

## Once Again 541

### Chapter 541

“Seonbae, aren’t you going home?”

“You guys can go first, I have something to do.”

“What is it? Do you need my help?”

Daemyung shook his head at Aram’s words. It was past 10 p.m. already. It was better to send her home before it got even later.

“Go home. Thanks for your work today.”

“Then I’ll be off first. Let’s go, everyone.”

Aram took the 1st year students and left the hall. Dowook had gone home an hour ago. It seemed that his family still hadn’t found a part time worker yet.

“Seonbae.”

Daemyung turned around and saw Jiyeon standing there awkwardly.

“Aren’t you going to go home?”

“Sorry. I think you’ll have to go home first today.”

“Is it work? D-do you need my help?”

“N-no. I think it’ll take a long time.”

“I think we can finish it earlier if we do it together....”

“That’s true but....”

Both of them entered a state of silence. Daemyung looked at Jiyeon for a while before laughing. Although they were dating, they were still nervous around each other when the two of them were alone. Jiyeon probably felt the same.

“Alright, seonbae. I’ll go home first.”

“A-alright. Be careful on your way home.”

“You too. Uhm....”

“Yeah?”

“Can I call you at night?”

“Of course.”

“Then I’ll call you later.”

Jiyoon smiled before leaving the hall in a cheerful manner. Daemyung looked at Jiyoon until the door closed before sighing.

“How the heck did I manage to kiss her?”

He wondered about it even now. If he was told to do it again, he probably wouldn't be able to. When they met up with each other over the spring holidays to watch a movie together before going back home, he was suddenly reminded of a scene he saw in the movie, and when he came to himself, he saw Jiyoon's face with her eyes closed right in front of him. Honestly, he didn't remember what it felt like. It was just like how the contents of a dream were blurry after waking up. The sensation from back then had disappeared into the realm of forgetfulness.

Phew - Daemyung shook his head. The guide to romance he read said that the man should be leading, but that wasn't so easy.

‘I think it might be better if I take it easy a little.’

Maru's girlfriend had come to the school. He didn't know the details, but it seemed that she was going to take Aram's place in the film. He watched Aram to check if she felt disappointed, but fortunately, that didn't seem to be the case. Well, she wasn't someone who hid her emotions so he was probably worried for nothing.

Maru had held his girlfriend's hand in front of many people without hesitation. Daemyung was surprised and had looked at Jiyoon. He was worried that perhaps Jiyoon was disappointed in him because of his shy attitude.

“...I'm being needlessly worried, aren't I?”

He muttered that to himself as he left the hall. He never felt as complex as this in his life. Being president of the acting club, dating Jiyoon, and the writing class on top of that. He had seen a documentary on TV talking about the lifestyle of successful people. One man from that program said that he didn't like playing because studying gave him more mental satisfaction.

At first, he thought that he was hearing some alien language. What the heck was he saying? His mom stared at him and said that he should follow his ways, but Daemyung didn't listen to those words at all. Playing, that is, online games were things that gave him more mental satisfaction than anything else. They were his only window of venting the stress he received from studying and personal relationships.

However, he could understand that man's words a little now. It wasn't that he found games no longer fun. It was just that he found something just as fun as online games.

‘Actually, I don't have any time to play even though I do want to play games.’

If he had the time, he had the confidence to spend three days and three nights playing games, but school homework, preparing for the acting club, as well as his personal studies and the assignment from teacher Bae Chulho, left him with no time. Thanks to those, he even lost a bit of weight. Though, it was only a single kilo.

Daemyung went to the container at the back of the school and opened the padlock before going inside. The stage background that Maru was making was leaning against the wall. As Maru was good with his

hands, it was really well-made. Daemyung walked further inside and took out some clothes. They were trousers, skirts, and jegori. Since they were doing a historical drama, they had to be mindful of the clothing.

“I think it just needs a little stitching.”

If they didn't have the clothes left behind by the seniors who graduated, the preparation for the play would have taken several times longer than what it took now. Daemyung looked at the clothes hanging in one corner. They were the clothes he used during his 1st and 2nd years. There were a few he had a hand in making. He felt proud when he thought about how the juniors would use them after he graduated.

He measured the clothes using a tape measure and checked the number of outfits they had before grabbing out a lamp on the display to the right. The lamp, made with paper, had mold on it so it had to be taken care of. He went back up to the hall with his hands full with the clothes and the lamp. He placed the items against one wall before turning the lights off and leaving the hall. With that, the preparations were done. All that remained was for Maru and the juniors to start working on them tomorrow.

He left through the school gates and looked at the clock on his phone. 10:48 p.m. It had ended earlier than he had expected. The day would reach its end once he went home, did his homework, and crawled into his bed.

As he was walking to the bus stop, Daemyung suddenly turned around. His destination was the convenience store. He did eat some kimbap with the others at around 8, but that had been digested already. He thought that having a single roll of kimbap for a meal was something pretty cruel. Although he ate less than he used to, his stomach was still pretty wide.

Just as he put on a happy smile while looking at the new flavors of triangular rice balls, the phone inside his pocket started ringing loudly.

He wondered who it was since it was rare that someone would call him this late at night. Gwak Joon - that was the name on the screen.

“Yes, hyung.”

-Where?

Gwak Joon's habit was to leave out all additional pieces of information. He had gotten used to him talking like that, but during the early days, he thought that Gwak Joon was upset, which made him worry needlessly.

“I'm in front of my school.”

-Come to the opposite side of the road from the school.

“What?”

The call was cut off. Daemyung blinked several times before leaving the convenience store. He was walking towards the school gates which could be seen in the distance when he saw a car with its

headlights on parked on the opposite side of the road from the school. It was a grey sedan. Daemyung knew who the owner of that car was.

“Hyung, what brings you here?”

Gwak Joon, who was in the car, gestured to him to get in. Daemyung sat in the passenger seat for now.

“Do you get scolded if you go home late?”

“No, not really.”

“You can drink a couple glasses of beer, right?”

“If it’s beer... yes.”

“I’m going to go meet Pilhyun hyung-nim. Do you wanna come with me? Hyung-nim said he wanted to see you, so I came to pick you up for now.”

“Mr. Ahn Pilhyun?”

Gwak Joon nodded. When Daemyung went to Bae Chulho’s house during the winter holidays, Ahn Pilhyun was there as well 7 times out of 10. The two of them would talk about the affairs of the world every night over a glass of beer and some fried chicken, and Gwak Joon and Daemyung were there usually as well.

“Is it okay for me to go?”

“If you’re okay with it. It sounds like we’re going to eat out somewhere pretty expensive, so I recommend you come.”

“Looks like something good happened to him.”

“A movie scenario he had been saving for a few years finally got sold. We talked about you when I talked to senior Bae a few days ago. It’d be good if we can meet during the day, but as you know, those that live on writing are mostly active around this hour.”

Daemyung checked the time on the clock on the car. It was 2 minutes to 11. Before, he would have refused with the reason that he was uncomfortable with such occasions, but it wasn’t that he was excited by such things now either. Considering that he had to go to school tomorrow, he wanted to go home and rest easy.

