

## Once Again 471

### Chapter 471

"My girl. Aren't you ignoring your mother too much these days?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I think you promised to eat out with me last weekend."

Hearing that, her daughter made a startled expression before approaching her with a smile.

"Sorry, mom. I completely forgot."

"You mean you intentionally ignored it, not forgot about it, so that you can go on a date with your boyfriend. I guess this is why people say that raising a daughter is no good."

"Mom."

"Just go live with Maru already. This mom of yours will live a lonely life with this laptop."

When she made a depressed expression, her daughter approached her back before starting to massage her shoulders. *She* was really good with her small hands as it felt as though all of her sore muscles were being relieved. Choi Haesoo subconsciously smiled, and her daughter caught onto that immediately and said,

"Mom, looks like you're okay now?"

"It's a big mistake if you think that I'd be okay with just a massage on the shoulders. Your mother is not that easy."

"Then I'll make dinner tonight. I'll make your favorite omelettes."

"Hm, that's a bit tempting."

"I'll be going out for some groceries then."

Her daughter soon changed *her* clothes and left the house. Seeing that, Haesoo thought that she was really glad to have given birth to a daughter.

"Just whose daughter is she? Wait, mine, huh."

Haesoo turned her laptop, which she had turned off to rest, back on again. She had gotten a job from a magazine company. It was a movie column, and along with a line that asked her to do the job quickly, an internet reservation ticket, as well as the movie title, was there. As she had finished her final draft of the romance novel, she was just about to watch a movie to get some rest, so she really had gotten a good job.

She searched *Twilight Struggles* up on the internet. It had been six days since the movie was released. It was age-restricted. It received an R19 rating not because of sexual content, but because of cruelty and violence.

Haesoo was not afraid of spoilers. In fact, she watched a movie after she crammed as much information about the movie itself. Some of her movie friends asked her what the fun was in that, but Haesoo always retorted by saying that you see as much as you know. Of course, knowing the twist of a movie with a twist would make it less interesting, but it would allow her to watch the decisions of the director that lead to such a twist in much more detail. It would allow her to clearly grasp the flow of the story, and see the techniques of the producers by following minute visual cues. Such techniques helped her out a lot when writing, so Haesoo watched movies while focusing on the story rather than the beauty of the movie itself. Thanks to her preferences, getting her hands on a lot of information prior to watching helped her out a lot.

“A disturbing movie huh.”

Like the imagery given by the word ‘struggle’, most of the reviews online mentioned that it was disturbing and unpleasant. Leaving aside how good the movie was, the story itself was so unpleasant that most people did not want to watch it twice.

After reading a bit, Haesoo nodded. Her own household was much simpler compared to the movie. She frequently visited her parents, and her parents also frequently came to Seoul to visit their grandchildren. Before they passed away, they went on a family trip together, and both of her parents died in bed. She heard from around her that they had died a fortunate death, and even when she met up with her siblings, they talked about how their parents passed away in comfort and sent them off with a smile.

However, Haesoo also knew that such a household was not ordinary. The final moments of an elderly that did not possess anything were truly tragic. She had done some investigation on the state of living of the elderly while working on a drama before which allowed her to find out the truth then: that filial duty only existed in books. Abandoned elderly mostly lived in practically shack-like buildings in the most rural areas, where the gradient was so steep that even most young people would have a hard time climbing. To be precise, half of them were abandoned, while the other half imprisoned themselves there of their own accord. Haesoo still remembered the smile of a grandma who smiled at her saying that she couldn't inconvenience her children on her ‘way’.

The movie used one such old man as the main character. He wasn't some ex-special forces agent, nor some super-rich businessman who went bankrupt after someone betrayed him. He didn't possess any special skills or had the smarts. He was the epitome of being ordinary. He had a decent job, met a decent woman, got married, had children, and spent his later years by himself like many other elderly people.

“What caused the civilian to become the villain?”

Haesoo decided on the title of the column on the spot. As for the contents, she was going to write it after watching the movie.

She expanded the information section of the movie and had a look at the actors. There were all sorts of famous actors that made her exclaim. Didn't they say this was an indie movie? Just casting these people should have cost hundreds of millions. Haesoo thought that the identity of the movie was wrong. This was the literal definition of a commercial movie, wasn't it?

There weren't any articles about the budget for this movie. Normally, one way of advertising movies was to show off how much money went into it, but in the case of *Twilight Struggles*, there were no articles talking about it at all. Was it under control? Or was it that the journalists haven't found out yet?

Recently, she was earning a living off of romance novels, but she actually liked this genre better. Deep-diving into the evil side of humanity. That was what piqued her interest.

Haesoo had a look at the clock. It was 2 p.m. When she looked it up, she saw that there was one airing in Suwon station's B-Movie. If she got there by car, she should be able to catch the next one.

"Mom, you're going out?"

After telling her daughter, who came back from buying groceries, to look after the house, she left. Although she liked watching movies with her daughter, it was age-restricted, so there was no helping it. She drove her car to the cinema and went to the ticketing booth to get her reserved ticket. She didn't like eating while watching a movie, so she went inside with her hands empty.

'There are quite a lot of people.'

The movie was quite cruel, so she didn't think that it would be popular at all. She thought that the younger people would prefer the romance movie that had been released around the same time.

"Over here."

"Excuse me, coming through."

"Hey, the movie's gonna start. When are you coming?"

She could hear the voices of various people.

People had filled up row A, which was the row closest to the screen, to row J, which was the closest to the entrance. Seeing the unexpected number of people, Haesoo stood there for a moment and looked at the audience seats. There were many young people, seemingly in their early 20s, filling up the seats. Were they here as a group from a movie circle or something?

After watching them for a while, she found out that they were all different groups. Perhaps they didn't know what this movie was about?

"I heard that the acting in this is seriously no joke."

"One of my friends lives in Seoul, and apparently, it's practically a war if you want to watch it there. That's what made her come all the way to Anyang to watch it."

"I heard it was cruel though."

"It can't be compared to the other movies that are released these days."

Those were the things she heard from around her. Was the movie popular among the younger generation? Haesoo sat down for now. Not long later, the ads finished. Seeing the lights become dimmer, Haesoo looked at the screen calmly.

\* \* \*

“I told you it’s not that fun.”

“It’s fine. Mom and dad will have dinner outside, so you two can eat on your own. Money’s on the table.”

We’re off - they said before leaving through the door. Maru sighed. It wasn’t exactly a movie made for couples. Despite his advice to them not to go, the two ended up going to the cinemas in the end. It wasn’t really a fitting movie for a nice Sunday afternoon, he thought.

“Is the movie that strange?” Bada asked as she put some snacks in her mouth.

“It’s not strange, but it is strange for the two of them to be watching together.”

“Why? The internet was in an uproar about it though.”

“Uproar?”

“Yeah, don’t you know?”

When he asked back again, Bada waved at him. Maru followed her into her room. She pressed the power button of the PC with her toe and opened a browser. After typing a few things, she pointed at the screen.

“Look at this.”

It was the blog of a girl that Maru presumed to be Bada’s friend. On the main page, there was the line ‘I want to watch Twilight Struggles’ in a cute font. There was even a smile emoji right after it.

“My friends all want to watch the movie.”

“Do they know what they’re even getting themselves into?”

“Who cares? Sungjae-oppa is in it.”

Ah - Maru immediately realized what was happening.

“But that person barely has any screen time.”

“But still, Sungjae-oppa is in it. Just that is enough to watch.”

“How devoted. But what can you do? It’s age-restricted, so you can’t watch it.”

“I’ll watch it once it’s on the internet.”

When Maru narrowed his eyes, Bada asked back as though nothing was wrong.

“But it’s not just us that likes it.”

Bada clicked on a few things with the mouse and the blog changed. There was a photo of a man in his mid-twenties on the main page.

“Even if I go to other people’s blogs, there are a lot of people who want to watch the movie.”

Bada showed him the blogs of many other people. Like what she said, most of their recent posts mentioned either that they watched the movie, or that they want to watch it.

“A sister of a friend of mine went all the way to Seoul in order to watch it. The Seoul Central Theater, was it? She said that watching it there is the proper way to watch it.”

“The Seoul Central Theater?”

“Yeah. But there are only two theaters that air it, so reserving a ticket for that is as hard as reserving tickets for concerts, if not harder. Buying one on the site is out of the question.”

Bada opened the website for the Seoul Central Theater and showed him the current reservation status of the movie. Even the last run, which was on at 40 past midnight, was almost fully reserved.

“Just what is....”

Maru blinked several times as he looked at the screen. It was definitely a well-made movie. The staff and the actors were in perfect harmony and made a great movie. He could say that because he was there when it was shot. Twilight Struggles was definitely an incredibly well-made movie.

However, there was a clear difference between a well-made movie and a popular movie.

“You’re acting strange, oppa. You should be rejoicing if the movie you’re in does well. Why do you look so sour?”

Bada clearly looked confused.

“Also, have a look at this.”

The next site that Bada put up was a site that gathered reviews of movie critics. It was a platform provided by a web portal, and on the top of the page was Twilight Struggles.

“Look at this. It’s all praises. Isn’t that awesome?”

Most of them were 8 stars or above out of 10. Maru took the mouse from Bada and looked for a critic named Lee Onjoo. She was a movie critic that was known to not give many stars when she rated, and even she gave 9 stars out of 10.

-Nurturing children was an obligation, and looking after the elderly was an option. As a result, the murder was morally justified. The stage of this cruel murder is our neighbor’s house.

After reading up to that part, Maru went to a web portal to look up Twilight Struggles. When he went to the information section about the movie, he could see the reviews of the general masses as well. The average was 5 out of 10 stars. There were some statistics as well, and it was running on both extremes: 10 or 1. As a result, the average became 5. There was no middle.

“Huh? That’s a lower score than I expected.”

“No, this is normal. Normally, the scores of the general masses are lower the higher the scores from critics are. However, a reaction like this should lead to a decrease in view count, but....”

There were a lot of blogs that had reviews, or posts about boasting that they watched this movie on the web portal. There was no need to expand the search to the past week. There were several pages of articles that came up from just yesterday.

Was it a piece of work that would be controversial among the ordinary folk? Maru found the current situation a little curious. At that moment, a name caught his eye.

Choi Haesoo. It was the name of his mother-in-law. When he clicked on it, he found a column related to Twilight Struggles. The article, which started off with the sentence 'this movie is something to be watched together as a family', was giving it a sharp evaluation.

Articles related to the movie like that took a whole portion of the search results. Did articles like this always come out in batches when a movie was released?

Just as he was wondering about that, he heard his phone ring. He went back to his room and picked up the call. After listening to the other party for a while, Maru uttered a short exclamation.

"An interview?"

## **Chapter 472**

"What? What was that?"

Bada stared at him intensely. It seemed that he was a little loud because he was taken aback so she had heard him.

"An interview."

"Yeah, like, what interview?"

"I heard that it's for a magazine, but I guess I'll only find out the details if I go tomorrow."

"Han Maru, you're popular now, huh?"

"Like hell," Maru said as he threw his phone on his bed.

Since he heard that the interviewee wasn't just him, he was probably the sidekick of the interview.

He went to the kitchen and boiled some water in the coffee pot. Bada, who was sitting in the living room, shouted 'hot choco for me'. He took out another cup before putting some cocoa powder inside.

"But hey, what have you been doing since just now?"

Maru put the steaming cup right next to Bada.

"Put it on the corner of the table. It's dangerous."

"You're bossing me around huh."

He clicked his tongue and put the cup elsewhere. Bada was handling a pair of needles and some yarn with a serious expression.

"I'm making a scarf, and it's easier than I thought it would be."

Bada proudly showed off the wool scarf. It wasn't long enough to be called a scarf yet as it was at most the size of a half-handkerchief.

"It's for me?"

“Are you crazy?”

“Phew, you’re still normal. If you said it was for me, I would have called the mental hospital.”

“It’s not happening, don’t worry.”

“Then a present for father? Well, I guess his birthday is coming up soon.”

“Uhm....”

“Hey, why can’t you answer that....”

“It’s dad’s birthday soon. You’re right,” said Bada as she looked at the calendar in the kitchen. Maru sipped on his coffee. Actually, ever since he found out that it was a scarf, he already had a guess as to who it was for.

“It’s not mom’s, since she doesn’t like red. Then I guess that leaves only one person left.”

“Don’t tell oppa about it.”

“Is that oppa this oppa or....”

Maru covered the coffee mug he was holding with his hand and immediately turned around. The ball of wool hit his shoulder before falling down. Even though she threw it on the spot, it was quite strong. Han Bada, nice shoulders, eh? You should aim to be a pro baseball player.

“I’m gonna kill you.”

“Why don’t you watch your mouth?”

“I do when I’m outside.”

“It must be nearing the end of the world. Just what does he find good about a girl like her....”

As soon as he said those words, Maru stood up and ran to his room. He saw Bada panting angrily as he closed the door.

“I’m going to kill you if you open that door again!”

“Should I text Dowook that he can look forward to the present?”

“Then I’m going to kill you for real!”

“Just go back to making that scarf before my hands move by themselves. I’m going to do some studying, so stay quiet. Oh, and let’s eat jajangmyeon for dinner.”

“I don’t like jajangmyeon though.”

“Oops! My phone is turning itself on even when I didn’t do anything. Dowook, what do you think of a scarf as....”

“Fine! I’ll order it, I’ll order it, okay?”

“Also, our parent’s bedroom looked a little dirty. You should get some cleaning done in there. If you organize father’s shirts, he’ll love it.”

“I’m really going to get you back for this.”

Bada thumped on the ground outside the door before leaving. Maru put the coffee mug on the table before lying down on his bed.

“Becoming close with someone sure is hard.”

