stood up if the stew here was bad, but I've been holding back since it is good, you know? But I can't hold back anymore. If you two had a fight, you two will resolve things here, and if it's not like that, let's get up since we don't have a reason to see each other."

One was her boyfriend, and the other was a colleague she was working with for a drama. Both of them were important to her, so she could not accept that there was a mental war between these two. The two men, who had been pretending to be oblivious, only then looked at each other and spoke,

"Kang Giwoo. Shall we go get some air?"

"Alright. Also, Gaeul. I'm sure you're misunderstanding something as this is how we usually are."

The two men left with their arms around each other's shoulders.

"That's how you usually are?"

Did they take her for a fool? Gaeul poured some soju into the glass and emptied it into her mouth. If the two of them circled around each other in a lukewarm manner when they returned, she was planning on leaving. The men could settle the rest for all she could care. From the attitude the two were showing, they clearly seemed to have gotten into a fight. If there was something bad between the two of them to the point that they didn't even look at each other, there was no need for them to drink together in the first place.

"They're all adults. How childish."

She only hoped that their battle of pride would end quickly. Of course, by reconciling, that is.

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"Lord chaebol, this is a drink of the ordinary folk. Would you like to try?"

"There's no distinction between chaebols and whatnot. I like that one too."

"Really? I thought you didn't drink stuff like this."

Giwoo received the Pocari Sweat that Maru handed him. He had not expected Gaeul to react like that. She actually didn't hold back and brought the topic up when that would inevitably make the situation go awry. Although he had known that she never held her words back from what he saw during the shoot, he didn't know that she was like this. The rumor that she went against Lee Miyoona sounded more credible now. Thinking about how she glared back at that old fox was actually quite interesting.

"Seems like something good's happening, smiling like that."

"Something good huh, there has been."

"Like what?"

"Like how the drama's doing well? I saw that you were on Doctors. You were really good at acting."

Though, his appearance was pitifully small, at around a minute for the entirety of the first two episodes. Giwoo sipped some of his drink and looked at Maru's eyes. Since this guy had a smart brain, he should have realized that Giwoo was being sarcastic. It would be great if he responded. He wished for Maru to become angry, but on the other hand, he wished for him to not fall to a cheap provocation like this one. After all, 'Han Maru' couldn't be such an easy guy.

"Not as much as you, though. I've seen all the episodes of Doctor's Office. Honestly speaking, it was more interesting than Doctors. From how the viewing rate is better, I'm sure the viewers are thinking the same."

"I'm sure there will be good reactions from Doctors soon. It's good after all."

"I sure hope so. It may be a minor role, but I still did participate in it. How's the atmosphere on your side?"

"It's the same as everywhere else really. We would meet up in the morning all fired up but become zombies by midnight. It's a lot better when Gaeul is around. I mean, she's a cheerful girl."

"You're right. Though, sometimes it's a problem because she's too cheerful."

Maru put down his plastic bottle. A couple that entered the convenience store gave them puzzled looks. Giwoo lowered his head. He did not want to be disturbed when the conversation was just about to become fun. The man from the couple took the woman inside when she was staring at the two.

"Popular actors must have it hard. You can't walk around in parks, can you."

"That's not entirely true. People don't recognize me if I dress up a little. People don't really care about what's going on around them. Before, there was a time I was concerned about how they would all recognize me, but now, I know that walking around the neighborhood is just fine."

He said the truth because he felt like Maru wouldn't even snort even if he boasted. Whether it was before or now, he could not see any greed in Han Maru. The first thing he learned from his grandfather was to read the greed on people's faces, but this guy didn't have any of that. It wasn't that he had no material desires and nor was he completely disinterested in financial success or fame, but for some reason, he wasn't obsessed with such things. That didn't mean that he was a complete ascetic either. Giwoo rolled his eyes in an attempt to read Maru's nature.

"The night air sure is good, isn't it?" Maru suddenly said.

What was he on about now? He was completely unpredictable, so Giwoo couldn't guess what words he would say next. He definitely wasn't the type to say that just because the weather was good.

"Why are you staring at me like that? You're putting pressure on me."

"Because I have nothing to ask. Oh yeah, what do we tell Gaeul? It's not like we fought."

"You and I have never fought each other and probably never will. We're strictly in a business relationship after all. You don't fight your business partner, you get along with them."

"Business?"

"What's wrong with it? I mean, we aren't exactly close enough to be classified as friends. But putting it as enemies is somewhat wrong too. We have to see each other's faces, but there's no reason to get close, and nor do we want to make enemies of each other. What's left then is a business relationship where we mutually benefit from each other."

Look at this guy. Giwoo clenched his teeth, and he could feel an aching pain from his molars. Who was he to define their relationship just like that? A slave could not define his relationship with his master. If Giwoo said that they were friends, they were friends, and if he said that they weren't, then they weren't. Maru had no right to decide that. Above all, he had been acting like this guy's friend the whole time, but he was the one to have denied it first. His lips started becoming twisted.

"How strange. I thought of you as a friend, Maru."

"That really is strange. Was there ever an opportunity for us to become friends? Of course, I guess I can be a friend of yours from your perspective. A friend that you work out with at the gym, a friend you talk to from time to time, a friend who knows a secret that you don't want to be exposed. The thing is, though, I have strict standards for picking friends. Giwoo, you get an above passing score for everything else but just one thing disqualifies you."

Giwoo wanted to grab this guy's head and chuck it in the recycling bin for speaking whatever he wished to. He couldn't even hear whatever he said after 'strict standards.' If there was a competition that scored participants based on how to piss people off, Han Maru would be the gold medalist. He didn't know about anything else, but Maru was definitely incredibly good at being cocky without knowing his place.

"You went a little too far."

"Sorry about that. I'm not exactly well-educated. I don't know if you know this; I graduated from an engineering high school because I don't have the smarts. I didn't go to college either. I did pick my words carefully, but it must have sounded awry to the young master of a chaebol family."

"I think you should stop talking about that chaebol thing. I'm not someone who judges people because of that."

"Giwoo, are you getting angry? It was just a joke. You're not the type to get angry from just this. I'm about to feel disappointed."

Fuming anger started climbing up his spine. Giwoo emptied the Pocari Sweat in one go. He didn't like that Maru talked back to him all the time and didn't like how he was being sarcastic, but above all, his very attitude that looked as though he read his mind was disgusting. The provocation he made before came back right at him. He would be making a fool of himself if he snapped out, yet if he laughed, he would lose. He gritted his teeth.

"I am a gold medalist material, aren't I?"

Just as he was wondering how to deal with this guy, those words entered his ears. He let go of the plastic bottle he was holding. The plastic bottle fell on the floor and spilled its contents.

"Why did you suddenly throw that away? You didn't even finish it. What a waste."

"Gold medalist? What do you mean by that all of a sudden?"

He suddenly panicked as though his secret was exposed. Maru mentioned the word gold medalist without context as though he had been looking into his mind.

"It suddenly occurred to me. Maybe it's because I watched the Olympics last night. Anyway, what made you so surprised?"

"It was quite curious when you said gold medalist so suddenly."

"I can be quite random at times. But were you the type to be shocked when you become curious? Giwoo, you had a cute side to you, huh?"

"Shocked? Who? I wish you could watch your words a little more too. So that the listener doesn't suddenly get taken aback."

"I might be random at times, but I do think about what I say. Oh, what field do you think I would be a gold medalist in? I think you'll know quite well."

It was those eyes. The eyes that looked like the pale moon looking over the entire world in the pitch-black night. They were the eyes of his grandfather that saw through everything he could think of. Giwoo could feel the back of his neck stiffen up. His fighting spirit and determination to grind that guy's face into pieces snapped apart, and an acquired submissive nature that told him to lay low started consuming him. It was a teeth-clattering sense of humiliation, but he couldn't budge his lips. Giwoo pinched the inside of his thighs strongly. A pain strong enough for him to scream woke his mind up from a state that was no different from a trained dog.

"Something like a discussion tournament, right?"

He barely spoke. A sense of unease that he may never be able to go against Han Maru if he dodged the topic now, pervaded him. Maru smiled and nodded.

"Kang Giwoo, let's get along in the future. You have a lot of things. Think of it as charity towards someone who lacks something and look after me, will you? We can't be friends, but we can be good business partners, right?"

Maru stood up first and added that he would explain things to Gaeul. Giwoo picked up the plastic bottle from the table and threw it on the ground before stomping on it.

"Son of a bitch."

Why was it that he became a frog in front of a snake when he looked at his eyes at the most decisive moment? He could feel insults rising inside him. He once again confirmed that he couldn't breathe the same air as him. He no longer had any thoughts of hiring some people who would do anything for money to deal with him. That wasn't enough to heal his wounded pride. He had to utterly annihilate the guy socially. He felt like he would only be relieved after seeing him become the modern version of a slave and crawl on the ground. He felt like he would no longer have nightmares only after hearing the words 'please spare me' from his mouth at least once.

"Fine, you don't have anything to lose, huh."

Giwoo uttered a short breath and calmed his expression. If that was what made him so confident, he could just give something to him. It would be quite a spectacle to see him once he pushes him off the cliff after giving him the things that would pain him if he lost them.

"Looks like I must give some things to that poor guy for charity."

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Maru came back inside. Giwoo wasn't with him. When she signaled to him asking where Kang Giwoo was, Maru said that he'd be back soon and sat down. Gaeul pinched Maru's thighs and asked,

"What are you two doing when you're grown-up adults? You're making me feel bad."

"Sorry."

"Don't 'sorry' me. Can't you tell me what's going on? Is it something I shouldn't know about? Or is it so trivial that I don't have to know about it?"

Maru said that he would tell her later and that they should eat for now. Gaeul looked into his eyes. He was born with the conditions to become a proficient liar, but he couldn't lie in front of her, especially when she looked into his eyes. He would probably be able to manage his expression to the point of fooling everyone if he tried to, but he did not. Gaeul believed that his actions were a form of respect, belief, and love. Maru did not look away and even put his face closer to her so that she could take a closer look. Gaeul raised the white flag first when he came closer to her.

"You're going to tell me after we eat, right? Alright then. I'll play along until I put down my spoon."

Not long later, Kang Giwoo entered. The two of them didn't change compared to before. In fact, the awkward smiles, meaningless trivial talk, and silly gestures just increased. They looked like water and oil trying to force themselves to mix with each other.

"How is it? Our restaurant's stew is pretty good, isn't it?"

The owner lady came with some sikhye as dessert by the time they finished their meal. Gaeul pointed at the stew that had bottomed out and said that it was really good.

"This sikhye is something I made at home, so it'll be really good. I don't usually give it out to people, but I'm giving you bonuses since you're friends of young Giwoo. Go on, have a drink."

"Thank you, I'll visit again next time."

The owner lady put down the cups and looked at Giwoo before thanking him. Giwoo didn't show any reaction as though he hadn't heard it. Was she thanking him for visiting? The owner lady then left again saying that she would bring some rice cakes.

"Looks like she really likes you, Giwoo."

"She's a kind auntie, so she treats everyone like that."

She didn't think that was true. When the two of them left, the owner lady had visited the room once. She looked around and asked if young Giwoo wasn't around, and once she found that he wasn't here, she turned around without regrets. Back then, there was a tray in her hands as well; it was a tray containing sikhye. It was true that she treated her customers well, but she looked after Giwoo more. While she could understand her feelings of wanting to give a famous person something more for being her regular, the expression that she had when she saw that Giwoo wasn't here definitely did not belong to someone who was simply here to give sikhye. She looked as dejected as though she was here to do business only to find out that the person she needed to do business with was absent.

"I thought I had seen you somewhere; you are Han Gaeul, aren't you? Sorry for not recognizing you. You looked so energetic in the drama. Who would've known that you're actually a very docile girl?"

The owner lady put down the tray with rice cakes in it before grabbing Gaeul's hand.

"I give off less of that impression if I erase my makeup."

"No, no. It must be because I'm slow-witted. You're really pretty. I thought it was strange when you said you were young Giwoo's friend, but you turned out to be Han Gaeul."

