

Once Again 921

Chapter 921. Crank Up 3

"I want to barge into the house above us," Yoojin said, looking at the ceiling.

She had been acting like that ever since she learned that the people living above and below Maru were indeed Hong Geunsoo and Kim Suyeon.

"Go on then. Tell him that you're from the house below."

"I'm just saying. I know how important privacy is. I'm just grumbling about it so don't mind me."

Yoojin sipped on the beer in her hand. Maru opened another bottle of beer and filled the empty glasses. As their objective wasn't to get drunk today, there were only six empty bottles despite having drunk for three hours.

"It's good to meet up and chat like this. I didn't get to do things like this in Japan," Yoojin said as she latched onto Gaeul.

Gaeul smiled and asked,

"From the photos you sent me though, you seemed to be getting along with your Japanese friends."

"They're good people, but I can't get truly down to Earth with them. Maybe it's because I befriended them through work. We do talk about our personal lives from time to time, but I found myself keeping a certain line. I'm sure they're doing the same."

"How long are you going to be staying in Japan?"

"I'm not sure. If I'm fed up with what I'm doing, I'd wrap up and come home, but it's pretty fun in its own way. Sometimes, it makes me think that quitting actor work might not be a bad idea."

Yoojin grinned and downed the beer that Maru just poured in one go. After exclaiming due to the fizziness, she put out her glass again.

"You're suddenly drinking too much. Slow down a little."

Maru only filled half the glass. Gaeul had told him beforehand how much Yoojin could drink. She was rather weak considering that she liked drinking. She would start grinning for no reason from four glasses of soju and would start talking by herself after one bottle. Any more than that and she might not have any recollection of it on the next day. He had to feed her moderately since it would be a pain to look after her once she loses herself.

"Your boyfriend is way too naggy. I just asked him for a glass of beer, but he wants me to slow down. Gaeul, just what do you like about him so much that you hooked back up with him again?"

"You know that's the third time you asked that, right?"

"Really?"

Yoojin stood up, her hair draping down. She staggered her way towards the bathroom, and anyone watching would be worried about her. Gaeul stood up and caught up with her to support her.

"She always does that even though she can't drink. She should just forget about drinking like me."

Jiseok clicked his tongue.

"There are people who need to drink in order to speak, so be a little more understanding. Not anyone can blab on about everything without the help of alcohol like you. Do you want more juice?"

Maru brought more grape juice for Jiseok, who nodded. After grabbing the juice bottle with a simple 'thanks', Jiseok yawned. It was past midnight, so Maru wondered if they should wrap up. He looked at the bathroom. Gaeul had pushed her body inside the half-open bathroom door.

"Yoojin, if you're going to throw up, drink some juice beforehand! It'll taste like grapes!"

Jiseok ran to the bathroom with the juice bottle. It was obvious that he would receive a backlash, but clearly, his innate prankster nature couldn't be fixed. A shout that made Woofie and the Pit Bull flinch escaped from the bathroom. After that, Yoojin said something for a long time. To sum it up, she was going to push Jiseok off the veranda.

"Is Yoojin okay?"

"Looks like she has a bad stomach."

"Wait a sec."

Maru poured some green plum extract into some warm water and gave it to Gaeul. Gaeul passed the cup inside the bathroom. The door was blocking his vision, but it seemed like Yoojin was drinking while crouching down.

"Let's put it away before she comes out and asks for more."

He cleaned up with Jiseok. He put away the plates, mopped the floor, and laid out futons in the living room. As the two ladies would be taking the bedroom, the men had to spend the night in the kitchen. He went inside the bedroom and cleaned up the bed before placing a small pillow. It was just high enough for Yoojin to fall and pass out.

"Han Maru."

When he came back out to the living room, he saw Jiseok waving at him from the veranda.

"How's everything going with Lee Miyoong? Was I helpful?"

"We don't know yet, since we haven't approached her. The one in charge of this case went to Busan. If things go well while he's there, he should be able to get to Lee Miyoong directly."

"So are you going to make this a scandal and put it on the news?"

"We aren't at a stage where we can say anything, but in order to catch something bigger than Lee Miyoong, we might have to sweep her under the rug. It'll depend on how that hyung-nim makes the deal."

"If it does erupt in a scandal, it will be quite huge. It might even be called an entertainment scandal to conceal political news, you know? Lee Miyoong is a super actress after all."

"A conspiracy to hide political news, huh.... That might not be entirely wrong."

"What the hell? That sounds so ominous."

Maru smiled and patted Jiseok on the back. Jiseok no longer asked any questions either. It seemed that he had noticed that this was what he was allowed to know.

"It's nothing dangerous, right?"

"I'm only watching everything from the back, so it's fine for me. The problem is that hyung-nim. I'm worried too. Things might become really dangerous after all."

"Isn't it better to contact the police beforehand?"

"The thing is, it doesn't look like any legal procedures will solve this problem. That's why that hyung-nim is taking direct action, and why I am as well."

"I hope I only see movie-like plots at the theater. You know what I mean, right?"

Maru looked at Jiseok as he turned around after grabbing him on the shoulder. He was laughing and smiling while they drank, but it seemed that he was worried. He was grinning foolishly whenever he made eye contact with him while drinking, but that was probably his way of hiding his inner worries about his friend potentially getting into trouble.

"I'll ask you for help if something happens."

"Forget about it. I hate scary movies."

Jiseok walked over to the bathroom, asking if Yoojin had finished vomiting.

Perhaps thanks to the green plum extract, or perhaps thanks to her objective of beating up Jiseok, who infuriated her, calming her down, Yoojin came back out of the bathroom looking rather clean. The prankster Jiseok was able to return to the living room after being locked up on the veranda for about ten minutes.

"Where's the beer?"

"You're quite something to look for beer after going through that. I put it all away so go to sleep already."

"It's not even one o'clock yet, yet you want me to sleep? Hell no. Do you think I came to Korea for that? Gaeul, why don't we go to Hongdae right now? Apparently, the DJ-oppa at a new club is really good."

Yoojin was quite up-to-date with Korean clubs despite living in Japan. They had to console this little kid, who didn't want to sleep.

"I have ice cream. Do you want some?"

"Even though it's winter?"

"You don't want it?"

"No, give it to me."

Maru stabbed four spoons into an ice cream pot and placed it in the living room. Yoojin, who took out a spoon first, took a big scoop and ate it. Looking at her eyes turning into a curve made him relieved.

"I want to date a man who looks after me like this. Maru, isn't there anyone decent around you? Someone who's as caring as you but doesn't go missing like you."

"I recommend Yoo Jiseok. Having him by your side will bring you joy every single day."

"You mean every day will be hell. Who's ever going to date that chatterbox?"

Jiseok sucked on his spoon and replied that he didn't want her either, saying that he would look for a monkey to find love if they were ever left alone in a dying world. Yoojin's spoon flew at Jiseok's forehead. Along with a crisp sound, the spoon that hit the forehead fell down on the floor. The sound was so loud and clear that it made the four of them burst into laughter simultaneously. Jiseok laughing about how it hurt made the laughter even bigger.

"It's so good here. This place is really relaxing," Yoojin said as she lay on her side.

As she scanned the futon laid out on the floor, her eyes looked like they were filled with trouble in contrast to her words. It seemed like her eyes were saying what she couldn't say with her mouth. When Maru unintentionally focused on her, a speech bubble popped up above her head – Maru, I'm so frustrated.

"Did something happen?" Maru asked.

Since he found out, he couldn't just turn a blind eye to it. As most worries tend to be resolved just by listening, it would help her calm down if he created an atmosphere where she could talk.

"I don't think I showed it."

"It just felt like it."

"If I think about it now, you always felt like you could see into people's hearts."

Yoojin sat up. A lock known as hesitation firmly sealed her smiling lips. Maru exchanged gazes with Gaeul. They may be friends, but it could be that she was having a hard time talking about it in front of men. Gaeul grabbed Yoojin's hand and took her to the bedroom. From how she obediently followed, it seemed that she was going to talk about it.

"Was she looking to drink today for a reason? I was wondering if something might have happened since her face didn't look too well, but it looks like I was right," Jiseok said, looking at Yoojin with pity as she went to the bedroom.

"You noticed?"

"Somewhat. But I couldn't pinpoint anything like you did. What about you, did you hear anything? It's curious that you noticed it immediately."

"Well, it was a coincidence for me. Maybe I just had an easier time noticing it because it has been such a long time since we last met."

Jiseok nodded in understanding.

"But I wonder what happened that made that girl act like that. She should have revealed most things thanks to the alcohol, but the fact that she's hiding it even now feels like it's something serious."

"If it's something that she can tell us, I guess we can hear it through Gaeul too."

Jiseok lay down on the sofa.

"I hope it's nothing much."

"True."

Maru lay down on the floor as he replied. He could faintly hear the two people conversing inside the living room.

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"What do you think about women who sell their bodies?"

What Yoojin brought up was totally unexpected. Gaeul was unable to speak easily. This was not a question that she could answer easily. All sorts of thoughts overlapped on top of Yoojin's face. By selling their bodies, did she mean what Gaeul was thinking of? If so, why would she ask such a question? Was she suffering because of something that happened because of inevitable circumstances?

"Wait. You seem to have the misunderstanding that it's about me, but it's not."

Yoojin stroked down her face, saying that she was sorry for saying that out of nowhere.

"Can you keep it a secret?"

"Unless you want me to, I will never tell another soul about it."

"Thanks for saying that. Now, where should I start? I keep feeling like I'm going to cry. I never knew something like that would happen to me."

"Did it happen to a friend of yours?"

"A friend? If it was a friend, I would have told her to snap out of it. It happened to someone much closer to me than that. No, rather than 'happened', 'causing' is the right word for it."

Yoojin bit her thumb. That was a habit that Gaeul hadn't seen after high school. From what she heard, Yoojin's mother told her that it was ugly and that she should fix it, which she did, but from how her old habits were coming out subconsciously, it seemed that she was mentally driven into a corner. Gaeul gave her sufficient time so that she could organize her thoughts.

"You know what kind of person my mom is, right?"

"I'm not sure in what context you're asking, but I do know that she's an amazing person."

"You're right. She's a really amazing person. Whether it's business or forming connections, she has never tasted failure. She was my pride ever since I was young. You know how you feel out of place and even get bullied for being raised in a single-parent household, right? But nothing like that happened to me. I had a mother who could fill in the role of father. Not only that, she stayed close to my dad even

after getting divorced and allowed me to meet him frequently. She was the perfect person. It even made me think that I would be able to live like her as long as I chased her back.”

Yoojin’s words were filled with deep regret. Gaeul thought about Yoojin and her mother whom she saw at their shop. Just as Yoojin said, she admired her mother. She would follow her mother’s words without suspicion, and even if she was scolded, she would grumble but would try to understand her, thinking that she had deep meanings. Gaeul thought that the relationship between the mother and daughter was cool, but on one hand, was worried that Yoojin might be too reliant on her mother’s words. She thought that Yoojin had safely graduated from her mother’s bosom after seeing that she no longer showed any hints of that, but now, it seemed like while she received a diploma, she still remained under the umbrella known as her parent.

“The fact that I dreamed of becoming an actor was also thanks to my mother. As she had connections to many celebrities, I was able to see many famous actors since I was young, and when I showed off my acting to them as a show of sorts, I heard that I was talented. It was fun doing it too. I was even more motivated when mom told me that I should do my best. Looking back now, I might have lived my life as my mother said from A to Z. It’s the same with the stylist work I’m doing now. It might look like I’m doing it because it suits me, but if I think about it carefully, mom definitely had an influence.”

Yoojin clenched her pants.