One fact he had come across as he lived one more life, was that there was no other method than approaching that person first when it came to becoming close with that person. A harmonious family, a close friend, and a faithful colleague. People with passive personalities had such people as well. That was because there were people in the world who always approached them first after breaking that barrier of difficulty and embarrassment.

Maru didn’t want to build a wall between him and his sister in this life at least. While they might not be at the level of close siblings in moving stories, he wanted to maintain a relationship where she could tell him about her worries at least.

In order to maintain that relationship, he had to keep reaching out and talking to her. He knew through the experiences of his previous life that not all families were close. In fact, the opposite can be said about it: perhaps being a family is precisely what makes them distant. Sometimes, blood relations were worse than those with strangers.

He grabbed his phone which was on the bed. When he opened it, he saw a message from Sooil.

-See you tomorrow.

It seemed that Sooil was the main, and he was the sidekick. But well, it was still great that he got his name in an interview. Considering that there were still numerous people in Daehak-ro that did not get to have their names known, just sighing about his interviewee status was a luxury.

“Alright. Let me borrow that famous actor’s name to get an interview done.”

Maru sent a text message to Sooil before closing his eyes.

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The next day. He grabbed his bag and left his house. He briefly looked at where he placed his bike, but he shook his head. The weather was a little too cold for riding today.

“I guess it definitely is winter.”

December wasn’t far away. He wrapped his neck with his scarf one more time as he got off the bus. The news talked about early first snow, and it seemed that the first snow would be coming within the week.

The disciplinary teacher who always guarded the school gates couldn’t be seen today. That man always swung around a wooden rod with his half-balding head, but apparently, he came down with the flu.

“You’re here.”

\*Cough\*. Daemyung coughed while covering up his mouth with his hands even though he was already wearing a mask.



“A cold?”

“Yeah.”

“You looked okay until a few days ago though.”

“That day, we went back home after watching a movie late at night, right? I felt a little chilly that night. I felt okay the next day, so I thought I was alright, but I came down with a fever over the weekend.”

Daemyung stopped there and coughed again.

“What do I do? I need to practice.”

“Looking after your body takes priority.”

“I feel sorry for everyone else.”

Daemyung sniffed. The back door of the classroom opened and Dowook entered.

“You have a cold as well?”

Dowook had hung a mask around his chin as well. His sharp eyes, which always made him look angry, looked loose today. He coughed before sitting down at his desk and then collapsed. He seemed to be out of the energy to even speak.

“I did hear the news that it’s quickly gotten cold, but man, this is terrible.”

Maru looked around the classroom. Teen-aged boys who had nothing but their health to boast about were all limping. He didn’t hear any news about the flu though.

Dowook coughed a few times before sitting up.

“Hey, you wore a mask all the way here. You might as well put it on properly.”

Maru pointed at Dowook’s mask as he said that. Dowook glared at him before telling him to mind his own business.

Psychology said telling someone not to do something made that person want to do it more instead. Maru narrowed his eyes and had a look at the mask. Now that he had a closer look, he saw that it wasn’t white, but pink. The texture was different from the plain mask that Daemyung was wearing.

Dowook turned around in fright. The mask strap fell off his ears and it was unfolded for him to see. There was a cute cat on the pink mask. Dowook became visibly flustered and grabbed the mask, but the ones that needed to see it had already seen it. It seemed that Soojin was worried about her sick brother and gave him a mask. Though, the problem was that it did not reflect her brother’s preferences at all.

“Hi, kitty.”

Maru waved his hand at the mask. Daemyung turned around while making a noise that was a mix of a laugh and a cough.

“Don’t laugh. I’ll seriously kill you.”

"I'm not. It's obvious that it's a mask full of your big sister's love. Rather than that, you're quite amazing for wearing that in the first place."

"Let today be your funeral."

Dowook abruptly stood up, but he soon sat down again because he was out of energy.

"You might get your funeral earlier than me. Don't overreact and just lie back down. Also, it suits you. Kittens are good. I can tell Soojin-noona's aesthetics."

"I should really throw it away."

Dowook raised the mask as though he was about to throw it away, but then carefully put it inside his drawer. It seemed that he was going to wear it again on his way back from school.

"What a cute little brother."

Dowook glared at him once before lying down. It seemed that he didn't have the energy to speak.

"The club president is sick, and the other senior is sick as well. Looks like the first years will have to do their best today."

"About that, Maru. Can I ask you to take care of them today? I was going to lead practice if I got better in the afternoon, but I don't think it's going to happen anytime soon."

"I want to do that, but I have a previous engagement. I can look after them until 7, but I don't think I can do longer than that."

"Really?"

"Why don't you guys take a break from practice today? Dowook doesn't look like he's in a good condition either."

Dowook coughed a few times as he lay face-flat on his desk. Daemyung sighed before shaking his head.

"We don't have that much time until the competition, so we can't just take a whole day off. We should at least do a read-through before going home."

"I can do that much, so both of you can go home right after school. Don't ruin your body so that you end up screwing up on the important day."

"Thanks, Maru."

"Also, get some sleep. There's still some time until morning homeroom."

Maru sighed a little as he looked at his two friends lying face-flat on their desks.

"Whoa."

Dojin, who came in late, blew his nose with a tissue as soon as he came in. It seemed that he had caught a cold as well.

"What the hell is up with all of you?"

“I don’t know. I’m dying.”

There was none of their usual vitality. Maru turned around to look at Iseul, who was outside the classroom.

“He’s been like that since yesterday. Please look after him.”

Iseul patted Dojin’s back worriedly before leaving. Maru pondered for a moment before looking at the faces of those that were sick. Now that he thought about it, all the guys that waited in the cold to watch the movie a few days ago had all caught a cold. They had shared the hot fish cake soup that they bought at the convenience store, and that seemed to be the cause of this.

“What is going on with all of you?”

Taesik, who came into the classroom with a smile, said with a dazed expression. Someone told him that everyone had caught a cold.

“You should’ve been careful. Those in bad conditions should go to the infirmary to get some medicine. Don’t push yourselves and drink warm water. If you feel something is wrong, then tell me immediately. It’d be horrible if it’s the flu.”

Taesik told the students on duty to follow him so that he could get the sick students some warm water. Maru shook his head as he looked at his three sick friends.

“You guys have nothing left if not for your health.”

“But hey, why are you the only one who’s completely fine?”

Dowook also seemed to have noticed what was in common between the people who caught a cold.

“Me? Because I have a sturdy body. Unlike you guys, I have divine protection.”

“Bullshit.”

“Don’t swear and get some sleep. Your face is red because of all the heat.”

Maru pressed down on Dowook’s back before standing up. He thought that he should buy them some warm drinks from the cafeteria.

“What a bothersome bunch.”

He put his coat around the sniffing Daemyung before heading to the cafeteria.

Black soybean noodles.

### **Chapter 473**

“They’re all things you know already, so you shouldn’t have to change much. There isn’t that much time left until the performance, so rather than looking for new things, you should do repeated practice so that you can smoothly show what you have already.”

Maru closed the script and had a look at the time. It was 6:48 p.m. Almost time to wrap things up.

“Try the things I told you before one more time once you get home. If you guys have the time, it’s not a bad idea to rehearse just by yourselves.”

“You’re leaving now, seonbae?” Aram asked as she stretched her arms.

“I have an appointment.”

“A date?”

“There you have it.”

“Oh, it’s not.”

“You’re good.”

“It hasn’t been just one or two days. Rather than that, what kind of appointment is it really? A shoot?”

“The first interview of my life.”

“Really?”

Bangjoo and Jiyeon also widened their eyes and approached him. Maru explained to them that he was just the sidekick.

“But still, it’s an interview.”

“She’s right. Congratulations.”

“Congratulations, seonbae-nim!”

He unintentionally got cheered for.

Maru shrugged before standing up.

“Anyway, what are you guys going to do? If you’re going to go home, you might as well leave with me,” Maru asked the three.

Jiyeon spoke after a while,

“I think we should practice just a bit more by ourselves. We usually practice until 9 after all.”

Jiyeon stared at Bangjoo and Aram. Bangjoo said that he didn’t care. Aram replaced her answer with a nod.

This was a little unexpected for Maru. When the 2nd years were absent, it was usually Aram who led everyone. Jiyeon was a girl of little words, and Bangjoo also followed Aram’s words without a fuss after all.

Jiyeon resolutely picked her script back up again after expressing her opinion.

“Jiyeon has changed a bit since Daemyung-seonbae is sick.”

Aram chuckled. Maru understood Jiyeon’s attitude after hearing that.

“It’s not like that.”

Jiyoon became flustered and denied it, but it was clearly written on her face. It seemed that a sense of duty drove her to replace Daemyung's absence.

"Then I'll have to ask you to clean up afterwards. Don't go home too late."

"Yes."

"And also."

Maru took out some money and handed it to Jiyoon.

"It's dinner time right now, so go buy something to eat. Or just eat out once you're done."

It was Aram who took the money instead of the hesitating Jiyoon.

"Thank you, seonbae."

"Thank you for the treat!"

He left and closed the door before glancing inside through the window. The three of them had immediately started practice. He wanted to show this to Daemyung who was worried sick about practice.

"Hello?"

He got a call when he climbed down the stairs. The caller was Byungchan.

-Maru, have you departed yet?

"Yes, hyung. I just left school. It won't take that long to get to Suwon station from here."

-Should I pick you up in my car?

"That's okay. It's not that far. Have you arrived yet?"

-I'm already here with Sooil.

"I guess I'll be the last one there. Rather than that, I hung up after just hearing about the interview yesterday. What is this interview about?"

-Do you know Sharon?

"Sharon? You mean Sharon Stone?"

-No, the women's magazine Sharon.

"No, this is the first time I heard about it."

-Well, I guess it'd be even more strange if you knew about it. It's the number 1 magazine ranked by subscription, and they wanted to interview you.

"An interview from a women's magazine?"

-Yeah. It's not that rare. In fact, those kinds of magazines interview a lot of male actors. And also, Sharon is really good when it comes to that.

“Why would something like that want me... I guess I can understand why they want Sooil, but I don’t understand why I’m in it. I don’t think bundling nameless actors like they do in dramas really work here.”

-They called your name out. They said that they wanted to interview Yoo Sooil and Han Maru among the young actors of JA.

“I was called out?”

-Yeah. I also thought that the agency approached them first about it, but it turns out that one of their journalists reached out first personally.

“What a rare event.”

-I got to call them due to scheduling and stuff, and the journalist there seemed to know you.

“Really? What is his or her name?”

-She’s the journalist Choi Miyeon. Do you know her?

“That’s not a name I’ve heard before. It’s not like I have any connections to journalists either. How strange.”

-Perhaps you became famous without you knowing it? I mean, your appearance in The Witness received very good judgement, didn’t it? Ah, there were articles about the beggar that was good at acting at the beginning of Apgu too.

“You’re quite knowledgeable.”

-It’s about actors I’m in charge of, so I should be up to date with the news.

There was a laugh of satisfaction from the other side of the phone.

“If it’s like that, I guess I must rejoice. But I won’t get too excited yet. I guess I’ll find out what’s really happening once I’m there.”

-Alright. Oh, have you had dinner yet?

“No, I’m kind of short on time, so I was going to eat after the interview. I don’t think the interview will take a long time after all.”

-Then let’s eat together once you’re here. I was told that the interview will last about an hour, so you can think of it as a late dinner.

“Alright then. Oh, the bus is here. I’m hanging up.”

-Watch out on your way here.

Maru got on the bus that stopped in front of him. A women’s magazine, huh. The thick magazine that he saw at the hairdresser’s he followed his mom to when he was young - that was the entire presence ‘women’s magazine’ had in Maru’s head. Maru wondered if they had the room to put an interview of an actor that was gradually gaining fame and an actor who was practically nameless when they must be lacking space to put ads on it.

'She seems to know me, huh.'

He rolled the name Choi Miyeon in his mouth for a while, but nothing came to mind. In the first place, there was no way he had any connections to a women's magazine.

He got off the bus and entered the café on the opposite side of Suwon station.

"Over here."

He saw Byungchan wave at him.

"Where's Sooil?"

"He left saying that he had an urgent call. You didn't see him?"

"No, he wasn't outside."

"Where did he go then, I wonder."

Byungchan leaned forward and looked outside the window before turning his head towards the entrance. The automatic door opened before a lady wearing jeans and a trench coat entered the café.

"Is she your type of girl?"

"Huh? No."

"I think she is though."

At that moment, the lady that came in looked around for a while before taking out her phone. A moment later, Byungchan's phone started ringing inside his pocket. As soon as he picked up the call, the lady standing by the door smiled and approached them.

"Sorry, I didn't tell you about the location for the interview even though I was the one who asked for it. Oh, let me introduce myself. I'm Choi Miyeon from Sharon."

"Ah, you're journalist Choi Miyeon. I am manager Lee Byunchan and I work for JA Production."

The lady smiled and took off her backpack. Byungchan then gave her his business card. Miyeon also took out her business card and they exchanged them.

"You must be quite flustered since the schedule just came to be out of nowhere, right?"

"No. You're doing an interview with some of ours. Who cares if it's a little random?"

Byungchan scratched the back of his head as he smiled. His usual snappy attitude was gone and he was grinning from ear to ear.

"You must be Mr. Han Maru, am I right?"

Miyeon turned around to face Maru. Maru lowered his head to take a bow on the spot.

"Yes, I am Han Maru."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Choi Miyeon. I hope I can get a good interview from you today."

“Likewise.”

Miyeon took off her coat and took out a digital camera and a notebook from her bag.

“Where’s Mr. Yoo Sooil?”

“He left just moments ago, but I can’t see him anywhere. I’ll go look for him.”

“You don’t have to go that far.”

Without even listening to her, Byungchan stood up and left.

“What an urgent person.”

“He’s not like that usually. What would you like for a drink?”

“Sorry?”