The owner lady gave her a piece of A4 paper and a sharpie and asked her for an autograph. It seemed that she was going to add it to the wall of autographs right next to the store's entrance. She wrote 'I hope your business goes well' before writing her name in the corner. When she did, she found a phone right in front of her face. They took a photo together as well. The owner lady said that the photo turned out good and that she could hang one on the wall. She then had a look at Maru. Although it was for a brief moment, Gaeul saw her eyes moving around busily.

"I'm just a sidekick. No one will recognize me even if you do take a photo."

“You, young man, look like something yourself. I’m sure you’ll become a star soon. I have a good eye for people, so don’t worry about it. You will become famous through a good piece. Don’t you forget about this place just because you become famous later. I’ve remembered your face now. It’ll be great if I could hang your autograph right next to his lady’s.”

Although she said those words, the owner lady did not ask Maru for an autograph or a photo. Maru just shrugged. After she left, Giwoo spoke,

“She’s full of energy, isn’t she?”

“She’s interesting.”

Gaeul finished her meal by putting the rice cake in her mouth. If the atmosphere was good, she would have continued chatting with the remaining food as snacks, but the two men were still in a cold war. At a time like this, the best thing she could do was to stand up quickly.

“Thanks for the food today. I’ll treat you next time.”

“There’s a bar right nearby. You should drink a little more.”

“I’m a little tired. Today’s the only day I can rest in the entire week, so I should go sleep at home. Giwoo, don’t you have a schedule tomorrow as well?”

“I do have a photo shoot.”

“Then you should go back and get some rest too. And you too, Maru, right?”

She left first after giving them hints. At the entrance, the autograph was already hung up. It had even been laminated already. She thought that the owner lady was pretty fast. By the next time she came here, she would be among the famous celebrity autographs on the wall. The owner lady grabbed her and told her to visit again next time. While this might look offensive, she didn’t find the owner lady hateful because of her hearty laughter. She could understand it as well after considering that this was her effort to be better off.

“My son is trying hard to be an actor too. So take care of him if you see him.”

“Really?”

“I’m not saying this because he’s my son; he’s really good. He’ll rise as long as he finds the opportunity. I think that I just grabbed the opportunity too.”

The owner lady stared at Giwoo as she talked about opportunities. From her words and actions, it seemed that Giwoo had helped her out in some way. She now realized why she was so eager to look for Kang Giwoo. He was the kind of guy who could never pass by a person in need, so it seemed that he had given her some help after hearing that her son was an aspiring actor. Giwoo was known to help others a lot, so it was possible.

“What a pity. I wanted to have a drink with you too.”

“We can just meet again next time.”

Once you two make-up – these words came up to her throat, but she didn't utter them. There was no reason to leave behind words of disappointment when they were dispersing. Giwoo told her that he would get her a chauffeur service, but she said it was okay and grabbed a taxi.

"How about you, Maru?"

"I brought my car, so I'm going to call a chauffeur. Alright, go on your way."

"Okay. I had fun today, you two. See you next time."

Gaeul sent a text message to Maru as she got in the taxi saying that she would be waiting at home. She saw the two men facing each other through the back window of the taxi.

"Just what is going on between them?"

Gaeul sighed softly.

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"Thanks for the food today. This place is pretty good."

"I'm glad that you enjoyed it. Let's meet again some time; that way we can get closer. Who knows? If we keep seeing each other, maybe I'll become a friend that meets your criteria."

"As much as I'd love it if that was the case, that probably won't ever happen, I think."

Seeing Maru say that with a smile, Giwoo's neck became tense. Giwoo looked around before taking a step closer to him.

"Do you dislike me that much?"

"Why are you doing this again? Then do you like me?"

"I'm trying my best to. You are bound to meet a lot of people in life, so it would be impossible to live a social life if you make enemies with everyone you don't like."

"That's true. That's why I'm putting in the effort too so that I can talk to you face to face like this."

"Then tell me about it. What part of me do you not like about me so much? Is it because of the things I did in the past? Of course, back then, I was in the wrong. My thinking was short, and I was immature. It's not that I want to justify myself, but I thought that was fine back then. As you said, I was raised in a sheltered environment as the young master of a chaebol family. But I grew up and have never done anything like that since then. What you told me helped me a lot back then. You know? I'm the type of person who believes that the people who say bitter things about me are my friends. That's the reason I think of you as a friend."

"That's an honor for me. The almighty Kang Giwoo considers me a friend. But perhaps it's because of my lowly status, or maybe it's just because I'm twisted, but I don't think I'll ever be in a relationship that I call 'friends' with you. That's why I said that we're in a business relationship."

"Can you perhaps tell me the reason why? You were the one who told me that I fulfill every criteria but one. I'm not sure if I should be saying this; it's not because of your pride, is it?"

He wanted to know what this Han Maru was thinking on the inside. Ever since this guy found out, he never did anything that other people might nitpick with. Even if he did, there was no way it would get exposed, so he practically didn't do anything. Asking anyone about Kang Giwoo's image would always result in an answer that would go something like 'a good person' or 'someone they want to get close to.' He always maintained that clean image. He always treated other people with goodwill regardless of the occasion, and Giwoo managed to turn that goodwill into friendship or trust. There was only one person who saw through his mask before he took it off. It was his grandfather.

"I'm sorry to say this; there are three life lessons I've learned over the course of my life. One, people don't change. Two, people can't be fixed. And three, if you still have to trust an unreliable person despite that, you must be prepared to face losses. Not just any losses, big losses," said Maru as he folded three fingers one by one.

Giwoo was unable to hide his lips twitching. This guy was practically doing this on purpose.

"You're saying I haven't changed?"

"There's no way I would under evaluate you like that, is there? I'm sure you have changed splendidly. The problem is the direction though. I've heard that those who were caught red-handed while committing a crime think about how not to get caught while they repent. The fact that the public opinion about you has become good and clean must mean one of two things. Of course, I believe that you're innocent and pure. It's just me who can't accept that because of how twisted I am. You understand that, right?"

"You have a talent for putting people in difficult positions. I wanted to be good friends with you."

"Let's start off in a good business relationship. That's how relationships work when you're an adult, don't they? You get close through business first and then become privately close. Please understand this twisted me with a generous heart."

Maru picked up his phone after tapping on his shoulder. It seemed that his chauffeur service was here.

"Let's go through our act beforehand next time. This time, we were so awkward that Gaeul noticed it. I'll watch out as well. See you next time."

Maru got in his car and became distant. Giwoo laughed on the spot to the point that his shoulders were jerking. He felt like he was going to go mad if he didn't laugh. He wanted to grab anyone off the street and beat them up.

"Come pick me up asap."

He gave his manager a call. The manager's subservient voice calmed his frustration down. Alright, Han Maru, let's do this properly – Giwoo looked for the number of the writer of 'Doctors.'

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When he opened the door, the first thing he saw was Gaeul standing there with her arms crossed. Go on, talk to me – she was standing there like a guard and didn't look like she would make way if she wasn't given a plausible explanation. Maru took his shoes off and went inside before lifting her up while

she was staring at him. Although she struggled, it was bearable. When he put her down on the sofa, she hurled herself at him immediately.

"You're not going to say anything?"

"I'm just having you listen comfortably, without standing up. I'm going to have some water, would you like some?"

Before he could even look at the kitchen, she quickly gave him some water in a cup. She poured a cup on the spot and gave it to him. It seemed that she was really curious. It wasn't surprising. After all, they were visibly awkward with each other. If they didn't act like they were close at all, she might have urged them to become closer, but the two of them practically ignored each other as though they were meeting after a big fight, so Gaeul must have felt nervous as well.

"To get straight to the point, I am in a relationship where I can never become friends with Kang Giwoo even if I die and come back to life again. It doesn't matter what he thinks of me. I don't have any intention of becoming close to him."

"Did you two get into a fight? You said you were friends."

"It's basically a form of courtesy when I call him a friend."

"Then why did you act close to each other back then?"

"Because while we may never become friends, we can't exactly become enemies either. There's you too. Though, it'll probably be difficult to pretend to be friends from today on."

"You were never friends in the first place?"

"Never."

He wasn't distancing himself from Kang Giwoo simply because he was an evil guy. In life, people were bound to come across situations where their benefit would lead to the misfortune of another. It was an inevitable choice, and even if that led to other people receiving damage, Maru would be able to understand it. After all, ordinary people would not choose to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. If such a decision was placed in front of him, Maru would choose the option that benefited himself and the people around him. If his decision ended up damaging someone completely unrelated to him, he might feel sorry but would not hesitate in his decision because of that. If Kang Giwoo's environment allowed him no choice, and if that was what caused the incident, Maru would have looked at his circumstance and understood with that in mind. He would have emotionally criticized him, but that would not become a hindrance to forming a relationship with him.

However, not only was Kang Giwoo's decision against his choice, it wasn't even a desperate one either. It was simply for entertainment. To stave off his boredom, he stomped on the fingers of a man who lived off the wages he earned every day. He didn't even do it himself. He had someone else do it. It was unreasonable violence and meaningless suffering. Giwoo said that it was a mistake and that he had changed, but nowhere in his grand speech did he mention anything about being sorry nor about apologizing or repenting. Those long list of words were all ultimately just self-justification. The man who had been injured without a clue because of him had been erased from his speech. He was practically saying that stains could be washed away. Maru could feel relieved. He was worried that there might be a

good side to Giwoo that even his abilities couldn't see through, but fortunately, Giwoo was pure evil just like before. He had grown up to be just the man he was going to be. Not in a good way; in a bad way.

"About the things I am going to start telling you now, I don't want you to believe all of it. Just take what you would. After all, when it comes to judging a person, your own experiences are much more important than other people's judgments."

Maru told her about the things with Giwoo in the past. She looked to be in disbelief when she heard that Giwoo ordered a so-called 'friend' to stomp on the fingers of a person completely on purpose.

"Is that true?"

"What I'm telling you now is the confirmed truth. There's a bit of my opinion mixed in there, but it is true that such a thing happened. I checked it myself."

"How can a person do that?"

"From his words, it was just an immature prank, and he says he's fixed his ways and is living a proper life, but I can't believe him. Of course, there is a possibility that he had really changed. He might actually have repented his wrongdoings and has resolved to live a proper life. However, what I saw from him was that he had changed for the worse."

"I can't believe that Kang Giwoo did something like that."

"Like I said, don't believe my words entirely. The Kang Giwoo in your mind might be closer to the truth."

She looked at her phone with a serious expression. She seemed to be thinking about whether to call him and ask. After fidgeting with her phone for a long time, Gaeul just sighed.

"I don't think I should call him and ask."

"Good thinking. Even if you call him and ask, nothing would change. Whether he admits to it or not, your conclusion will be that he's a good person right now."

"Giwoo was a really good guy at the shooting set."

"Then keep believing in that. You're going to be seeing him for a long time, so you can't treat him awkwardly."

"You made me feel iffy because you said that."

"That's why I was trying not to tell you. After all, it is you who would be in an uncomfortable position regardless of the outcome."

Maru poured some water for her, as she might be feeling thirsty. She emptied the cup in one go.

"The Kang Giwoo I saw was someone who didn't walk past a staff member in trouble and would help them out. He always arrived at the set first and greet everyone cheerfully. At get-togethers, he would liven up the mood even if it meant making fun of himself. There is probably no one among the set who hates him."

"That's how you should act too. Just like how you always have been."

"I want to do that, but I think I'll see Giwoo differently in the future. Like what you said, I'm going to be working with him, so I won't show it on the surface. There are many people who are staking their lives on the drama after all. I can't have my personal problems influence the shoot. However, I will definitely be wary of him if I have to meet him in private in the future."

"Even though Kang Giwoo might have changed for the better?"

"I believe in my eyes and my intuition, but I believe in your words just as much, Maru. No, in some sense, I sometimes rely on your words more than my own judgments. The Han Maru I've seen is definitely not a person who would talk about nonsense. Also, I think you're warning me by telling me all this after trying not to tell me until now."

Maru did not say anything as he looked back at her staring as she stared at him. Be careful of Giwoo, stay away from him; I actually hope you don't get involved with him at all – such words were all unnecessary. She knew what she had to do. She walked on a tightrope between reason and emotion and arrived at an answer that Maru wanted her to. When she said that he would not say nonsense, he felt thankful, but at the same time, heavy.

"I'll watch over Giwoo for a little longer."

"Go ahead."