“I’m not saying that I hate it. I mean, I am doing well after I listened to my mother, aren’t I? I would definitely have come across failures if I tried to do something on my own. Mom was never wrong, and following mom’s words will make everything go smoothly was at the crux of my life until now, but....”

“Did something happen?”

Yoojin nodded heavily.

“I asked you, didn’t I? About what you think about women who sell their bodies. Personally, I don’t want to understand those people. Yes, I’m sure they must have their circumstances. I’m sure there are people who entered that business due to inevitable circumstances. If they were coerced to do it, then I would pity them. I can help them too. The problem... is that my mom is creating such women.”

Gaeul felt as though the room darkened in an instant. She quickly reached out and grabbed Yoojin’s hand. She felt like Yoojin was going to disappear like an extinguished flame if she didn’t.

“When I first found out, I couldn’t believe it. Mom was my hero in life. She was an iron woman who did not know failure. She might be stern and old-fashioned in certain aspects, but I thought that she would never do something evil. But I was wrong. There were numerous women under her. My mother is the procuress. I don’t know when it all started. I only found out about it recently.”

“Yoojin. Isn’t there some kind of misunderstanding? What if you are mistaken about things?”

“I wished that to be the case and investigated several times. From young, mom and I never entered each other’s room without permission. That continued all the way until now. That was mom’s rule, and I followed it. But ever since I found that out, I sneaked into her room. That was when I was convinced. There were records of trading people on her second phone like she was trading items. I had a look at her laptop as well. It was password-locked, but funnily enough, it was my birthday, you know? My hands

were shaking when I unlocked it. There was a single folder on the desktop, and when I clicked on it, there were a bunch of photos under the name of 'profiles'. Photos of girls around my age with their breasts out."

Gaeul was unable to say anything. She couldn't even say a word of consolation and could only hug Yoojin. Her head blanched. She could neither swear at Yoojin's mother with her nor scold Yoojin for anything.

"When did you find out?"

"It's been about three months."

"You kept it a secret until now?"

"I couldn't tell that to anyone. Every single day was horrific. I was disgusted that my mother did such things, but I wasn't able to say anything. After some time passed, I became numb to it. I was disgusted at myself when I realized that. I hated myself for not being able to say anything despite knowing that mom was clearly in the wrong, and also for just smiling like an idiot. I resolved myself hundreds of times that I should talk to her seriously about it, but I never managed to. Mom is too big of an existence for me."

Gaeul patted Yoojin's back. She had never shown it until now. Even when they chatted over the messenger, and when she sent photos of her working, there was only a smile on her face. But it turned out that her smile was nothing more than decoration. Gaeul should have realized this when Yoojin emptied her glasses strangely quickly, despite knowing that she preferred to take things slow. Yoojin was drinking in order to force down the words that were encroaching her throat.

"I'll help you. Ask me anything. I might not be able to help you much, but if you need my help, I will do my absolute best."

After sobbing, Yoojin raised her head before smiling awkwardly. Yoojin looked so pitiful trying to say that she was okay.

"I thought you'd say something like that. But it's fine. This isn't something that anyone can do anything about. Above all, my mom will be harmed if you do something, right? I can't do that. I can't ruin the life she lived until now."

"Yoojin."

"I know that I'm wrong. I also want mom to take her hands off that business. But I don't have the courage to tell her myself. But I can't make other people go after her for it. Everything will just work normally as long as I stay oblivious, won't it? I shouldn't have gone to mom's room that day. I only found out that day the reason mom never came into my room without my permission, and likewise, did not allow me to go to her room without permission. Sometimes, there are just things that you're better off not knowing. Mom found that out when she was young."

"Are you going to continue staying oblivious forever? You know you can't do things like that. It's only an excuse when you said that you became numb to it. You're here crying while talking to me about it. Now might be the chance. The more you hide it, the harder it will be to talk about it later. You know well that

secrets that are easy to break like eggs will turn into concrete later and that you won't be able to do anything about it."

"You're a good girl after all. How good would it be if I were you? If I was, then the moment I saw those photos on her laptop, no, the moment I started having doubts, I would have talked to mom about it. But you see, I'm Lee Yoojin, not Han Gaeul. I know in my head what the correct answer is, but my body just won't listen to me. I'm scared that she might turn her back on me after I talk to her about it. I'm more afraid of her becoming distant than her doing something illegal."

How was Gaeul supposed to get through to someone with a different set of ideals? To Yoojin, the fence known as her mother might be taller than a castle. Gaeul almost told her that she was foolish, that it was her duty to right the wrongs, but she did not talk about it. Yoojin was a precious friend. Precisely because she cherished her, it was hard for her to say those words – which would be nothing but violence to her. She did not want to treat it like a small problem either since she had such a hard time talking about it. Gaeul knew the fear of becoming distant from someone. She tried projecting Maru and herself into Yoojin's situation. If Maru was willingly doing something illegal, and their relationship might collapse if she pointed that out, would she be able to tell him that he should upkeep the law? Gaeul didn't have the confidence to do so.

"You are thinking I'm foolish for acting like this, aren't you?"

"No, I understand you. It just means that you cherish your mother that much."

"I didn't need to ask for help from anyone. It's clear what I need to do. I'm simply afraid of the aftermath that will overwhelm me. I don't want to lose my mom. Mom is a strong woman. She didn't have a shred of hesitation when she got divorced from dad. I knew that her own path was the most important to her. The moment I tell her that she should reconsider, mom will probably tell me that it's time that we went our separate ways. I wouldn't be able to endure that."

Yoojin stood up after wiping her eyes with her hand. She fanned her reddened face with her hand.

"I'm acting too shameful, aren't I? It's nothing worth crying about."

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

"Sorry. I feel like I just made you worry. I was going to hold it in, but it just came to my mind when I felt relaxed. But still, it's very refreshing now that I talked about it. I think I can hold it back in the future."

"So, are you going to continue pretending to be oblivious?" Gaeul asked.

Yoojin did not answer.

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"Are you okay with that? I'm honestly worried about you. I feel like you'll suffer even more. No, I'm sure you will."

"Sure I will. I thought I became numb to it, but I'm still bawling my eyes out over it."

Yoojin sighed and sat on the bed. Her cute face had turned into a mess because of tears and worries. She knew clearly what she had to do, but the reality that she couldn't do it was making her suffer.

“If it’s okay with you, why don’t you get the opinion of the two people outside? I’m sure both Maru and Jiseok will seriously listen to your words and think about it. Of course, if you don’t want to, I will not tell the two of them what I heard just now.”

What Yoojin needed was motivation and courage. As long as she was given the opportunity to straighten up and redefine this twisted relationship between parent and child, Yoojin should be able to do it well. It wasn’t like she didn’t know what the problem was after all.

Yoojin stared at the door for a while.

“Those two can be trusted. But no matter what I hear, I don’t think I’ll change my mind. It’s just so hard to think about a life without mom.”

Yoojin stood up after calming down. It seemed that she was willing to talk to them about it. Gaeul followed her out to the living room where she saw the two men sitting on the sofa without even turning on the TV. They were probably waiting for the conversation inside to end.

“Looking at you, it looks like I should be listening,” Jiseok said as he came down from the sofa.

Maru immediately turned on the kettle after noticing that Yoojin wasn’t looking good, saying that she should talk about it while drinking something warm. The sweet fragrance of hot chocolate spread inside the living room. Yoojin picked up the mug and drank carefully. Gaeul carefully watched her as she did so.

“Don’t stare at me too much. It’s too much for me.”

“I won’t, so tell me what happened.”

Yoojin faintly smiled at his words. After drinking a few more sips, Yoojin talked about what she said inside the bedroom. The expressions of the men turned more and more serious as the story progressed.

“That’s bad.”

Those were the first words that came out of Jiseok’s mouth as soon as the story ended. The two men weren’t able to easily give advice either. It was natural since it wasn’t something that a word of advice could resolve. It was Jiseok who broke the silence that felt incredibly long, despite being a short time. He talked to Yoojin to calm her down. Yoojin also replied obediently unlike usual, looking like she was organizing her thoughts.

Maru, who Gaeul expected to come up with a pinpoint resolution, was staying silent with an expression even more serious than Yoojin’s. He scratched his eyebrows and rubbed his mouth several times while Jiseok and Yoojin had a conversation. It didn’t feel like she could talk to him. She could only wait until those firmly sealed lips parted on their own, making her feel nervous. Perhaps, in a corner of her heart, she might have been expecting Maru to resolve this easily. The longer the silence became, the more realistic the severity of the issue felt. It wasn’t just a matter of a relationship between a parent and a child, it involved illegal dealings as well.

“Yoojin. Have you ever seen your mother meet a man named Hong Janghae? Or have you seen that name on a text or any of those profiles?” Maru asked.

Everyone had been staring at Maru for a few minutes now, so it finally felt like she could take a breather. But Hong Janghae? Unless it was a different man with the same name, that should be the name of Seoul's president. Why would that name pop up here?

"Hong Janghae?"

Yoojin's eyes widened after tilting her head. Her expression gave away the answer already. Maru nodded before picking up his phone and standing up.

"Wait a sec. I need to check something."

* * *

Dongwook, who was just about to step outside his room to smoke, was stopped by the phone loudly ringing on his desk. He grabbed his phone after putting a cigarette in his mouth. Maru was the one who called.

"What is it at this hour?"

-Were you sleeping?

"No, things didn't work out that well, so I was dazing out in a motel. It sure is hard chasing after a man all the way in Busan. So what's up?"

-There's something I need to check. That Mari person. She was in Japan before she came to Korea, right?

"Yes. What about it?"

-Can I know the name of the person in charge of Miss Mari back then? They shouldn't have let her roam around freely, so there must have been someone in charge.

Dongwook left the motel while dragging his slippers. The motel was in an urban area, so there were many people around even though it was late at night. He got past the cars coming into the motel and lit up his cigarette.

"That's that damned Hong Janghae. And Lee Miyoan in Korea."

-Don't you think there must be someone who carried out Hong Janghae's orders?

"If you're talking about that, then yes. There's a madam involved. In Korea, Lee Miyoan and Hong Janghae were nearly on equal footing, but in Japan, it felt like Hong Janghae had complete superiority."

-Can I know who this madam was?

Dongwook puffed his cigarette deeply before throwing it away. The questions were turning more and more detailed.

"Did you catch a clue?"

-For now, please check on your side first. This is a sensitive topic, so I can't really talk about it first.

"Alright. Wait a sec."

After hanging up, Dongwook returned to the motel room and browsed through his notepad. It contained the information he got from Mari, and unfortunately, the madam's name wasn't there. It was only written as 'madam' as she was the middle woman. He gave a call to Mari. Even after a long time, she didn't pick up. Had she fallen asleep already? Just as he was about to call Maru again after leaving a message, Mari's name popped up on his screen.

-Mister?

"Miss Mari, I'm sorry. I called you because I had something to ask."

-Not at all. But what do you mean something to ask?

"You told me that there's a woman in Japan who played the role of the madam in Japan, right? The one you said got to know about in Korea and called unni."

-Yes.

"What was her name?"

-We didn't call each other by name. We just called her the big unni. We never revealed our names either. It was a world where it was natural to call even close co-workers by their nicknames. Of course, the madam-unni knew all of our real names.

"You don't know her name, huh."

Maru seemed to want confirmation of her identity. He definitely seemed to be onto something, too. Did he have to invest some time into identifying this madam?

-I don't know her name, but I know what she does. I heard from an unni that she runs a hair shop when I worked in Korea. Of course, this might not be true. With the risks involved in the job, everyone refrains from revealing their identity.

"A hair shop, you say?"