“The main character isn’t here yet, so we can’t exactly start by ourselves, and since the weather has gotten quite cold, I don’t think it’s a bad idea to wait with some tea.”

Miyeon covered her mouth and laughed before speaking,

“You put me in an awkward position, saying everything that I have to say. You really are a peculiar actor like I’ve heard.”

“Like you’ve heard?”

“Ah, I guess you don’t know about it yet. Do you know journalist Kim Dongwook?”

“If it’s not someone else with the same name, then indeed, I do know him.”

“He’s a senior of mine. When he was a journalist for a TV station, and when I was a journalist for a newspaper company, we met a few times. I’ve been meeting him recently due to a few things, and somehow, things lead to one another and we talked about you.”

“Did he talk bad about me by any chance?”

“I wonder, did he?”

Miyeon stood up with a faint smile.

“Would you like coffee, then?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder what the other two like.”

“I’ll pick for them.”

“Can you do that?”

They walked to the counter and gave an order. Maru ordered a caramel macchiato for Sooil, who liked sweet things, and plain black coffee for Byungchan since he enjoyed those usually.



They got the buzzer and returned to their seats.

“Should I call them?”

“No, don’t do that. It’s not good to put the interviewee at unease. Also, it’s my fault in the first place for scheduling such a vague appointment.”

“Alright then.”

“Rather than that, though. You’re quite a good talker. Is this not your first interview?”

“No, it is my first interview.”

“I see. How is it? What did you feel when you heard that you were doing an interview?”

“I thought that I must be a sidekick bundled with someone else. After all, there’s not that much to interview about me.”

Hearing the word ‘bundle’, Miyeon faintly smiled as she opened her notebook.

“You really like being direct with your words as I heard before.”

“It depends on the occasion. Isn’t everything off-the-record right now?”

“I want to use it as my first impression of you, can’t I?”

“Of course you can. In fact, I would want you to do so. I have to put as much of myself in the interview so people get to know more about me.”

Miyeon opened her notebook and picked up her pen. Maru looked at Miyeon and thought that she was really proficient. She was someone who knew how to make a comfortable environment to speak. She also had the conversational skills to continue asking questions so that there was no gap while talking.

“Have you ever seen our magazine?”

“No, I don’t really have any interest in magazines.”

“Then do you not have any magazines that you subscribed to, or buy at irregular intervals?”

“I don’t. I usually read novels. I never picked up any other kind of reading.”

“Ah, novels. I also like novels. Since we’re at it, can I ask you one of the questions I’ve prepared? Though, I do have to ask for your permission before the interview.”

“I’m okay with it. I’m not going to answer if I can’t answer the question.”

“Very well. Twilight Struggles. You’ve read it, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have.”

“You were in the movie as well.”

Maru was a little surprised at that remark.

“Is it strange that I know?”

“Yes, it was a little unexpected.”

“I actually watched the movie a while ago. It was a good... movie.”

“It is a good movie. Though, it’s not something comfortable to watch.”

Miyeon nodded in agreement.

“Indeed. It wasn’t that comfortable to watch. The other actors really put their skills on full display, but your acting left a deep impression as well.”

“It was only for a short moment though.”

“A big impact only happens within short moments.”

“You might stump me if you flatter me too much. I don’t have any immunity for things like that.”

“You’re quite good even now though.”

At that moment, the buzzer rang.

“Should we get the drinks first then?”

“Alright.”

Miyeon put down her pen and stood up. Maru also followed her. When they returned to their seats with the coffee, the sound of the automatic door opening could be heard. Sooil and Byungchan had returned while shivering.

#### **Chapter 474**

“Sorry I’m late. I had an urgent call.”

Maru greeted Sooil with his eyes and then looked at him. His cheeks were pale due to the cold. It seemed that the call was so personal that he couldn’t tell Byungchan about it.

“You should drink this. It should warm you up.”

Maru gave Sooil his drink. After drinking the coffee, Sooil sighed out.

“I’m Choi Miyeon.”

“I’m Yoo Sooil.”

Miyeon had waited until Sooil caught his breath to introduced herself.

“It’s quite cold, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Even though it wasn’t this cold just a few days ago,” Sooil said as he put down his coffee cup.

“The weather has gotten really whimsical lately. One of the editors at my office is down with a severe cold.”

“I’m also taking some medicine because of a slight sinus cold.”

“A sinus cold? Oh dear, are you okay?”

“Yes. It’s somewhat bearable.”

Miyeon smiled and spun her notebook 180 degrees so that Sooil and Byungchan could read it.

“First up, I tried narrowing down some of the interview questions I’m going to write in the column. I’m going to remove any if necessary before we get to it so that we don’t break the flow of the conversation. Oh, I also want to record the whole conversation. Will that be okay with you?”

“That’s a little...” Byungchan said with a difficult expression.

“I’m not going to reveal it to anyone. I’m just recording so that I can recap when I actually start writing the column. Due to the nature of interviews, I’ll end up putting some of my own opinions once I start typing it out later. I like putting the raw version of the interview in the column, so I usually record them. There’s nothing better than a voice when it comes to interpreting the nuance of the words. The overall atmosphere of the text differs drastically if I type it out while listening to the voice recording. Of course, if you find it uncomfortable I won’t turn it on. The interview is supposed to be done in the most comfortable environment for the interviewee.”

Miyeon smiled. Maru sipped his coffee before looking at Byungchan. Byungchan spoke,

“Are you two okay with that? If it bothers you, it’s definitely better to refuse it now.”

“I’m okay with it. It’s not like I’m going to confess my sins or anything,” Sooil said in a joking manner.

Maru also nodded. The main event for the interview was Sooil anyway. The main character was okay with it, so there was no need for the sidekick to say something about it.

“I guess you can turn on the voice recorder then.”

“Thank you. I’ll repay you with a good interview. Then shall we get started?”

Miyeon pulled the notebook to her side.

“Oh, before that, let’s take a photo together. We might take more in different poses.”

Picking up the digital camera, Miyeon stood diagonally to Sooil. Byungchan stood up and fell back, and Maru moved behind Sooil.

“Consider that I’m in front of you. And place your hands naturally. Oh, holding onto your cup sounds fine as well. The outside is dark so it makes a good contrast.”

Hearing Miyeon’s request, Sooil picked up the cup. Maru placed his hands neatly on his thighs and looked forward. After a few shutter noises, Miyeon returned to her seat and sat down.

“I’ll show you the photos after the interview. If you like any of them, I’m going to use that one in the magazine.”

Pushing her cup to one side, Miyeon put the voice recorder in the middle. A red light started flickering to indicate that it was recording.

“Then let’s get started, shall we? Mr. Sooil. First of all, thank you for accepting our interview. I heard that you were busy with drama shoots. It’s the one directed by producer Heo Soogwan, right?”

“Yes. Thanks to director Heo, I was given the opportunity to shoot a good piece.”

“Were you acquainted with the director before this?”

“I saw him once during a drama afterparty. I was told that he wanted me to participate in his next work. Back then, I thought he was just joking, but I really was called.”

“I heard that the title of the drama is ‘Your Time’. What genre of movie is it?”

“The story is about a man who replaced another man that looks just like him. As for genre, there’s mellow, action, and a bit of mystery.”

“You are playing the role of the main character in his younger days, right?”

“Yes. I was lucky enough to play the younger days of senior Kang Suyeol.”

“Oh, I see. That must have been a lot of pressure on you.”

“Well, I did have to lead the first part of the story, and the one that will be receiving my acting is senior Kang Suyeol, so it did put some pressure on me. I’ll probably receive a lot of insults if I didn’t do well.”

“There are rumors about your good acting among the child actors though. The movie that starred you as the main character has also gotten good results.”

“I’m still far from perfect though. I’m still in a place where I receive a lot of help from others. I still need some time to say with confidence that I am fulfilling my role properly.”

“Are you dissatisfied with your acting?”

“Well, I think that it’s harder to find an actor who’s one hundred percent satisfied with their own acting.”

Maru sipped his coffee when Miyeon wrote things down. The interview was centered around Sooil’s career activity. It seemed that Miyeon had investigated quite a lot as she smoothly talked about what character he played in which work.

Twenty minutes passed after the interview began, but there were no moments of silence. Even during the little breaks they had, they talked about the atmosphere of the café, the taste of their drinks, or little things like what happened that day, so that they didn’t get distracted from the interview.

Sooil also focused on the interview. Even for questions where he could answer in short words, he added more detail, inducing the next question.

Maru remembered back to what happened at the JA building last time. Sooil had made a condescending woman fall back with his lies and smooth talking skills when that woman was acting cocky towards the part timer. He felt this back then, but Sooil did not waste any of his words as though he had learnt how to speak fluently. He increased the content when necessary, and decreased it when it was not. He was just like a negotiator.

Miyeon's prior investigation, progressive skills, as well as Sooil's talking skills made the progression of the interview very smooth. Maru just enjoyed his coffee as he listened to their conversation. Since he found out that he was just the sidekick, there was no need to be in a hurry. He was satisfied just by finding out what an interview was like.

"The movie you were shooting recently has come to a sudden halt, hasn't it?"

"Yes. I prepared a lot for that movie, so it's such a pity."

"I hope the problem gets resolved and we get to see a good movie."

"I also hope for that to happen."

Miyeon smiled and put down her pen. Sooil also picked up his coffee again.

"Is that the end of the interview?"

"Yes. You said you have an appointment right? Oh, let me take some more photos."

Miyeon walked around and took photos from different angles. They were all photos that zoomed in on Sooil's figure. She talked to Sooil about some of the photos she took before sitting back down again with a nod.

"Then I'll take my leave. Sorry about this. Maru, see you next time."

Sooil left first. Maru looked at Byungchan.

"He has a schedule. Sooil was the one who said that we should hold the interview in Suwon because you might find it a little hard to come all the way to Seoul when we might as well have held it in Seoul."

Maru was a little confused at first as to why they were doing the interview in Suwon, and now his curiosity was resolved. Byungchan lowered his voice and spoke,

"I'll come back right after I give Sooil a ride."

"You don't have to. If it's a shoot, he might need a manager. Don't mind me and keep looking after Sooil."

"That makes me feel sorry towards you though. Even though I'm your manager as well."

"Sooil isn't in the same league as me, is he? You told me last time that Sooil takes priority. You did everything you could by scheduling the interview here. Don't exhaust yourself by going back and forth between Seoul and Suwon."

Maru pointed at Sooil who was waiting outside. Byungchan grabbed Maru's arm and spoke,

"Sorry. Even though I promised to eat with you after this."

"Today's not the only day. Let's eat together later. Also, watch out for the cold. I saw you coughing before."

"I'm already taking some medicine. It'll be a huge problem if I get one of you sick because of me. Alright then, I'm going first. Sorry about this."

Byungchan shook hands with Miyeon before asking her to take care of the rest. Miyeon saw him off without any signs of displeasure as though they had talked about this beforehand.

"I made you wait, didn't I?" said Miyeon as she turned around a little.

"Well, I guess I did wait quite a bit," he said in a joking manner.

Miyeon smiled as she controlled the voice recorder. A red light started flickering once again.

"Let's continue from last time, shall we? Twilight Struggles, didn't you have a hard time shooting?"

"I want to pretend that I didn't have a hard time, but honestly speaking, it was very hard. I was cast in the movie not long after I started learning acting, and there were numerous people around me who couldn't be compared with me at all. If I look forward while unfolding the acting I prepared in my head, I see their acting, immediately putting me in despair. I was only able to last because it was a single cut. If I stayed there any longer, I might have suffocated to death."

"But those kinds of experiences help you out a lot."

"That's definitely true."

"What kind of changes did you experience after the movie shoot? Maybe you became more proactive, or maybe you became more shy."

"Honestly speaking, I became loose."

"Loose?"

Maru pulled his chin inwards a little.

"Twilight Struggles was a huge pressure for me, but at the same time, it was a splendid objective. It was just a single line, but I held onto that line for a long time. I can't say that I am satisfied with the acting I ended up doing in the end, but it is true that I did everything I could within my powers back then. After pouring everything into that, the next thing I did was background acting."

"Background acting, you say?"

"Yes. An actor is always supposed to do their best regardless of what acting they're doing, but I think that there's a difference in that 'best' I just talked about. I tried my best regardless of whether I was a minor actor or a background actor, but the time spent preparing for each one definitely has a difference. In the end, that leads to a difference in immersion and a difference in tension as well."

"You sound like a balloon that lost all its air after being inflated."

"I guess you can compare it to that. I couldn't feel the thrill I felt that day during drama shoots. Of course, I'm not saying that the drama shoots aren't fierce. The problem was more with myself."

"Let me change the question. When did you start learning acting? I heard that these days, people start as early as preschool."

"It was the beginning of this year when any hesitations I had about acting disappeared and I started learning acting properly. Oh, to be exact, I guess it's last winter when I received the novel version of Twilight Struggles. I started digging into characters back then."

Miyeon was quite surprised.

"So you're saying that it hasn't been a year yet? Then what triggered you to start acting?"

"I guess that's when I entered the acting club of my high school."

"Did you have desires about acting back then?"

"No. The reason I entered the acting club wasn't because of any desires I had, but because one of my friends persuaded me to."

"Then you started completely out of coincidence?"

"Strictly speaking, yes. But nothing in life goes according to plan, does it? How many people become teachers because they wanted to be, and how many people become businessmen because they wanted to be? I think that everyone starts due to a coincidental trigger."

"You're right. My dream, when I was young, was to become a piano teacher after all. Who would've known I would become a journalist instead."

"That's just how life is."

"This is quite interesting since your view of life sounds quite persuasive despite the fact that you're a high school student. I feel like you have a lot of social experience, or am I misunderstanding?"

"I'm just imitating a few things I saw in books. Where do you think I can get any social experience at my age?"