"If I actually confirm that the actions he showed in front of other people is all just pretense and that he's a completely different person inside, I would go up and say something to him."

"Say what?"

"That he should not live his life like that."

"Call me when you do. I'd love to watch from the side."

"I'm very serious right now, you know? An actor I've been respecting quite a bit might actually be human trash. I have a kissing scene with him, you know? I'm already at a loss on how to set my emotions at that time."

"You can't help it. Work is work."

Gaeul stood up abruptly before glaring at him.

"Is that what you should be telling your girlfriend?"

"What can I do? You can't quit the drama midway."

"You're such a bad guy."

"Since it's like this, do you want to retire and become my wife? I will make you touch nothing harmful except water, laundry, and vacuum machines."

"You aren't proposing to me right now, are you?"

"I think it's something similar."

"For a moment, you looked like an even worse guy than Kang Giwoo."

She pouted, making her lips look like that of a bird. If he told her 'peck me,' he felt like he might not be able to see her for a while, so he held it in.

"Do you even plan on accepting if I do it properly?"

"Try doing it properly first. I can decide when the time comes."

"You know a friend of mine called Dojin, right? His girlfriend proposed to him while dancing, and man, she looked cool. The times we live in say that a man buying a wedding ring and proposing is old-fashioned. What do you think?"

"Not even worth considering."

"I thought you'd say that."

Maru put his arm around her shoulders. Although Gaeul resisted for a little bit, she eventually smiled and put her arm around his waist.

"You really can't see what people are thinking on the inside. I never knew that such a proper-looking man has a history like that."

"Everyone's like that."

"That sounds like you too have a secret that might get you in trouble if exposed, huh?"

"Not just one. I have about five."

"How about you tell me one? I'll forgive you for that crappy proposal if you do. You share a secret with me in exchange for giving you a chance. Don't you think it's a good deal?"

"Was my proposal that crappy?"

"Can you imagine what my mom would tell me if I tell her about it?"

"Mr. Han, I think you need to have a deep talk with me?"

Maru covered her lips with his. Just as he was about to start twisting her lips for fun, her hand on his waist suddenly pinched him.

"Don't you try to gloss this over."

"How strict."

"I have to be this strict if I want to live with you."

"But isn't it unfair for just me to reveal my secret? If it's about the proposal, I can just do it properly again next time."

"Fine. Then I'll tell you a secret too."

She took her hand off his waist and took a step back.

"I have a precious friend. But other people can't see her. I don't know if she's a ghost or a fairy. She's a cute little rabbit, and she always consoles me and says good things whenever I have a hard time. Though we fought recently and she disappeared."

After saying those words, she smiled and waved her hand in the air.

"Actually, forget that. I said something unnecessary. I can't exactly call it a secret when no one's going to believe it."

"I believe it though."

"Don't. I was just absentminded. How can there be something like a ghost or a fairy in this world? Not only that, she looks like a rabbit. I mean, ghosts come in white cloths, and fairies are supposed to look like Tinkerbell."

"It might be a rabbit. Small and cute but unrelenting when it comes to words and not wanting to lose. I'm sure she thinks about you a lot and cares for you. She must want you to become happy above everything."

Gaeul looked back at him, flabbergasted.

"How did you know?"

"Know what?"

When Maru pretended to be oblivious, she thought for a moment before chuckling as though she understood.

"You're thinking that the rabbit is like me, aren't you?"

"I said I believe she exists."

"You clearly don't. I just said it as a joke, so don't be so serious."

I know you're not lying – Maru replied inwardly.

"Then I guess I must tell you a secret of mine too."

"You're going to tell me?"

"That was the deal. It's an extremely important secret. Don't you go around telling anyone else."

He gestured to her to come closer. Her face became closer. Maru put his hands around his mouth and whispered into her ears.

"I loved you in my previous life and the life before that."

"What the heck is that."

"I'm serious. This is like revealing divine secrets. Even the best fortune tellers won't be able to tell you something like this."

She frowned before hurling herself at him, saying that she needed to hit that mouth of his. Maru told her to hit his lips with her own, and Gaeul attacked him with her lips after declining once.

Chapter 834. Sequence 11

Lee Eunbin closed her laptop and stood up. Her back and butt were hurting because she had been sitting down for three hours without moving. She was used to the pain from her wrists and fingers but now that her back was causing a fuss, it was very distracting. She would have gotten treatment if it was her disks that had a problem, however, her back pain was not a problem of her physical body but her mind. She sat on the sofa and changed the TV channels before stopping on KBS. 'Doctor's Office' episode four was being broadcasted again. When she watched for about ten minutes in a daze, a sharp tingle climbed up her back. 'Doctor's Office' viewing rate 18%, 'Doctors' viewing rate 13% - the viewing rate that she tried so hard to forget came to her mind again.

Eunbin turned off the TV and returned to her laptop. This wasn't the time to be dazing off. She did not want her piece to be forgotten because of a competing piece like this.

"I finally saw the light, so I can't fall down here."

'Doctors' was a piece that came to be after 3 years of waiting. She had completed the script a long time ago, and it was going to rot inside a cabinet somewhere without ever meeting production, but she managed to bring it to life at this opportunity. It would be great if she just got paid for her manuscript and waited for the completion of the drama since it was complete already, but due to the old-fashioned lines, mid-drama product placements, as well as overall plot changes, she was writing a new script as though she would from scratch.

If she could just scrap it all and rewrite a whole different story from scratch, she felt like she could start writing without blocks, but trying to twist the orientation of an already existing puzzle piece or creating one completely anew and fitting it in with the rest of the puzzle made her feel dizzy. That was why, when the new writer on her team said 'the overall outline is there, so I guess it won't be that hard to write,' she hurled her laptop.

She pressed the keyboard a couple times before checking the time. It was 5 p.m. An hour had already passed even though she wasn't on the next page. She was hungry but didn't have the energy to move. As the drama was still in its early stages, she still had some leisure when writing, but it was obvious that her fingers and her head were going to get stiffer towards the end, so she had to create some leeway while she could. She didn't want to write the script of the episode that was going to be shot on that day.

The cat she was raising lingered around the laptop. Her objective seemed to be the heated keyboard. Until just three months ago, she lived like an unemployed person with that cat, but now, she was unable to play with her for even an hour a day. It would be great if she could write a set amount per day like a certain senior she knew.

It was when she was tickling her cat on the chin while lamenting about herself that she suddenly got a phone call. It was likely a fellow writer was asking her to come outside. If she picked it up, she would not be able to refuse and end up going outside. Those unnis were cruel people who would barge into her own house if she didn't after all.

Since her work wasn't going well, she just gave up on it and picked her phone up, and looked at the name on it. When she checked the name, she picked the call up in haste.

-Hello, writer.

"Yes, hello."

She felt like she said that with a voice that was too thin, but she had already uttered those words. Eunbin knew that she could not see the person in the flesh, but she still started cleaning her desk. She gathered up the trash in front of her laptop and put the cat down on the ground.

-Are you okay with taking a call right now? I'm worried if I gave you a call when you are busy.

"It's not like that. I just woke up and was about to eat."

She originally didn't have any plan to eat, but her appetite got the better of her after hearing the voice on the other side. It would be great if he asked her out for a meal since he had called – such useless delusions spread out in her mind like a fog. She could only fantasize since she knew that it wasn't going to happen for real. Just as she got to the point where they were having wine together in the lounge of a skyscraper hotel, she heard a line that woke her up. She couldn't believe what she had just heard, so she asked back,

"You want to have a meal together?"

-Yes, if you're okay with it.

A fanfare went off in her head. It had been 15 years since she started off as a writer for an entertainment program and now she had become a drama writer. Was the wind of romance finally blowing on the thirty-five year-old her? She rolled her feet on the ground when she realized that she had gone too far and responded calmly,

"I'd love to."

-That's good. Then can you tell me your address? I'll go pick you up.

Eunbin reflexively told him her address. After finishing her call, questions like 'maybe I should have asked him to meet at a nearby café', 'why does he wants to see me all of a sudden', and 'what should I wear' came to her mind, but there was no time to hesitate.

"Kang Giwoo wants to see me. What can't I do?"

Eunbin asked for her purring cat to wish her luck before moving.

* * *

"You watched 'The Strong Fellas'? I was the main writer for that one. Though, I did leave after it was set on track."

"Did you perhaps leave around the tenth episode?"

"Yes, that sounds about right."

"I knew it. It became worse after that. I wished for the program to bring out more of the interaction between characters, but they kept making people do more games. I really enjoyed the banter between the people on it before, so I found it a little pitiful that they stuck to the schedule after some time. Maybe that's because you were out of it."

Eunbin waved her hand in the air, saying that that wasn't true, but she was grinning so hard that her lips were twitching. When Giwoo brought his car in front of her house, she felt really complex. At most, they only saw each other's faces once, but Kang Giwoo asked her out to eat together. However, her worries disappeared after entering the hotel restaurant. The meal that she thought was going to be awkward was so fun that she felt stupid for being worried. Giwoo's tastes were surprisingly like her own. Not only that, he said that he had watched all the programs that she had participated in. He might have looked that up on the internet before they met, but still, that was out of interest and consideration for her, wasn't it?

The food melted down without a trace in her mouth, and the conversation tickled her ears. Ever since she started writing the script for the drama, she felt really hurried whenever it was past 6 because of her stress, but today, she couldn't feel the time passing at all. She even felt like she was on holiday. She felt like she would get incredibly good character lines if she maintained her current mood.

"How about some wine? If that bothers with your work, then I'll order something else."

"Oh, no. Don't say that. Writers are inseparable from drinking alcohol."

"Then do you like drinking as well?"

"I don't enjoy it that much, but I don't refuse when I'm offered a drink. There are a lot of writers around me who are good at drinking, so hanging out with them made my capacity larger. Moreover, I did work as a writer for entertainment programs, so I had a lot of get-togethers here and there."

She stared at the red wine in the wine glass for a while before taking a sip. The chaebol rival of drama protagonists always drank like this – it felt like a dream that she had realized a desire that she had always written about. Of course, she frequented hotel restaurants when she worked on her writing, but it was the first time that such a handsome actor had brought her here in private.

"I really enjoyed 'Doctor's Office.' The characters there are so much like what I imagined mine to be, so I get jealous whenever I watch it. I always wanted to have you do an act like that in a different piece."

"I would have joined your side if I had gotten the scenario for 'Doctors' first. What a pity."

"Thank you, even if it's just words. But still, I'm sure you have it good. Doctor's Office is making more headlines than Doctors is. Thanks to that, my back hurts a lot these days."

"Your back?"

"I'm usually okay when I'm resting or before my work starts airing, but once the drama starts airing and the viewing rates are out, my back starts to hurt. It's especially worse when it loses out to another piece from the same time slot."

"Well, I'm sorry."

"You don't need to feel sorry. It's my fault for having terrible writing."

"Don't say that. Your drama is really interesting."

"What good is being interesting? I lost; that's what matters. Actually, when I do interviews, I say that I don't care about viewing rates and that I just do my own work, but I'm a person too; I also care about popularity. It's natural for me to want my own child to do better than other people's."

"Aren't you a being a little too honest?"

"Maybe it's because I had a drink. Don't you feel the same, Mr. Giwoo?"

Giwoo smiled and nodded.

"Actually, yeah. I also want the pieces I do to have good results. If the viewing rates are good and it becomes a hot topic, that will be another line on my career, so I do mind."

"See? It's normal for everyone to want to do well."

Eunbin ate the last piece of steak. Tomorrow, the third episode of Doctors as well as the fifth episode of Doctors Office would go live. The viewing rates would probably change according to what the searched term is during the night. Although many people say that writers consider their own piece to be the best, her self-confidence would hit rock bottom when the results actually come out. When she watched the first episode, she shouted 'yes' in joy, but she didn't know that she would actually lose. Eunbin, who was smiling bitterly, recalled that Giwoo was in front of her. She was actually drinking with the main cast of a competing drama. She felt a little more depressed, but she didn't show it on the surface. Right now, it was time to enjoy herself and forget about work. Just then,

"I know it might be rude of me to say this, but I'll tell you since I seem to get along with you, writer. There's one thing I felt disappointed about while watching Doctors."

"Was my writing terrible?"

"No. I really like the way you proceed with your plot. But due to the nature of dramas, you have no choice but to focus on the characters, right?"