-I heard that it's a pretty famous hair shop in Cheongdam-dong.

"Thank you. I might be giving you a call later, so please stay up for a while."

-Okay. Uhm, did you find oppa?

"Right now, I came down to Busan and even went to the labor office that he supposedly works in, but I couldn't spot him. There's the likelihood that he might go missing again if I asked around, so I returned for the time being. I'm planning to blend in with the people looking for work tomorrow."

-Please find him. Also, tell him that I'm waiting for him.

"I'll also tell him that you love him. Alright, anyway, stay up for a little while. I'll call you back after checking something."

Dongwook called Maru again.

-Did you confirm it with her?

"I did ask, but it's not a field where people reveal their real names, so the middle woman was just called madam."

-I see, so it's like that after all.

"But it's not like I had no results at all. Miss Mari told me that the woman called madam runs a famous hair shop in Cheongdam-dong. It might not be the truth, but it's something I got from her."

-Did she specifically say a hair shop in Cheongdam-dong?

"Yeah. From how you're asking back, you seem to be onto something. Am I wrong?"

-I'll contact you again in just a minute.

"I don't know what it's about, but be quick. I need to go out early in the morning."

-Okay.

Dongwook threw himself on the bed with his phone in hand.

* * *

The puzzle pieces unpleasantly fell into all the right places. Maru rubbed his phone. It was as clear as day and looked like there was no need to check at all, but he couldn't afford to not confirm with such a serious matter like this. He went to the veranda, leaving behind the three people staring at him. He looked up the hair shop that Yoojin's mother ran. He screenshotted a photo of the introduction of the director and sent it to Dongwook via a messenger, asking him if this was that person.

A moment later, Dongwook texted him back.

-I showed it to Miss Mari, and yes, that's her. This person is the madam who joined hands with Hong Janghae and is managing all the girls. But how did you know about this woman?

He got confirmation. Maru sent back a text telling him that he would talk about the details tomorrow. He put his arms against the banister with his phone in hand. The night wind was so cold that he could feel his body temperature dropping, yet the heat in his head did not cool down at all. Someone totally unexpected was involved in this. A middle woman, huh? The more progress he and Dongwook made in this matter, the tighter the death grip would become around Yoojin's mother. Perhaps the quick-witted Hong Janghae might make Yoojin's mother the scapegoat and escape. He was a devious man, so he might have finished his preparations already.

Maru turned around to look at the living room. He could see the three people staring holes through him through the window, especially Yoojin. He was in a situation where he should be asking her the details of the matter and asking her for help. The problem was whether Yoojin would cooperate or not. She was someone who couldn't even imagine going against her mother, so how would she react after finding out the truth? She would probably call her mother immediately and tell her to stop because it was dangerous; that she should wrap up since a certain journalist was investigating her.

Yoojin's mother had to be a stepping stone. If she slipped away like that, it would be difficult to reach Hong Janghae. It was even harder to let her go since she might be a witness that might have a point of contact with Lee Miyoon. Maru looked at Yoojin. He had to understand her psychology perfectly. Did

she reveal what she was thinking purely because she wanted to lighten the load on her heart? Or was she hoping that someone would persuade her? If she had already made a decision to never betray her mother... then he might have to hide this matter.

Things were going in a really uninteresting direction. Maru bit his lips and went back inside.

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“What was that call about?” Gaeul asked as she looked at Maru who sat down.

Maru was cautiously on a long phone call ever since he asked Yoojin about Hong Janghae. There was no way he randomly mentioned someone completely unrelated to this topic. She wondered what Maru said to whoever it was over the phone.

“Someone I know is investigating something, and he ran into a similar situation as this one so I asked just in case.”

“Something similar?”

“It’s a little complicated to explain. But it’s not a big deal.”

Gaeul felt a sense of disparity while looking at Maru smiling. He seemed to be hiding something important. Whether it was his expression, action, or the tone of his words, they were all calm and made it seem like nothing big was going on, but she was strangely concerned about them. Yoojin and Jiseok both nodded and took their attention away from him, but Gaeul narrowed her eyes and observed him. She locked eyes with him just as she was drinking. He was smiling nonchalantly. Seeing Maru ask her if there was anything she wanted to know, Gaeul intuitively realized that he was hiding something. Something that he could not say out loud.

“I’m going to keep watching mom. Who knows, she might quit tomorrow. I don’t think mom’s a foolish person. Right now, she’s involved in that kind of business for some reason, but I’m sure she knows it’s not an upright thing to do. I’m sure she’ll do well without me having to tell her about it.”

Meanwhile, Yoojin was talking about the conclusion she came down to in the bedroom once again. Not going against her mother was Yoojin’s ultimatum and plan. That would not change no matter who it was that tried to persuade her.

“Then I guess there’s no choice. It’s not like we can tell you to do something. If you decided to do that, then we have no choice but to watch what happens,” Maru replied.

“You think I’m pathetic, don’t you?”

“If you came to a decision, then you can’t call that pathetic. You came to that conclusion after thinking hard about it, didn’t you?”

“I know it’s empty words, but it’s still consoling to hear that.”

“That’s good. Oh, let me ask just in case: you will never change your mind, will you?”

“Probably not. I just can’t imagine myself going against my mother. I don’t think I can endure whether it’s going my separate way from mom because I said something to her or her looking at me like she can’t understand. I know it might look frustrating to you, but this is how I honestly feel.”

Maru concluded the conversation with a nod. He looked like he took his hands off this matter. On one hand, he looked like he respected Yoojin’s wishes, and on the other hand, he looked like he had given up early since it would not matter no matter what he would say. Gaeul fidgeted with her hand hidden under the blanket. That was just like Maru. He was not someone who would passionately persuade others to do something. Other than a few exceptions, his motto was that he should not get deeply involved with someone else’s life matters. Accepting and putting it aside was extremely natural for him. However, for some reason, it kept tugging on her heart. She felt like a fish bone was stuck in her throat. It would naturally disappear with time, but just like how the bone would express its presence the more she focused, Maru’s actions, words, and questions made her feel uncomfortable.

“Maru, wait.”

Gaeul stood up and pointed at the bedroom. Maru only blinked and did not stand up. Being the smart man he was, he seemed to have noticed what she would ask from him inside the bedroom already.

“Let’s talk a little,” she said with a little emphasis.

She entered the bedroom after telling Yoojin and Jiseok to talk for a while. Maru followed her in and closed the door.

“You know why I called you here, right?”

“Not at all – would you believe me if I said that?”

Gaeul gestured towards the bed with her chin. This didn’t look like it would take a short time and could be finished up while standing. She could hear the TV being turned on outside. They were probably watching TV since Yoojin’s matters had been resolved somewhat. Maru sat down next to her. She waited until he spoke first,

“I suddenly feel nervous like I’m at a job interview.”

“So you did something wrong?”

“Does it look like that?”

“What in the world are you thinking about? I did call you because I found it strange, but I don’t really know for sure.”

“Did I act unnatural?”

“No, you were perfectly Han Maru. The questions and your solutions were just like you. But something kept catching my eye, telling me that there was something more than just that. I’ll apologize if it’s actually nothing much. I might be overthinking things since this concerns Yoojin, but if it’s not like that, I hope you can tell me about it.”

“A woman’s intuition sure is amazing.”

Maru locked his hands and placed them on his lap. He started talking as he looked straight forward. Listening to the story that was not too long, Gaeul went from surprise to anger, before ultimately chiding Maru.

“You tried to reach Hong Janghae using Yoojin’s mother as a foothold?”

“I know how much Yoojin cherishes her mother, so she would probably tell her mother to stop first if she finds out about the danger. If Yoojin’s mother takes her hands off this business, Hong Janghae will also have no choice but to decrease his range of action, so there would be less chance of catching any clues about him.”

“If I didn’t ask you, would you have driven Yoojin’s mother into a corner after your preparation are done?”

“Our aim is Hong Janghae and his backer, so we won’t drive her back too harshly. We’ll probably ask for her cooperation. Though, we look for another method if things don’t go that well.”

“What do you think would have happened to Yoojin if something bad happened to her mother? She’s someone who’s having a hard time just thinking about it. I’m sure someone like you could predict what would happen to her if she sees her mother collapsing in front of her very eyes.”

“Sometimes, things are just inevitable. I don’t really care what Yoojin’s mother does, but if someone I know is involved in it, then I should think about the severity of both sides.”

Maru’s eyes looked cold and dark – something that she had seen several times. They looked like they would steal the warmth of anything that fell in their path. It was heartbreaking. Thanks to Maru’s story, she was able to see that Lee Miyoon was on the line in the process of chasing Hong Janghae. Maru was helping journalist Kim Dongwook for her sake, even if the consequences may involve harming Yoojin’s mother.

“Yoojin is my friend.”

Maru replied that she was also his friend.

“I don’t want to see Yoojin suffering. I know that what Yoojin’s mother is doing is wrong. I sympathize with the fact that she should be stopped. That’s why I plan to persuade her slowly so that she can straighten out the wrongs herself. Only then will Yoojin be able to overcome the situation she’s in. She has to accept the situation and approach her mother with courage in order to straighten out her relationship with her mother. I believe that Yoojin will be able to graduate from her mother’s shadow in that process. And she has to.”

“You’re entirely right. I wish we could do it like that.”

“Then why are you waiting? I’ll try to persuade her as fast as possible.”

Maru sighed softly.

“I told you. This is being carried out by someone who has received suffering that’s incomparable to mine. I’m only helping out from the side too. If it was me, I would be able to wait if you told me to. Like you said, doing things your way will allow Yoojin to gain emotional stability. But I cannot outright tell that hyung-nim to wait.”

“Can’t you ask just once?”

After scratching his eyebrows, Maru started talking about the things he didn’t need to before; he talked about what happened to the person who investigated Hong Janghae’s back for the sake of an actress who was sacrificed in a prostitution incident, for the sake of justice, and for the sake of journalism. Gaeul was unable to close her mouth when she heard that such a person was socially eradicated, and that person even attempted to commit suicide.

“I can’t bear to tell that hyung-nim that we should just let Yoojin’s mother go just because she’s the mother of a friend of mine. That person is investigating this matter with half of his life on the line. The only thing I can tell someone like that is some information and to be careful.”

Funnily enough, a part of her agreed to Maru’s words. Wanting to look after Yoojin and empathy towards that female journalist was equal. Putting aside personal feelings, it was natural to help that journalist. Whether it was reason, justification, or justice, everything was on the journalist’s side. There was only one reason that Yoojin’s mother shouldn’t be hurt – it was because Yoojin would feel sad. Her reason whispered to her that that was nothing compared to the sorrow of someone who tried to end her own life under the pressure of power.

“But if you still want me to tell him, then I’ll try. I don’t know how he’ll act though.”

“How can I ask you to do it after listening to all this?”

“That was why I stayed quiet. There is only one conclusion, and it’ll be better if I’m the only bad guy.”

“You always did things like that.”

“I can’t help it.”

Maru was smiling, which was frustrating to her.

“You aren’t spending some sweet time in there, are you?” Just then, Jiseok’s shout could be heard.

It had been nearly 30 minutes since they entered the bedroom. Gaeul wiped her eyes with her palms, feeling like she would tear up if she didn’t do anything.

“The only thing I can do is to tell Yoojin carefully so that she can prepare. Of course, whether you tell her this or not is up to you.”

“You know I can’t say it to her, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Did she have to hide the truth from Yoojin and have her prepare for the shock just like Maru said? If things did go the way he explained, then many people, including Hong Janghae, would be punished under the law. Yoojin’s mother, who played the role of the procuress, would end up serving a sentence in prison, and Yoojin would blame herself for it. After all, she knew that she should have stopped her early on.