“I’ll go.”

Daemyung put on the seatbelt. If there was anything he learned during the past two years, it was that he had to act if he wanted to change himself. Moreover, this was Pilhyun’s call. He was one of the two people he called teacher as he had taught him a lot of things. Such a person called him first, so he had to go.

“If it looks like it’ll get too late when we get there, let’s sleep over at his house. I’ll drive you to school in the morning.”

“I can take the bus early in the morning. It doesn’t take long from Seoul to Suwon.”

"I'm basically kidnapping you, so it would be absurd if I don't do at least that."

Gwak Joon started his car.

"But what were you going to do if I wasn't at school?"

"I was planning to go to your house."

"It would've been easier if you called me earlier."

"True."

Gwak Joon yawned. His actions, as well as his questions, were unpredictable.

"Hyung, you're tired, aren't you?"

Gwak Joon usually managed himself meticulously, but he became a little dull once his fatigue went past a certain point. He saw Gwak Joon working on his manuscript for several nights without sleeping, and he had acted like he had left his mind at home, just like he did now.

"I'm a bit tired since I haven't slept for two days, and I just came up from Busan."

"From Busan?"

"There's a writer's office over there. I tried going there to focus, but it wasn't that good. I wrote one page, and stared at the wall for the rest of my time there. I'm just coming back from there."

"Why don't you go home and get some re...."

"The stingy hyung-nim is treating me, so I can't miss that. If I go and drink and daze out for a while, I'll recover."

Gwak Joon narrowed his eyes and turned the wheel. Daemyung gulped before grabbing the side handle. For some reason, he felt like they were speeding up.

"The car feels a little slow, doesn't it?"

"N-no! You're driving at 140 right now."

"Oh really?"

Only then did Gwak Joon slow down. Daemyung sighed inwardly. He had ridden Gwak Joon's car several times before, but he had never seen him go this fast. He always drove slowly, so it felt relaxing to ride next to him, but just now, he drove like a complete speed freak.

After that, Gwak Joon drove past 100 km/h from time to time, but fortunately, he slowed down soon enough.

"We're here."

The car stopped. Daemyung sighed in relief before getting out of the car. The two of them left the parking lot and walked towards the entrance. There was hanja written on the front of the building, and a small 'izakaya' was written underneath it in the English alphabet. He followed Gwak Joon inside.

“There’s someone waiting inside.”

“May I have a name?”

“Gwak Joon.”

“Ah, okay. Please wait a moment.”

While Gwak Joon talked to the employee, Daemyung looked around. A large hall could be seen behind a large glass wall. Everyone was drinking quietly. There were a lot of couples and most of them were young. To the left was a long bar, but there weren’t any customers sitting there.

When he sniffed, he smelled some charcoal. The hunger he had forgotten about made his stomach rumble again.

“Allow me to guide you to the 2nd floor.”

They followed the employee to the 2nd floor. Unlike the 1st floor, the 2nd floor only had individual rooms. Alcoholic drinks he had never seen before filled one wall, and unfamiliar paintings were hung up along the wall as well. At a glance, they seemed to be landscape paintings from Japan. Going past a curtain that replaced a drawer, they arrived in front of a private room with a sliding door. Noise could be heard from the inside. Some men and women were talking loudly.

“Isn’t this voice him?”

“I think so.”

Daemyung thanked the employee before standing behind Gwak Joon. Gwak Joon slowly opened the door. The loud noise inside died down in an instant.

Pilhyun was sitting on the left. Since he was supposed to be here, that wasn’t strange at all. However, who could the two ladies on the other side be?

“Ah, oh! You’re here? Oh, fatty’s here too.”

Pilhyun, who looked very drunk, ran up to Daemyung and grabbed his cheeks. Daemyung coughed slightly due to the smell of booze.

“Well then, sit down.”

Daemyung was dragged inside.

“Ahn-hyung. Who are they?” asked the lady sitting on the left.

Daemyung looked at the person in detail unintentionally. He felt like he had seen this person somewhere.

“My little brothers that I cherish!”

“But this one’s too young to be a little brother?”

Daemyung smiled awkwardly at the lady that pointed at him. He had no idea what was going on here.

“Then let’s make him my son. Well, then! That’s not the important part. Drink for now. Let’s talk after we drink!”

Pilhyun raised the glass over his head while shouting. Daemyung looked at Gwak Joon with a look that meant ‘send help’, but Gwak Joon was half-out-of-it as well and had already started drinking. It seemed that fatigue numbed his brain functions.

‘I don’t get it anymore.’

Daemyung picked up a glass as well.

Traditional Korean clothing. They are also parts of hanbok

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He drank the first glass in one go. He thought that it would be bitter like the soju he first had at Suyeon’s house, but a faint peach fragrance spread inside his throat instead. He thought it would be a strong alcohol, but maybe it was fruit juice?

“Phew, that makes me feel better. Toilet, toilet....”

The two ladies sitting on the other side immediately left the room after emptying their glasses. Daemyung grabbed the drink bottle that was standing on one side of the table. It was the drink he just had now. 2% alcohol content. It seemed to be a Japanese alcoholic drink but he could not read anything else on it.

“Hyung-nim, isn’t this just juice?”

Gwak Joon also picked up the bottle before he asked. Pilhyun spoke, his breath smelling like alcohol,

“Don’t you start. This is our 3rd round. We’re drinking that to sober up.”

“You people are amazing. But who were the two women?”

“Scary women I got to know through work. It’s been about 15 years since I got to know them, I think?”

“So they are writers.”

“Joon, your personal network is too narrow. You would’ve known them if you came to the writers’ meetings when I told you to.”

“You know my personality. I’m gloomy.”

Daemyung nodded when he heard Gwak Joon say that he was gloomy. It wasn’t just his impression. His style was like a crow as well. Black glasses, a black t-shirt, and even the strap on his watch was black. When he first looked at Gwak Joon’s car, he even asked why the car was grey without thinking. At that time, Gwak Joon said that he didn’t like black with his own mouth. That didn’t sound believable at all.

“I’ll be going to the toilet too then.”

“Alright.”

Gwak Joon left as well. Daemyung looked at the sighing Pilhyun before picking up his chopsticks. He thought that it should be okay to eat. First, he picked up a piece of fried chicken. Even though he hadn't put it in his mouth yet, he felt like he could taste it. Just as he was about to put it in his mouth as his starved stomach cheered gleefully,

"Hey, did you ride Joon's car?"

"Eh? Ah, yes," he replied as he watched the fried chicken stop 5cm in front of him. He felt as though he was going to start drooling.

"I'm surprised you're still alive. Didn't he drive like he was on the motorway?"

"I panicked and stopped him after I saw him go up to 140."

"Well done. Joon, that guy kinda gets weird when he can't write. It's fine on empty roads, but he starts getting hysterical once he goes somewhere crowded. You have to especially watch out for him if he drives in the middle of the city. If he ever says that he's frustrated because he's stuck in his writing, open the door and jump out of the car. One mishap and you'll be shaking hands with the grim reaper. I mean, I have experience with him."

"I'll bear that in mind."