"That's true. Doctor's Office is supposed to be a medical politics drama, whereas Doctors is a human drama. It's not surprising that the characters have a lot of influence over whether the drama does well or not."

"That's it. I was watching the drama, and I saw a character that was too good to be wasted after just being used once."

"Really? Who is it."

"The character who's called 'Bigfoot' among the interns. You know, the one who has the comedy role."

"Oh, that one."

"Have you perhaps looked at the actor who plays it?"

"I did. I felt really good because he acted just the way I pictured the character in the drama to be. He seemed to be acquainted with the producer as well. I haven't met him in person, but I did think that he had an incredible understanding of the character."

Giwoo rested his chin on his interlocked hands.

"I thought that that actor was really good at setting up the mood. I feel that the cheerful atmosphere from episode one was heavily influenced by him. But starting with episode two, the only role he had was just smiling."

"It can't be helped because of the distribution of roles."

"That's what I found rather disappointing. I'm sure you have a splendid eye for actors, but actors have a different eye for other actors. I was more absorbed in the scenes where that actor came out."

"Really?"

Eunbin thought about the minor actor that she didn't know the name of. She felt like the producer told her what kind of person he was when she was checking over the roles, but she forgot about it because it wasn't important. All she could remember was that his surname was Han.

"Should we get some ice cream as a dessert?"

"I love ice cream."

For a topic he talked about rather seriously, he switched topics too quickly, but Eunbin didn't think about it deeply. Giwoo must also have just mentioned it in passing. The talk went to about movies they recently watched, and Eunbin soon forgot about anything related to the drama.

Chapter 835. Sequence 11

She had a thought as she put her fingers inside the back of her heels: this isn't a dream, right? She saw the cat on the desk raise her head before putting it down again. The t-shirt and the pajama pants she took off yesterday were flung on the sofa, and the empty convenience store lunch box was right underneath it. Her own living room, which she rarely cleaned, intersected with the hotel restaurant she was just in. Eunbin grabbed her phone. Only after seeing his number on her phone did she realize that the dinner they just had was indeed real. She had a talk with an actor she never contacted before over a nice dinner. He was a cool man just like the rumors said. She couldn't be more excited when he said that they should meet again next time. It would be great if they could meet again.

"But this is probably where it ends."

When she thought about Giwoo's background, though, her romantic feelings all shriveled up. Although no one mentioned it, everyone in the industry knew that Giwoo was of the YM Group's lineage. One time, there were rumors that he was given lucky opportunities because of his environment and rose to stardom too smoothly, but after some time, those words never appeared again. The skills that Giwoo showed must be part of the reason, but she also thought that there weren't many people who had the audacity to actually go against the direct line of descent of the YM Group. She had heard that a few of the journalists who were trying to use that for a gossip article of sorts had all given up in the end.

"But mommy felt good, even for a brief moment. Though, it's a pity that it's a dream that can't come true."

After reporting to the cat about what happened over dinner, she sat down in front of her laptop. She was stuck on her writing before, but she was writing very smoothly now. The inspiration cells that were dying from all the overwork had all come back to life again after that blissful dinner. She wrote while

also looking through the materials before asking the youngest writer for additional investigation. Although her drama was focused on the characters, since it was set in a hospital background, using genuine medical terms and having accurate information about diseases were important. She fixed her drama script according to the materials that the youngest writer sent her as well as her call with the neurosurgeon in charge of fact-checking her story. When she first wrote 'Doctors', she did it by herself without the support of the TV station, so she was stifled whenever she came across a point where she needed information, but ever since she was promised that her drama would be produced, she was given so much support that it was to the point that she could even live in front of a hospital. A drama where specialists appeared was not something a writer could write by themselves.

She was typing without stopping and eventually, she rotated her wrists and stood up from the spot. She had been working for two hours now. Usually, when she sat down for two hours, she would spend one of the two fidgeting around, but she actually ended up focusing for the whole two hours this time. Was this the Kang Giwoo effect? Although she could continue for more, she wanted to maintain her current condition. It was likely that she was going to stare at the screen like an idiot if she tried to squeeze herself, so it was time to get some rest.

She lay down on the sofa in comfort. She briefly thought about going to the sauna in front of her house, but she decided not to make any more leaves for today. As a professional shut-in, going outside three times a day was a difficult thing. She ripped open a bag of snacks and put it on the sofa before watching a foreign drama that was on air. It was a medical investigation drama that she had watched several times already, yet she became absorbed in watching it every single time she watched it. It was a drama that stimulated her desire to write her own.

After watching the drama for a while, Eunbin used her remote to go to the smart menu and then the rewatch section. She played back the first episode of Doctors that aired last week. Eunbin never rewatched her drama episodes after watching them for the first time because of the disappointment and regret that overwhelmed her after watching which would consequently ruin her day. As she had expected, the lines that the actors said picked her nerves from the start. She thought that it would have been better if she was wittier with the lines. It was especially regretful since producer Yoo Jayeon's direction skills were flawless. Was the lack of views due to a problem with the writer after all? A guilty conscience perked its head inside her. Just then,

"So that's him."

She sat up and rested her chin on her hands before looking at the man on the screen. It was the actor that Giwoo had mentioned. She remembered his name on her way back to her house: Han Maru. This man was the reason that she was rewatching the drama. Despite the fact that the production was splendid and the actors were all well-known, her drama was losing to Doctor's Office, so it was about time she changed up the story. She couldn't change the overall topic or the general outline, but it was possible to insert episodes that might catch the viewers' eyes. During the meeting with the producer, she was told that the results were satisfactory and that she could keep going like this, but she would have to seek change if she wanted to reverse this competition. After all, being 'okay' always contained a probability that it would go down from there. She did not want to ruin a piece that she had focused her efforts on.

Eunbin checked the acting of the lead actors and at the same time, had a closer look at the actor known as Han Maru. Just as Giwoo said, it was too much of a pity to just throw him away after using him once. According to the script, that character could be thrown away but now that she had a look at the final result, she felt like she could use him in another episode. It might be okay to use him within a scope that didn't ruin the drama.

Eunbin returned to her desk. The times when writers faced the wall when writing was long gone. They had to learn to see the desires of the audience and reflect them in real-time. Since Doctor's Office decided to go with a breathless political story, she had to go with a sweet mellow story in order to grab the viewers who had changed their channels away. She tensed her fingers on her keyboard. She just thought of a good story.

* * *

"Nice house. But oh, what's this?"

Joongjin looked at the mirror ball on the ceiling with curiosity. Maru smiled awkwardly. When he explained that he put it up there because he liked it, Joongjin said that it was rather unexpected.

"I didn't know you had preferences like that. Or is it that I am not following the young people's trend these days?"

"It's not a trend; it's just due to my weird character. Would you like something to drink?"

"Do you have black coffee? I would like it cold if possible."

"Please wait a moment."

He brewed some coffee and gave it to Joongjin. Joongjin had the dog by his side as though he quite liked her.

"What a cute dog. I usually don't like dogs that much, but this one's pretty friendly. But the dog seems to have an injured leg?"

"I was told that she has had a bad leg since birth. She probably became used to it as she runs around quite well."

Joongjin picked up a fake bone from the floor before asking if he could throw it. Maru pointed at the kitchen. When the bone drew an arc in the air, Woofie rushed to it like mad. It seemed that Joongjin wanted the dog to come back with it, but the dog wasn't smart enough to return with what was in her mouth. Seeing her chew on the bone under the table, Joongjin smiled as though it was a pity.

"I could have told you about it in the café, but I wanted to have a look at where you live, Mr. Maru. There's nothing more helpful than the house they live in when it comes to learning more about them."

"If that was the case, I should have decorated my house a little. Change the curtains to a colorful one and even put out a carpet."

As he lived minimalistically, there was nothing to look at. Joongjin picked up his mug and looked around the room. He asked if he could take a look around the bedroom, so Maru opened the door for him without hesitation.

“There seems to be a lady who lives with you?”

“She’s someone I will live with, not in the far future. But how did you know?”

“I saw that in the bathroom.”

There were two boxes of sanitary pads in front of the case for towels. Below that was a bottle of shampoo and bottles of hair treatment for women as well. Maru scratched his eyebrows and put the sanitary pads inside the case. Gaeul said that she was going to put them away, but it seemed that she had forgotten. Meanwhile, Joongjin looked around the dressing room before coming back to the living room.

“As I thought, you live quite a simple life.”

“I don’t like complex things. It’s much easier to live with just what you need.”

“Other than that sparkly thing on the ceiling, that is.”

“Let’s make that an exception.”

Joongjin sat on the sofa.

“It was like this before as well; you are still quite interesting, Mr. Maru. You seem old-fashioned, yet you sometimes have something unexpected about you. Do you remember the day we went to a restaurant together for the first time?”

“If you’re talking about the day you talked about how geniuses are useless, then I do.”

“That was six years ago already. Oh, how time flies. I’ve met several actors while working in this area. Among them, I liked them to the point that I wanted to work with them, but when I actually went to find them, they were long gone. This industry is hard to survive in even if you have the talent. In that case, you, Mr. Maru, have the skills but also have the luck to back it up.”

“I think so too. I mean, I’m still holding out when I kicked away the opportunity that came right to me.”

Maru sat down next to Joongjin and drank coffee. Joongjin did not say anything until he finished drinking. He just kept looking at the floor, the ceiling, and the veranda.

“If you want to work with me, there is something important I must tell you.”

“Please tell me. I’m good at matching other people’s requests.”

“Then for this time alone, you must abandon that tendency to do so. As you probably know from working with me, when I work with other people’s money on a movie, I start drawing a picture first. I put a picture inside my head and work towards it so that not a single thing is off the mark. Whether it’s the actors or the props, they all have to be in the place they have to be. Individual character and momentary sparks of inspiration are all unnecessary. I just have to fit everything else to the picture I have in my head. At times like that, I use anyone as an actor. I mean, literally anyone. The truth is that directing style and production skills can cover up most things as long as they have a little bit of acting skills. With someone like Mrs. Yang Miso, I can even use an ordinary person.”

“But it’s different when you work on your own piece?”

"It's very different. The films I use my own money to shoot are for my own enjoyment. I start off by drawing a picture just like before, but when I actually work on it, I do it in a way that something completely different comes out at the end. For that, I need a person to smash my imaginations and my completed picture into pieces. I need an actor who would show me a more charming path than the path I created for myself."

"You suddenly made me lose confidence."

"It's okay. You won't betray my expectations."

Maru responded with a smile.

"If it's already set that I will not betray you, then it seems like my job is to break your image to pieces. So do I need to do a terrible job at acting?"

"That doesn't sound bad either, but if you want an award, then I suggest you do your best."

Joongjin smiled and put down his coffee.

Chapter 836. Sequence 11

"Well then, Mr. Maru, I'll talk to you again with the contract next time."

"I shall look forward to it."

After shaking hands lightly, Joongjin left through the door. As he said that Maru didn't need to see him out, Maru just saw him out until the elevator. Just before the doors closed, Joongjin spoke from inside,

"The indie film you shot last time, the reactions are quite good after it was released on the internet. Go look for it if you have the time. There are quite a lot of comments too."

Having returned home, Maru searched the Ttukseom Indie Film Festival on his laptop. The award-winning pieces from the competition lineup and a few of the general lineup were open to the public to watch. The number of views, comments, and the measure of popularity, the number of likes, was indicated next to the video clips. Among all the videos, 'Starting Point' towered over the rest in all the numbers. In terms of view counts, other videos had numbers around the hundreds whereas Starting Point was climbing past 10 thousand views.

He had a look at the comments. People who were clearly Yoo Sooil's fans were adding to the comment count. It was the support of fans for their actor. From time to time, he saw comments that complimented his acting skills, but the pages those comments were on were soon pushed behind to the later pages. After reading about three pages of comments, he closed the window. There were no insults. That was enough.

He sent a Katalak to Sora saying that the video was put up on the internet. He got a reply back immediately. Apparently, she knew about it because she was notified beforehand but had completely forgotten about it because she had something else to do.

-How are people's reactions?

-They're all praising Sooil's acting.

-I knew it. Nothing about you, seonbae?

-One every now and then.