Gaeul felt complicated. This problem involved the family of a friend of hers and the thick resentment of a person. Those two couldn't be separated cleanly, so she couldn't see a clear solution to this. So this was why Maru chose to stay quiet.

"It would've been great if Yoojin's mother didn't do something like that in the first place."

"You can't revert something that has already happened."

"I know. What has happened cannot be reverted nor changed."

Gaeul stood up from the bed. In order to protect her friend, the only thing she could do was to help her from the side starting now so that she could maintain a firm will. It would be hard for the time being if she refreshed Yoojin of the fact that her mother might be arrested, but that would lessen the shock if it happens for real. Just as she was about to tell Maru that they should leave,

"Changed, huh," Maru suddenly tapped on his knees with his index finger while muttering those words.

After tapping a few times, he stood up abruptly. Then he approached her and hugged her.

"If Muse does exist, then you would be one."

"What is it?"

"I don't know if it would work out or not, but thanks to you, I thought of an idea."

Having backed off from her, Maru had a deeper smile than ever.

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"What do you mean change?"

"It's just like it sounds. As long as we change the person, we can solve it smoothly. Perhaps it'll be even better."

"Change the person? You said it'll take a long time to persuade Yoojin, so that wasn't an opinion. Heck, if a person can be changed with words, we wouldn't have this problem in the first place."

"Right. It's difficult to persuade Yoojin. She will not be able to accept harming her mother or saying something to her. That's why we'll change the target. Instead of Yoojin's mother, we'll put Lee Miyoong in that spot as the middlewoman."

"Change her to Lee Miyoong?"

Gaeul thought back to what she had just heard. If she wasn't wrong, Lee Miyoong had already lost all support. The reason she lost her restraint and caused a ruckus recently was also because she had been thrown away. Switching Yoojin's mother out with Lee Miyoong would be the same as returning her authority back to her, and Gaeul didn't think that that was something that an outsider could do.

"If we fan Lee Miyoong's desperation, we might see a way. It might not go the way we expect it to, but we should try to do something."

It was unknown if it would work or not, but Gaeul felt relieved that Maru found a way. Due to that relief, her knees gave way after being tense all this time. Gaeul sat down on the bed. She was just catching her

breath when she heard Yoojin's laughter. It seemed that something funny appeared on TV, and she seemed to be laughing more exaggeratedly since she felt sorry for stiffening up the mood. It was great that Jiseok was there to follow up. Had she been left by herself, she might have started thinking about bad things, but Jiseok seemed to be consoling her quite well. The two of them always growled at each other every time they met, but they seemed to be more worried about each other than anyone else. Though, it didn't seem like they would ever develop past the point of being friends.

There was a solution, and there was laughter. Perhaps thanks to feeling relaxed after being tense all this while, Gaeul felt the word 'responsibility' fill her head when she had been trying to ignore it all this time. Yoojin was a friend of hers, and she thought that it was natural for her to think that her friend should not suffer. Anyone would think like that after all. However, was it a good thing to just let Yoojin's mother be free for a reason like that when she was involved in illegal trade? Maru said he would switch her out. If things go well, would that mean she would lose all charges against her?

Gaeul didn't think that putting Yoojin's mother on trial would make her relieved. It was simply a matter of conscience. Could she turn a blind eye to those crimes for the sake of lessening her friend's pain? Did she even have the right to do so?

"Did your sense of justice come back to you after all this time?" Maru asked as he crouched down in front of her.

Gaeul shook her head before eventually replying that it did.

"If your plans go well, Yoojin's mother will go scot-free, right?"

"If things go perfectly, it might be that way, but actually, I can't say anything for sure. It's true that she dipped her feet into this. If things really go well and all of the related personnel get investigated by the prosecutors, then she'll become a prime witness or a defendant. Still, that's a better option than being thoroughly investigated."

"So even if things go well, there's that possibility, huh."

"This is all just a hypothesis. There's the possibility that nothing might happen at all, and there's also the possibility that she might get investigated. We don't know what will happen tomorrow, much less what will come after that."

Maru grabbed her hand and continued,

"Honestly speaking, I don't really care about whether Yoojin's mother gets sued or if she gets excluded from the case without a charge. Anyone can end up doing bad things in life. If they don't get caught, that just means they are living an experienced life, and if they get caught, they'll just get punished for it. If a child teases another in jealousy, they'll get reprimanded. If you violate traffic signals just to go a little early, you'll have to pay fines. If you deal with the sexual trafficking business, you'll have to pay fines and serve sentences. If she did something that goes against the law in order to live a comfortable life in this world, then she must be prepared to get caught."

"True, but..."

"Also, South Korean law is very lenient and it is normal to receive a smaller sentence than what you deserve for your trade. That's why scams are everywhere. Yoojin's mother is a talented businesswoman.

She should not have dipped her hands into a business where she would make losses. She must have started that business because she judged that she would gain a lot of things even if she does get caught.”

It was a dilemma. The mind of the law-abiding citizen as well as her sympathy towards her friend clashed head-on. Her views on rights and wrongs directly contradicted her views on what she liked and what she didn't. Gaeul pondered about which way was the best way out.

“What are you going to tell Yoojin?”

“I'm going to tell her to help her mother.”

“What do you mean help?”

“Help her mother take her hands off that business. If we change the nuance of our words a little, Yoojin should accept it, readily. She should not go against her mother and try to guide her back to the right path, but she should help out since her mother might be put in danger.”

“Are you going to tell her that right now?”

“No, we should just sleep for the night. I'm going to talk about it after I set up everything so that Lee Miyoon can fill the blank left by Yoojin's mother taking her hands off the business.”

“That leaves me with one thing to do. I should help her so that she can power through no matter what happens.”

“Try talking about it starting tonight. If she can say that she cannot escape her mother's shadow, then it shows that she knows what the problem is. Knowing the problem also means that she can fix that problem. As long as you let her understand that children are supposed to become independent from their parents, she should widen her vision.”

Gaeul nodded. She could picture what would happen in the future. In the middle of that was the figure of a mother and daughter living as usual after having escaped the case contrasting the figure of her friend in pain as she looked at her mother enveloped in trouble.

“Honestly, I thought I would be able to cool-headedly report any wrongdoings no matter who did it. I believe that's the shortest path to righting what's wrong. But now that it's actually about a friend of mine, I'm thinking about whether there's an escape route first.”

“What can you do about it? That's just how people work.”

Maru patted her back. Gaeul calmed her breathing and left the bedroom.

* * *

“I guess not everything gets resolved cleanly in this world like it does in cartoons. But still, this incident might work in Yoojin's favor. It's about time she takes off her momma's girl badge.”

“If she looks like she's in pain later, you should look after her a little. I saw that Yoojin smiles a lot when you're the one talking.”

“That’s one hell of a difficult thing you’re asking me to do. Maru, you should pay money when you ask others to do something like that.”

Maru crossed his arms. After finishing off the warm honey tea he bought from the convenience store, the cold overwhelmed him once again. He didn’t plan on talking for long, so he only put on a cardigan before leaving. Had he known that it would be this cold, he would have put on a jumper instead.

“I wonder if the girls are sleeping now.”

Jiseok raised his head. He seemed to be counting the floors in the apartment. Maru turned around. The bedroom light was still on. It seemed that the ladies' talk was going to become deeper as well.

“But hey, it’s hard to time it right. That will only work if Lee Miyoon can fill in the vacancy right as Yoojin’s mother takes her hands off it, won’t it?”

“That’s why keeping up to date will be important. I’m sure Lee Miyoon wants to strike a blow on Hong Janghae. I think it might work if we tell her to bend her pride for the sake of revenge. After all, seeing how she’s acting lately, it looks like she places more importance on the power she lost to Hong Janghae than her own pride.”

“You’re right, that senior has become semi-crazy these days. There are rumors floating around that she might end up retiring as an actress soon.”

Maru threw the empty bottle in the trash. The plastic bottle hit the wall with a low thump before being tossed into the trash can.

“It’s a good thing instead. Hong Janghae is one thing, but I have business with Lee Miyoon. She might have been exempted from this case, but if we tie her in like this, she’ll get punished for sure.”

“You seem rather angry because of the scratch on Gaeul’s face.”

“Don’t even start. Gaeul appeared in front of me while calling me like it was no big deal, but she had a gauze attached to her face. I thought she got into an accident. But hey, who would’ve known that Lee Miyoon scratched her face with her bag?”

Jiseok crossed his arms.

“I heard from a friend of mine who was at the scene, and apparently, Gaeul was super serious that day. She got injured on her face, but she didn’t bat an eyelid and told senior Lee to obediently leave the set. Heck, she might have asked her to leave on the surface, but she basically told her to fuck off, right? Had it been anyone else, that person might have lowered themselves to ask if there was nothing wrong with the bag, but in that situation, she just erupted. Apparently, she even said that she would sue her for assault if she didn’t leave. That friend of mine said he felt like it was stress relief. Thanks to that, Gaeul is being treated like a hero on the set for Doctor’s Office.”

A hero, huh? Maru laughed out loud. He originally wanted to find out the details of the incident through Mijoo, but Gaeul seemed to have warned her heavily as he was unable to find out about anything. He did expect her to have responded boldly, but he did not imagine that she would boldly warn her in front of everyone else.

“She’s like that, but she can’t say it firmly since Yoojin’s involved in this. If you think about it, both you and Gaeul are similar in that aspect. You two are both incredibly harsh on yourselves but very generous towards others.”

“Me?”

“You aren’t?”

“Probably not. You probably think that because you’re a friend of mine.”

Jiseok clapped twice in realization.

“That’s true. I should stay close to you in the future too. I might get blown to smithereens without knowing anything if things don’t work out with you,” Jiseok said with a smile.

He then pointed at the apartment. When Maru looked around, he saw that the light in the bedroom had been turned off. It seemed that the ladies had gone to sleep after finishing their talk.

“It’s cold. Let’s go back too.”

Maru followed Jiseok, who stood up first, back to the apartment.

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When he wiped his snot, it became a layer of thin ice on the back of his hand before crumbling apart. It was so cold that insults were mixed with every white breath he breathed out. Dongwook approached the drum barrel where a small fire was lit up. As expected of the labor market which started off earlier than anywhere else, it was filled with people. Dongwook wasn’t new to this, so he didn’t look around awkwardly like a novice and put his hand between his crotch as he got some of the warmth from the fire.

Today was the fifth day already. Waking up early every morning according to the sound of the alarm felt terrible, but he had no choice in order to meet Mari’s man. He sniffled his snot that came out regardless of his will and had a look at the clock. According to some info that one of the private investigators found, Mari’s man was working in one of the labor markets in the Southern parts of Busan. He wished he could just search through everything, but if there were any watching eyes around the man, then his investigations until now would be for naught. He had already missed once too. The fact that he didn’t know what the man was thinking also tugged on his mind. Mari might be waiting for him dearly, but the man might have changed.

“God damn, it’s cold. If I had any money, I would’ve quit this job ages ago,” said a man wearing a black beanie.

Dongwook nodded. For him though, it would be Mari’s man that would make him quit this job. He had the desire to give that guy a big hug if he ever did find him. However, if he suffered a few more days under this freezing pain, he might slap the guy the moment he saw him.

Dongwook had another look at the photo of the man he got from Mari. He had seen him to death to the point that he would show up in his dreams, but he looked at the photo whenever he had the time. He didn’t even do this with his first love either.

“How’s it on your side?”

He got a call from a private investigator who was doing the same thing as him in another labor market. That private investigator had been waiting for two hours ever since 3 in the morning, but Dongwook was told in a tired voice that he did not find the man.