It definitely was dangerous. He decided that he should watch out the next time he rode Gwak Joon's car. Daemyung looked at Pilhyun before moving his chopsticks again. Gulp - his mouth was more than ready to accept the food. He opened his mouth and put the fried chicken about halfway in. Just as he was about to bite down expecting to hear the crunchy sound of the fried batter breaking, he heard a voice call out to him again.

"Daemyung."

"Yeh?"

The meat juice flowed out, but he had to take it back out.

"Why do chickens have two legs?"

It began again. Moreover, it was a topic he had talked about before. Daemyung knew that this conversation would branch out and they would eventually talk about the cosmos. Food was cooling, but Pilhyun was looking at him seriously. In the end, Daemyung put down his chopsticks.

"That's...."

Just as he was about to step down the path leading to the unknown, the door opened and the two ladies that went to the bathroom came back. Pilhyun's attention turned towards them.

"Feel good?"

"Of course it does. Why don't you do it too?"

Daemyung thought that the lady with the short hair had a rather... incredible mouth. He knew instantly that she was close to Pilhyun. Pilhyun faintly smiled before standing up. This was his opportunity. He picked up his chopsticks again and reached for the fried chicken that he had half-bitten into.



"Looks like you're about the same age as my child," the short-haired lady noted.

Daemyung raised his head. The lady rested her chin on her hands and stared at him. Her eyes were saying: 'play with me'.

"Ahaha, yes."

Although he thought that his personality had changed quite a bit, it wasn't that he was better around strangers. Now that Pilhyun and Gwak Joon weren't here, Daemyung looked at the two ladies with a racing heart. Their status as writers made him even more nervous. Things like 'are they famous?', 'what if they ask about my writing?', and 'what am I supposed to say?' riddled his mind.

Daemyung's only option was to look at the door. He hoped for Gwak Joon and Pilhyun to come back quickly, but unfortunately, the door didn't budge.

"Can I ask how old you are?"

The short-haired lady had a potty mouth when talking to Pilhyun, but she unexpectedly used a calm speech tone. Daemyung could feel that she wasn't treating him like a child. An adult - that was the word that flashed past Daemyung's head.

"I'm in my 3rd year of high school."

"Oh, you're actually the same age as my daughter. But that makes me curious. Bro Ahn, ah, I mean, how did you get to know writer Ahn Pilhyun? He's the type of guy who'd rather smoke at his house instead of going around meeting people. Especially not young fellows like you."

"I got to know him through someone else. Through the introduction of a friend of mine, I got to know Gwak Joon-hyung, and I got to know the writer through him."

"Really? You have a good friend then."

"Yes, he's a good friend."

Daemyung looked at the short-haired lady in detail again. Those round eyes, he felt like he had seen them somewhere.

"Are you perhaps an aspiring creative writing department student?"

"No, I plan to major in philosophy."

"Philosophy? Now you're someone I haven't seen in a long time. You want to learn philosophy?"

"N-no. I want to write. My ultimate goal is to direct a film though."

"Then you should come to the creative writing department."

"I'm thinking that I should learn more about people. I do want to write, but as I told you before... my ultimate goal is to become a director."

"I see. You feel a little strange because a woman you've never seen before is asking too much about yourself, don't you?"

“N-no. It’s not like that.”

“You’re a good boy. I can see that at a glance.”

The lady hummed for a while then grabbed the drink bottle before giving him a glance. Daemyung immediately picked up his glass.

“This place will go out of business if law enforcement shows up.”

“Then I won’t drink.”

“I’m joking. Those people don’t come here. But are you okay with alcohol? This might not have a lot of alcohol in it, but it’s still an alcoholic drink.”

“I’ll be fine if it’s just a little.”

“Then this must be fate so have a drink. We might see each other again once you start writing properly.”

When the glass was half-filled, the short-haired lady exclaimed a little.

“You said you wanted to become a director, right? For a movie? Or for a drama?”

“If possible, I want to try both of them.”

“Then you should try talking to this girl. She’s famous in the industry.”

The short-haired lady pointed at the lady sitting next to him. That lady had long, silky hair as though she managed it well, and the clothes she was wearing looked very expensive to Daemyung as well. The way she opened her eyes made him think that she was high-class which made it hard for him to talk to her. The lady with the blue shawl chuckled before drinking.

“There you go, acting heavy again. It’s really a habit of yours, isn’t it? I thought you had a hard time because of that. Why are you doing that again? Lee Hanmi, get yourself together, will you?”

“Haesoo-unni, it hurts!”

The short-haired lady seemed to be named Haesoo, while the unapproachable lady with the blue shawl was named Lee Hanmi.

After the two wrestled it out for a while, the two giggled and raised their glasses. Hanmi, who had been acting heavily until just moments ago, laughed like an idiot before starting to speak.

“Hey, kid. What’s your name?”

“M-me?”

“Yes, you! Who else is here?”

“My name is Park Daemyung.”

“Daemyung? Hey, Daemyung. My name is Lee Hanmi, do you know who I am?”

“N-no.”

“Then what about this unni? She’s called Choi Haesoo.”

“Sorry. I’m not too knowledgeable about writers.”

When he said that, Hanmi laughed as she mercilessly slapped Haesoo’s arm.

“Unni, unni! He doesn’t know us. I’m not a famous writer after all, right?”

“It’s natural for him to not know me, and it’s not that surprising that he doesn’t know you either. So stop making a fuss about it.”

“Goddammit, no one knows me anyway. Should I just write whatever I want? Even if I go through the pains of writing, I see the same stuff on the internet all the time.”

“There you go again.”

Haesoo hugged Hanmi and patted her back. Looking at the immature sides of the people who seemed at least double his age, Daemyung realized that this was an opportunity. He picked up his chopsticks and decided to stuff the chicken in his mouth before anyone interrupted him.

He moved the quickest he had this whole year. He picked up the fried chicken with his chopsticks and put it in his mouth. The rendezvous he had been looking forward to so much began, and just as he was about to let the two sides of his mouth say their goodbyes, a hand appeared out of nowhere and grabbed his chopsticks. The chicken that shook at the end of his chopsticks fell on the ground like a dried out leaf.

“Hey. Listen to me. Why are the kids on the internet all like that these days? Hey? You’re that Gen X or whatever. Explain to me, hey? Just what is there to dislike about my writing?”

Hanmi said that with a crying face. Daemyung couldn’t hear her voice. His mind was wholeheartedly focused on the piece of fried chicken that fell on the floor.

“Uhm....”

He didn’t know why, but he felt like crying.

“Can I say it after I eat this?”

\* \* \*

Haesoo smiled in satisfaction as she watched Daemyung eat. After watching her daughter eat practically nothing for a while because of her diet, it felt rather refreshing to see someone devour food using both of his hands.

“My, good boy. Eat this as well.”

“Ah, yes!”

There was a bright smile on his face. It made her happy just seeing that expression. Haesoo turned around to look at Hanmi. Even she, who had been complaining the whole day, was smiling as she looked at Daemyung eating.

“He eats so nicely, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Daemyung, eat this as well.”