-Should I go and manipulate the comments a little, asking them to acknowledge our good actor Han Maru?

-I won't refuse if you do. If you're doing it for free that is.

-I'm not doing it for free. 20,000 won per hour.

Twenty thousand, then I want to do it – Maru thought as he was about to turn off his laptop when he recalled a URL. He went to his fan café, which he had saved to his favorites. The front page had a large screen capture of his figure in the drama 'Doctors'. Although there weren't many people active, those few people were actively maintaining the café.

He went to the free posts section and left behind the URL to the movie. These fans had maintained the café when he left for the military without even saying a word. Just like what Gaeul said about how he had to cherish his fans, he had to communicate with them, even if it was late. Though, his form of 'communication' was just notifying them of recent updates. Still, it was probably better than staying silent the whole time.

"Thank you for your encouragement. I will do my best to repay you through acting."

He read the title of his post out loud. He decided on that title after thinking about it for quite a while. He tried being cute and even tried using the latest internet jargon, but in the end, he went back to the plain one because he didn't have the courage to post such a thing. With his mouth, he had the confidence to say all sorts of embarrassing things, but conveying his emotions through text was difficult for him if he wasn't doing it to someone close.

After seeing that his post went up, he powered off his laptop. 'Fans' still seemed to be a far-fetched thing from him. If someone approached him, saying that they were a fan, the first thing that would come to his mind would be doubt, thinking that there was no way it was true. Though, it wasn't like he had a signature to sign autographs with, either.

Just as he got up and was about to get ready to clean, he saw Gaeul's autograph. He stared at the autograph that was inserted in a corner of a photo frame before bringing a piece of A4 paper from his room and a pen. He sat on the floor and wrote 'Han Maru' in cursive handwriting in the corner. He was so terrible at writing that he couldn't tell what he wrote. He couldn't exactly call squiggly worms an autograph, so he wrote slowly with effort this time. He wrote like an elementary schooler just learning to write.

He repeated writing his name a few times before feeling a gaze and lifted his head. When he did, he saw Woofie looking at him like he was pathetic. She looked like she was saying 'gimme food if you have time to do that.' Maru crumpled up the paper and threw it in the trash.

"I know I won't ever have to write an autograph. I just practiced just in case," he muttered in embarrassment.

Woofie dragged her food plate over before putting it down in front of him. Her eyes still said 'forget that, just give me food.' Maybe this girl had the soul of a human that had reincarnated into the wrong animal? – he had this thought from time to time. He poured some dog food before sending Gaeul a text message saying that Starting Point was on the internet and that she should watch it if she has the time.

While Woofie ate with her nose stuck on her plate, he cleaned the living room. He used a duster to wipe the dust on top of the photo frame before suddenly thinking that it perhaps wasn't a bad idea to write 'housewife' on his resume. After all, when it came to laundry, cleaning, and cooking, he was beyond the realm of doing them as a hobby as he could be considered a professional. He imagined taking Gaeul's coat from her after she came back from a long day of shoot before stopping. He thought that it might actually happen. While it wasn't that bad, he wanted to be the breadwinner who fed his wife and family.

-I watched the film. Your acting was good. Maybe you're going to become famous at this rate.

Gaeul sent that message around the time he was done cleaning the bathroom. It seemed that she had some time to watch it because it was lunchtime. He asked her what the shoot was like and got a crying emoji as a reply. He could picture her face grumbling about how hard it was because there were so many scenes that she had to rouse her emotions for.

-I'll make you good food when you come. Do your best.

-Then should I go today?

-Aren't you shooting late into the night today?

-I'll go there afterwards. These days, your place is the first place that comes to my mind when I think about 'home'.

-Then I guess we should call it our home now. Do you have anything you want to eat? Don't make it too difficult though.

-Something delicious but low in calories.

-Such a thing doesn't exist in this world.

-Then something spicy. I'd love a glass of soju or two.

-I'll cook some seafood stew, so do your best at work.

-Alright. I'll put in my best efforts and go home.

Maru immediately grabbed a grocery bag and left his house. He couldn't exactly cook seafood stew with an empty refrigerator. He barely managed to tear Woofie off of him, who tried to go with him, before leaving his house. From how he could hear her scratching the front door, it looked as though he had to take her on a walk after this. Otherwise, it was pretty obvious that she would bother his sleep throughout the whole night.

* * *

Her heart had already picked up a spoon and was sitting in front of a pot of seafood stew. Gaeul kept recalling that Maru told her to look forward to it as she picked up her script.

Her life usually involved going home to the dark house and eating a handful of nuts and a few pieces of fruit from the refrigerator. When she was eating cold food at the table, she sometimes even felt depressed and just went straight to bed. When work was hard, she even sometimes cried a little. She thought that she was a woman who could enjoy solitude, but the loneliness that had piled up within her was not something that she could enjoy. A house where she lived alone with the food that she ate by herself; there were times when being by herself in an empty house couldn't be more enjoyable, but more often than not, she missed the days she lived with her mom, who would reply to even the trivial things she said. She consoled herself by thinking that the loneliness would disappear one day, and that 'one day' came around sooner than she had expected.

By this point, when she thought about 'home,' the first thing that came to her mind was the apartment that had gray walls and monochrome furniture in Banpo-dong rather than the apartment in Seocho-dong that she had spent weeks designing the interior. The thick smell of mint, the tapping of Woofie's feet on the wooden floor, and the funny man who always greeted her with the pink apron she gifted to him as a prank. Unlike the apartment in Seocho-dong, where the only sound she could hear was the hum from the refrigerator, she had no time to feel lonely in that place. Ever since 'home' changed from a 'fixed residence' to a 'place she wanted to go', Gaeul wished to go home more than any time before.

"You look to be in a good condition," Giwoo said as he sat next to her.

"I am. I had a great night's sleep."

"I want to have a great night's sleep too. These days, I can't sleep for some weird reason."

"I heard that sweetened tea is good for apnea."

"Really? Maybe I should try it sometime."

Ever since she heard what kind of person Giwoo was from Maru, Gaeul had never taken her observing eyes off of him. The result she had gained over the past few days was that Giwoo was a gentleman after all. He was kind, gentle, and smiled a lot. Did he change? Or was he hiding it? Maru told her to see and judge for herself, but to her, she felt an underlying warning to never trust Kang Giwoo from his words. While she didn't like being doubtful of people, his past actions were so terrible that she couldn't help but watch. Injuring someone else was beyond the scope of 'prank' that she could understand.

"It's gonna get cold pretty soon," Giwoo said.

"I think autumn is getting shorter. Same with Spring."

"I was hoping it would be less cold this Winter. I mean, it was freezing last year."

"Yeah."

Giwoo, who was chatting with her, was called by the producer and thus stood up. Gaeul put her script to one side and looked at Giwoo, who was talking in the distance. Even the producer, who was known to be picky, would smile in front of Giwoo. Were Giwoo's actions that earned everyone's goodwill all just an act? If it was, then the man known as Kang Giwoo may as well be the character of a horror novel. There was nothing scarier than that after all.

"Senior, what brings you here?"

The producer, who was talking to Giwoo, said that as he looked at the entrance of the set. Gaeul looked behind her. The busily moving staff all froze up in an instance before making way for someone. Lee Miyoon was walking in the middle of them. Gaeul stood up and bowed slightly to Miyoon. Miyoon, who had a large earring on, gave her a glance as she walked past. They made eye contact. Gaeul did not avoid her eyes and did not blink until she went past.

"Your trashy attitude hasn't changed," Miyoon said in a small voice that only Gaeul could hear.

Gaeul's eyes twitched. She was practically picking up a fight. If it was before, she would have fallen for the cheap provocation, but she had seen this woman's face for five years now.

"Senior, your earrings are really pretty today."

"Really?"

"Probably."

Miyoon clicked her tongue loudly as she walked past. Gaeul opened her script before sitting down on the spot.

Chapter 837. Sequence 11

Mijoo frowned the moment she saw Lee Miyoon enter the shooting set. That cruel old woman always treated Gaeul-unni badly. She had never walked past unni nicely even once. In places where there are many people, she would just give her a glare and walk by, but in places without people, she would pick a fight with unni without holding back. What's up with your eye makeup?; What's up with your hairstyle?; What is up with your clothes? Nitpicking her appearance was on the better side. Sometimes, she even told her off for things that couldn't be seen. The words that Mijoo thought were the most absurd were 'your energy in treating your senior is bad.' Just what the heck was that 'energy'? Whenever she heard that old woman's nitpicking that didn't even make sense, she sympathized with unni.

For the past two years, she worked as unni's stylist, she had never seen that old hag say nice words to her. The queen of the set, who did not mind other people's eyes at all, always walked around with her head held high and scolded unni. The members of the staff who were close to unni sympathized with her, but they would not dare go against the queen and always stayed silent. Mijoo also stayed obedient because of the rumors she had heard, but once, anger got the better of her, and she tried to pick a fight with her without holding back. That was when unni stopped her. Do not ever try to fight her – unni was rather scary when she stared right into her eyes as she said such words. Back then, she felt a little frustrated as well. After all, she was trying to stand up for her, and yet she got scolded instead. Only later did she find out that Miyoon didn't like her and that she would not be able to set foot in the industry again, much less come back to the TV station had she picked a fight that day. The rumor that she had snatched the name tag of a staff member and then handed it in to the front desk to fire that person was definitely not an exaggeration.

"That hag doesn't even get old."

"I'm sure she must manage her appearance a ton. According to the rumors, she spends hundreds of millions every year going to a dermatologist. She literally put billions on her face, so it'd be pitiful if she didn't look at least like that."

“Not only that, I’m sure she ate so many insults that she might live a long life.”

The staff gathered around and commented. It seemed that these members had already experienced something bad because of her. As the only roles she played were main character’s mothers, kind neighborhood ladies, and gentle high-class ladies, she was known to the audience as an actress with a good personality. Mijoo realized just how scary image-making could be by looking at Miyoon.

“Miss Gaeul has it tough. Miss Mijoo, please take care of her.”

“Looks like I’m going to have a drink with her tonight. But heck, in the first place, why is she visiting a shooting set for a drama that she doesn’t even appear in?”

“Because that woman’s hobby is to make rounds through TV sets. It seems like she likes it when everyone looks up to her.”

She talked with the floor director who had been working for three years before giving him hints and staying silent. Someone from the lighting team was walking over from the other side. Although the general opinion of Miyoon was incredibly bad, it wasn’t that there was no one on her side. In fact, there were quite a lot of people who stood up for her. The best example of that would be the lighting director. The two of them got along so well that Miyoon sometimes called him her partner. Miyoon would find out if they talked behind her back with that person around, so they had to be careful.

“The producer must have it hard too. He has to walk on a tightrope between those people.”

“Isn’t the director close with Lee Miyoon?”

“He’s just giving her the superior treatment because he has no other choice. Being a director, he can’t just outright hate people, can he? Especially if that person is Lee Miyoon. Don’t you know that story from before? A newly recruited assistant director came to the drama department and called Lee Miyoon without having a clue and had to end up apologizing that day. I don’t know if it’s true or not, but I heard that he apparently even kneeled.”

“He had to apologize just for calling?”

“Apparently, it was because that new recruit called her ‘Mrs. Lee Miyoon,’ and being her, she told him to say that again. Feeling something strange, the assistant director said ‘senior,’ and he got called immediately.”

“What’s so wrong with ‘senior?’”

“It’s because he didn’t call her ‘madam.’ She flipped the whole drama department over saying that an immature idiot doesn’t even know how to work properly.”

“Senior or madam, same thing.”

“She just didn’t like the fact that she was called directly without going through the manager. Of course, that’s a mistake too, but denouncing people’s character like that just because of that is going too far.”

“It’s going too far, way too far, in fact. I wonder what ghosts are doing, not possessing people like her.”

“I don’t think ghosts can do anything about that woman.”

Even the most resentful ghosts might run away in the face of Lee Miyoong's evil glare. Miyoong, who was talking to the producer, suddenly waved. The one who received her call was Giwoo.

"Doesn't that woman look after Giwoo-oppa a lot?"

"She always likes ones that do well."

"But unni is doing well too."

"That's because Miss Gaeul doesn't relent. That old hag likes people who are on her level but would still give her a good level of respect. She would never give a second glance to young actors, no matter how respectful they act. In fact, they would get slapped if they tried talking to her."