“You should get back inside and rest if you want to do the same thing again tomorrow.”

-You got anything? Even a feeling that something might happen?

“I’m not sure. My intuition seems to have frozen over as it won’t activate. Dammit, why couldn’t he go missing during warm springtime.”

-I’ll have another look around this place.

Dongwook hung up. It was good that he came to Busan following the information he got from the action leader, but the man’s following course of action was up in the air. He didn’t know whether the man felt a sense of danger to his safety, or was on orders, but when he arrived at Busan, the man had already switched to another office. That marked the start of searching through all the labor markets scattered throughout Busan. It was fortunate that he was able to narrow down the region to the Southern areas. Of course, on the off chance that there was something wrong with the information, some of the investigators were looking into the North, West, and East areas.

He suddenly became curious about the amount of money president Lee Junmin must be paying those people, but he soon dismissed the thought. He possessed an entire apartment ‘building’ with a view of the Han river. That alone was expensive enough that an ordinary salaryman could never hope to earn in a hundred lifetimes. He had heard a rumor that president Lee Junmin was a close confidante of the president of the country, and it probably was true.

Just then, a van came over with the high beams on. The people gathered in front of the drum barrel immediately scurried over to the van.

“Two for ductwork.”

Many of the people gathered raised their hands. There was no mention of pay or the place they would be working in, but people tried their best to get picked. A man holding a ledger scanned around before picking two men at the front. He gave them a 500 won coin each and told them to wait while drinking some coffee.

“Two for plasterwork.”

“Three for setting beams.”

“Five for menial work.”

After selling the work positions like an auction, the man left in the van with the ones he picked. The remaining people returned to the drum barrel. After that, something similar occurred many more times. The people who weren’t picked looked up at the sky towards the east. The labor market would end once the sun was up.

So today was a dud too, and he started feeling hungry. It seemed that he would have to visit various labor work offices after getting something to eat once the sun rose. He did wait for a little more since he heard that the man might show up while driving, but this might as well be finding Mr. Kim in the middle of Seoul....

Just as many people started leaving, thinking that there was no more for today, another van slowly entered the clearing. That was probably the last van. Dongwook also pulled his clothes tighter before approaching the van. A man in his middle forties got out of the van. From his hairstyle to his facial shape, he had zero similarities to Mari's man, not that he had a need to look at that man since he was clearly in his forties.

With the final bit of his hope, he walked around to the front of the van. It was time to have a look at the one in the driver's seat. A man who had a blue towel wrapped around his head was fidgeting with his phone with his head down. It was a feature phone. Dongwook slowly approached the driver's seat. The man who had his head down seemed to have been bothered by the reflecting headlights and raised his head. He was quite handsome considering that he was just driving a van in a place like this. He was also Mari's man that Dongwook had been looking for all this time.

Dongwook tapped on the window. The man looked around before scrolling the window down.

"Uhm, can you tell the leader on the other side to use me?"

"Mister, don't do this and just raise your hand over there. I don't have any power."

"Now, now, don't say that."

Dongwook grinned and quickly scanned the man's wrist. Mari said that she and her boyfriend made a matching bracelet. He found a bracelet around the man's left arm. It was a bracelet made from braided pink threads. It was the same bracelet that Mari showed him. The fact that a man clad in black from top to bottom had a pink bracelet meant quite a lot.

When he took out a ten thousand won bill and gave it to the man, the man frowned and flicked his hand away. Dongwook intentionally hooked his finger into the bracelet the moment the man tried to do so, enough to break the bracelet if he tried hard enough.

"Hey! If this snapped off, I would have killed you."

"Why are you so hung up on a cheap bracelet? You're making me embarrassed."

The man scrolled up his window, saying that he didn't want to deal with a crazy man. Seeing his reaction, he seemed to cherish the bracelet quite a lot, meaning that he still had Mari in his heart.

"Finally, I'll pick three men with quite a bit of experience."

A voice could be heard from the other side of the van. It seemed that they were going to leave soon. Dongwook called Mari on his phone. She picked up immediately as she had been staying up all night just like him.

"I'll give him the phone so talk to him. Tell him you love him, that you miss him, and that you want to see him, things like that."

Dongwook tapped on the window again. The man glared at him. When he tapped a few more times with a pleading look, he sighed and scrolled the window down again. Dongwook handed the man the phone under a ten thousand won bill with a phone number written on it.

“You should pick up that phone.”

“What are you doing?”

“It’s the person you want to see. Don’t show it on your face.”

The man, who seemed suspicious of him, looked around in wariness before picking up the call. Soon, his eyes widened. His stiff expression softened up immediately. The man didn’t say anything; he only repeatedly said ‘yes, ‘yes’ with a teary voice. Dongwook reached his hand out. The man who was selecting people from the other side of the van was approaching. Mari’s boyfriend quickly handed him back the phone.

“What are you doing?” asked the middle-aged man.

Before Dongwook could reply, Mari’s boyfriend replied instead,

“This mister is giving me money so that I can refer him to you.”

The middle-aged man laughed before looking through his ledger.

“What can you do? We do have a welding job open.”

Dongwook waved his hand in the air in dismissal.

“I don’t want something like that. Can’t I get an easy job where I just clean some trash?”

“You seem to be a novice. Got laid off? You still seem young though. Don’t come to places like this and use your experiences to get a proper job. Once you start this job, you’ll never escape it.”

Dongwook nodded and turned around. Mari’s man was very quick-witted, so he should probably keep the number written on that bill. The only thing left now was to wait. Once he was done with his business, he would probably call Dongwook of his own accord. If he didn’t, well, that would indicate that he gave up on this.

“Miss Mari. Was that him?”

-Yes, it was. His voice sounds a little soft like he’s caught a cold, but that’s definitely him.

“Then I’ve done my part of the deal, right? I’ll wait for your boyfriend for a few days in Busan. If he calls me and we meet, I’ll bring him to you, and if he doesn’t, I’ll go back by myself. You know what that means, right?”

-Yes. I promised after all. I’ll help you regardless of what decision oppa makes.

Mari was filled with vitality from just calling him. Dongwook decided to give her another piece of hope.

“Your boyfriend was wearing that pink bracelet. He seems to be cherishing it.”

-Really?

“Yes. He probably didn’t forget about you. You should wait for a little.”

-I don’t know how to thank you for this.

“We’re just starting off, so save your thanks for later. I’ll hang up now. I need to get some rest. You should get some rest too, Miss Mari. You’ve done a good job.”

This trip to Busan felt like it would take forever, but it came to a closure after merely five days. The only thing left now was to wait a few days and wait for the man’s call. Dongwook looked at the van going off into the distance. It was very rare for a youngster to use a feature phone in an era like this. Should he think that there were still prying eyes around? Since there was a history of him being dragged by gangsters and even locked up, he probably couldn’t make a move so easily.

Dongwook notified the private investigators that the situation was closed for the time being. They were all just humans in the end, so they all rejoiced at the fact that they no longer had to deal with the freezing cold now. Those who had to go to Seoul left, while three of them decided to remain behind in Busan. If Mari’s boyfriend ever needed help, they would have to reach out to him after all.

He met a few roadblocks on the way, but ultimately, he was able to get his desired results. It would be great if everything else went like this. Dongwook recalled the conversation he had with Maru a few days ago. Maru suggested that they should reinstate Lee Miyoon, who was excluded from this case, back to the center of it. He wondered if it was possible, but after hearing Maru’s plans, it didn’t sound too bad. Cuffing Lee Miyoon was something very welcomed by him. Hong Janghae might have been the one who dragged his junior journalist to the edge of a cliff, but it was Lee Miyoon who pushed her off.

It was 4 minutes past 6. The dark skies started brightening up. The people gathered around the drum barrel started disappearing one after the other into the brightening skies. Dongwook joined that group. He finished his job, so he had to fill his stomach now.

Chapter 927. Crank Up 4

When he opened his eyes to the tickling sensation on his cheek, he saw that ‘Bullie’ had approached him and was rubbing his nose against him. Usually, Bullie never climbed up onto the bed, despite being quite spoiled, so it was quite a wonder. He sat up, feeling fatigued. Bullie lightly jumped off the bed. He looked at the wall where sunlight shone and checked the time. It was 11 a.m. It turned out he had slept so deeply that he forgot about his morning exercise. It was not surprising that Bullie climbed up onto the bed to wake him up. He was probably checking if his owner was dead since he would always feed him in the morning.

When he went to the living room, Woofie rushed up to him in an instant. After pouring some dog feed for the dogs asking him for food, he picked up his phone. It was flooded with photos sent by Gaeul. After a photo of her dipping her feet into a strangely green-colored sea was a photo where tropical fruits were piled up like a tower. She sent him photos of where she was, what she was doing, and what she was doing every hour like a civil servant reporting to her higher-ups. Maru felt like he would be in big trouble if he didn’t reply after reading it. Looks good, looks fun, looks delicious – was what he was going to use as replies before he ultimately decided to add some emojis into it. He originally wanted to send a long piece of text, but he felt like he would look old, so he changed it to short sentences.

Seeing her smile like usual, it seemed that she rather liked her paid vacation. He was inwardly worried because there were two annoying people mixed in the group, but it seemed that he was worried for nothing. Though, he shouldn't really be worried since she was someone who would reject anything that she didn't like without batting an eyelid. Apparently, Lee Miyoona was holed up in the hotel and Kang Giwoo was also maintaining a certain distance, so it should become a paid vacation without many problems.

When he showed the two dogs the photos with Gaeul in them, they jumped around in joy. Maru captured the dogs on video and sent them to her. After looking at the photos, he stood up. He put away the dog bowls and had a light breakfast.

-Have you eaten lunch?

"I just ate. I woke up late, so it was more like a brunch."

Byungchan had called him. He poured some water into a mug as he listened.

-The afterparty has been scheduled, so get ready for it.

"The afterparty? I'm invited?"

-Of course you are. We didn't get any calls until now, so I was worried if I had to give them a call myself, but we got one now, albeit a little late. It's in two days in Seoul, so don't schedule anything for that time.

"I don't have anything to do. But am I really allowed to go?"

-If you aren't going, then who will? Don't talk nonsense and wait at home. I'll go pick you up.

"It's right nearby, so I can drive there on my own."

-I'm bored. Also, I got orders. You know that actor who got exposed to the media for going rampant after getting drunk recently, right? I've gotten orders to drive the actors around as much as possible. Heck, we're on the lenient side. The agency next to us even put out a driving ban. Though, they're an idol agency.

"Then I guess I should comfortably get you to drive me after all this time."

-I'll give you a comfy ride so you should wait at the styling shop the day after tomorrow. I have work in the morning, so I can't give you a ride to the shop. There should be a stylist waiting for you there. You got some sponsored clothing too, so put that on.

"So someone has graciously sponsored me."

-I'm not sure if this is true or not, but the owner of that business apparently saw your video.

"Of the drama? Or the film?"

-The cute dance.

Maru laughed in absurdity.

"I should really stake my life to erase that video or something. At this rate, I'll be known as a comedic actor."

-You're gaining an image that you didn't have before, so be grateful. I thought you'd become popular since your name came on the search rankings when Doctors was trendy, but it cooled down in an instant. That's just the sorrow of an unpopular actor. It's a good thing to get yourself known like this, so if people ask you to do it, then at least pretend to do it.

"If I can make myself known that way, then I guess I have no choice."

Byungchan hung up, saying that they should meet in two days. Maru wanted to stay in the drama until the end, but the writer deemed that he should pull out while he still left behind a strong impression, and Maru agreed with her, so he didn't feel too disappointed. Thanks to that, he had been controversial for quite a while and managed to go to a talk show.