Hanmi placed the fried udon in front of Daemyung. Daemyung's eyes shone before he started eating the udon with glee. The noodles were sucked into his mouth endlessly at an incredible speed.

"Take it slow. You might upset your stomach."

"Y-yes."

After taking a deep breath, Daemyung moved his chopsticks again. Since it was their third round of drinking, they only ordered some light snacks to go with their drink, but it seemed that they had to order some proper food.

"Bro Ahn is the one paying. But what are those two doing? Why aren't they coming back?"

"I saw them smoking outside."

"They'll rot their lungs soon enough."

They called the waiter and ordered a few more dishes. Daemyung refused, saying that he was okay, but he quietened down when he was asked if it was really okay. He was unexpectedly cute for his size.

"Hey, do you know about 'New Semester'?" Hanmi asked.

Haesoo almost spat out what she was drinking. What was this girl going to talk about in front of a kid. She tried to stop her, but Daemyung showed interest instead.

"New Semester? I do know about it. You're referring to the drama, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. How is it? Do you watch it?"

"Yes. I watch it every week."

"Every week? I heard it wasn't popular with the boys though."

"I find it fun though."

"Really? Uhm, Daemyung. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

Haesoo signalled her not to with her eyes, but Hanmi ignored her.

"What do you think it'll be like if two of the characters started dating?"

"D-dating?"

"Yes, dating."

"I think it'll be interesting."

"Right? Everyone's at that age where they're curious about love. Okay then. Who do you think fits Yeseul?"

"I think Giwoo would suit her."

"Right? The two of them suit each other. Then, what do you think about Giwoo doing the confession?"

"I don't think that's too bad. He is a little embarrassed, but I don't think it will be too disconcerting."

"Disconcerting?"

"Eh? Giwoo is that kind of character after all, at least from what I saw until now. Yeseul is clueless about love, and while Giwoo does know about dating, he's embarrassed about it."

"...Then what if someone bridged the two of them? For example, Lee Chan."

"Lee Chan? Sounds good. He's a real prankster. I also like Lee Chan."

Haesoo blinked several times as she listened to the conversation. Didn't boys usually like girl characters from fiction? And yet he liked Lee Chan? She decided to tell Maru that he had a male fan when she saw him next time.

"I see. So it's good... of course it is. So internet authors are much better than me after all..."

Hanmi lowered her head while laughing like an idiot. Haesoo sighed. She fell into that rabbit hole of guilt all over again. Just as Daemyung was looking at both of them due to the weird atmosphere, saviors appeared. The door opened and the two men came back.

### **Chapter 543**

"What the heck happened to her?" Pilhyun asked as he pointed at Hanmi.

Haesoo clicked her tongue.

"She's in a state of self-loathing again."

"Again? She was okay before though."

"It began again."

Haesoo patted Hanmi's head, who was lying on her legs. The girl that was like the manifestation of confidence fell to such a low state due to a slip. She pitied her.

"Uhm. Mr. Gwak Joon, was it?"

Haesoo looked at Gwak Joon, who sat next to Pilhyun. The man who was clad in black from top to bottom, nodded back to her.

"Looks like I haven't introduced myself properly. My name is Choi Haesoo. I've known bro Ahn for quite a while, and I'm just a woman who writes stuff."

"Gwak Joon. I write novels."

"Uhm, I'm asking just in case, but did you write Twilight Struggles?"

"Yes."

"So you weren't someone with the same name. I enjoyed the movie. I haven't read the novel yet though. I also wrote an article about it, quite generously too."

"Thank you."

“Bro Ahn, you should’ve introduced him to me if you knew such a good person. You were monopolizing him to yourself?”

Pilhyun made a sour expression and denied that claim.

“This dude is someone who holes himself up even more than me. Even I have a hard time meeting him. Not only that, he’s no fun to hang out with, and he looks scary too. I don’t think there are many people who even know this guy in the novelist world, you know? Even his editor asks me where he is. At most, he knows brother Bae.”

“Really?”

Haesoo nodded as she looked at Gwak Joon’s face. He definitely didn’t look like the sociable type.

“I tried to introduce him to you once, but he was writing back then. He’s hard to call out once he starts writing, so I just gave up on that notion.”

“Then I guess I’m lucky to have met him like this, huh. Nice to meet you, Mr. Gwak Joon.”

“No need for honorifics.”

Haesoo shook hands with Gwak Joon. A writer who’s rarely seen when he writes, huh. Haesoo felt like she was meeting a creature known as a ‘novelist’ that only existed in fiction. While she also made a living through her writing, she was far from having such a personality. She was passionate when it came to writing, but she forgot about everything once she left her keyboard. Sitting still in a room while focusing only on writing made her shiver just by thinking about it.

“This is Lee Hanmi, who’s at the epitome of self-destruction. Ever heard of her?”

“Hyung-nim told me a few times, so I do know her. He told me that she’s the one who became the most famous among the writers in Suwon.”

“Hey, hey, Hanmi. I’m boasting about you. Wake up.”

Haesoo tapped on Hanmi’s cheeks. Hanmi slowly sat up.

“It’s a shit life anyway. I don’t care what happens. Writers are shit,” Hanmi said.

Haesoo poured a cup of cold water for Hanmi. Although she had sobered up a little, Hanmi’s mentality had crawled into the depths of the abyss so she wasn’t able to get herself together. She couldn’t imagine how she normally acted.

“Lee Hanmi, I knew you’d get yourself into trouble one day. This is why people need to make numerous mistakes. Look at me. I’ve fallen over several times on my way to being fifty years old, and now I’m at the point where I don’t get disappointed with most things.”

“Who’s the one who nagged everyone around him because he couldn’t write just a while ago?” Haesoo asked as she looked at Pilhyun.

Pilhyun replied ‘who might that be’ as he drank the low-alcohol drink.

“Stop making her feel bad and console her a little.”

“What good is consolation when it comes to writing? Do the keys type by themselves just because someone consoles you? Do the manuscripts get written by themselves? It’s just how life is.”

“Bro Ahn. You’re such a bad guy.”

“Choi Haesoo, I’m gonna have you pay for what you ate.”

“Urgh, what a stingy man. Little brother Joon, don’t treat a guy like this as your elder.”

“I’m used to it, so I’m okay with it. Also, I freeload at his house from time to time, so I can’t afford to have him hate me.”

“Money’s the greatest enemy, eh?”

“Indeed.”

Pilhyun, who had been listening this whole time, suddenly shouted.

“Lee Hanmi, stop whimpering and let’s start drinking. What are you going to do about something that has already happened? Spilt milk won’t go back in the glass by itself. Just pray that the viewing rates stay up and write the next part. You’re just a contracted writer, so you need to write those episodes to earn money.”

“You really are a bad guy, oppa.”

Hanmi said that as she raised her eyebrows. It had begun once again. A bad relationship - this seemed like a gentle expression. In a feud - that wouldn’t suffice either. Archenemies - that was a much better description.

Haesoo looked at the two people growling at each other like dogs fighting for territory before giving up. They should stop once they got tired. She was also tired because she had been listening to Hanmi’s grumbling all day.