Maru smiled nonchalantly. Miyeon also nodded with a smile.

"Let's move over to dramas, shall we? Recently, you showed very characteristic acting through Youth Generation, The Witness, and Apgu. None of these characters had any similarities, yet you digested them quite well. Especially The Witness. There were a few articles when the episode was aired. Have you read them?"

"No, I don't look for articles about me or my acting."

"Really? If it was me, I would have been curious to death."

"I am curious, but there's nothing good for me if I look at something that happened in the past. If it's a drama I'm participating in regularly, I'd be monitoring them and reflecting what I learned upon my next acting, but they were all minor roles. Oh, I did look some of them up when I did Youth Generation. Though, I was very embarrassed when I read them."

Miyeon wrote down something with her pen before asking again.

"Your acting of the young murderer in The Witness, especially the interrogation scene with the actress Ahn Joohyun became quite a hot topic. What did you feel after that? It was quite a fiery scene."

“That was the moment I concentrated the most after Twilight Struggles. The actress Ahn Joo Hyun showed splendid acting and expressions, and I was very nervous because I thought that I couldn’t reply to her skills. So, I started acting with the mindset that I should show her my spirit at least. Actually, I relied on her to cover my lacking acting skills. That scene was only created thanks to Miss Ahn Joo Hyun’s excellent acting skills. I didn’t contribute that much.”

“Don’t you think you’re being too humble?”

Maru shook his head.

“I’m someone that really cherishes my food bowl. If I could show off my humbleness to get profit, I would gladly do so, but I can’t lie because of that. If the opposing actor was someone else that day, my acting would’ve become a horrible one where I just screeched all over the place.”

“You’re quite harsh when it comes to evaluating yourself.”

“I’d like to call it being objective.”

Maru picked up his coffee cup.

The cooled coffee flowed down his throat.

## **Chapter 475**

Miyeon flipped over her notebook page.

“Have you ever referred to other actors when you learned acting?”

“Countless times. Since I didn’t know anything, the only thing I could do was imitate other people.”

“Everyone starts off with that. If that’s the case, who’s the actor or actress that influenced you the most? Is it one of the cast from Twilight Struggles?”

“In my heart, I have three teachers. Sir Yoon Moonjoong, senior Yang Ganghwan, and lastly senior Yang Miso. They are my teachers.”

“Sir Yoon Moonjoong is very renowned. He’s treated as a great senior by many actors.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Mr. Yang Ganghwan has also spread his name recently. Oh, now that I think about it, you participated in the recent street performance that became quite an issue, right?”

“I only helped out a little from the side.”

“Mr. Kim Seokjoon, who has gained popularity through that street performance, has expressed that he is indebted to you. Can I ask what happened?”

“It’s nothing amazing, really. Back then, I was just looking for people to participate in the performance, and he entered my eyes so I just led him to the stage. After that, it was his own skill that captured the hearts of the audience.”



“In one interview, Mr. Kim Seokjoon said that you were the one who persuaded him until the end when he continued to refuse. Did you know that he would cause quite an uproar if he stood on stage?”

“It was a pure coincidence.”

“Still, I think there’s a reason behind why you continued to persuade him despite his refusal. I’m a little curious about what made you want to help him.”

Maru grabbed his cup tightly and smiled slightly. He sipped the last bit of coffee as he spoke. The reason he dragged that man to the stage that day was definitely not out of goodwill. That man just looked like he had a story, and he thought that he should be able to heighten the effect of their street performance if they used him. As such, ‘help’ wasn’t really a fitting word here. After all, he didn’t consider what kind of circumstances the man could be in at all back then.

He put down his cup and started speaking,

“I wasn’t trying to help him. He just looked like he had a story, and I just led him to a place where he could talk about it. The reason I continued to persuade him despite his refusal was purely because of my own greed. I thought that he had something that might change the stage. That’s why there’s no need for that person to thank me.”

He didn’t feel the need for any censorship, so he just told everything he had. Of course, he also had made the calculation that a characteristic interview like this might be better than an ordinary one. It would be somewhat too ordinary if he just acted like a kind kid after all. After writing something down while nodding, Miyeon looked at Maru again.

“It’s rather fresh since you really are just as I’ve heard.”

“Just as you’ve heard? Oh, you said that you heard about me from Dongwook-hyungnim, right?”

“Yes. The reason I’m doing this interview is quite simple. I am a little indebted towards senior Dongwook, and this is my way of paying him back. He asked me to interview the promising youths of JA Production and mentioned your name, as well as Mr. Sooil’s.”

Miyeon spun around her pen once. At the same time, she pressed down on the record button on the voice recorder to stop it.

“Back then, senior told me that Mr. Sooil was someone well-rounded, so too well-rounded that he felt a little artificial, and that you were....”

Miyeon faintly smiled before continuing.

“A warm calculator.”

“That’s a rather weird expression. I’m not sure whether I should be happy or not.”

“I think he used it in a good way. From the way you were worried about your manager’s health, you should be the type that’s kind to people around you. Actually, I didn’t expect that much when I was preparing for the interview today. Interviewing young people can get really monotonous at times. Although they say that a good interview is the result of good questions, the help of the one answering those questions is really important at times. In that sense, Mr. Sooil’s interview was very impressive. It’s

somewhat funny for me to say this, but I felt that he was being rather strategic. It felt like he had prepared for the interview. I wondered if JA Production taught their actors like that, but when I talk to you, Mr. Maru, I don't feel like that's the case."

"Am I that different from Sooil?"

"You're both similar in regards to the fact that you don't get dragged around by the questions and mediate between your opinions and the question. However, if Mr. Sooil felt like he had readied several model answers and choose from them, you, Mr. Maru, feel like... a warm calculator. You calculate your gains and losses on the spot and give an answer that profits you rather than a model answer."

"Can journalists tell that?"

"Just like how a mathematician can deduce an answer with a formula, journalists like us gain something like an instinct if we face people for a long time. Of course, I don't entirely trust it. Journalists love gossip, but they don't stake their lives on it. That's why most of that is talked about personally and privately. It's something that I must dismiss."

Miyeon tapped on the voice recorder that had its light turned off.

Maru also shrugged.

"Being calculative isn't something bad."

"Of course. In fact, we live in a world where being calculative feels more reasonable. There are too many people who force their way through with the wrong things without picking up the calculator first."

"You said you used to be a journalist for a newspaper company, right?"

"Yes."

"Can I also ask you a personal question?"

"Sure. The reason I'm chatting with you right now is because I have free time."

"That's good. Was it a major newspaper company?"

"It is one of the places you think of when you think about newspapers in the country."

"If that's the case, don't they pay you more than magazine companies? There must be a larger variety of things you can do there as well."

"That's definitely true. I heard that becoming a senior journalist that can write the headlines regularly or the head editor for a department will allow you to encounter a lot of unimaginable and interesting things. Of course, a bigger salary as well."

Miyeon stretched out her fingers as she spoke.

"You look like you're wondering why I switched my job."

"Yes."

“Well, I’m not sure. When I left, I could come up with numerous reasons and circumstances for me to leave, but right now, I don’t know why I left.”

“Do you regret that decision?”

Hearing his words, Miyeon leaned back in her chair and made a relaxed smile. Maru nodded. That was enough of an answer.

“I came here to do an interview, but I was questioned instead.”

“Only by doing this would I leave behind an impression on you. I also heard that I should stay close with people who make their living with a pen.”

“I really look forward to what you will become in the future. I guess that kind of nonchalance is the secret to your rapid increase in acting skills. If you do become a popular actor, don’t ignore me and at least reply to me when I say hello.”

Miyeon turned on the voice recorder again.

“Then shall we finish things up?”

\* \* \*

“Thank you for your work.”

“Thank you too.”

Maru stretched his arms out as he stood up. Unintentionally, he dragged things out. It seemed that Miyeon was really free as she talked about various things throughout the interview. As Maru was also free, he gladly chatted with her.

“Oh, it’s snowing.”

Leaving the café, Maru reached out. He thought that it was a raindrop that hit his face, but when he looked at the sky, he saw snow. The news did talk about an early snow, but he didn’t know that it would start snowing at the end of November. He saw documentaries about how global warming was a serious issue, but it seemed that Earth wasn’t that hot yet.

“I don’t think it’ll pile up,” Miyeon said after leaving the café much later than him.

She was holding her coat, her bag, and her notebook in her hands. She was looking at the small car in front of the café, and it seemed that it was hers.

“Then see you next time.”

“Yes, watch out on your way home.”

Miyeon nodded before walking off. Just then, it seemed as though her coat had been caught by her legs as she stopped for a while to look. At that moment, the backpack’s opening widened and a few notebooks fell on the ground. Maru quickly approached her and helped her pick them up.

“I forgot to close it.”

Miyeon smiled and closed the bag after putting the notebooks inside. Just as Maru stood up after thinking that it was done, a piece of paper caught Maru's eyes. It was a cutout from a newspaper. He stared at Miyeon, who was opening the car, before picking it up.

The newspaper snippet was an article that Maru knew very well. The Five's slave contract issue. It had caused quite an uproar during its time, but it was now a cold potato that no one talked about. There was another article cutout below that article, stuck with tape. That was about celebrity sexual bribery.

Next to a photo of a woman that had her head lowered, there were the names 'Lee Miyoon' and 'Hong Janghae' written in a red marker. The two rather unwelcome names reflected on Maru's pupils.

At that moment, a hand suddenly appeared in his vision.

"I can take that off you, okay?"

She was smiling, but her eyes seemed to be panicking. Maru stared at Miyeon who was probably clearing up a bunch of thoughts inside her head. Was this woman chasing something? Was there something between Lee Miyoon and Hong Janghae?"

"What incident is this?"

If it was someone unrelated to him, he wouldn't have asked that question. After all, it might provoke displeasure within them. As an unrelated person, interfering with someone's personal life, especially when it was related to their work, was something incredibly rude. However, the name Lee Miyoon caught his eye. He could ignore Hong Janghae, but Lee Miyoon was working on the same shooting set as the person that meant everything to him.

And that person said that she hated Lee Miyoon.

He was aware that Lee Miyoon's usual attitude and actions weren't that good through experience. He was also aware, thanks to Suyeon, that Miyoon was called the 'madam' in the entertainment industry. Of course, in a bad way. A woman that calls out male idols to her private space and asks them to sleep with her.

However, the article that Miyeon dropped on the floor just now seemed to indicate that there was something else when it came to this Miyoon.

"You don't need to know," said Miyeon as she stiffened her expression.

Maru did not hesitate to ask further.

"Is the madam involved in something dirty? Such as sexual bribery of actresses?"

"How do you know about the madam?"

She seemed startled as she changed her way of calling Maru.

Maru narrowed his eyes.

"I'll have to apologize in advance, but I think I need to ask the questions this time. Do you have some time?"

## Chapter 476

“Time?”

Miyeon realized that there were thorns in Maru’s words immediately after she said that word, but she did not apologize or make an awkward smile. In fact, she frowned and looked at Maru.

“I don’t know how you know about the madam, Mr. Maru, nor what you think about this incident, but this is not a matter you should get involved with so easily.”

Maru pulled on the newspaper article he still held on to. This was a problem that involved a lot of people and a lot of incidents. She was also almost used to their advantage after blindly rushing into it, wasn’t she? Senior Dongwook told her to take it slow. That was a warning. This was something dangerous, so she did not plan on getting a high school student who just entered this industry involved in this.

She stuffed the article cutouts in her backpack and was just about to go back to her car when a strong grip held her hand back. Miyeon looked back at Maru with a bit of panic.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I understand that you’re worried about me and that you’re trying to prevent the reveal of this incident in a half-assed manner which would make the whole deal less significant. However, someone I know is involved with Lee Miyoon, and not in a good way.”

“With Lee Miyoon?”

“Yes.”

Miyeon looked down at her palms. Maru’s attitude had changed from his logical and calm one during the interview. He said that someone he knew was involved. She could tell that that someone was very important to him through the pain she was feeling in her wrists.

After a bit of hesitation, Miyeon shook her head.

“Then tell that person to never have a private schedule with Lee Miyoon. But you can’t say it as though she’s a bad person. This is all speculation right now. As long as that person maintains a certain distance from her, she won’t be able to do anything. That’s what this is about after all.”

He should’ve understood after this, so Miyeon tried to shake his arm off. However, Maru did not let go.

“It won’t take that long.”

He clearly wasn’t going to relent. Miyeon looked around her. She did so in order to see if anyone around them was listening to them, and also because it was hard to face Maru head on. She had a hard time believing that this was the same person that smoothly talked about himself with a faint smile until just now. Maru was just that offensive. Miyeon was reminded of an angry male animal, no, a beast. One that bared its fangs to an enemy that entered its territory, nay, tried to touch what was its.

At that moment, Maru loosened his grip. 'I'm not a beast' - Miyeon could clearly hear Maru's words as she took a step back. Feeling that she was found out, Miyeon pulled down on her hems with the hand that wasn't holding her bag.

"My answer is still a no. I can't tell what are practically my speculations to other people. Also, this is not a problem that a high school student can do something about. Just tell that person to put some distance between them and Lee Miyoon. That's the best thing you can do right now."

This involved huge entertainment agencies. Not only that, according to the actress that told her about the sexual bribery matter, people higher up than that may be involved in the matter. Miyeon never thought deeply about who those 'higher up' people might be. That was because she had a strong premonition that she might end up letting go of this matter once she started digging that far. If she was to maintain the puny journalist mindset that senior Dongwook talked about, she had to focus on the problem itself rather than who she was up against.

Lee Miyoon. She was the bridge that connected everyone at the center of this incident. Although Miyeon wasn't at a stage where she could prove that, her instinct as well as many testimonies indicated that she was the main broker.