He lifted up the half-filled mug. As there was nothing for him to prepare since there would be a stylist preparing the clothes for him, there was nothing for him to do. Usually, actors would be sent some photos of the options of clothing they would wear, so he just had to choose. Just as he was thinking about when he last cleaned the bathroom, his phone started ringing. His phone was working quite hard today.

"I always feel uneasy when our director Kang calls at this hour."

-Did I ever make you feel uneasy, seonbae?

"If I had to list it, I think I can talk until 2 o'clock."

-Ando-oppa says he has no complaints against me.

"You're bound to lie and suck up if you're held hostage. So hey, why did you call?"

-You're at your house, right now, right?

"Why are you asking me about my location again? It's making me uneasy. Aren't you at work?"

-I took the day off. It's the end of the year, so I'm having a blast using them all. Of course, I do have something to do too.

"Now I suddenly want to leave."

-That means you're at home now, huh? Stay right there.

Before he could reply to that, the call ended. Maru stared at his phone, which had turned silent, hoping that it would give him a solution, being the high-tech device it was, even though he knew that he had no other method but to wait obediently. The ring of the elevator quietly echoed in the living room. Being the meticulous person she was, director Kang made the call right at the entrance. So... she didn't even consider the possibility that he wasn't at home?

Knock knock - hearing the knocks against his door, he sighed bitterly before opening it. Sora was standing outside, wearing a semi-formal suit.

"There's one more dog now?" Sora said as she looked at the Pit Bull — Bullie — watching from the distance.

"Yeah."

"I heard that dogs get lonely too, and it's better to have two of them instead of one."

"That's good info. You're here just to tell me that, right?"

"No, I'm here to pick you up."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"To where?"

"To a fan meeting."

Maru played back the short conversation they just had and spoke again,

"Fan meeting?"

"Yes."

"Of who?"

"You."

"Why?"

"Because you have fans? Keep asking if you want to ask foolish questions, but just remember, the more you delay things, the more likely you'll end up participating in the fan meeting in that jersey you're wearing."

Maru became speechless. He was surprised at this young director's skills to host a fan meeting for an actor without any name, and even more at her insensitivity to call on the day itself to check the schedule.

"What were you going to do if I had a schedule?"

"Of course, I checked that beforehand. I have a different driving force compared to other people, so it might look like I'm rushing things, but I've never ignored the process. I called the manager, no, wait, the head manager of whom I got a number before. Head manager Lee Byungchan."

As soon as Sora's words ended, a notification arrived on his phone. There was a message from Byunchan. The content wasn't that long: 'Miss Sora said she scheduled a fan meeting regarding the indie film. She'll probably call you soon.' Maru was pretty sure that even Byungchan didn't know that 'soon' would be this fast.

"So you didn't get notified yet. No wonder I felt like I wasn't getting anywhere with you."

"I just received it. Maybe it's because I've been playing around for a long time, but my luck with work seems to be erupting right now. So, do we have to go right now?"

"You have enough time to change clothes. Put on some neat clothes. You do have some, right?"

Maru pointed at the small room he was using as a dressing room and went inside to get changed. He put on a long coat that he got as a gift before coming back out.

"I'm not sure about anything else, but you do look great in a suit."

"Thanks for the compliment. So where are we going?"

"It's not that far. It's near Gangnam situation."

On their way down the elevator, Maru heard how this fan meeting came to be. Apparently, it started at the Chungmuro Short Film Festival. She and the film were invited and she greeted the people there, and apparently, the responses were much hotter than she had expected. The atmosphere was so good that she ended up talking about the film in great excitement until they talked about the actors and then the fan meeting.

"The first one to bring up the fan meeting was the owner of a café. I obviously thought that it was going to be for Sooil-oppa, so I was going to turn it down, saying that it would be a little difficult, but that person talked about you. She said she would gladly arrange the location for us, so there was no reason to refuse. There were more than fifty who were willing to participate back then. Do you know what's even better, though?"

"What is?"

"Most of them are women."

"That's nice to hear."

"I should record that and send it to Gaeul-unni."

They got in the car. Sora, who was behind the wheel, inputted the address on the GPS navigation device and drove off.

"It was quite unexpected. Quite a lot of people knew about you. What made me really happy was that there were some people who watched our work three times. She's a blogger who frequently visits indie film festivals, and she apparently fell in love with it during the first screening, and she ended up watching it in Chungmuro this time, and back when it aired in Suwon."

"I'm grateful."

"There were many people who came after reading her blog during the invitation. There were some journalists for film magazines too. When I looked at them, the audience worked in many different fields, so I thought that there was no better form of promotion. That's why I agreed to the fan meeting."

"So the fan meeting was being set up while I didn't know anything about it, huh?"

"That's just how figureheads work. You just lend them your name, and things work out by themselves."

Maru looked outside the window and rolled the word 'figurehead' inside his mouth. It had a pleasing tone. Wasn't it a dream job where he would earn money just by pretending to work? Though, joint responsibility would be a problem.

"And there were quite a lot of people who said they became fans after watching Doctors. There was a lady who had a hard life because her salary was getting delayed that felt better through watching you. It seems like there were many people like her, who wanted others to sympathize with their pains."

"I guess that's just how tough the world is."

"When I heard all that, I felt like I should do a comedy for the next film so that the viewers can watch without thinking about anything. You look like you'd be great at it too."

"As long as you pay me money, I'll do anything."

"How can you talk about money between us?"

"It's precisely because it's between us that I should talk about money. If you want to use me without pay, then why don't you become a famous director first."

"Don't come crying to me later asking for a role."

"Say that after you've become famous."

The car jolted once. Sora was smiling brightly after speeding right past a speed bump. Maru turned quiet, and then put on his seatbelt.

Chapter 928. Crank Up 4

The car stopped because of a taxi that stopped in the middle of a crossroad while tailgating. Sora tapped on the wheel with her index finger.

"Don't those men know that tailgating like that just to arrive a few minutes early will lead them decades early into the afterlife?"

"I guess they're just telling the others to crash into them if they have the confidence."

"Should I?"

"So you're the one who bought a ticket to the afterlife. I want to go to the afterlife as late as possible, so please hold back."

Sora puffed the air out of her cheeks and lifted her front bangs. If she didn't have a horn, she would probably have gotten off and smashed her head into the taxi, telling the driver to drive properly. In terms of recklessness, even Gaeul wouldn't be able to hold a candle to her. Personally, Maru wanted to have someone like her around him. After all, she would finish whatever job she was given by herself.

"Don't you find it a waste of time to be driving for someone like me on a golden day like a day off?"

"Looking after you is one thing, but this will also be a part of my career. Also, even though I'm taking a day off, staying at home will be boring, and going on a one-day trip somewhere doesn't really suit me, so it's better to work even on a day off."

"You're a workaholic."

"I'm not that bad. If I'm given money to play around, then sure, I'll leave everything behind and go somewhere. But do I earn money by playing around? Or would I get experience from it? That's one slogan that travel agencies use that I can't understand. 'Discovering my new self.' Heck. Can you really find yourself just by spending ten days in Europe when you couldn't do so for decades? If broadening

your horizons was such an easy thing, who would go through the pains to study? They'll just replace it with traveling."

"If that was the shared opinion of people in their twenties, I guess half of the travel agencies in the country would've closed down. Those travel agencies must be grateful to the youths with dreams."

"Do you have dreams about traveling too? Like, do you feel like you can change if you experience something overseas?"

Maru shook his head. As a traveler of a journey known as reincarnation that no other person would've experienced, he could say for sure. He may have experienced hundreds, if not thousands of lives, and yet he couldn't change his mind about loving a woman. He could not agree with the statement that traveling once could change a fundamental part of him.

"But I do not disagree with the statement that it may become a trigger. There are people who say they have changed," Maru said as he pointed forward at the moving car.

Sora started driving again and replied,

"I call that an error of success stories. Imitating successful people is a shortcut to ruin. It's common advertising material too. They sell self-development books, essays, and lessons on life by stimulating the desire that they can do it too, just like those successful people."

"What did you say you were doing at your work?"

"I'm in the promotion department."

"I see why you're saying that then."

The GPS navigation device notified them that they were at their destination. After turning around a building where people were lined up outside, he saw a café that had been decorated like a holiday house. There were people on the 1st-floor terrace and the 2nd-floor balcony.

"I sent a text that we'd be arriving soon."

When Sora opened the window and poked her head outside, the people at the café waved their hands and cheered. Maru checked his own face with the camera on his phone. His face felt hot already. He couldn't afford to become a tomato with BB cream on.... A fan meeting, which he never thought he would have in his life, was right in front of him. It was a nervousness incomparable to standing on a stage.

"Seonbae, don't tell me you're nervous?"

"Is it obvious?"

"Holy shit. I did think that something like this was going to happen when you introduced yourself last time on the stage, but you're really weak at this stuff, huh? Don't be nervous. It's not like you're gonna be eaten. All you have to do there is to smile calmly, say hello, and just talk. You finally got yourself something called a fandom, so you should display yourself properly."

"Isn't calling it a fandom an overstatement?"

“You know that girl idol band called Silhouette, right? They grew big enough to hold a concert by themselves. Even that began from a single video from one person before becoming a fan meeting that started from that. Right now, they perform in front of tens of thousands of people, but they only sang in front of four people during their first meeting, when they had seven members in their group. Seonbae, this might be a turning point for you too. Who knows? This small fan meeting might be a legendary fan meeting later?”

“Why don’t you try writing a novel if you ever quit your company? I’m sure you’ll learn really quickly if you learn from Daemyung.”

Sora parked the car in front of the café and he got off. He finally saw the big banner that he couldn’t see before because he was busy looking at the people. Pink hearts were embedded on either side and on top of that was a photo of him smiling. The slogan was simple: ‘Actor Han Maru fan meetup.’ If there was a ladder, he would have gone up and taken it off himself. The people walking by in front of the café looked at the banner as they walked past. He knew that it was lunchtime and there was no one who would care about that, but he couldn’t help but feel embarrassed.

“Fans of Han Maru sure are prepared. Seonbae, why don’t we take a photo in front of that?”

He shook off Sora, who was grabbing his arm, and went inside the café. He just wanted to run away to a place where he couldn’t see the banner as soon as possible. Though, he soon realized that looking at the banner was much better the moment he opened the door and looked at the people inside.

Deafening cheers erupted. He felt like a traveler who had first set foot on foreign land. Even though what was being spoken to him was Korean, the words just went straight out the other ear. Mr. Han Maru, Maru-oppa, our actor – they were titles that went through his ears in a flash. He stood dumbfounded for a few seconds before taking a bow.

“Hello. I’m Han Maru.”

He naturally clasped his hands together in front of his stomach. There was a sense of responsibility that suppressed his nervousness. These were people who had taken their time off to come see him, an insufficient actor. He couldn’t give them disappointment on their first meeting.

“Who did the banner outside? It was great,” Sora said as she followed inside.

Her question livened up the awkward atmosphere in an instant. A woman who had sunglasses on her head raised her hand. She said that she could easily make one because her business dealt with them.

“Thank you. But you photoshopped me too much. My skin is on the darker side.”

“You’ll get better if you look after your skin a little. Of course, I’m not saying that it’s bad as you are now.”

“Thank you, even if you don’t mean it. I’ll try my best to get it treated so that I look like the one outside.”

Maru proactively talked to his fans. He thanked every one of them for coming and got to know them. There were things he needed to know for the sake of a smooth conversation. His sense of shame faded

out when he started talking to them. Sometimes, he didn't know what to do when his fans stared at him without saying anything, but Sora came to save him whenever that happened.