She ate some fruits as she sighed. Just then, Daemyung, who was sitting on the other side, entered her eyes. He was looking at the two with sharp eyes. Unbefitting of his rather rounded face, his eyes looked pretty fierce. He didn’t look angry though. He looked more like he was incredibly focused.

“What are you looking at?”

“E-eh? Oh, it’s nothing.”

“Don’t lie. You were staring holes into them.”

“It’s just... oh, you can speak casually with me.”

“Alright then. But why were you really looking at them? I’m not trying to pick on you or something. I’m just curious. It’s fun to watch people fight, but people don’t watch fights with eyes like yours,” Haesoo said as she tensed her eyes.

Daemyung replied after a bit of hesitation.

"I was just watching them. A friend of mine told me that I have good eyes for observation. Honestly, I really don't have a lot of strengths. So in order to make the most of my lacking strengths, I kinda got into the habit of watching people."

"Good. Famous writers say that they go to the bus stop when they want to make a character. They say that they can come across all sorts of characters there. If you have good eyes for observation, it'll be much easier to create a character."

"I think so too."

"But don't look at them too fiercely. They might misunderstand you."

"It lets me focus better. It also leaves a clearer image in my mind."

"Really? Looks like you have a good memory. I could never remember things like that."

Daemyung smiled in embarrassment. He was such a cute kid.

"It looks like you live nearby huh. It's quite late."

"I live in Suwon."

"Suwon? That's a coincidence. I live in Suwon too. Wait, tomorrow's not a day off."

"Yes. I was planning to sleep at teacher Ahn's house and go to school early in the morning."

"You have it hard because of Bro Ahn as well. Bro Ahn! Why did you call this guy here? He'll have a hard time going to school tomorrow."

Pilhyun, who was quarreling with Hanmi, twitched his eyes.

"I'll drive him back!"

"Like hell you will. Obviously, little brother Joon will be the one giving him a ride."

"He and I are two in one. Rather than that, Hanmi's really in a bad state, huh."

Haesoo looked next to her. Hanmi had buried her face in her palms. She was muttering some things, and they mostly seemed to be some curses directed at the world, so there didn't seem to be a need to listen to her closely. When they met for lunch, she ate like she was the only one aware of the world's destruction tomorrow, but once some alcohol entered her system, she started blabbing about all sorts of things, which included stories about herself. She talked about everything to the point that it made Haesoo wonder how she had held that within her for so long. She would probably be able to write Hanmi's biography from the stories she heard today. Of course, it would be incredibly depressing.

"Sorry for acting like this when we're adults. I'll apologize in everyone's stead," Haesoo said as she faintly smiled at Daemyung.

Daemyung smiled awkwardly before nodding.

"Joon, let's go smoking."

"Already?"



“I just feel stuffy in here.”

Pilhyun took Gwak Joon outside. Hanmi, who had lost her opponent to growl at, shriveled up like dried up seaweed.

“Man, you have a tiring way of living your life, huh.”

“It’s over for me.”

“Like hell it is. You have loads of days left to live. You fought well until now. You should just keep doing that. You won’t find anyone who’s never made a mistake in this world, you know?”

“Maybe I should’ve slipped like oppa said?”

“Now you’re just making me look bad. If you are successful, then you should be thankful for it. Don’t go churning the insides of countless people who don’t get their works sold.”

Haesoo looked at Daemyung. She wondered if it was okay to say this in front of a student, but he didn’t look like the light mouthed kind, so it should be fine. In the first place, Pilhyun wouldn’t have called him here if he wasn’t.

“Try talking to the producer about it. Imagine how good it would be if you can discuss with others like the other writers do.”

“Unni, don’t you know how I’ve been doing my interviews until now?”

“I do, I really do.”

Hanmi was someone with a high ego when she was in her 20s, but she had the writing skills to back it up. While Haesoo was focused on publishing her work, Hanmi staked her life on dramas. She earned money as a secondary writer for some documentary series at a TV station to get by everyday life, and she split what little time she had to write a scenario for a mini series which she handed in for a contest. The day she was notified that she passed, Haesoo celebrated with Hanmi, who froze up in front of the camera.

After that, Hanmi became successful with many mini-series titles. Hanmi in her thirties was a writer who lived in the world by herself. Looking at what she said for various lectures would make anyone wonder if such an arrogant and cocky person could exist in the world. Haesoo wasn’t surprised by it. A writer who never failed even once. She was someone who hit it big for 8 years straight while many others of her profession rarely even had one hit, so who could insult her for being cocky? Her speech had toned down quite a bit ever since she reached forty, but her arrogance was still very high and looking at her work was pretty hard.

“Why did I do that?”

“You shouldn’t have become such a character.”

A writer who never holds prior discussions with the producer. A writer who refuses feedback. A perfectionist writer. That was Hanmi’s identity according to what Haesoo heard from other people. Haesoo had seen the extremes of that cockiness once before. 3 fixes to a script in one day. Even after committing such a tragic crime, Hanmi was bold about it. She was filled with the confidence that only

she could write the script, and that confidence was something that supported the perfectionist in Hanmi. Indeed. The atlas that propped the being known as Hanmi up was that confidence.

Yet now, that confidence had been shattered. She said that it wasn't something that happened recently. She said that she had become afraid of writing about a year ago. However, since she acted as such until now, she kept wearing the hat that didn't suit her and kept writing without any consultations with the producer. Haesoo swore at her saying that she was foolish, but it wasn't that she couldn't understand her. Everyone lived that way after all. A meager pride had become the identity that represented oneself from some time onward, so that pride couldn't be easily thrown away. Hanmi was pushed to the extreme, and this was the result.

"Unni, unni."

"Urgh, damn girl."

She had become a kid. The writer whose pen broke had become a child who burst out into tears while playing with fire. Since she lost her confidence, she lost her directionality, which was how she ended up writing the latter half of her script while referencing fan-fiction on internet forums. The problem with that was that she borrowed some of the ideas despite the fact that they had conflicting elements with what she originally wrote.

As stifling as her persona might be, she couldn't really go anywhere to complain about it, and with the deadline approaching, she probably ended up finding a breakthrough by referencing a fan-fiction. She shouldn't have had any time to cross-reference her own work to make sure that it wouldn't sound disconcerting. If she had time to do that, she would've consulted others a long time ago.

This little sister was incredibly frustrating with the way she worked. Since writing was everything to her, and she was never betrayed by her writing before, she had been pushed into a corner like this. Because of that meager pride, because of that meager reputation, Hanmi said that she was afraid of being tagged the 'failed writer'.

"Ah!"

Just then, Daemyung made a sound after being quiet all this time. Haesoo tilted her head and looked at him.

"What is it?"

"N-nothing."

"Hey, you stutter quite a lot, huh? What is it? Tell me about it. I'm someone who can't hold back my curiosity."

"Uhm... the thing is, I thought you looked similar to someone I know when I first met you."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"A celebrity?"

"No...."

"Just joking. But who exactly?"

"A friend of a friend of mine. You really look like her."

"Really? You said you live in Suwon, right? Do you perhaps go to Myunghwa High? My daughter goes there."