She had seen numerous seniors who had to leave their positions because they used their pen the wrong way, and going further than that, had to forfeit their lives altogether. This incident was a dangerous item that had to be handled in secret. To give a comparison, she had to lead a huge truck carrying explosives to the side of the road with her small car and have it stop driving. The moment she made a mistake and crashed into the truck, she would be the only one being overturned. Also, once the truck started going haywire and started crashing into things, the people that needed to be protected might get caught in the explosion.

Miyeon predicted that there were other victims of this sexual bribery. The reason senior Dongwook told her to take things slow and careful when it came to prying into Lee Miyoon should have been to make her realize the dangers that would come with it, and also to tell her not to overlook the weak that might also receive damage through this incident.

She was practically running circles around a fire with dry firewood. Dragging a mere high school student into something like this was not right on her conscience, nor her work ethics.

"Do you understand now?"

Miyeon put her bag on the passenger seat and closed the door. Maru seemed to have given up as he didn't say anything. Miyeon sighed in relief, thinking that he had finally understood.

She went around to the driver's seat and opened the door. Now, all that was left for her to do was to leave. Although this could be considered a bad goodbye, she thought that she had to say it at least and looked at Maru.

Maru was holding up his phone. He was moving his fingers busily as though he was about to send someone a message. At that moment, Miyeon had a bad feeling. Maru smiled apologetically as he looked at her.

"Lee Miyoon will hide her tail once she knows about this, right?"

“Don’t tell me you’re...”

Miyeon quickly approached Maru and whisked away the phone he was holding. There were a lot of words written on the phone screen. It asked what she thought about sexual bribery.

“Are you crazy?” Miyeon didn’t hold back her words this time.

“Are you out of your mind?”

Lee Miyoon was never mentioned even when the prosecutors handled this matter. In such a situation, what would she do when she received this message? She would hide herself even more. It would become even harder to gather any evidence, and perhaps this whole matter would be brought down to nothing. That wasn’t the only thing.

“Do you think she’ll let you go if you send a message like this to her? Sending a text like this to her when her crime hasn’t even been proven is a threat and false accusation. Do you want to end your life in the entertainment industry?”

“I guess I can’t help it.”

Maru took back his phone before pressing a button. Miyeon looked at Maru in shock. Just then, she heard a sound from her pocket. The message she saw just now had arrived. The sender’s name was unknown.

“I don’t know Lee Miyoon’s number.”

“You...”

At that moment, she reminded herself of the fact that she gave him her business card back at the café. It wasn’t surprising that he knew her phone number. She felt pathetic for not remembering it, and laughed in vain when she experienced his scamming skills.

“But it’s not that hard to find out. She did express interest in me after all. I’m not doing this because Lee Miyoon was involved in sexual bribery. I don’t plan to discuss justice with you, nor do I plan to become some sort of exemplary citizen. However, if there’s the slightest possibility that that woman can become harmful to the person I know, then I want to know about it beforehand.”

Maru pointed at the café again.

“If you leave now, I won’t be able to guarantee what kind of actions I will take in the future. Since I don’t know anything, I’ll start poking around everywhere, and the day Lee Miyoon hears about my weird actions, the results of your investigation will become nothing but trash. So, can we talk just a little so that we don’t waste both of our time?”

If you want, I’ll buy you coffee - he added before shrugging.

Being played around by such a young kid, Miyeon didn’t have the energy to get angry anymore. She just wanted to sit somewhere and start sighing. It would be great if it was in her own car, but if she went inside her car right now, she didn’t know what kind of actions this weird guy in front of her might take....

Seeing Maru point at the café, Miyeon sighed a little.

“This is not something you can do anything about just because you know about it.”

“I know that already. I don’t plan to either. I just want to know just in case.”

Miyeon bit her lips as she returned to her car. She opened the passenger seat before taking out her bag.

“It won’t be a fun story,” she said as she closed the door.

\* \* \*

“And that’s as far as I’ve found out until now,” Miyeon said to Maru who was skimming through her notebook.

The first snow of the year was falling outside. The small snowflakes at the beginning had turned into rather heavy snow right now. The world would probably be dyed white tomorrow morning.

She made a bitter smile. She didn’t know what she was doing here. At first, she was planning to tell him briefly and end things there. Her plan was to persuade Han Maru, who showed interest in this incident with a youthful curiosity and a vague sense of wariness, before going home, but the farther their talk progressed, the more Miyeon talked about thanks to Maru’s insight.

He listened to the whole circumstances with a serious face that did not fit a high school student before pointing out the core points in this incident and asked her important questions just like senior Dongwook. She was even scolded for being too careless when she talked about how she met the broker that worked with Lee Miyoon in the past. For a brief while, she even felt like she was being scolded by her teacher.

“By circumstantial evidence, it’s highly likely that Lee Miyoon was involved.”

“I say 100 percent.”

“Maybe. But aren’t you dropping the honorifics too easily?” Maru said as he sipped some tea.

Miyeon snorted back.

“Then would you like me to treat you politely again?”

“No, this is actually much easier for me as well.”

“You really tire out the people around you, don’t you?”

“Not entirely. But was the sexual bribery incident resolved after the broker was arrested?”

“I looked into that as well, but that seems to be the case. There was a crime, and there was someone that confessed that crime. It’s not like I can ask for help at this point in time.”

Prostitution was a very sensitive topic for women. Just asking them to testify had to be approached in a careful manner after all. There shouldn’t be that many people who would want to remind themselves of such a horrible memory.

“So the key to solving this incident is to find out what kind of contracts, if any, there are between Lee Miyoon and Soul, right?”



“It’s just as hard to find that out as it is important.”

“About the sexual bribery, the people involved are mostly new actresses and singers, right?”

“Yes, they’re the people most desperate for an opportunity after all. I think that the majority of the time, people involved in this approach them after finding the right opportunity. After all, these days, they might end up posting about it on the internet if they’re too forceful. MH Entertainment’s incident was like that. But also....”

Miyeon lowered her voice a little.

“I hear that there are a lot of people who willingly do such a thing.”

“It’s an incredibly charming offer as long as they don’t get found out. I think I’ll also consider it if complete secrecy was guaranteed - if I get some money or a role in a drama just by sleeping with someone once.”

“Don’t ever do it.”

“I said I’ll consider it. There’s no perfect secret in this world after all. Moreover, it’s obvious that you’ll eventually get caught doing it, so there’s no need to do it.”

“What a free way of thinking. Normally, people even detest talking about this.”

“It’s a result of people struggling their best to make a living, isn’t it? I can understand them. I can sympathize with them too. The world these days isn’t so clean that you can tell them that they should compete fair and square. Of course, that doesn’t mean that the ones that do are foolish to do so.”

Maru closed all the notebooks and put them in front of Miyeon in a neat pile.

“So? What are you going to do now?”

“Nothing. I listen to other people’s advice.”

Maru’s eyes seemed to gleam as he said those words. Miyeon believed Maru’s words. He should be telling the truth when he said that he won’t be doing anything. However, she was a little worried since those eyes clearly indicated that he was going to take action as soon as something went wrong.

“I’ll contact you once I find a good opportunity.”

“A good opportunity?”

Miyeon looked up at Maru who was standing up. Maru nodded back at her with a smile before leaving.

‘I wonder what he’s thinking about.’

Miyeon sighed as she drank the cooled tea. She had unexpectedly got a helper. Although she didn’t like this situation, why was it that she also looked forward to it somewhat?

“Let’s go for now, eh?”

Miyeon put her notebooks inside her bag before standing up.

**Chapter 477**

“You introduced yourself through the drama Apgu this time around. Since this was your first traditional drama, I think you must have been nervous. How did you feel?”

Hearing journalist Lim’s words, Kang Giwoo waited for a moment before speaking.

“I am always tense when I shoot a drama. I’m actually rather worried since although this is my fourth drama, I feel like my nervousness is rising instead of falling. Moreover, since it’s a traditional drama where I have to watch out for my intonation and pronunciations, I had to prepare more than usual, and the longer I prepared, the more nervous I became. Due to that, I ended up inconveniencing a lot of people around me including the director.”

“I see. But the reaction of the audience was quite good when it was broadcasted. Some netizens are saying that they would be rather disappointed to see Han Myunghoe turn into an adult.”

“Whenever I hear those words, I feel thankful and also responsible to do better in the future. The best reply an actor can give to repay the audience is better acting after all.”

Manager Cha nodded as he heard Giwoo’s words. He wasn’t wrong from one to ten. He could clearly see that this guy knew nothing but acting. From the way the company was giving him full support, it seemed that the president was aware of his good personality and skills.

“I heard that you were close to the actor Yoo Sooil. Is there something in common between actors around the same age?”

“Sooil is a splendid actor and a splendid friend. People that know him, know him for his good acting as well. If the opportunity arises, I’d love to work with him on the same work, but I’m still waiting right now since I’m not up to par yet.”

“Does that mean that the actor Yoo Sooil is better than you at acting?”

Hearing the provocation within the journalist’s words, manager Cha frowned.

“Of course. When it comes to acting, Sooil is better than me. That’s why I’m trying my best to chase him.”

“No way, is that how you actually feel?”

“Yes.”

When Giwoo replied with a smile, the journalist found no fun in it and went on to the next question. They also took photos from time to time with some props in the background. Since it was an interview that would go on a movie magazine, they put some effort into choosing the right place.

“Lastly, I heard that you were recently cast in ‘New Semester’, a drama about the growth of young people created by YBS.”

“Did the news already spread that fast?”

“Why of course.”

The journalist smiled before continuing.

“Since Youth Generation from RBS didn’t do as well as they expected, YBS is trying their hand at their own youth drama, right? Moreover, you are one of the main characters as well. Do you have any resolutions when doing the drama?”

“You’re giving me too much pressure, so I don’t really know what to say. Hmm, I will try my best to make sure the drama is worth watching so please watch the first episode. You’re going to watch it too, right?”

“Of course.”

The interview ended on a good note. Manager Cha saw out the journalist and the photographer before returning.

“There’s a lot of snow outside. It looks like it’ll be snowing all week.”

“Has it piled up?”

“Yeah.”

“You must have a hard time driving then.”

“This is nothing. Rather than that, you finished your schedule for the day. What are you going to do now?”

“You can go back first. I’ll visit a few places before going back home to rest.”

“If you want a ride, I can give you one.”

“It’s fine. Oh, yeah. Hyung.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know someone called Han Maru?”

“Han Maru? Oh, isn’t that the minor actor back at the shoot? I do remember his name since he has a rare name.”

“Apparently he belongs to JA.”

“JA? You mean JA Production?”

“Yes.”

“Really? I thought he was just someone from an acting school or something. Well, I guess he was good at acting.”

Manager Cha thought back to Apgu’s shoot. That night was particularly hot. Giwoo’s acting had hit a block towards the end of the shoot, and according to his memory, that boy named Maru did a demonstration for him.

‘Giwoo asked him to do it.’

Manager Cha looked at Giwoo with pride. Boys at his age were filled with arrogance and did not easily make a request to others, and yet he asked an actor around his age to teach him acting.

Giwoo had what it took to become big.

“But what about him?”

“You gave me a magazine with my interview in it, right? Right after mine, there was an interview with Sooil and that Han Maru. It seems like the interviewer wrote a good note for him.”

Giwoo handed him the magazine. Manager Cha read the interview on the spot. It was easy to see that the main character of the interview was Sooil whether it was from the photo or the length of the interview, but considering the depth of each question, it was also easily noticeable that the interviewer took good care of Maru.

“He did do well. Looks like the interviewer knew that.”

“Right? Han Maru did do well.”

“Yeah. He was great that day. I was a little startled since he looked like he had practiced your lines.”

“Right. I was also surprised.”

Giwoo smiled and told him to give him back the magazine. After receiving the magazine, Giwoo looked at the column with a smile on his face. Manager Cha looked at him for a while before speaking,

“Then I’ll take my leave first.”

“Okay, watch out, the road must be slippery.”

“Yes.”

Manager Cha returned to the company with his car. Snow from a week ago still hadn’t melted completely and remained in the corners of the road. He parked the car before going up to his office.

“Hey.”

He was called by the head manager as soon as he went in.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry to tell you this, but you’re out of a job.”

“What?”

He stared at the head manager for quite a while since that came out of nowhere. The head manager frowned and scratched his head.

“We’re going through a restructuring because the company is lacking money, and we didn’t have anyone else we could lay off.”

“Head manager, no, hyung-nim. You can’t do this to me. You know I moved houses to come here.”

“Hey, do you think I’m doing this because I want to?”

“Hyung-nim. Say it while looking me in the eyes.”

Manager Cha grabbed the head manager who turned his head away, but the head manager just sighed and no longer spoke.

“I didn’t do anything wrong though.”

“I know, I really do. I know that you work well. And also, I’m not looking down on you at all. We’ve been working together for a long time after all. I’ll look for a job for you. Go to a company much better than ours and work there.”

“Hyung-nim.”

“Sorry. You know the rules. That’s just the kind of field we work in.”

The head manager opened his wallet and took out all the bills inside.

“Here, take this. You should be able to pay this month’s rent at least.”

“Don’t do this to me, hyung-nim. Please. You told me I was going to be promoted to a schedule manager. Also, what is going to happen to Giwoo? There’s no one here that knows him better than me.”

“Hey, let’s leave things on a good note. If you act like this, I won’t be able to do anything for you. You know that this field is not that wide, right? If we end things with a smile, we will be able to meet again with a smile. The opposite is true as well. If we end things while swearing at each other, we’ll start off swearing at each other the next time we meet.”

The head manager then stood up from his seat. His face looked very apologetic and full of pity. Manager Cha looked at his face and swallowed his anger. The head manager was the one that brought him his current job when he was out of work.

‘He’s not to blame.’

That was obvious from his face. This wasn’t the head manager’s fault.

“You really can’t abandon me, okay? I’m not quitting everything just like this.”