There were only about thirty people in total, so everyone got close to each other soon. Although they belonged to a variety of different ages, occupations, and hobbies, they shared the common point that they were fans, so there was no awkwardness. Maru had assimilated with them and was talking with them. It became a talk show where both parties talked, instead of a one-sided lecture.

"I thought you were going to show up until the end in Doctors. It was such a pity that you disappeared midway."

"Me too. Honestly, a part of me wanted you to hook up with the daughter of the director. I'm sure there might be people who would hate that kind of plot, but I empathized with the character so much that I wished he did well. But in the end, that character just got sent to another hospital."

"Apparently, that's what's realistic. I asked my husband, and while there are people who become resident doctors in the hospital they spent their time in as interns, apparently, some people get sent to other hospitals if there's friction between other members."

"How was it for you? Didn't you feel disappointed because you had to leave midway?"

Questions that the fans discussed among themselves came his way. Maru felt the gazes focusing on him and spoke,

"It'd be a lie to say that I didn't feel disappointed. It was the first character I played that received so much attention. But it was better for the character to leave the story for the plot. I was told that the writer was torn about it as well, about whether it was the right thing to do to exclude him or not. You know what people say, right? People should leave while they're still being applauded. I received good opinions, increased interest in the drama, and added an element of freshness to the story, so as a supporting character, I fulfilled my role. If the writer got greedy and invested more time into the character known as Bigfoot, I'm sure the result wouldn't have been good. The drama has a time limit after all. Assigning valuable story time to a minor character instead of the main characters is getting priorities wrong, and if that happened, the central plot of the drama would have collapsed."

Maru gave his honest opinion. People who liked things had sharp eyes. Rather than being polite and making roundabout comments, Maru talked about everything he could within his limitations. He wanted to do so too.

He thought that not many people would have any interest in the drama because they were fans of the indie film 'Starting Point,' but all the fans here seemed to have watched the drama as they nodded.

"Can I ask you one thing?"

As soon as he spoke, the fans urged him to say it regardless of what it was.

"Tell me honestly. Who here watched Doctor's Office during the main run, and watch Doctors through a rerun or a download?"

More than half of the people here raised their hands as though they didn't feel any shame about it. Maru laughed out loud. So viewing rates didn't lie after all. All of a sudden, there was a discussion about

why Doctor's Office was more interesting. People in their twenties and thirties sided with Doctor's Office. They were people who tended to get absorbed during watching, so their general opinion was that they didn't mind the political stuff. The people who liked Doctors mostly did so because of the audio, and Maru agreed with them on the fact that it was easier to understand even after missing a few minutes.

"Next time, I'll watch everything you're on during the main run."

"Me too."

Maru scratched his head and spoke,

"I don't know when I'll shoot a drama again, so you might have to wait for a long time to see me."

Maru thought that they would tell him that he should soon get another one as a form of encouragement, but the fans were ruthless. He even heard advice that it was hard for new actors to succeed these days, and he should do his utmost best. Maru clapped and said that that was right.

"I created a short video, and while I get that set up, our actor Han will brew each of you a cup of coffee," Sora said as she pushed his back.

It seemed that there was something else she had set up beforehand. When he came to, he was wearing an apron.

"Uhm, can I take a photo of you? You look really cute in an apron," said a girl who seemed to be in college.

When Maru accepted, all the fans sitting down stood up. Their hands were all holding phones and cameras that they took out god knows when. Maru even saw some camera lenses that cost as much as a second-hand car. They were indeed fans who prepared for the fan meeting during the film festival. Their preparations and drive were extraordinary.

"Let's all shoot once each and then shoot a group photo!" Sora shouted.

To Maru's ears though, that sounded like 'here's a mackerel for cheap.' When else would he experience something like this? Thinking as such, Maru pulled his apron tight and walked towards the fans.

Chapter 929. Crank Up 4

He handed the last mug to the last fan. As this was his first time using a coffee machine, he was awkward at first, but thanks to the kind explanation from the café owner, he was able to do it with ease towards the end.

"Please become popular quickly so I can brag to my friends in the future that Han Maru made me coffee."

"That doesn't really depend on me. You know, don't you? Everyone must give me lots of attention so that I can play a good role."

Maru left the counter, also holding a mug in hand. He found out that it was pretty decent to drink. That was the power of recipes. Even rookies like him could make good coffee like this.

“Why don’t we take a group photo with the coffees?”

Sora struggled and moved the tables away. The fans also moved away the chairs to make space. One of the fans, who volunteered to be the photographer, took out her camera and stood at the front. It didn’t even take a few minutes for her to open up the tripod and set up the angle. She smelled like a pro, so Maru asked her in passing if she ran a photo studio. He was asking half as a joke, but the reply was a stunning yes. Apparently, she was running a photo studio that specializes in taking baby photos with her husband.

“Shouldn’t I pay you for this?” Sora asked as she took out her wallet.

The photographer reached her hand out as though she was waiting. The people watching started laughing. The photographer also smiled and took away her hand.

“I don’t plan to accept money for doing something I like. This is something that is part of my resolve as a fan. If you really want to pay me, actor Han should come to our studio and take a photo. We’ll put it on the main display.”

“I’ll make some time to go.”

“You promised, okay?”

After finishing the setup, the photographer joined the group. She raised a small remote control like a conductor’s baton and pointed at the camera. Maru raised his mug, and the fans followed suit.

“Doesn’t this feel too much like a company get-together occasion? It’s way too orderly.”

When someone said that, everyone burst into laughter. That was when the shutter could be heard. The photographer pressed it without any warning. People erupted in complaints everywhere, about how they had their eyes closed, had an ugly smile, or were covering their faces.

“This is much prettier than looking stiff.”

The photographer brought the camera over. Maru was the first one to see the photo on the screen. Not a single person was looking at the camera. They were all looking at each other and smiling joyfully. It was a very liberal photo, and also something that made him smile just by looking at it.

Instead of the front, the people’s gazes were focused on the woman wearing a pink blouse in the middle row towards the right. It was obvious where the source of the laughter came from.

“Look at this, I have my eyes closed.”

“Heck, that is still better than me. Look at me, my mouth is wide open.”

“I think I came out quite pretty. I had a hunch that something like this would happen, so I tensed up.”

The fans shared their opinions while looking at the photo. Maru thought that the fan meeting would proceed without a problem even if he disappeared. They got along so well that they would probably have fun without Han Maru at a ‘Han Maru fan meetup.’ He would be sweating profusely if people spoke intermittently in a stiff manner, but they thankfully got along with each other like long-time friends, which put him at ease.

“It’s a good thing that we did this, huh?” Sora remarked in a small voice from the side.

Maru nodded without hesitation. He felt that he would have regretted it if he didn’t do it. Just the fact that there were so many people cheering for him like this made him energized. Unless the acting was done for self-satisfaction, actors were bound to pursue the love of the audience. This moment would probably push his back in the future when he started to feel regret about becoming an actor or became exhausted; it was the motivation to allow him to think that he can do a little more.

“Actor Han! I have a wish for you.”

“As long as it’s not to reenact what I did in the talk show, then anything is fine.”

“How quick-witted. I was going to ask you to do that.”

“Please spare me. It’s been giving me nightmares ever since it spread around on the internet.”

“Then how about a song instead?”

When the fan that brought it up started to say ‘sing, sing’ in an urging manner, the other fans around followed suit. Just a minute ago, he was proud to see the fans unite, but now, he was slightly sad that there was not a single voice of opposition.

“Then I’ll try singing my favorite song. I’m not that good, so don’t expect too much.”

He used a straw as a microphone and started singing. Although he wasn’t even good enough to be called a good singer, it wasn’t unpleasant to the ears, perhaps thanks to the fact that he practiced his vocalization every day. His innate voice wasn’t too bad either. As singing was a part of acting, he didn’t feel that repulsed by it. After all, he had sung quite a few times on stages when things were delayed. He couldn’t exactly pull out when his job was to keep them interested.

He closed his eyes for a brief moment to remember the lyrics he couldn’t remember and opened them again. A familiar scenery folded out in front of him. Camera lenses gleamed instead of human eyes.

Maru continued singing as he started walking around. The cameras followed him, which made his prankster nature kick in and made him start running around everywhere. The cameras followed him busily. If Sora didn’t grab him by the arm midway, he would’ve tried going upstairs too.

“Now you’re enjoying it, huh?” Sora said.

He couldn’t deny that. Now that the pressure had lessened, his mouth and body became lighter. He was reminded of the joys of talking to strangers during the days he drove a bus.

As he moved around busily while singing, he was sweating by the end of it. He marveled at how professional singers and dancers could do their job for hours for a concert.

“Should we let actor Han rest a little and watch the video prepared? It’s a video prepared by Miss Yoon Youngseon.”

While he made another cup of coffee, Sora was installing a monitor on one of the café tables. It seemed that she intended to use the laptop for the speakers and have the video come out through the monitor.

The fan who created the video inserted a USB stick on the laptop. Maru watched the monitor half with expectations and half with worries because he didn't know what was in it.

"I'll turn the lights off."

The café owner pulled down the blinds and turned the lights off, and it became pretty dark. The fan controlled the laptop along with the words that she was going to start. The video window popped up, followed by some relaxing music. Was it something touching? He was weak to things like that.

'Han Maru' - The three characters that made up his name popped up on the screen. Along with some white noise, the play he did for the acting competition when he was in high school was played back. Maru leaned forward and watched the screen. He, as well as his friends from several years ago, were there. His memories told him that his acting was pretty decent, but now that he actually saw it, it was very awkward.

"Where did you get this?"

"Someone uploaded it to the fan café."

He never knew that there were things like this in the fan café that he didn't even visit that frequently. He felt grateful and apologetic at the same time. This wasn't the only place that had the fans he had to look after. Although the fans wouldn't know because of the low resolution, Maru felt like it was vivid as though he was there. This was a big gift for him. Although not everything that happened was good, it seemed to have become good memories, and he smiled the whole time. The following clips were from the movies and dramas that he shot. Some sound effects and subtitles were added throughout as well. Producers always told him that shooting was nothing compared to editing. Maru thanked the producer of this video once again. Not only did she find all sorts of clips to stick together, she also added all sorts of effects so that it wouldn't look boring. It must not have been an easy job. Maru was thankful that she did it purely because she was a fan.

After the act that received good reviews in Doctors, a soundtrack that seemed to signal the end flowed out. Although he watched calmly the whole time, he was quite touched on the inside. There were many occurrences behind the acting that happened on the surface. The stories that the fans wouldn't know about made his nose tingle. He was an adult, so he couldn't just start crying on the spot. He pressed down on his palm to calm down his emotions. He could see himself smiling calmly.

"It's not over yet."

And just as he had expected, what replaced the emotional code at the end was his figure during the talk show. Even the things he did in the kal-guksu restaurant were mixed within. As though to show that her editing skills hadn't been maxed out yet, the video displayed a splendid level of editing skills.

"I was wondering where that went."

He had somewhat become immune to it and had mostly given up on it, so he was able to laugh with the others. He even got swept up in the mood and danced along with the video. Although he was overwhelmed with regret by the end of it, it was already a thing of the past.

After the commotion died down, Sora left the café, saying that she had something to prepare. Maru talked to the fans that looked at him.

“It looks like I’ve talked enough about myself, and above all, that video seems to have compressed my life into the whole thing, so I wish to hear about you all now. I don’t care what it is. If you have anything you want to tell me or want to discuss what you’re going to eat for dinner, talk to me about it. Heck, even talking about the global oil prices is fine.”