"No, I go to Woosung High."

"Ah, I see."

"But that person that looks similar to you goes to Myunghwa High."

"I also know someone who goes to Woosung High."

"...."

"...."

Something just clicked. Haesoo spoke, thinking there's no way it would be true.

"No way, it shouldn't be. You said that you liked Lee Chan from the drama, right?"

"Yes. Because he's a friend of mine."

"...Really?"

"Yes."

"Oh my word. You know Han Maru?"

Daemyung, sitting opposite to her, blinked before opening his mouth wide.

"Yes. I do. He's my best friend."

"Oh my, you're friends with my daughter's boyfriend?"

"I knew it, huh. I thought I was mistaken."

"Do I look like my daughter?"

"Yes, a lot, actually."

"No way, I'm much better, aren't I?"

"...."

"You're quite honest. Sorry that I'm being quite senseless. Rather than that, we meet like this huh. Do you also do acting?"

"Yes. I do. Ah, right. She came to our school today."

"My daughter, you mean?"

“Yes.”

“I told her to go play with Maru and she actually did go there, huh. Kids these days are so fast.”

Haesoo smiled and picked up the drink bottle.

“As strange as it might be, here, you should drink a little.”

She never thought that she’d meet an acquaintance of her daughter here.

It once again came to her that the world was pretty small.

## **Chapter 544**

“Come in, come in.”

Pilhyun opened the door and waved at them to come in. Daemyung carefully went inside. The faint smell of cigarettes tickled his nose. There were piles of books stacked to the side around the living room. Pilhyun’s house hadn’t changed at all.

“Bro Ahn, you should really clean your house a little.”

“This is serious, oppa.”

Haesoo and Hanmi clicked their tongues as they made their way in. They were holding large plastic bags, which contained some cans of beer that they bought from the convenience store before they came to his house. Gwak Joon came in last and closed the door.

“Let’s start the 4th round! I’ll see the end today! Wait a bit, I’m going to change my clothes.”

Pilhyun went inside his bedroom after saying that. Gwak Joon, Haesoo, and Hanmi turned on the TV in the living room and watched it in a daze.

“Shall I put this away?” Daemyung asked as he pointed at the plastic bag.

There were around 20 beer cans. There was no way they were going to finish all that, so he was planning to leave some out and put the rest in the refrigerator.

“The beer ghost will drink it so leave it there,” Haesoo said.

Daemyung nodded then looked at the TV. There was a B-rated horror movie on TV. It was about starfish-like monsters latching onto the necks of people to control them, and it was pretty fun. He watched the movie for about 10 minutes.

“Wait, don’t tell me hyung-nim is...”

Gwak Joon stood up and quietly opened the door to the room Pilhyun went to. Daemyung also poked his head over to look. Pilhyun was lying on the bed inside the lit room. He was snoring loudly as well.

“Daemyung, help me out a little.”

“Yes.”

He went into the room and laid Pilhyun out in a proper posture before putting a pillow behind his neck. He didn't feel flustered or anything since this happened quite frequently when he came to Pilhyun's house. He put a blanket over him before leaving the room.

"What about bro Ahn?"

"He's asleep."

"He's getting old, huh. Let's put this in the fridge. I guess it counts as a visitation present."

Daemyung put the beer and some snacks from the plastic bag into the fridge. He only left out three beer cans and a bag of snacks to eat at the living room table.

"Little brother Joon, you drinking?" Haesoo asked as she waved a can of beer.

"Sorry. I'm tired since I drove all the way here from Busan. I think I'll go to sleep first."

"No wonder you looked exhausted. Go to sleep. We ladies will chat by ourselves."

Daemyung looked at Gwak Joon entering a room as well as Haesoo and Hanmi. He wasn't that sleepy thanks to the alcohol in his system. It was also just 1 a.m. It was a little early to fall asleep.

"Then I guess this is for you, Daemyung?"

Haesoo gave him the canned beer. When Daemyung hesitated a little, Haesoo immediately followed up.

"I'm just joking. You have to wake up early tomorrow if you want to go to school, right?"

"I usually sleep late."

"Really? Well, I heard kids these days don't sleep until late at night. It's a lot different from when we were kids. Then do you want to try drinking? Only if you can, though."

Daemyung accepted the beer for now. The beer-soju he drank at Suyeon's house was bitter which made him get drunk easily, but he should be fine if it was just beer. He also liked the sparkling sensation when he received a drink back at the Izakaya.

"Fuu, unni, give me some water," Hanmi, who was leaning against the sofa this whole time, said.

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Yeah. I think I am. What about oppa?"

"He's dead."

"What?"

"I said he's dead."

"Oh, he's sleeping, huh. I thought that would be the case. Pilhyun-oppa would fall asleep while trying to write when we shared an office together."

"He's a man who gets a lot of sleep. Daemyung, can you get some water? Not for me, but for her."

"Yes."

Daemyung poured a cup of cold water in the kitchen and brought it to Hanmi. Hanmi pressed down between her eyes after she accepted the cup.

"Looks like I'm old as well. I didn't know I'd feel dizzy after just that."

"Being dizzy isn't the only problem. You said all sorts of stuff. If I didn't like you, I'd have recorded all of it and then posted it on the internet with the title: 'Almighty Lee Hanmi's downfall' or something."

"That might feel refreshing. Should I stop writing dramas now? I earned plenty."

"I thought you were writing the drama in order to solve the conflict between generations. Why are you sounding so weak now?"

"Whose side are you on, unni?"

"On the side of justice."

"Be on my side. I have it hard."

"Alright, who else will take your side if it's not me? Come over here, this unni will pat your back."

Daemyung sipped on the beer as he looked at the two. He tried to ignore them since he thought that listening to other people's conversations was like a sin, but he couldn't help but listen since this space wasn't that wide. He didn't know the details, but from what he gathered here and back at the Izakaya, Hanmi seemed to have done something bad.

'She said she's the writer of a drama, so it should be about New Semester.'

New Semester didn't have that many problems until now, at least according to what aired. All of them did well in acting, and the story was good as well. From how Hanmi was worried sick about something, it seemed that she ran into trouble with an episode that hadn't aired yet.

Daemyung thought that writing really wasn't that easy after all as he emptied about half of the beer.

"Your name was Park Daemyung?" Hanmi asked as she stared at him.

"Yes, it is."

"I hear that you write, correct?"

"It's nothing amazing. I'm just learning."

"Really? Do you find writing fun?"

Daemyung stopped to think before speaking.

"It's not that fun."

"Then why do you write?"

"I-I don't know."

"Just tell me. It's not like I'm going to spread it to everyone. This old lady is just feeling stifled."

Daemyung looked at Haesoo. Haesoo silently told him 'go on'.

"It's because what I'm writing right now is about myself."

"About yourself?"

"I am going through the events that I encountered from elementary school to before I entered high school. It's in a novel format, and since it's about me, it's not that fun."