“I know. How many years do you think we’ve known each other? Just wait a bit. I’ll look into another agency. You’re known to do good work. As long as I give them a little push, people will ask you to work for them. Who knows? You might start working for a busty actress instead of a kid. People need to switch their jobs once in a while to gain more experience and grow up. Let’s raise your value this time. You know that being a road manager counts as work experience, right?”

The head manager put the stack of bills into manager Cha’s chest pocket as he patted his shoulders.

Manager Cha nodded before leaving the office. The image of the head manager’s face as he grabbed his hand until the last moment still lingered in front of him. Yes, he should definitely get a call as long as he waited for a while.

“Oh, I guess I should text him at least.”

Manager Cha sent Giwoo a text message saying that he was sorry for quitting so suddenly. The weak-hearted Giwoo would probably feel uneasy as soon as he receives the text, but he sent a message anyway since he thought that it wasn’t right to quit without saying goodbye.

After leaving the company, manager Cha stared up at the building. He lived a cheap life of 900 thousand won per month without any insurance, but he still had a dream of his own.

“Right, it’s not over yet.”

Manager Cha gripped his fists before turning around. The head manager - no, it was just hyung-nim now - wasn’t someone that would betray him. He would probably provide him with a better opportunity soon.

As he walked while thinking about that, manager Cha took out his phone in his pocket.

‘Looks like he hasn’t seen the message yet.’

Normally, he would’ve gotten a reply as soon as he sent it, but he didn’t get one back even though ten minutes had passed. Was he busy right now?

“Well, he’ll probably call me with shock once he finds out I’m no longer working.”

Perhaps he might beg the president to get him working again. Giwoo was just that affectionate and kind after all. He felt better after thinking that. Manager Cha thought that he should have a fulfilling meal precisely at a time like this and went into the nearby supermarket.

He’ll probably get a call tomorrow.

\* \* \*

“New semester?”

“Yeah, New Semester.”

Byungchan spoke in a happy mood.

Maru tilted his head. He did hear Byungchan tell him that he should look forward to some good news, but a new semester all of a sudden?

“You’re going back to college again?” He asked as a joke.

Byungchan shook his head saying that that wasn’t it. Just then, they got the udon they ordered. After putting down two iron pots with boiling udon, the owner gave them a small plate of soondae as a service. It seemed that Byungchan was a regular here.

“It’s a drama that is starting soon. Don’t you know about it?”

“You know that I don’t know things like that.”

“Hey, you should really watch TV. You’re on it, so how can you not watch it?”

“I was going to even if you didn’t tell me. I felt a little awkward when I did the interview last time.”

“Right, you should watch more TV and more variety shows. You should learn what they’re about when you can so that you can take the opportunity when it rises.”

“I will. But what about the drama?”

“There’s an audition for a supporting role. The main characters are already decided, and when I had a look at their schedule, the first episode is set to air in January next year.”

“So there are around two months left.”

“Yes. Since they started doing promotions after casting the main characters, they’re looking for supporting roles now. RBS didn’t do well with Youth Generation, right? It seems like YBS is trying to take a portion of the pie.”

“Didn’t Youth Generation do pretty well? I know it did when I appeared in it.”

“It was good in the beginning but went downhill towards the end. You know, one of the main characters belonged to Blue. The reactions became quite drastic when rumors about how Blue was over started circulating around, and perhaps due to that, some of the fan cafés forbid their members from watching it.”

“Fan cafés do something like that?”

“Hey, you don’t know how scary idol fans can become. If you meet any boy or girl idols at a TV station, you should keep your distance. If some of the extreme fans got a photo of that, it would be total chaos. If someone at a certain level hangs out with them, they might start shipping the two saying it’s a god-sent relationship, but if someone awkward hangs around them, they will attack with all their power in the comments.”

“That sounds scary,” said Maru as he raised some noodles.

He thought that he should just greet Chaerim with his eyes if he met Chaerim later.

“All the popular kids are in it, so you should do your best in the audition and get a spot.”

“If I have the skills, I will, and if I don’t, I won’t. But is it a public audition?”

“These kinds of dramas don’t hold public auditions. First, they’ll hold one for agencies like us, and then the acting schools, then personal connections, and if they don’t have anyone even after that, they’ll turn to public auditions.”

“So being in an agency is a huge advantage huh.”

“It is, especially if it’s something like JA.”

Byungchan told him that he should intake a lot of iron and put a piece of boiled liver in his bowl. Maru smiled and ate it.

“Anyway, do your best. You know that the child actors that became popular all did so through youth dramas, right? You should be able to become big if you take advantage of the opportunity this time. You’re good at acting, good with words and... anyway!”

“Why? Is my face bad?” Maru asked with a smile.

“Hey, face isn’t everything when it comes to actors. Of course, you aren’t bad-looking. In fact, you look manly. You’re decently tall and decently sized as well. You must be popular with girls.”

“Thanks for the flattery. Geez, I should really undergo cosmetic surgery or something.”

“Hey hey. Don’t say something like that. An idol that was found out to have had cosmetic surgery had to retire recently. You should watch out for things like that. No matter how much the entertainment industry changes, there won’t be a change to the perception that cosmetic surgery is unforgivable.”

“Will that really be the case?”

“Just you wait. Korean people despise people who have put knives on their faces. Just look at the TV. How many celebrities have had cosmetic surgery? At most, it’s double eyelids, or maybe corrective surgery. Anyway, even if you do have cosmetic surgery later, don’t ever admit to it. The best answer is to say that you became like that after going on a diet.”

“Okay,” Maru replied with a nod.

## **Chapter 478**

“Drag your voice from your stomach and throw it out. Remember that the sound will meet less resistance if you expand your throat.”

Suyeon walked around placing her hands on the members’ stomachs to help them with their vocalization.

“Aram, relax your shoulders. Are you nervous?”

“It’s not like that, but I subconsciously end up tensing.”

“Look at me. Pull up your shoulders like you’re pulling them up to your ear level. Then let them go. It is true that you must watch your breathing, but if you focus on that too much, you’ll end up tensing the area around your trapezius muscle. That is even worse than just not watching your breathing. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Feel where your breath brushes past in your body. Then, imagine that the breath you just inhaled is going past your lungs, through your stomach, down to your thighs, knees then your toes, then comes back up in the opposite order before bursting out. Haaa, haa. That’s right. Don’t let the breath and the voice play separately, let your breath carry your voice. Don’t roll up your tongue! Don’t brush the top of your mouth with your breath!”

Good - she added before going over to the next person. Since she couldn’t visit that many times recently due to her drama schedule, Suyeon stuck around till the end of practice, perhaps out of apology, or perhaps because she had free time.

‘She must have some feelings of responsibility.’

Suyeon stood in front of Maru, who was breathing out. After watching for a while, she made a smile before walking right past him. Maru exercised like he usually did and continued the vocal practice.

“Stop. Well done for today. You guys must be having a hard time since you’re trying your hand at a play different than the one you did in the summer.”

“Doing the same one again is just no fun,” Aram chuckled as she replied.



“Looks like you guys practiced pretty hard while I wasn’t here. You’re at a level where it would be fine for you to go up on stage now. As long as you polish your foundations a little more, you’ll see good results.”

Suyeon pressed down her baseball cap before picking up her bag.

“Since you’re at it, let’s give it one more push. Oh, once you’re done with the performance, we’ll hold an afterparty at my house again, okay?”

“Without the alcohol this time,” said Bangjoo as he shook his head.

Last time, he had a hard time thanks to alcohol. Suyeon accepted it.

“Then let’s wrap things up here today. Well done.”

“Thank you for your work.”

They clapped to signal the end of practice as always.

“Han Maru.”

Suyeon, who was leaving through the back door, called out to Maru and gestured to him to follow her. Maru put down the desk he was carrying and left the classroom.

“Our cute little brother.”

Suyeon approached him with a smile on her face. Maru immediately took a step back to put some distance.

“Why are you acting like that? You’re such a cold guy.”

“Why are you acting like that then? It’s creepy.”

“Can’t you see that I want to look after the junior of the agency as a senior?”

“Why don’t you tell me a more convincing lie? What’s this about?”

“What a disappointment. You fail to understand my feelings.”

After making a disappointed face, Suyeon sighed before crossing her arms.

“You are going to take the audition for New Semester, right?”

“The agency told me to, so I have to.”

“You know that I was cast there as a trainee teacher, right?”

“I didn’t, because I’m not someone who goes around digging into other people’s private lives. But is there a problem with that?”

“What problem could there be? I said I was just trying to cheer you on.”

Making a prankful smile, Suyeon tried to poke Maru’s cheek. Maru pushed her finger away with his hand. Suyeon didn’t give up and tried to do it again, but Maru kept pushing her finger away since he didn’t want it.

“You don’t like me, do you?”

“I don’t like you. That’s for sure.”

“Wow, what a disappointment. Didn’t we spend a romantic night together in a villa once? You even peeked at my inner workings.”

“Should I tell what you just said to Geunsoo-hyung?”

“Why can’t you take a joke? But hey, what is Mr. Geunsoo up to these days? We belong to the same agency, but I can’t seem to contact him.”

“So that’s your objective after all?”

“Don’t call it an objective. I’m just giving words of encouragement to my adorable junior while asking what Mr. Geunsoo is up to on the side. Don’t you think we’re lacking teamwork even though we belong to the same company?”

“Why don’t you give up already? Geunsoo-hyung looks like he doesn’t even have this much interest in you at all,” said Maru as he showed her his pinky fingernail. Suyeon looked at the ceiling and made a sad face.

“You know, these days, I lost contact with everyone. All the men that had interest in me are being too cautious.”

“There was a big event, so I’m not surprised.”

“This is different from sexual bribery. Those girls just didn’t enjoy it, while I did.”

“Why don’t you just date a man normally? It must be more fun than throwing them in the trash after sucking out the juice.”

Hearing his words, Suyeon chuckled.

“What horrible thing are you talking about? Are you serious?”

“I was just joking. But don’t go around teasing pure men. That’s just too pitiful.”

“Love is always about give and take. I can make a request since there’s something in me that the man wants. Even the guys that talk about platonic love are all the same when they go to bed. They think about nothing but discharging their desires.”

“What a good thing to say in front of a high school student.”

“You’re my stress relief window. It’s your fault for consulting me all the time, making me say everything in front of you.”

“It’s you who blabs on about things because you’re drunk, you know? It will be bad if there’s an issue with your memory at such a young age. I heard that Alzheimer’s disease doesn’t care about age these days.”

“I’m too healthy to catch something like that.”

Suyeon stretched her arms out with a refreshed smile.

“Ah! That’s much better. My mouth was feeling itchy too. A friend you can talk to sure is good, eh?”

“Were we friends? Ever?”

“We weren’t? Best friends that share our secrets?”

“You know a secret of mine?”

“I know the secret that you know my secret.”

“What an amazing secret that is.”

Maru didn’t talk anymore and looked at Suyeon. Suyeon calmed down again.

“You look like you have something to ask. And something important too.”

“You told me that Lee Miyoon is the madam last time, right?”

“Ah, the madam.”

Suyeon pulled her chin inwards and put her finger on her lips.

“What about her?”

“I was wondering if you knew anything about her other than the rumors.”

“And why do you want to know about the madam? You piqued my interest since it was so sudden. It shouldn’t be that you want to show off in front of her.”

“I just wanted to know what kind of person she is.”

After tapping on her lips for a while, Suyeon made a foxy smile.

“You just wanted to know, huh? What is this? What’s going on?”

“If you don’t want to say it, then that’s fine as well. It’s nothing serious.”

“I’m not thinking about ignoring you when it’s the first time you come to me for help. I’m just curious as to why you’re expressing interest in that woman. There’s no way you prefer older women. Oh, you said you had a girlfriend right? Then is it a one-off thing?”

“Think whatever you want.”

“You really should stop hiding in front of family members.”

Suyeon looked at her watch before speaking,

“It’s about time I went. Alright, I’ll tell you everything I know about Lee Miyoon. But what exactly do you want to know?”

“There’s a rumor that she’s the broker that connects women to the clients. Is this true?”

"I can't give you a confident answer to that. It's a sensitive topic. Well, I won't deny that there are such rumors floating around."

"Did you ever receive an offer?"

Hearing that question, Suyeon smiled without saying anything. Maru nodded once.

"Do you think I did it or not?"

"You probably didn't."

"Why is that?"

"Because you're playing a game with other people's hearts. It doesn't sound like you to simply just sell your body in exchange for something."

Suyeon's smile became thicker. Her upper teeth were showing.

"You know me too well. Don't go around spreading rumors though. But hey, why are you digging into Lee Miyoon? You can tell me that much."

"As a preventative measure."

"Preventative measures, huh? For who?"

"Do you prevent diseases for specific people? You just do it."

"So you don't want to tell me?"

"We aren't close enough for that."

"I guess that's true."

Suyeon took out her phone before busily tapping with her fingers. She seemed to be texting someone.

"Hm, I'll look into her a little for my cute junior. But don't expect too much. That woman's scary. I don't know what you're trying to do, but don't get involved too deeply. Even when I look at her, she's a total witch."

"A small witch, or a big witch?"

"Make that a young witch or an old witch. Oh, right. I didn't call you out to talk about this."

At that moment, Suyeon got a call. She winked before turning around to take the call. Her voice was very loud and clear as she took that call, and the other side of the phone seemed to be male.

"Yes, yes. Of course. I'm not saying this just because we belong to the same company. He's really good. You should take a good look at him during the audition. Is this a lobby you ask? Do people lobby with words these days? I'm just recommending you a good actor. I also would have an easier time if there's someone good next to me. You can decide for yourself after you see him. Well, if you think of me when you see him, you can always give him bonus points. Yes, director. Have a good rest."

Suyeon closed her phone.