"Giwoo-oppa must have it hard too, going along with that woman's antics."

"Giwoo is a kind guy, so Lee Miyoong won't say anything to him. She doesn't touch good-looking men anyway."

Miyoong suddenly burst out laughing as though she heard something funny before pinching Giwoo on the cheeks. Giwoo acted gently like a grandson in front of his grandmother. After letting Miyoong massage his cheeks for a long time, he barely managed to escape. Mijoo subconsciously sighed. Pitiful Giwoo-oppa.

"Does she even want to do that at her age? I mean, she's going to be sixty in a couple years."

She felt bad when she thought about Giwoo, who was smiling on the outside but would definitely not be feeling the same on the inside. How could two humans be so different? One side made everyone nervous and anxious just by appearing, while the other made people smile just by being there. It was a good thing that the two people neutralized each other. If the queen was here by herself, she would be walking on thin ice right now.

She was glaring at that hateful face when someone tapped on her shoulder. She thought that it was the floor director who was behind her and turned her head around, which almost made her scream. A woman wearing a stiff black leather jacket had a thin smile on while looking at her. She was Lee Miyoong's stylist.

"You seem to have a lot of dissatisfaction towards the madam, huh?"

She saw the floor director hurriedly waving his arms in the air in unease behind the stylist. He was explaining the reason why he wasn't able to tell her about this woman's appearance beforehand. It seemed to be some grand reason but that wasn't the important thing. The important thing was that the floor director wasn't caught, while she was. She suddenly lost strength in her lower stomach. She had heard that the queen's stylist hadn't changed for the past fifteen years. The fact that she lasted 15 years under a woman who treated other people like dogs because of her whimsical needs must mean one of two things: her patience on the level of Buddha or Jesus, or she was the same kind as the queen. While she had never heard about the queen's stylist, Mijoo intuitively thought that it was the latter. The way she looked down on other people and the smile that looked like she was having damn fun was way too similar to Lee Miyoong's.

"Me?"

And thus began the thorough self-defense. It was obvious what would happen if she admitted to it. She had to play dumb and erase what she said with her mouth.

“Why are you suddenly pretending not to know? I heard everything. I wonder how absorbed you were in back-talking her that you didn’t even realize that someone was watching you from behind.”

The words that came out from those reddened lips felt like blades. Her skin felt prickled as though she had been cut.

“What did you hear?”

“This and that about the madam. You’re going too far, holding a person in so much contempt. Our madam is such a kind person.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Then are my ears weird? Should I get them checked out? I definitely heard it, but you said you didn’t say it.”

Her lips became dry. It seemed that this woman was out to kill. Mijoo actually felt frustrated as well. She only said the truth, but she was being nitpicked. That said, she couldn’t exactly tell this woman to go back to Lee Miyoona and tell her what she just heard. The size of her fear eclipsed her courage to fight back.

“You’re quite rude. Someone’s talking to you, but you’re just staring as though it’s none of your business. You’re making me the weird person.”

“Uhm, that’s not it.”

The queen’s stylist raised her hand to interrupt her. Those curved lips of hers signalled that she had enough of playing around.

“I should tell the madam myself.”

“What?”

“I may have heard wrong, but I heard it after all. The madam will make the judgment. Now that I think about it, you are Miss Han Gaeul’s stylist, aren’t you? How peculiar. The stylist of the rude actress that keeps talking bad about the gentle madam is talking bad about the madam too. It’s a little too weird to be a coincidence, don’t you think? I guess this is what you call ‘like actress, like stylist’, right? I don’t really like saying this, but you’re quite ignorant.”

Mijoo abruptly raised her head while listening. She could tolerate everything else but not her looking down on unni.

“Excuse me, why are you talking like that? Fine, I was in the bad, but how is our unni involved in any of this?”

“Why are you getting angry all of a sudden? Did I say anything wrong?”

“Just because there’s a hole for your mouth doesn’t mean you can say anything you want.”

“A hole?”

“What else? Then is it blocked off? I can see that it’s wide open. Heck, I can even see some gold teeth in there. Those are hard to come by these days.”

The queen’s stylist, who had her mouth agape because of the absurdity she felt, twitched her nose and closed her mouth. Mijoo felt good for having one-upped her but became depressed again after realizing that the situation hadn’t improved at all. But still, she was not going to act like a defeated dog and lie down with her limbs in the air. Considering all the things she received from unni during the past two years, she would rather take the blame on herself. She did not want to sell unni off in order to escape this dilemma.

“They say you can get a glimpse of what the person is like by looking at the people working under them, and indeed, the stylist is such a snob.”

“Oh, so you work ‘under’ her? What times do you think we live in? My unni treats me like her equal.”

The stylist was at a loss for words again. The leisurely expression on her face had disappeared as well. She felt like a wall had appeared in front of her eyes. She was worried about the consequences, but she felt refreshed right now. It would be great if that woman grabbed her hair first. If it was a dog fight, she had confidence not to lose. She even sent a signal to fight, but the stylist took two steps back as though she had no intention to. It seemed that she was confident in letting her mouth do the fighting since she had the queen as the backer, but was afraid of actually clashing. Mijoo was drenched in a sense of victory when,

“I shall go speak to the madam.”

The stylist pulled out her sword. Mijoo lost her strength in her abdomen again. In the end, this was how it was going to be. Once Miyoon came around and said a word, she would not be able to speak a word back. The word ‘fired’ floated around in her head. It was a word that was very likely to become real. Now that she was actually driven into a corner, her pride and whatever didn’t matter anymore. She wanted to grab her and apologize to her but that woman walked away without even looking back. Mijoo clasped her hands. Her hands were drenched with sweat. Winning a battle gave her a short moment of joy, but winning the war was impossible. There was no one who could stop the queen once she came around.

“Noona.”

There was a person who blocked the stylist from going back to the queen. It was Kang Giwoo. For a brief moment, he really seemed like a prince on a white horse.

“Oh, Giwoo.”

“You should’ve come to see me if you were here.”

“I was just going back.”

“Really? Then let’s talk outside. The weather’s good. I had to go buy coffee anyway, for the madam.”

When Giwoo dragged her by the arm, the stylist’s ice-cold face soon turned warm. The stylist laughed while covering her mouth and walked outside first.

“I’ll handle this. Don’t worry.”

Giwoo said those words as he walked past Mijoo. Mijoo felt as though the world that suddenly turned upside down again was put back in the right position. The sharp pain in her lower stomach had waned as well. She couldn’t find Giwoo, who was waving his hand as he left, more reliable.

“That’s a relief. I thought something was going to happen.”

The floor director came around. Mijoo replied back with ‘you’re right’ before glaring at him.

“You should’ve told me if she was here.”

“Sorry. I was away for a bit because of a walkie-talkie message, and she came at that time.”

“You are such a meanie.”

“I’ll buy you something good next time. Let me go for today.”

Mijoo glared at him once more before looking at the entrance, hoping that nothing bad would happen.

Chapter 838. Sequence 11

If there was lint on clothes, it was natural to use scissors to cut them off or burn them with a lighter so that it wasn’t vexing to the eyes. People were the same. If people like lint were lingering around, they had to be dealt with. With lint, it would disappear over time through wind or other things, but people, on the other hand, would take root on the spot like they were fungi.

Miyoon always cleaned up lint at a suitable time through suitable methods. Sometimes, they resisted vigorously, but they were all dealt with in the end. The only one that wasn’t swept away and hadn’t disappeared of her own accord was Han Gaeul. Whether she was using that pretty face of hers to act cocky, or she had something to rely on, she did not know, but whenever she met her, she would look back at her with bold eyes. They were eyes filled with fighting spirit. Some of the lint sometimes glared back at her with their eyes, but they would always lower their eyes and act cute once she dealt with them. However, that girl held on. It was rather fun when she bared her teeth and growled back at her, but she was no ape and seemed to have learned how to fight as she did it more discreetly, which vexed her a lot.

“Director, wait a bit. I’ll go talk to actress Han.”

The producer made way, saying okay. She liked the producer because of his attitude. He wasn’t blindly faithful nor did he rudely go against her. She stood in front of Gaeul, who had her eyes glued to the script. She still wasn’t raising her head. Miyoon looked down at her without saying anything on purpose. She could see a shadow looming over the script, but the girl did not budge. She even looked forward to how long she was going to ignore her. Being rude could be a marvel after a certain point, and this girl was just like that. She held her hands behind her back in front of Gaeul, who was flipping over the pages quietly. She could feel the eyes of the actors and the staff in the distance. The little girl in front of her eyes was calm, but the onlookers were all anxious.

“Senior, why are you standing like that?”

The girl only pretended to say hello after reading all the way till the end. Miyoon put on a gentle smile.

“How absorbed were you that it was to the point that you didn’t notice a person right in front of you?”

“I tend to not be aware of my surroundings when I’m focusing on something, especially when I’m reading my script. I would probably not notice even if someone kidnapped me.”

“Maybe I should try kidnapping you once to see if you notice or not.”

“It’s just a figure of speech. I would actually notice if someone carried me away. But why were you watching me? Usually, you just look at me like you would a bug and walk by after leaving behind childish words.”

“I was wondering what you were so focused on. And it turned out to be a script huh? How curious. You’re so terrible at acting, but you hold onto your script for half a day. I think that’s too much of a waste of time.”

“I’m not good at acting, so I should try to look at the script hard. Since you mentioned that, I think I should read my script again. You don’t seem to have anything to say to me either.”

Those rude eyes turned to the script again. Miyoon looked at Gaeul’s head and recalled the car keys in her pocket. Perhaps this girl would become a little more obedient if she drove the key right in the center of that swirling hair and twisted it around. It would be quite fun to see her stand up like a machine and greet her politely. She clasped her hands and tapped on the back of her hands. If she wished to, she could destroy her right now. After all, there was no one flawless in this world. If there wasn’t a flaw, then she could just make one. The reason she left her alone until now was that she was curious about how long her kindling fighting spirit would last.

There was someone who stubbornly resisted going down among people who would crouch at the slightest hint. She was a rather peculiar doll of sorts. Not one that would respond statically when pressed but a broken one that knew how to glare and how to kindle her fighting spirit. Honestly, it was rather fun playing with her. The satisfaction would just be that much greater when subduing a girl that resisted her.

However, seeing the girl ignoring her up front, she couldn’t hold back her impulse to destroy her. She wanted to tell her that it was a big mistake if she thought that she could act so boldly because she was a popular actress. It was extremely easy to bury an actress with a scandal, especially if that actress is young.

“My, my, Gaeul. You’ve dulled. You know that you can’t treat me like that. You were doing well until a while ago, weren’t you? Picking a fight while taking hints. But today, you’re too reckless. Your eyes are so clear that they’re cocky. I liked those frozen fish eyes from before. Don’t you remember? I’m talking about three years ago. The girl who would bare her fangs at me suddenly became docile all of a sudden. She was really quite a spectacle because her eyes looked so sunken after crying or something. After that, you always had those eyes, but you’re very lively today. Did something good happen? A man perhaps? Well, it’s about time I guess.”

Hearing the word ‘man,’ Gaeul’s eyes twitched. The fire of fighting spirit in her eyes started burning. She was just probing her out without thinking, but it seemed that she was right on point. A man, huh. Gaeul soon calmed down and smiled at her, but Miyoon had already seen what she was thinking on the inside, so it didn’t matter.

“That’s right, you should at least score well when it comes to marriage. Your face is pretty decent after all. So, which one is it? Business people? Or maybe you got lucky and scored yourself a chaebol? I’m sure there are many people giving you their numbers in order to try meeting you. Is it perhaps someone I know?”

“Perhaps you know him too, senior.”

She thought that Gaeul would retort, saying that she knew nothing, but she instead just admitted it outright. Miyoon squinted her left eye. Was this girl playing a prank right now? Or did she give up and just tell her the truth? After much thinking, Miyoon came to the conclusion that the girl did not have a man. It was quite fishy since she fell for the provocation so easily. It was quite laughable for the girl who wouldn’t bat an eyelid at most stuff to jump at the mention of a man. It was probably an act that she was panicking. Her skills were improving, what a bitch.

“You should meet someone good too.”

“I’m hopeless for marriage now. It’s more fun living by myself.”