"Isn't writing about yourself the most interesting writing out of everything? Writers usually don't live in the same society as other people. Moreover, they're frustrated all the time as well. That's why they try to appease their inner desires by writing. It's especially the case when the writing has the characteristics of an autobiography. Under the condition that they aren't being censored, they can write anything they want, and that's insanely fun. It's just fantasy! You know, when I first wrote novels, I wrote sexual fantasy. I mean about sex, sex! Is that too blatant of a word? Then what about sexual intercourse?"

Daemyung almost spat out what he was drinking. He didn't know where to look when she said all those words.

"Hanmi, why don't you watch your words a little more in front of a kid?"

"Unni! Writers should not be afraid of taboos. Did you become a writer because you wanted to be respectful? No, you didn't. You became a writer because you want to poke at the desires that you wrapped up inside your heart and liberate them. Politics, religion, sex, capitalism! Aren't people with pens supposed to rush at those topics like madmen?"

"There you go again. Daemyung, I'm going to go away for a while, so be her talking partner for now. Now that she's sober again, she's trying to go back to being a lofty crane again."

Haesoo blocked her ears and went to the kitchen. Daemyung tried to run away sneakily, but he found Hanmi sitting next to him.

"Listen to me."

"Y-yes!"

Was he supposed to kneel here? Daemyung's body jerked before he looked at Hanmi. Like what Haesoo said, her eyes were clear as though she had sobered up. Her voice was also vivid and clear. The limp person complaining about life was gone.

"Park Daemyung!"

"Yes!"

"Why do you find no fun in writing? Tell me honestly. You know that this is an opportunity you won't get anywhere, right? There are hundreds of aspiring writers who want to listen to my lectures. Even if it's paid seminars."

"Ah, yes."

"Amazing, aren't I?"

Daemyung hesitated a little before saying 'you are'. Hanmi smiled when she heard that answer. For some reason, that smile looked very worrying in Daemyung's eyes. He felt like she was the type of person who had to have other people confirm for her to keep her self-confidence.

"Tell me. Why do you find no fun in writing?"

"Uhm, if it's just writing scripts, it's fun. Coming up with lines is hard, but when I finish that process and look back at my work, it's really fun. The novel I'm writing right now is about self-retrospect though, so it's not that fun."

"Why?"

"Because I was bullied."

"With a body like that? I think you'll be able to blow anyone out the window with a punch."

"I look better than I did before. Before... It was all just flesh and no muscle."

"Well, I guess such things do happen. But you still shouldn't find writing no fun. You're supposed to flap your wings and take off, and if you are fed up with writing at this time, you won't be able to do anything."

"I-is that so?"

"Of course! Look at me. You know, I've never failed with my writing before. Starting off my first ever mini-series, even a short skin that I wrote got good reviews. Do you know about 'To the Sun'?"

Daemyung nodded. That was a drama he watched in middle school. It was a story about the people working in a hotel, and he had watched every single episode from beginning to end.

"I wrote that as well. 45% viewing rate. Isn't that incredible?"

"Really? I really liked that drama."

"I'm not surprised. I write quite well if I do say so myself. Do you want to hear about what happened back then? I was sitting in front of my desk with my laptop open when I suddenly got ideas springing up in my mind. From then on, I stayed up for three nights to create the character and the synopsis. I finished the manuscript for four episodes in exactly three months."

"Amazing."

"It is. I'm an amazing woman. It was back then when the chiefs of drama departments in all three TV stations wanted to meet me. Gee, even the president of RBS visited me once. He asked me to work with him. He asked me for my scripts that I had saved up. This Lee Hanmi is that kind of woman, I'm telling you."

"Really?"

"Really. Do you finally get how amazing I am?"

"Ah, yes."

"And this one time...."



Daemyung realized one thing as he listened to Hanmi's words, this person wasn't sober. Hanmi combed through her history while laughing like a fool. Daemyung kept listening to her story. She was a successful writer who still worked in the field. Although she was drunk, there should be something to learn from her from this story. Like that, he listened to her for about 30 minutes.

"But it's over now."

"What?"

"I became scared of writing. I can't think of anything anymore. I don't even know what I want to write and I'm not sure if I'm writing the right thing. This never happened to me before. When I picked up the pen, my hands always started writing by themselves, and when I turned on the laptop, I could easily fill pages with text. But now, I can't do that."

Hanmi smashed her head on the table and started crying. Daemyung panicked. He had never seen someone so much older than him cry so sadly in front of him. Haesoo was sleeping on the sofa, so he couldn't wake her up either.

For the time being, he gave her a tissue. After crying, Hanmi wiped her tears with the tissue.

"You shouldn't start writing. This is horrible. I can't see what's in front of me anymore."

"B-but you did well until now."

"Until now, sure. But it's all over now. I couldn't write a single line even after staying up for three days and three nights. I could only type dots before I gave up. Not only that, I used a plot written by someone else; a plot that doesn't even suit my story."

"E-everyone makes mistakes."

"No! I can't make mistakes. You might not know because you're young, but a title written by Lee Hanmi must not fail. Failure is intolerable. But I can't write. That's why it's over for me."

"Uhm, why don't you try talking to other people?"

"If this was something I could solve by talking to another person, the pains of creativity wouldn't exist in this world."

Hanmi sighed. She was at the epitome of a pessimistic thought process, so Daemyung couldn't say anything to her. If he was good with words, he could have tried consoling her, but he didn't have that talent.

Hanmi started sniffing again.

Daemyung looked at her for a while before being reminded of his own novel. The novel that he only showed Gwak Joon and Maru. The work he wrote as he reminded himself of the days where he insulted himself even more than others insulted him. Daemyung didn't want to go back to the past at all. He was so proud of himself right now.

He treated the previous him before he started writing as someone who deserved those insults and resolved that he should make the most out of the present. However, he changed his mind when he

started writing. His past - those painful moments - wasn't something to be cherished. There were memories he wanted to forget about and a past he wanted to erase - that did not change. He tried to remove more of his shameful moments and fill his work with his cool moments, but the more he wrote, the more he thought that he shouldn't run away from reality. That was why he wrote about everything. It was an excruciating process. The emotions from those moments came back to him vividly to the point that they made him want to stop writing.

Despite that, Daemyung kept writing. It was not fun nor was it enjoyable. However, he continued because he thought that it was a necessary process. Writer Bae Chulho once told him that writing is like cloning oneself, as well as the fact that writing will lose all power when the writer denies themselves, whether it be their past or their present.

"Uhm, madam."

"What?"

"Can you have a look at my writing?"

"Your writing?"

"Yes."

Daemyung quietly looked at Hanmi, and Hanmi nodded even while frowning. Daemyung took out a notebook from his bag and gave it to Hanmi.

"You want me to evaluate your writing?"

"No. It's just... I thought that I should show you."

"What do you mean?"

"Just read it for now. I hope it can be of help to you. Though, I might be misunderstanding something all by myself."

After that, Daemyung no longer spoke.

## **Chapter 545**

It came to him after he passed the novel to her, this felt incredibly embarrassing. That notebook contained his writing which was a little too honest. In fact, he thought that he would be better off if he was naked.

Daemyung calmed down his breathing before looking at Hanmi. She was making a bored expression, but it didn't look like she was just skimming over his work. She even flipped pages backwards in order to check some things from time to time.