“Who do you think that call was from just now?”

“By the flow of things, the producer for New Semester.”

“Correct. What good is a family member if not something like this? Human relationships are all give and take, right? I gold-plated your name as compensation for you listening to my grumbles. Of course, I didn’t put too much on it, so don’t worry about that. You don’t hate it, do you? If you don’t like it, I can always just call the director again,” said Suyeon as she pressed down her cap’s bill.

“I like it when someone gives me a push. Like a certain someone said, a decent amount of promotion is always welcome. Since we’re at it, you can push me a little more. Tell them that Han Maru is quite useful.”

“I knew you’d say that. But you’re going to have to do this properly since I also put my name on the line to advertise you. This is a form of business for me as well. My words will sound more convincing in the future if you do well. Alright?”

“Got it. I’ll do well in the audition.”

“Good. See you during the shoot next time, my cute junior.”

Maru smiled and slapped away Suyeon’s hand, which tried to pinch his cheeks. Suyeon pouted before turning around.

“Your cheeks are really expensive, you know that?”

“They have an owner already.”

“Really? I guess there’s no helping it then.”

Then let’s go for real now, shall I? - she added before taking out a brown pair of glasses. Training clothes, a baseball cap, and glasses. Unless someone decided to take a close look at her, no one would think that she was the actress Kim Suyeon. Though, a fan might still notice.

“But do you think you can go to the nationals in the winter? You slipped in the summer,” said Suyeon as she put her hand in her pocket.

“We’ll see the results when we get there. We only slipped by a small margin during the summer.”

He never thought that they’d have to forfeit the grand prize to a school he had never heard of before. Myunghwa High probably was startled as well. Thanks to that, Myunghwa High got the gold prize, and Woosung Engineering High got the silver prize. Meaning, Woosung High failed to go to the nationals.

“I’m just asking this in case, but have you seen Hwasoo High’s performance?”

“I was late to even your performance, so how could I have seen anyone else’s? Also, that school is in the northern Gyeonggi region, so they didn’t even hold it in Anyang.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable.”

“Is it unexpected?”

“No. Actually, if I think about it, you weren’t an irresponsible person. It’s not that strange for you to know.”

“Why can’t you put it in a gentler way? I’m putting in a lot of effort, you know?”

“Alright. I’ll put in some effort as well.”

“You just won’t lose to me a single time, will you? From what I hear, Hwasoo High’s overall balance was good, but one person just dominated it. If you are interested, try looking into them.”

“I will if I have the time.”

“Why are you looking at me like that? I’m a busy woman, you know? Don’t make an actress that appears on TV do something like that, geez.”

“Did I say anything? I’m just looking at you.”

“Urgh, I shouldn’t talk to this guy.”

Suyeon waved his hand as she climbed down the stairs.

Hwasoo High, huh. He was reminded of something he had almost forgotten about.

## **Chapter 479**

Beep beep beep - three beeps sounded. Maru took a deep breath as his eyes stayed shut.

‘My nose feels dry. I should watch out.’

He sat up, feeling the air that was quite chilly. He had put his phone on top of the shelf so that it was out of reach from his bed. That was done in order to prevent himself from turning it off while half-asleep. He reached out and grabbed his phone. The time displayed on the screen was 6.

He turned off the alarm and did some light stretching around his neck. After that, he lied down on the mat he laid on the ground before sleep and started stretching his muscles, which were still half-asleep. He stretched his legs out by locking his fingers and pulling on his knees, then turning around to do a cobra stance to relax his waist. He felt his dull senses wake up one by one as he breathed consciously. Maru’s mornings were always systematic.

After stretching, he went out to the living room. As it was Sunday, the house was still dark. He took a glimpse at the skies between the closed curtains and saw that it was still purple. It was winter, so there was still some time until the sun rose.

He washed his face and changed his clothes. He took out his trainers from the shoe rack and put them on before leaving the house. When he went down the stairs, he saw that the snow hadn’t melted yet. He walked past the snow that had been blackened from all the surrounding dirt and grease and took the path to the mountain. This path was paved for the residents of the apartment near the residential area.

His breath turned slightly white. Maru started jogging. The cold air made him wake up completely. After running for around 10 minutes, he saw a hiking trail with wooden stairs. He greeted the elderly that came from the top before starting to climb up.

“Aah, aah.”

He made some sounds as he moved. An actor had to be capable of speaking clearly even while moving, and practice was the only way to reach that level. He relaxed his shoulders and focused on the sound. If he messed up the vocalization, he would start to tense the wrong muscles. Once he did that, he would easily tire himself out and maybe even damage his throat.

A warm breath climbed up his throat. He remembered to expand and relax his throat as he voiced out. When he saw someone approaching him from afar, he became awkward and smiled before practicing again. As he didn't have a suitable place to voice out all he wanted to, he had to risk some embarrassment.

After arriving at a place where he could look down at the apartment complex, Maru stretched his arms out before taking in a deep breath. When he was climbing up, he limited his voice to a certain volume so that only he could hear his own voice, but now, he was going to raise his voice. He placed his palms on his stomach to check the tension of it as he voiced out. He continued his vocal exercise while imagining that he was pulling out his voice from somewhere deep. All the breath in his body turned into sound and spread around.

When his breath filled up to his throat, he took in a deep breath then voiced out the lowest note he could do. His voice nearly sounded like breathing. He started off with a 'huh' sound before eventually changing it to an 'uh' sound.

He felt a presence around him, but he couldn't stop. A man in his fifties walked past him while coughing.

After finishing his exercise, Maru greeted the man who was stretching nearby him. The man asked what he was doing.

“It's a vocal exercise.”

“Are you preparing to become a singer?”

“No, I'm an aspiring actor.”

“Ah, alright. Do your best with that.”

He often encountered these kinds of situations, so he just smiled and focused on practice.

The elder said that he never skipped vocal practice for even a day. Even when he was hospitalized, he said that he opened the window in the ward every morning and practiced. Thanks to that, he was cautioned by the nurse a couple of times, but the elder always smiled back before continuing his practice. The figure of the elder who told him that there was nothing scarier than being lenient on yourself left a deep impression on him.

After sufficient practice, he climbed down the mountain. It was 7, and the sun was rising. Once he returned home, he took a shower before turning the stove on when his parents' bedroom opened. He said good morning to his mother who went to the bathroom with a tired face before making breakfast. He knocked on Bada's door to wake her up, but he didn't get any response as he had expected.

“Wake Bada up and eat breakfast.”

“Okay.”

He saw his mother out as she went to work before washing the dishes. After looking at the clean dishes, he knocked on Bada’s door once again.

“Breakfast’s ready.”

“I’ll eat it later.”

“Later when?”

“Ah geez!”

“Eat it when it’s still ready.”

“Gosh, stop nagging me!”

He kept talking to Bada, who was grumbling, to get her to come out. He fled to his room when his sister ran towards him like an angry dog baring its fangs before getting breakfast ready for her.

“You should start waking up early now since you’re going to be in high school and all.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Hope so.”

“Why are you nagging me in the morning? Even mom doesn’t nag me these days, who are you to nag me?”

“I took over from mom, satisfied?”

Maru took out an apple from the refrigerator before peeling it. He sliced it to bite size pieces before putting them on a plate.

“I heard you said that you want to go to cram school, right?”

“Yeah. All of my friends are going to one, so I thought I should go to one as well.”

“Make sure you do your research before registering for one.”

“One of my friends told me about one, so I’m going to try that place out.”

“How far is it from the house?”

“It’s right in front of the school. I’ll be able to go there right after school. I thought I wouldn’t bother going to one if it was too far, so I looked into nearby ones.”

“That’s good.”

“But hey, why am I reporting to you about all this?”

“It was you who blurted everything.”

“That’s true. Oppa, give me some water.”



It was 'hey' or 'you' when she didn't need him, and 'oppa' when she needed him. Maru poured a cup of water before putting it down in front of Bada.

"I'm going to go to school so do wash the dishes before you get yourself comfortable."

"School? Are you going to practice?"

"Yeah."

"When does it end?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Buy some Bungeo-ppang on the way back. I want some."

"But it's right in front of the..."

"I don't want to leave the house. It's cold."

Maru sighed and told her to clean the house in exchange. Bada seemed to have some sense of shame left as she nodded.

"Look after the house. Don't order things for lunch, warm up the soup and eat that instead."

"I get it already so get going."

"Also, don't forget to lock the door. When I saw the news recently...."

"Okay, okay."

Bada waved her hand back and forth. Maru looked at the clock in the living room. It was 10 past 8. It was about time he left.

"Don't end up burning the soup while watching TV like last time."

"I get it already!"

She answered properly, but Maru couldn't help but feel that she was unreliable. He looked at the sour Bada once before leaving the house.

\* \* \*

The phone alarm entered his ears. It was Red Star's new song. Lee Heewon closed his eyes and hummed along with the song.

"Ah, the song is good."

He briefly thought that he should get up, but decided to keep listening since the music was so good. When he followed along with the addictive lyrics, the song soon ended. Heewon opened his heavy eyelids and reached out to find his phone. After finding his phone next to his head. Heewon grinned and opened the folder phone. With his eyes closed, he pressed some buttons on the phone. Menu, four, and then two buttons down and then ok.

Red Star's song started playing again. Heewon put on a satisfied smile and put down the phone.

At that moment, he heard a knock on the door

“Hyung, you up?”

It was his younger brother’s voice. Heewon wondered if he should answer or not for a while.

“Hyung, I can hear the song.”

“You must be mistaken.”

“Hyung, it’s morning. You should get up.”

“Can’t I sleep a little more? It’s Sunday.”

“Didn’t you say that you had practice for a play? You told me to wake you up yesterday.”

“Ah, right. Practice.”

“Then shouldn’t you get up?”

“I should.”

After replying, Heewon buried his face in the pillow. He thought that he would have no more wishes in his life if he slept like this for just ten more minutes.

“...Hyung.”

His younger brother sounded dejected. Heewon curled up in sadness. He covered his face with the blanket and stayed still like a log. Soon, the door opened.

“Get up, hyung.”

“Just ten more minutes.”

“No, you said you need to go to school. You must keep your promises,” said his brother calmly.

Heewon looked for a retort, but couldn’t find any.

“Then do you want to go in my stead?”

“I’d love to if I could, but you know I can’t.”

“Then just five more minutes.”

“Alright. Just five more minutes, okay?”

“Yeah! Just five more minutes.”

Ah, what an angel. Heewon smiled and grabbed his phone again. He didn’t get tired of Red Star’s song no matter how many times he heard it.

He could hear the sound of boiling soup through the slightly open door. Heewon sniffed. So breakfast was doenjang-jjigae today, huh. He tried poking his feet out of the blanket.

“Whew, so cold.”

There were still three days until December. Heewon thought that the weather was too cold as he sat up. The cold air brushing under his arms made him shiver.

"It's so cold," he said as he left his room.

His brother, who was doing the dishes at the sink, looked at him before going to his room.

"You should put this on. It's cold."

"Thanks."

He put on the vest that his brother gave him. It was quite warm as though it was kept under a blanket. He sniffed as he sat down on the floor. On the table were side dishes made by his brother. He used his fingers to eat the stir-fried anchovies. The slightly salty taste was delicious. When he did that a few times, his brother glared at him. Enduring the gaze, he put a slightly larger anchovy in his mouth. It was delicious.

"Here, hyung. Your rice."

"Thanks."

There was a fried egg on top of the rice. The yolk was half-boiled. When he poked it with the spoon, delicious-looking yellow yolk seeped between the rice grains.

"Hyung, you should eat quickly and wash yourself."

"I still have plenty of time."

"I thought you had to go by 9."

"Yeah."

"Did you have a look at the time?"

"No."

"...You should eat quickly. You might be late."

Heewon glanced behind him. The clock that had been here since they moved, which made weird cuckoo noises every hour, was nearing 9. The minute hand was just going past the number 8.

"There's still 20 minutes left."

"You'll be late if you get washed."

"Then I'll just go without taking a shower."

"There's a bird's nest on your head, you know?"

"I heard that bird's nest is trendy these days."

"Says who?"

"Says the TV."

"I never heard that before."

"That's because you don't watch TV. So don't just read books and watch some TV, okay?"

Heewon took the opportunity to play Red Star's music from his phone.

"Hyung."

"Yeah?"

"I think people should focus on eating when they're at the table," said his brother with a rather serious face.

Heewon hesitated before turning off the music. His brother nodded with a smile.

"How long are you going to practice today?"

"I'm not sure. It might take a long time."

"I'll eat lunch by myself then, okay?"

"You should come with me."

"Why? I don't have anything to do there."

"You can watch from the side."

"I'll be inconveniencing everyone."

"Why do you think that? The people in the acting class all like you, you know?"

"I still can't. You're doing practice, aren't you? It must be rude for someone unrelated to be there."

"No, it's not."

Heewon frowned before eating a spoonful of rice. He truly thought that everyone liked his brother.

"You should eat some soy-pickled garlic as well."

"But it's too spicy."

"It's good for your immune system. Consider it medicine and eat some. Also, the owner lady gave us this because she cares for us. We can't throw it away."

Heewon looked for a way to avoid eating it, but he had no choice but to put some in his mouth when his brother looked at him. When he chewed on it, the taste of soy sauce and spiciness filled his mouth.

"This really doesn't suit my tastes."

"It's good for your health. We can't have you becoming sick."

After breakfast, Heewon went to the bathroom.

"That doesn't look so bad."

He put some water over his face before pressing down on his hair with some water on his hands to straighten it out. He couldn't wash his hair in weather like this. It wasn't because he couldn't be bothered, but because he had to be careful to not catch a cold, so he could make an excuse like that to his brother.

After wearing a hoodie, he put the hood over his head. With that, he could fool his brother perfectly.

'This is good.'