“That’s good.”

“Why is it good?”

“Because you’re having fun. Or did you perhaps interpret it in another way?”

“No, I was just asking. There’s no way you’d say that you’d be pitying the man who would live with me.”

“Of course. There’s no way living with the person you love is unfortunate.”

Miyoon laughed and pinched Gaeul’s cheeks. Gaeul laughed back at her while facing her. She raised her fingernails upright and pinched to the point that it would remain marks before letting go. There was a dent under her cheekbones. She wanted to make another one but decided to hold back since she couldn’t destroy her now.

“Oh, I think you should get your makeup redone.”

“I will.”

“And do your best when acting. Giwoo is doing his best to raise the viewing rate, so I would be saddened if you poured cold water over it. Okay?”

“Oh, I see you haven’t seen people’s comments about me. Try going on the internet. I’m known to be quite good at acting. If you can’t use a smartphone, I’d love to teach you how to.”

“I’m a new generation, so I know that much.”

“New generation? I guess that’s still good. You didn’t call yourself a Gen X.”

“How cute, geez. I wonder who looked after you as you’re so cocky.”

“Well, a lot of it’s thanks to you.”

Miyoon tapped Gaeul on the cheeks before turning around. She wondered what got wind of that docile girl so that the girl was acting so precocious. But still, it was quite fun to see her having raised her claws

after such a long time. She imagined how that sharp voice would change when she was being suppressed. She wished for her to not beg while crying. It would be more like Han Gaeul to get crumpled into oblivion. She would be very disappointed if the girl suddenly turned subservient and apologized. That wasn't the kind of thing she expected after toying with her until now.

"Gaeul, a person should be more like bamboo than a reed, right?"

She did not wait for an answer.

* * *

Gaeul brushed up her hair while looking at Miyoon leaving. Just as she said, she overreacted. She should have just exchanged a couple words and looked away like she normally did, but she ended up reacting sensitively because she mentioned a man as though she saw right through her. The old deceitful fox's eyes were scary after all. When she touched her cheek, she felt that her skin had thankfully returned again.

"Gaeul, are you okay?" The producer had asked her cautiously after approaching her.

Gaeul nodded instead of replying. The producer was someone who reacted sensitively to his surroundings like a poikilotherm. He would enter a state of hibernation around Miyoon, who brought winter with her, and would look out for people if the weather warmed up again. Some people insulted him for being duplicit or being an opportunist, but Gaeul thought that it was just a way of survival for him. She was thankful that he didn't talk bad about that woman with her.

"I'm sorry. I should have distracted her away from you."

"It's fine. This is not the first time it happened."

"I'll definitely help you out next time."

She heard the same thing last time. Gaeul placed her script on her chair and stood up. The shooting set that had been paralyzed by the appearance of Miyoon started moving again. The shoot would probably resume soon. She looked around looking for Mijoo. She could swear she saw her standing by the entrance until just now. Did she go back to the car?

As she looked around the set, she caught sight of Mijoo. She was just coming inside. From how there was coffee in her hands, it seemed that she had been to the café inside the TV station.

"Unni, here."

"I just wanted something to drink. Thanks."

"I'm not the one buying. Giwoo-oppa did. Yours as well as one for all the staff."

"Really?"

She saw Giwoo enter the set with a straw in his mouth. There was coffee in both of his hands.

"Unni, just now, I..."

Mijoo, who was speaking while in a fluster, suddenly became quiet. She also twisted her body. It was her habit when she was about to say something that she might get scolded for. Gaeul smiled and asked,

“What is it this time? Did you forget my outfit just like last time?”

“I never did that.”

“Then what? You did something wrong from how you’re twisting up your body like that. Is it serious?”

“No. It’s been solved already.”

“That’s good then.”

Mijoo switched topics as though she also deemed that she no longer needed to mention it.

“What did that old woman Lee Miyoon say to you?”

“Just the usual. But today, I was in the wrong too. I should have held back, but she irked me.”

“You did nothing wrong. Considering what she did to you, you’d be considered innocent even if you slap her.”

“Hey, a slap is still going too far.”

“It’s not going too far. You’re too kind for your own good. A woman like that must have her ass whooped. I would have picked a fight with her on the spot if I had a backer.”

Gaeul snatched Mijoo’s hand, which was clenched into a fist.

“Don’t you dare do that. I told you last time that she would definitely do the deed if she thinks that there would be no consequences. She is especially merciless against staff, so just don’t get yourself involved with her. If you just greet her well, there will be no problems.”

Mijoo smiled awkwardly before turning her eyes away like a child who was caught playing with fire in the night. Just as Gaeul was about to talk to her again, the producer called her saying that they were about to begin the rehearsal.

“Unni, I’ll go back to the car for a bit.”

She was suspicious of Mijoo for going back to the car but decided not to pry. She also said that the matter had already been dealt with. She wasn’t the type to lie, so there shouldn’t be anything to worry about.

“Okay then, let’s do our best today too,” the producer said.

Chapter 839. Sequence 11

“Are these the ones?”

She checked the list of clothes and got out of the car. A clothing designer who was close to Gaeul-unni opened a new shop and sponsored some clothes. That person said that she would not sponsor anyone with her products, but she ended up sponsoring Gaeul-unni. She arrived back at the set with the clothes. Unni was standing in front of the counter wearing a white doctor’s gown. The neck exposed above the

collars was elegant, the line of the clothes draping down her shoulders looked noble, and finally, she even had a touch of cuteness thanks to the slipper with a rabbit on it. Although her clothes were cheap ones that could be bought for 20,000 won at the local market, as Han Gaeul was the one wearing them, they didn't look cheap at all. She may as well be having a photo shoot right now. Geez, who was the one who styled her? Such a good sense of clothing.

"Unni, your figure is so good."

"When have I ever not been good?"

"You should try being humble if you get flattered like that. Is this how you're gonna act since you have a boyfriend?"

"I'm cute even without being humble you know? Also, that has nothing to do with having a boyfriend."

Unni smiled and checked the clothes that she brought.

"This one looks better, right?"

"I think so too. If you think about the season, the left one is better after all. Alright then, I'll get this ready."

"Please. Also, I'll call the owner and visit myself, so don't send back the clothes first."

"You're going yourself?"

"She looked out for me, so I should at least visit and say hello. I wasn't able to go when the store opened."

"Then should I buy something as a gift with Chanwoo-oppa?"

"Can you?"

"I wonder what will be good though. I don't know her preferences. Should I just go with a small vase?"

"She hates cumbersome things. Also, I'm sure that she has a really clean interior, so I'm pretty sure there's nowhere to place a vase. She likes drinking and eating, so I think I should buy some dry snacks that can be eaten with wine. You know about the jerky that they sell in the department store nearby, right?"

"I do. Alright, I'll go with Chanwoo-oppa then. I'll send you a photo before we buy it, so have a look at it to see if you like it or not."

"Chanwoo is good at things like that, so ask Chanwoo. Buy two bottles of wine and four boxes of jerky."

Mijoo nodded before turning around. She had to be quick before the shoot began. She picked up Chanwoo, who was talking to the managers of other actors on the set, before heading to the department store. She gift-packaged some jerky that she would never buy with her own salary and bought some wine with an employee's recommendation. She kept thinking this while looking at the jerky packaged in a luxurious-looking container: How could dried meat be so expensive? Though, it was still cheaper than the red liquid next to it. She returned to the set with Chanwoo while eating the jerky

they gave out as a sample. The fragrance filled her mouth as though it was trying to tell her that there was a reason for the cost.

“Unni, this is really good.”

She showed the jerky and the wine to unni. Unni took out a box of jerky from the shopping bag before waving it in front of her as though she should take it.

“I can eat it?”

“I told you two to buy more so that you two can have it. Take one to Chanwoo as well.”

“You’re such a good girl, unni. I’ll put the rest inside the car.”

When she brought it to Chanwoo, he liked it and said that he got some good snacks to drink over some soju. She put the luggage inside the car and was about to come out when the jerky caught her eyes. She wondered if she should eat just a little right now before opening the package. She put some pieces in her hand and returned to the set.

“What are you eating?”

Giwoo, who was holding a bottle of water, stopped as he walked by. Mijoo quickly picked up a piece of jerky and offered it to Giwoo.

“Mr. Giwoo, I bought this as a gift, and it’s really good.”

Giwoo blinked a little before telling her to raise her hand a little more. When she raised the hand holding the jerky, Giwoo put his mouth forward. Mijoo looked around before putting the jerky in his mouth. She never imagined that she would feed him like this. She felt embarrassed and yet happy.

“It’s good.”

“Right? Expensive things definitely are expensive.”

“But Miss Mijoo.”

“Yes?”

“I wasn’t intentionally trying to hear it, but you seem to call me Giwoo-oppa in front of other people.”

“Uh, the thing is....”

Mijoo smiled awkwardly. Although she got to see Giwoo almost every day ever since they started shooting Doctor’s Office, she had never talked to him in private. At most, she just greeted him as a sidekick of Gaeul-unni when they talked to each other. Although there was a time when they put their arms around each other’s shoulders during a get-together, that couldn’t exactly be called a conversation.

“I subconsciously did that because I wanted to stay close to you.... If you don’t like it, I will never do that again.”

As actors had to meet many people, of which some would be some weird people, there were many who were wary of getting to know others. Such actors despised people who pretended to be close to them.

Although she knew about it, Giwoo was such a kind man that she subconsciously called him 'oppa' in front of other people, and it seemed to be a mistake after all. Just as she was waiting while being prepared to hear something bitter,

"No, no, that's not it at all. If I disliked you, I wouldn't have helped you at all. In fact, I was just thinking that it's a pity that we haven't talked to each other even though it's been quite a while since we got to know each other. Do you remember the get-together last time? We really enjoyed ourselves back then."

"I do. You really brought up the mood back then, Mr. Giwoo."

"That's thanks to your responses, Miss Mijoo. About that, I'd like to stop calling you 'miss' and call you comfortably. Is that okay with you?"

Before she could even think about answering, her head was nodding by itself. How many people would refuse an offer from Kang Giwoo? Mijoo spoke after being inwardly relieved,

"Then I'll call you Giwo-oppa from now."

"And I'll call you Mijoo."

"I really do click with you."

"Me too. I should have done this a long time ago. I was originally going to call you and Mr. Chanwoo back when I tried to eat with Gaeul. We would've become close a lot earlier if we met back then. But Gaeul seemed to be busy, so our appointment kept getting delayed."

"Unni was a little busy for a while. The drama was one thing, but she also got a sudden flood of photo shoots and adverts."

"Popular actresses never get to rest huh."

"But that goes for you too."

He looked so much more handsome from up close. Mijoo stared at Giwoo's face for a while before recalling what just happened.

"Uhm, Oppa, thanks for covering me earlier. I should have thanked you properly but the shoot began."

"That was nothing. Like I said before, things went well so that noona will probably not nitpick with you. She might be a little stiff, but she's not that bad, so be a little understanding."

It was because he was Kang Giwoo, that the frosty woman obediently took a step back. If it was anyone else, that person would have become a sacrificial lamb for Miyoon alongside her. Mijoo wasn't stupid enough to tell the bad things about that stylist and Miyoon to Giwoo, who was smiling gently, so she just stayed quiet. Miyoon and her stylist were probably very kind people to Giwoo. Just like how unni who would act like an amazoness was endlessly kind to her.

"Since we're talking about it, why don't we have some stew after the shoot tonight? With you, Gaeul and Mr. Chanwoo."

"I'd love to go. I really do, but Gaeul-unni has a prior appointment."

“Does she have work right after the shoot?”

“It’s not work. She says a designer she knows opened a shop, so she’s making a visit.”

“Is it Lacquemant by any chance?”

“Yes, do you know about it too?”

“I just went there two days ago.”

“I see.”

“If you’re just visiting to say hello, it won’t take that long.”

“That’s true, but she has a personal appointment after that. I don’t think she can make it today. She said she’s going to drink with Maru-oppa.”

While ruminating about the schedule, she ended up talking about private matters as well. It was probably due to the fact that she lost her tension. She suddenly felt complex. Should she explain who Maru is? Or just play dumb and make excuses? She thought that telling Giwoo of all people a secret shouldn’t be a problem. As though to tell her that there was no need for her to think about such things, Giwoo spoke first,

“Maru? Do you mean Han Maru?”