Chatting all at once was no pressure, but getting attention seemed to be a little too much for them as no fan spoke up easily. Just as he thought that he should talk about an episode that happened during a shoot, one of the women raised her hand.

“It’s nothing amazing, but I just want to say that you gave me a lot of energy through your acting.”

“Through my acting?”

The woman introduced herself. Her name was Eunhye, and she worked at a middle-sized company with a terrible salary.

“It was back when I couldn’t pay rent for two months and was having a hard time. As you know, it feels terrible when you have to pay utility bills and rent but you don’t have any money in hand. It wasn’t even my fault either as the company just wasn’t paying me, so it was frustrating. But in dramas, people who supposedly lead hard lives live in huge houses and ride expensive cars, even though the ones who really lead hard lives can’t even dream of such things. That was when I saw you in Doctors. Of course, there were many dramas that talked about the sorrows of young men and women, but your acting combined with the story made it look really genuine and consoling.”

After talking smoothly, the woman stuttered at the end, saying ‘I just felt like that.’ It seemed that she was flustered because she didn’t know what to say. Maru followed up so as to not put her in an awkward spot,

“I think that was the biggest compliment I received this year. There are no words more valuable than what you just said to an actor. I was consoled, I was able to laugh, I felt my heart ache — by looking at your acting. I’ll try my best to become an actor like that in the future as well, so as to not disappoint all of you here.”

Although his comment had been forged through business statements, there was no lie in his meaning. The fans applauded. When people started talking heatedly about Doctors again, Sora appeared with a huge box in her hand. When he asked, she answered that it was some hand cream and some sun cream packaged into neat boxes.

“You should hand them out, seonbae.”

“When did you get something like this prepared?”

“I ripped them off of Sooil-oppa. I asked if he could prepare some gifts for your fan meetup.”

“I guess I should thank him later.”

“Try calling him on video right now.”

“If I do, this place will turn into a Yoo Sooil fan meetup, you know? It’s my fan meeting, so it should be about me.”

“You know, you get jealous quite easily.”

“It’s because this is my first fan meetup. Satisfied?”

Maru smiled and took out the gifts from the box.

Chapter 930. Crank Up 4

“Thanks for looking out for me. People liked it. Thanks to you, I was able to keep some face.”

-I’m glad they liked it. I was worried that they wouldn’t since it was prepared in a hurry.

“Despite that, the packaging and the brand were quite high-class, though. I didn’t know that well, but one of the fans told me that the hand cream cost 30 thousand won, and the sun cream 50 thousand. I was surprised after hearing the price.”

-A friend of mine is doing his first fan meetup, so I can’t gift cheap things, can I? They say the feelings behind the gift are important, but the gift itself is important too. Above all, though, I had some money laying around.

“Sure you did. Since you were spending, why not prepare luxury bags or something?”

-There’s a limit to my wealth.

“Anyway, thanks. I’ll repay you with anything whenever I can.”

Sooil laughed in a small voice over the phone.

-Then just show up at my fan meetup in the future. I’ll let things equal out with just that.

“When are you doing it?”

-Soon, I think. As for the place, I think I’m going to rent the SC central hall. There’s dancing practice and singing practice scheduled starting next month, so it’ll be after that which will coincide with my debut anniversary.

“That’s a huge place you’re renting. How many people can it hold?”

-I’m not entirely sure, but there are at least 800 seats.

“800, huh? That’s on a completely different scale to mine. If you’re renting that place, the fans must be paying for tickets then.”

-Yeah.

Someone seemed to have called Sooil, as Sooil said ‘hold on’ away from the phone.

-I think I should hang up. The shoot is starting.

“Alright, do your best.”

-Okay. Anyway, congratulations on your first fan meetup. Hope you do well in the future too. Oh, yeah, by the way, I’m moving into that apartment next week too. Be sure to visit.

“So you’re coming too, huh.”

-You love it, don't you?

"I love it to death. I'm going to push everyone to your side, so you take care of them. Bar Han Maru is closed the day after you move in."

He chuckled mockingly at Sooil, who shouted no at him. Maru looked toward the back seat. There were about ten boxes of gifts left after handing them out to the fans.

"You prepared a lot without me knowing. Thanks. I got to be known as quite sensible thanks to you."

Sora shrugged as she drove.

"The main character's job is done as long as he shows up. Also, since it was me who planned this whole thing, I should be the one to have prepared it as well. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I finished things off awkwardly. You worked hard too. People would've thought that you were cocky if you acted all lofty, but you brought yourself down a moderate amount and hung out with them. Maybe it's because of that, but there's a review already."

Sora used her phone with one hand before handing it over to him. It was a blog that had a smiling baby as the background. He had a look at the fan meetup review that came up 10 minutes ago. There were photos from the beginning of the meetup to the end along with some text. This person seemed to have managed a blog for a long time, as the layout of text and photographs was good, and reading it was easy.

"It's a blog with 40,000 visitors a day. She's someone who usually posts things regarding childcare, but she sometimes uploads articles about her favorite actors. She's skilled enough to post on magazines, and she wrote such a good post for you without any pay, so you lucked out."

"Maybe I should thank her in the comments."

"I don't recommend that. Fans and actors should have a certain sense of distance between them. Meeting offline like this is fine since it has meaning and only happens once in a blue moon, but there are people who don't think well of personal expressions of thanks from actors. Well, there are celebrities who interact with other netizens on the internet, but they're only fine because of the image they have built up over a long time."

"Somehow, you're more knowledgeable than me."

"I studied a little because of the team presentation. I'm also in the industry to a certain extent. Once you become a little more famous, you'll probably get someone who'll manage your social networks for you. The businesses that work with the advertising department of our company usually do a lot of marketing through famous celebrities, and most of the time, they have separate people who manage the accounts. The company is looking out for the reputation of its entertainer. Apparently, some posts even have to go through approval before being posted."

"A successful celebrity is practically a small corporation themselves."

"That's it. The money that person earns might not be that much, but there might be hundreds of millions of won revolving around that person, so it's not surprising that their public image is regulated."

The car stopped in front of a pedestrian crossing. When the pedestrian lights were flashing green, a couple ran over from afar. Sora watched the couple as they walked past the front of the car and went off to the other side.

“Work is going so smoothly, but why is there no progress in my romantic business?”

“If I could discern that and resolve it for you, I would’ve quit being an actor. I would’ve become a billionaire just by writing books related to love.”

“That’s true. It’d be much easier if mister Koo Ando quit his old-fashioned ways. There’s no law stating that a man should be the one earning money, is there? If the woman earns more, then the woman can just be the breadwinner.”

“It’s a peculiar problem that’s not entirely related to pride, so don’t be too harsh on him.”

“I know that, and that’s why I’m enduring. He told me he gave up on going back to college and that he would find a job, but whatever it is, I just wish he can finally get some leisure. Only then will I find an opening to exploit.”

Sora pressed the gas pedal as she grumbled. The car jerked up and down as though to represent her feelings. Looking at her like this, it seemed she was still a kid.

“Do you not have a date when Daemyung-oppa will finish his next scenario?”

“Well, I’m sure he has a lot on his mind. He saw potential through the work this time, but it didn’t lead to profit.”

“No matter how much I think about it, I think he should stop wanting to dip his hands into production and should just focus on writing. He has the talent for it, so he should make the most of it.”

“Considering Daemyung’s personality, he’ll probably focus everything on one thing. He might look wishy-washy at a glance, but he has a stubborn personality. The problem is that the stubbornness is focused on the production side.”

“He’ll probably change his mind if he gets acknowledged as a writer by writing something good, right?”

“It’s highly probable. As long as he is human, he can’t be free from the problems of living expenses. Personally, I’m like you and want him to focus on writing.”

“You should ask him indirectly later. For some reason, I sound like I’m nagging him if I ask.”

“Alright.”

The car stopped at the entrance to the apartment complex.

“If I can do as I wish, I would love to have you treat me, but I have a prior engagement with my parents.”

“That’s such a pity. I would’ve prepared you a feast.”

Sora frowned and scoffed, sarcastically agreeing with him.

“What should I do with the leftover gifts? Do you want them?”

“If I take them, they’ll probably rot in a corner of my room. How about you use them? Or you can give them to your business partners as gifts.”

“I’ll be thankful if I can take them. I’ll leave now; have a good rest. Thanks for today.”

“You too, have a safe drive home.”

After checking that Sora’s car had left the apartment complex, Maru went to his apartment. He patted the dogs that rushed to him the moment he opened the door before taking a shower. While he got washed up, he recalled the faces of the people he met during the fan meetup. He couldn’t remember them all, but some of those that gave him a deeper impression would probably remain in his mind until the day he retires as an actor.

He gave the dogs some food before turning on his laptop. He tried going to the Han Maru fan café that he had forgotten about for a while. He had added it to his favorites, but it had still been such a long time since he had last visited. The managerial members seemed to have undergone a change as the front banner changed. The sharp-feeling calligraphy on top of the photo was very eye-catching. Before, it was just a captured image from a video.

He saw a clearly managed banner and the post section under the front page that felt like it was designed by a professional. The OST for ‘Doctors’ flowed out of his laptop speakers as well. Maru hummed along with the song and clicked the latest post that came up on the ‘schedules’ section. It was about the fan meetup.

Maru could tell who the poster was in an instant. It was because there was a photo he took with that person. Her story was also rather peculiar and remained inside his head. She was the lady who worked at a middle-sized company with a terrible salary.

Unlike how she stuttered when she spoke, the writing was very smoothly written. Perhaps this was why earning the hearts of the fans was important. Leaving aside all the other reasons, it was very clear in an economic sense as well. They proactively promoted the actor they were fans of without taking payment. He hoped that he would continue to feel grateful whenever he saw posts like this. If he accepted the goodwill of the fans as a given, then he would probably be at the end of his career. Fans were more passionate than anyone else, but conversely, they could become colder than anyone else as well. The moment they realize that the actor they liked had changed, their passion towards the actor they respected would cool down in an instant. He hoped that he would always stay grateful for the small interest and cheers.

After reading the post, Maru added a comment. Blogs were extremely personal spaces, so like Sora said, he had to be careful when writing something, even if it was something small like an appreciation message. However, it should be fine to leave behind a message on his own fan café. He commented that it was fun to talk to her today and that he wanted to meet people he wasn’t able to meet today if there’s a next time.

Some people seemed to have set up notifications as other comments soon followed up. There were various comments ranging from those asking if he was really Han Maru, as well as those that said that he looks much better in real life.

Judging that he should leave behind a greeting message, he looked for the actor-specific section that the managing members had set up. A single post – the greeting he left behind before – was the only thing there. Maintaining a sense of distance was one thing, but he thought that he should express his goodwill towards the fans that had been with him since he was nameless.

He uploaded the photo he got sent via the messenger app and wrote a short review. Before he clicked the post button, he was reminded of a good idea. He leaned his phone against the sofa and took a video. He put his dogs in his arms next to him and took a bow, saying that he had fun.

He attached the video at the end of the post and uploaded the post. He didn't know how many of them would watch it, but he wanted the fans that came today to see it at least.

He was scrolling down just a little to see what other posts there were when a number caught his eye. It was the number of café members. Was there an error? Maru narrowed his eyes and had a look again. No matter how hard he looked, there were 3,500 members.

The number of members had multiplied by dozens while he had lost interest. It might be tiny compared to fan cafés of idol bands with hundreds of thousands of members, but Maru was shocked. 3,500 might look like a simple number, but if that number of people stood before his eyes, he would be overwhelmed.

There were twenty comments on the post he had just written. Maru crossed his arms and looked at the laptop from some distance.

“So, I'm kinda major among the minor group?”

He laughed to himself after uttering some weird logic.