He left the bathroom with a satisfied smile.

"Hyung, you forgot this."

Just as he was about to go out, his brother handed him his script. Now that he thought about it, he forgot to put it inside his bag after reading it last night. 'Hwasoo High Lee Heewon' written in large letters on the cover felt rather embarrassing.

"I won't lose it even without my name on it," he said to the perpetrator that wrote his name on it.

His brother smiled at him without a word.

"I'm leaving then. Don't forget to eat lunch."

"Alright. Don't skip lunch either."

"Okay. Ah, should we order fried chicken for dinner?"

"We're almost running out of this month's expenses that we got from our aunt. We need to save up."

"...R-really?"

Heewon said 'but the chicken...' in a small voice.

An image of a chicken drumstick lingered in front of his face.

"But since it's the end of the month, and we saved some last week, I think we can order one," said his brother with a smile.

"Really?"

Heewon's expression visibly became better as he looked at his brother. His brother nodded slightly.

"Fried? Or sauce?"

"I'll order half-half."

"As expected of my Haewon! How smart."

Heewon said goodbye to his brother before leaving through the door. He climbed up the stairs of the semi-basement and basked in the rays of the morning sun. Just then, he heard the door opening behind him.

"Hyung, you forgot your phone."

"Ah, right."

Heewon smiled and took the phone that his brother gave him.

Fish-shaped pastry with red bean paste inside.

## Chapter 480

“Good morning!”

Maru lightly waved at the first years who greeted him with a loud voice.

“Did something good happen? You guys are full of energy in the morning.”

“Dowook-seonbae said that he’ll buy us something good after practice,” said Bangjoo while licking his lips.

Maru sat next to Dowook, who was doing stretches.

“Are you okay with that? You treated us last time too.”

“I quit smoking, and I don’t have anything else to spend money on. Above all....”

Dowook, who rotated his waist without saying anything, whispered in Maru’s ear that his sister kept giving him pocket money.

“What an endearing elder sister. Doesn’t Soojin-noona need another little brother?”

“I’ll think about it if he’s my younger brother as well. I’ll half-kill you first though.”

“That sounds horrible. Rather than that, is her business doing well?”

When he first met Soojin, Soojin said that she was doing various things. Making stuffed dolls that he thought she did as a hobby, was one of them, and he recently heard the news that she opened a stuffed doll shop. Apparently, she sold her items, created her items there, and even taught others there as well.

“There are a lot of customers. Apparently, there are rumors about the store on the internet.”

“That’s good.”

“It’s not good at all. At this rate, I might end up having to stick eyes on dolls.”

“The employment rate is low these days. You should treat your sister nicely.”

Dowook called him a lunatic, but his face was smiling.

“Do you think practice is going well?”

“This is easier than our summer one. Though the number of lines has increased.”

“You’re smart though, a few more lines shouldn’t matter that much. Keep doing your stretches.”

After patting Dowook on the shoulder, Maru approached Jiyoona, who was sitting against the wall, and Aram who was pushing on Jiyoona’s legs with all of her power.

“Aram, wait!”

"I told you, you need to do this much to do a split."

"But even so!"

Jiyoong was having a hard time even though it was the morning. She was only able to escape Aram's grasp after tearing up.

"Do you want to do it as well, seonbae?"

"I'm probably better than you though."

"Well, I guess you're flexible after all. But how can a boy be so flexible?"

"You should've learned under senior Miso last year."

"That instructor did look a little scary."

The two girls switched positions and Aram sat against the wall. Jiyoong, who was getting ready to push Aram's legs, quietly stood up and whispered into Aram's ears.

"Alright, you can go to the toilet. Have a nice poop!"

"It's not that."

Jiyoong was about to shout at Aram but made an awkward smile when she saw Maru.

"Go ahead. I'll take care of Aram in the meanwhile."

After nodding, Jiyoong quietly left the class.

"You should really stop teasing Jiyoong. She might end up bursting into tears."

"Before, I wasn't able to tease her properly since she looked like she was really going to cry. Though, I'm teasing her all I want these days since she receives it well."

Maru grabbed Aram's hand before slowly pulling it towards him. Aram's torso softly came down before hitting the ground. Her legs stretched to either side didn't even move.

"Looks like you're still going to the dojo."

"Of course. I'm going to go even when I go to college."

"Why didn't you try your hand at being a pro? I think you would do well."

"I thought about that for a brief moment in primary school, but I don't think I'll be able to cope with a group lifestyle with my personality. I'm the type of girl who would charge at full throttle when I see something unjust."

"I know what that's like."

Aram slowly sat up.

"How's practice? You said you were having a hard time memorizing a line."

"I figured it out after practicing with Jiyeon a couple of times. It still doesn't stick to my mouth, but I don't make a mistake at least."

"That's good."

Maru let go of Aram's hand. After rotating her waist left and right, Aram groaned before standing up. Maru then called out to Bangjoo, who was reading the script.

"Yes, seonbae-nim."

"What are you doing? Sit down."

"Me too?"

"Since we're at it, why not?"

Bangjoo stiffly walked up to him and sat against the wall.

"I thought you were practicing."

"I couldn't do it no matter what I did."

"But Aram managed to, though. You can do it since you do sports just like her."

"Flexibility is important in Judo as well, but there's no need to do leg sp... seonbae-nim!"

"You're aspiring to become an action actor. You should be able to utilize your body properly for that."

Maru slowly pulled on Bangjoo's arm. Since there was a risk of injury, there was no need to push it. Bangjoo also didn't seem to want to make a big fuss as he stiffened up before focusing on his breathing. After lowering his torso to a point where he almost touched the floor, Bangjoo said.

"Seonbae-nim, can you press down my back a little?"

"Are you really okay with that though?"

"Since I'm doing it, I might as well."

"Don't push yourself."

He might injure Bangjoo if he pushed with rebound, so he pressed slowly according to his breathing. Although Bangjoo couldn't do a perfect split like Aram, he was definitely better than his peers.

"What happened to asking your sister to teach you acting?"

Bangjoo, who was groaning, replied with difficulty.

"I wasn't going to at first, but after I heard you, I thought it would be a loss to miss a good teacher so I told her about it. She said she'll look after me when she has time. She's busy with a drama these days."

"Do your best to learn from her. Her acting skills are the real deal after all. How's practice? Are you not stuck on anything?"

"I keep messing up my movement lines. I'm confident in using my body, but I can't memorize things well."



“Well, moving around consciously definitely is quite difficult.”

Maru tapped on Bangjoo’s back. After sitting up, Bangjoo smiled brightly saying that he felt refreshed. While Bangjoo was talking with Aram, Jiyeon returned to the classroom. Maru grinned and pointed at the wall.

“M-me?”

“There’s no one other than you though.”

“...Please go easy on me.”

“Don’t worry. You won’t die.”

While looking at Jiyeon’s posture, Maru asked a question.

“Is pronunciation practice coming along well?”

“Yes. I’m practicing with a pencil in my mouth like Daemyung-seonbae told me. I think I’ve improved my pronunciation when I speak fast.”

“Keep it up. You’ll become even better.”

“Yes.”

“But isn’t it better to call Daemyung, oppa instead?”

“....”

“Fine, you can decline to comment.”

Jiyeon leaned forward as much as possible with her stiff body. She struggled to lower her body, but the only thing that straightened out was her fingers, not her waist.

“Everyone’s here?”

Daemyung, who entered the classroom with a large insulated bottle, said that to everyone. Maru told Jiyeon that she did well before standing up.

“What’s that?”

“Barley tea. It was pretty cold in the morning, so I made some. Everyone, have a drink.”

Daemyung poured some hot barley tea into some paper cups. Maru felt his body, which had frozen up slightly due to the cold air, warming up thanks to the tea.

“Daemyung, see me for a sec.”

Maru pointed at the window with the cup in hand. Daemyung handed the insulated bottle to Jiyeon before coming to the window.

“Everyone seems to be doing well with practice.”

“Because the prize is big after all. You should’ve seen what their faces were like when they heard that the grand prize was 10 million won.”

Daemyung chuckled.

"I guess that's the motivation down. Oh, you should look out for Bangjoo during practice. It seems like he's still confused with his movement lines. Also, Jiyeon seemed to have gotten some confidence because of the practice you made her do."

"That's good. I thought she was getting depressed because of her pronunciation even though she's doing well."

"Aram and Dowook are doing well by themselves. Dowook seems to be a little nervous because of the number of lines, but practice is the only thing that can solve that."

"I should have him practice more so that he can become used to it before we go on stage."

Daemyung nodded and thanked him before going back to everyone else. Maru quietly looked at everyone talking to each other with Daemyung as the center. Everyone's gears were fitting well with each other with Daemyung as the central pivot.

"Maru-seonbae! We're going to the meat buffet in front of Suwon station after we finish practice a little early. You're coming with us, right? Apparently, they just opened!" Aram shouted with excitement.

Maru made a circle with his fingers and nodded.

\* \* \*

"It's so cold. On days like these, I should really stay in bed."

"Seonbae, you should really move around."

"It's too cold to move around."

Heewon tried to pull a blanket over him, but his junior took away the blanket.

"You're so mean."

"Stand up and do some stretches. You're the club president. You're supposed to be leading everyone. Why are you acting like that?"

"I told you I didn't want to be the club president..."

At that moment, the door to the clubroom opened and a bunch of people came in.

"Chansoo, do you wanna be the club president?"

"There you go again. You do it."

"Inho, how about you? You suit this position more than me."

"Forget it. Also, you can give it up now. There's no one other than you."

"But why me?"

Heewon made a sad face as he reached out for the blanket.

"There! We rested enough so let's start practice."

Inho encouraged everyone and had them stand up. Seeing that, Heewon thought that Inho was really the right man for the president position.

“You should stand up as well. We’re going to the practice room.”

“Can’t we do it here? The practice room is so cold because it doesn’t have a heater.”

“Once you move around with all your might, you’ll start sweating and no longer feel cold.”

“I don’t want to do that though.”

“Everyone, let’s carry our president.”

Hearing those words, the juniors approached him with suspicious smiles. Heewon thought that their faces looked even more malicious than the devil’s. He struggled until the end, but he couldn’t win against more than ten people. In the end, he was dragged to the next building.

“This place is way too cold.”

Heewon put his hands in his armpits. This separate building, which was used as an indoor gym as well as a lecture hall, was cold enough that his breath turned white. If he stayed here for a long time, he would catch a cold, and if he caught a cold, his brother would nag him worriedly.

“We should really....”

“Well then, let’s start running,” said Park Inho while clapping.

The juniors started running laps inside the hall in two lines. Heewon wanted to stay out, but his arms were being held, so he had no choice but to run.

After running five more laps, he felt his body heating up.

“Let’s do some stretches before starting the read-through.”

Heewon yawned and secretly walked into a corner, but his juniors didn’t know any mercy and dragged him to the center of the stage.

“Let’s follow what Heewon’s doing,” said Inho.

Seeing everyone’s eyes focus on him, Heewon had no choice but to start stretching. After some light stretching, he looked at Inho again. Inho made a satisfied smile as he spoke,

“We were defeated by Myunghwa High in the summer, but let’s take the grand prize this time. We got the best actor award, so there’s no problem with that.”

After saying that, everyone shouted ‘fighting’.

Thinking that they were really synchronized, Heewon was about to shout ‘fighting’ a beat later but awkwardly had to put his hand down.

“I heard that the grand prize is 10 million won for the winter competition. What happens if we win it?”

“We split it according to our headcount.”

“That means at least 700 thousand won for each of us.”

“700 thousand huh. I’m upgrading my PC.”

“I’m getting new clothes.”

The juniors seemed to be filled with expectations.

Heewon said in a small voice after looking around at the club members.

“If I knew this was going to happen, I wouldn’t have done my best during the summer competition.”

“What are you talking about, seonbae. You got 100 thousand won because you got the best actor award.”

“It’s only 100 thousand. My brother took most of it as well. I only got to use 20 thousand.”

He felt a little depressed when he wondered where the 80 thousand went and wondered if he should tell his brother to raise his pocket money a little.

“You should be thankful that your brother is Haewon, seonbae. Otherwise, you would’ve been in big trouble.”

“Right. You should be thankful that Haewon has a meticulous personality. If he was like seonbae... urgh it’s horrible just imagining it.”

The juniors of the acting club, who were the same age as Haewon, spoke with a smile. Heewon mumbled before sighing. He couldn’t retort since what they were saying was entirely correct.

“Let’s start the read-through. Oh, before that, I have something to tell you all.”

Inho coughed before speaking.

“If we manage to finish practice early today and not make any mistakes, we’re going to eat out.”

Eat out? Heewon widened his eyes. His stomach grumbled when he heard those words.

“Where are we going?”

“A meat buffet.”

“I’ll do my best today,” said Heewon as he clenched his fist.

“Are we going to go to the place we went to last time? That place wasn’t that good.”

“We’re going to Suwon.”

“Suwon? That’s a bit far.”

“It’s right below Seongnam, it’s not that far. Actually, my father opened a store there. He told me to bring everyone over once, so that’s why we’re going.”

“Then it’s free of charge?”

“Do you want me to have you guys pay?”

“No!”

Heewon was all smiles. A free meat buffet! At that moment, a face popped up in his head.

“Ah, uhm, Inho.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about this, but can I call one more person?”

“You mean Haewon?”

“Yeah. He’s by himself at home. Can I call him?”

“I was going to call him even if you didn’t. He helped us practice over the summer, so of course we’re going to call him.”

“Yes! I knew I could count on you.”

“But let’s do our best during practice today, okay?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll never make a mistake,” said Heewon as he raised his chin.

He couldn’t remember the last time he went to a meat buffet. He could practically hear the meat sizzling already. His brother should like it as well.

“Well then, let’s start practice,” Inho said as he straightened out his shoulders.