“You know him too, oppa?”

“I do. We even worked together once. Just a while ago, the three of us, including Gaeul, had a drink together too. I’m a long-time friend of his.”

Her dizzy head suddenly became refreshed in an instant. If he knew him, and if they were long-time friends, there was no need to hide anything.

“So you three already knew each other. And here, I was thinking about how to explain it. Unni decided to meet Maru-oppa in the evening. So she won’t have the time.”

“I guess I can’t help it if she has a prior engagement. But that’s a little disappointing; they’re just drinking by themselves.”

Mijoo faintly smiled and spoke,

“What can we do? The couple wants to drink together. Even if you’re friends, you shouldn’t join an occasion like that.”

It wasn’t that long ago that she met Maru. Unni introduced him to her saying that there was someone who wanted to thank her. She was startled out of her wits when she heard that they were dating. She grabbed unni’s sleeves and asked if it was really true multiple times. She heard about a lot of things while drinking that day. It was also the day she got to know just how much faith unni placed in her. Unni, who was smiling while quietly looking at Maru, looked happier than anyone else in the world.

“Yeah, the couple wants to be together, so joining them is a terrible idea,” Giwoo said with a strangely joyful expression on his face.

Did something funny come to his mind? He even coughed awkwardly while covering his mouth before waving his hand in the air.

“Alright, then let’s leave the drinking to next time.”

“I’ll look forward to it. You’re treating us to something expensive, right?”

“Of course, I heard something interesting, so I can buy you anything.”

“Something interesting?”

Giwoo smiled once again. Something felt off, but seeing Giwoo smiling brightly like that made her pleased.

“Mijoo, can I ask you one thing?”

“What is it?”

“The conversation we had now, just keep it a secret from Gaeul. I don’t really care, but Gaeul might be sad if she finds out that you blurted out something private. No matter how close you are, you should keep what you should to yourself, right? I won’t tell Gaeul anything either.”

Giwoo turned around, saying ‘see you later.’ A kind-hearted man thought in a different way. He even solved what she was inwardly worried about.

“Oppa, I like sashimi.”

“Alright.”

Giwoo raised his thumb as though she could look forward to it.

Chapter 840. Sequence 11

They had a break just before the kiss scene. Gaeul put down her script and looked at Giwoo, who was talking to the camera director. She had been observing him for the past few days, but she wasn’t able to find anything suspicious about him. He was still as kind as ever when looking out for the staff and as serious as ever when he was acting. He should catch her eyes if he was scheming something, but he was clean all around. Maru said that he would never be able to become friends with him. Even though he said that there was a possibility that Giwo had changed for the better, he also said that his relationship with Giwoo would never change. From that, there seemed to be a reason. What could it be? Did Maru find a flaw in Giwoo that couldn’t be seen on the surface?

“I’m so nervous right now. You see me sweating?”

Kang Giwoo acted nervously in front of the producer. He also put on a smile like a young boy. Although she had come across many actors on sets, she had not come across a man who gave off such an innocent image. If it was before, she would have smiled while looking at Giwoo being nervous like a child, but perhaps thanks to her bias, she now observed his smile and actions very closely. Was it from the bottom of his heart? Or was he just putting on a show after calculating everything? She also considered the possibility that Giwoo had changed for the better, but for now, she placed more weight on the fact that he might have grown up to be the evil prankster that he was. The rumors about him as

well as the things she heard all pointed to the fact that Giwoo was innocent, but her suspicion did not die down. This just went to show that she trusted Maru's words that much. If time passed and her suspicions were completely resolved, she would explain the circumstances and apologize, but until then, she was planning on being wary of him.

"Don't you two need a rehearsal?" the producer asked Gaeul.

Gaeul placed her hand on Giwoo's shoulder and winked.

"Director, we don't need things like that. We'll finish the kiss scene in one go, so don't you make a mistake."

"If that's the case, I'm good. Alright then. Let's get started."

Gaeul sat on the chair in the lounge in the hospital. This was the scene where she found out that the medical accident of the unni she knew in the story was actually a setup and she was having a hard time emotionally. It was then that Giwoo approaches her, hugs her, and proceeds to kiss her. It was a stereotypical romantic plot. As this scene also showed the reliance the man and the woman had for each other after having just been caught up in the dark political struggles of the hospital, the director emphasized its importance several times.

"We need to do this in one go, right?" Giwoo said, next to her.

"We do. Don't you get embarrassed and just come straight at me. I'll accept everything."

"Alright, Miss Han Gaeul. You're very reliable."

The producer approached them after Giwoo tapped on her shoulders. The producer explained the movements they should take as well as the background behind their act. As one side was supposed to be crying, while the other was supposed to be agitated, the kiss scene had to be a dynamic one, so they had rehearsed several times beforehand.

"As you know, the heart-racing excitement of the first kiss is the best. If you keep repeating it, your emotions will dry up. The earnestness, the abstractness, the sweetness, and the excitement of the first kiss - let's try getting all of that in one go. Also, Giwoo, you turn to the left, while Gaeul, you turn to the right. That will make the scene look the prettiest. We'll make it as short as possible so that both of you don't get emotionally exhausted, so let's do this in one go."

The producer stepped back. The camera was installed and the lights started emitting light. After giving a glance at the boom mic above her head, she exercised her lips and mouth by going 'vrrrr' with her lips. Just as the director said, she wanted to finish this in one go. Although she was an actress and this was supposed to be an act, it was still a kiss. When she had her first kiss scene, she grabbed a senior actress and asked if she didn't have any personal feelings at all. That senior actress said that she was truly in love with the person in front of her at that very moment. That actress was married too.

Gaeul calmed down and got her emotions together. This wasn't the right time to think about what kind of person Kang Giwoo was. It was time to fulfill her role in the drama and share love. She put the background in her eyes before dissolving herself into her character. The pain given to her by the truth poked at her heart. Her chest hurt, and she was in desperate need of someone who could caress that

pain. She breathed slowly and grabbed onto that rope of emotions. Gaeul had completely become the character in the drama.

When she dug deeper and deeper into the character in the drama until she could no longer differentiate between her own emotions and the character's emotions, she heard the cue sign. The lines in her head had seeped through her entire body instead of just being lines that were going to be uttered from her mouth. She said her lines as though she was looking back on something she had experienced.

She stood up from her seat and denied the reality that unni had died in vain. Her eyes became hot. Her throat tightened up, and it became hard for her to breathe. Giwoo, who came in after opening the door, grabbed her arm and told her to calm down. However, being told to calm down was too cruel of a measure when she just found out the truth. Her chest hurt. Her heart felt like it was being ripped to pieces. Her legs were shaking and it was hard for her to stay standing. She needed somewhere to lean on; she needed a refuge that would allow her to forget about this stifling reality temporarily. She leaned on the cabinet and curled up. Her body, which felt like a lump of fire, cooled down immediately. The reality that she could not handle shook her entire body.

Giwoo hugged her abruptly. Gaeul struggled in his arms before spitting out a trembling breath under his warmth and hugging him back. The wave of sadness spread throughout the body that she came into contact with. When the agitation that wreaked havoc inside her body became calm, she lost strength in her body. She left her entire body weight to Giwoo, who she was leaning against. At the same time, Giwoo's face became closer. Their lips met and their breaths connected. She could see Giwoo's semi-closed eyes. His pupils, which were centered, sneakily moved towards the left. He was avoiding her gaze.

The little bit of her consciousness that she had left behind clicked its tongue. She herself was putting everything into this character. She could not tolerate him moving his eyes away. No matter how embarrassed he was, no matter how much he didn't like this, he had to put everything aside and put everything he had into this moment. She moved the hand she placed on his waist to his neck. At the same time, she pushed her lips even closer forward. Her entire body felt hot. It was a fire created by the woman who loved Giwoo as well as the actress who wanted to finish this in one shot. She could see Giwoo's pupils being colored in panic. Gaeul sent her love and rebuke through her eyes – do it properly if you're an actor.

Giwoo took half a step forward as though he had come to himself. Gaeul was satisfied with that. After all, if they were going to act out the lingering energy of a kiss, the emotional distance between them was supposed to shrink. After finishing that dynamic kiss, she slowly pulled her head back. Giwoo, who pulled back, moved his head forward again as though he was possessed. He seemed to have forgotten about the camera.

Gaeul naturally lowered her head so that Giwoo's lips touched her forehead. The moment the long kiss ended, she took a step outside of the character. If she was still swept in her emotions, she would have put her lips against his as well. She put her forehead against Giwoo's lips as though it was the first kiss before looking at Giwoo's eyes. She could feel disappointment in his gaze. It seemed that he had been absorbed in his character as well.

Gaeul slowly took a step back before covering her lips with the back of her hand. She was surprised by the unexpected kiss, but at the same time, she made a relieved expression. As the peak of emotions of acting was past her, she was returning to Han Gaeul again. She had to finish the act before she completely left the character and it started looking disconcerted. She grabbed the lounge door and left. Although she had only gone past one wall, her heartbeat had returned to normal. The emotions that consumed her entire body soon disappeared like rainwater being drained. One of Gaeul's sources of pride was that she had never met difficulties when tuning her emotions. Sometimes, she even thought that she had a problem with herself because she was too good at cleaning up her emotions. She could control her emotions freely as though she had been doing this job for a very long time.

She walked around the wall and looked at Giwoo, who was still in the lounge. The producer was waving his hand over his head. That was even bigger praise than 'well done.' Giwoo walked around the lounge aimlessly before sitting on the table. He was expressing his regret for his impulsive action and the lingering emotions without looking too flustered. No wonder people went crazy over Kang Giwoo. His acting was better than his appearance.

"Alright, we're done!"

The director clapped twice before standing up. The staff, who had been holding their breaths until now, also became relaxed. Gaeul brushed up her hair before approaching Giwoo.

"Good work."

"Uh, yeah."

He seemed dazed. Gaeul was about to ask what was up with him but decided not to. It was probably because of the emotions he wasn't able to wrap up properly.

"It was very good. Both of you come here. I don't think you'll want to do that again."

Gaeul tapped Giwoo's shoulder. Giwoo, who was in a daze, nodded and started walking.

* * *

Giwoo looked in the mirror. An idiot with his eyes half-open was looking back right at him. Only after wiping his eyes with cold water did the idiot disappear. He had done kiss scenes several times. If it was just a kiss without the scene, an uncountably many times. The only kiss he placed meaning in was the first kiss that he got from a noona he met at a family meeting when he was young. Starting from the next one, kissing was just like an ordinary procedure just before going to bed with someone. To get heated up by just rubbing his lips against someone else's was ridiculous as he had experienced too many things. In one way, kisses were a light form of skin contact, perhaps even lighter than a handshake.

Giwoo recalled Gaeul in his arms. Up until the moment he hugged her, he was thinking about something else completely different. He was thinking about how to use the information he got from Mijoo to bully Han Maru. However, the moment he saw her eyes as her lips touched his, his head turned blank. She was bold and relentless. It was a completely different feeling from the other actresses that he had done kiss scenes with. The eyes that looked straight at him and that gaze that rebuked him to focus properly were charming. He was swayed by her, who was acting like she was in love with her entire body. Although he didn't have the lead, he didn't feel that bad. In fact, he felt so disappointed when their lips

fell apart that he did something that wasn't even in the script. He still had the lingering feelings of the moment they touched their lips together.

I want to keep hugging her – that impulse swept his entire body. Even though he knew that it was just an act, his heart was moved. Giwoo shook off the water from his hands. He regained his calm and put on his signature smile. It was a flawless one. It also meant that he had calmed down.

“Han Gaeul.”

There was a need to check one more time. Whether it was a mistake in emotions through coincidence or if he actually wanted to have her. Of course, someone like Han Gaeul wasn't bad. Perhaps thanks to the kiss scene, he even felt that she wasn't that lacking as his partner. So she was dating Han Maru, huh. The man in the mirror put on a twisted smile.

“Someone who has value needs to be next to someone who recognizes that value.”

He was going to make her his and just throw her away if it didn't seem right. It might be rather interesting if Han Maru picked up what he threw away. For now, though, he decided to watch so that he could see whether she was someone he should embrace or just make use of.