Haesoo's snoring could be heard. Heavy breathing could be heard from the room Gwak Joon had entered as well. It seemed that everyone was tired.

"Bring me," Hanmi said as she reached her hand out.

Daemyung looked at her because he didn't know what she meant.

“Bring me water.”

“Ah, yes.”

He didn't do anything wrong, but he still flinched. Daemyung brought some water and put it in front of Hanmi. Hanmi put down the notebook and drank the water.

“Have you finished it?”

“Yes.”

Daemyung nodded slightly before pressing his lips together. He had no specific purpose behind showing her the novel. He just wanted her to read it. He wanted to let her know that writing isn't fun all the time and that facing oneself is very hard, but important.

After gulping the water down, Hanmi heaved a sigh before picking up the notebook again.

“I thought you finished....?” Daemyung quietly asked.

“I can't understand it in one go because the writing is sloppy and unpolished. It's grammatically incorrect starting from the first sentence. Also, although perspectives are quite liberal these days, you're lacking basics as the perspective changes without any signs.”

“S-sorry about that.”

“Also, why are the line breaks like this? If you chose to go with a novel format, you should draw the shape of the paragraph inside your head. Are novels a joke to you? You should give the reader a sense of speed by formulating paragraphs. Sticking everything together or splitting everything apart isn't going to be the solution.”

“I-I will bear that in mind.”

“I can preach to you all day about just the first page, but I'll hold back for now. Give me some more water. No, brew me some tea. Green tea, red tea, barley tea - I'm fine with whatever so just get me something hot.”

“Y-yes!”

He replied energetically before standing up. If Miso pressured people physically, Hanmi used her words to exhaust him mentally. Daemyung left behind Hanmi, who opened the notebook again and went to the kitchen.

\* \* \*

Hanmi flipped the page while taking a sip of the steaming tea. She always drank something hot whenever she read some form of text. Without it, she couldn't focus. The novel that Daemyung handed to her was sloppy to the point that it made her laugh. She could tell at a glance that Daemyung was full of the desire to write and did not consider the reader at all. There were unpolished words embedded inside the sentences. They were absent where they needed to be, and they were present where they shouldn't be. It was a mess. If a student learning to write brought her this kind of writing, she would have asked that person to read it out loud on the spot. No, she might have ripped it apart.

“If you want to start a thought, mark it so that the readers can understand. Whether you change the paragraph or put some special character, it doesn’t matter. Just do something. If you don’t want to change the scene, then insert a sentence to transition between the two states. If you suddenly go to the past and then come back to the present, the perspectives are all screwed up, making it hard to read.”

“Y-yes. I will keep that in mind.”

“Hey, how many books have you read?”

“I’ve been reading ever since I entered 3rd year....”

“That’s not an answer. How many? How many books do you read per month?”

“I think about five.”

“That’s not too little. Though it’s not that much either. Keep that up. Someone who wants to write must keep reading. If they don’t read, they won’t be able to write.”

After saying that, Hanmi focused on reading the writing again. It was really sloppily written. There were no writing techniques used here, and the flow of emotions was all over the place as well. The distance between the narrator and the main character was random, so the reader had to be the one adjusting the distance between the two. Not only that, the vocabulary was so limited. It would be much better if he used some synonyms for repetitive words, yet he was using the same words repetitively to say the same thing. No, repetition would actually be better. There were some hanja words in some of the sentences which seemed to have been used to sound cool without actually considering the meaning. Those caught her eyes a lot.

“When you first write, pretend that your readers are elementary school students. If you do, you’ll be able to structure your sentences better. You won’t be using difficult words, so there should be fewer grammatical mistakes as well, and the sentences will become simple. Untwist your sentences and split apart the long ones.”

After saying that, she flipped the page over. The very first sentence made her feel dizzy again. It was blatantly obvious that it was written by a novice to the point that it made her lose her motivation to point things out. She should have closed this kind of writing a long time ago. It would’ve been more like her if she asked the boy what he was up to by showing her this kind of rotten writing.

However, her fingers flipped the pages by themselves. This was her second time reading it already. At first, she speed-read it, and this time, she was taking in everything including the spaces. It was sloppy and messy. The writing felt ‘noisy’ and it made her reluctant to keep reading it.

Yet her eyes were looking for the next sentence. Hanmi knew what this meant.

‘His writing was interesting.’

Before the widespread adoption of the internet; back in the days when they wrote on manuscript papers and ripped them apart to throw them away or ate them when they forgot the beginning indentation, writing was something sacred for Hanmi. She was enraptured by the glory of words that allowed her to construct an infinite world with limited resources. Her dream was to become a novelist, but she found out that she was more talented at turning her words into scripts, and ever since then, she

started digging into scenario writing for dramas. Hanmi went through all that to reach her current status, and there was one writing that shocked her about a year ago.

Writing that was flooded with various emoticons. At first, she just laughed about it. She thought that it was just a child's joke. However, the effect that writing had was beyond her understanding. A drama adaptation and a movie adaptation for that novel had been decided. She thought that the world was going crazy. That thing, which she wouldn't call a novel, was being treated as one.

Hanmi thought that writing that a child could make, which inserted pictures to depict the emotions instead of the subtlety of words, could never be interesting. That was why she read it. She didn't just skim through it, she read it over and over again so that she could research it.

The conclusion she came to back then was that the writing was interesting. It felt as though a pillar that supported her, one that was known as common sense, had collapsed. Around that time, novels based on emoticons started flooding the publishing industry. Some of the novelists she knew snapped their pens. They quit writing saying that the market had changed and that they were lagging behind. They shouldn't have that many regrets though since they only wrote as a side job. Making a living as a novelist in this country was pretty much impossible after all.

As a drama writer, the effect didn't reach Hanmi. However, ever since she read that writing, she had an identity crisis. Writing that had no form. Scenarios were considered liberal when compared to novels since it was a form of writing that would be used for shoots. It used mostly spoken writing without using narratives, so it was very different from normal writing. However, even those scenarios had rules they followed, but the emoticon-filled novel had no rules at all. She was honestly depressed when she saw some special characters replace the flow of emotions and the fact that such writing was loved by many of the young people.

Had that been all of it, she would have ignored it, but that novel was definitely interesting. The readers recognized it. The moment she saw a novel that completely ignored the grammatical structure being loved by many, she felt stifled and felt her vision go dark. Before that, she did not acknowledge the culture created by the internet generation. Looking at people who wrote internet novels, she thought that they were novices who didn't know the weight of the pen. However, reality was completely different. While readers liked structure and rules, they valued fun even more.

Fun. Contemplating that word, Hanmi started reading other things written by the younger generation. She decided that she should read the trend and write something that would be popular with that generation. She thought that such a thing would be easy. She resolved to become a writer who could read the trend and write dramas that led the trend, being popular across both generations.

She spent a year like that, and she forgot how to write. She analyzed the emoticon-filled novels she had laughed at so many times and felt depressed because she couldn't write like that. The dramas she wrote still did well, but it was about time she wrote something new, and because of what she said in an interview, she was tasked to write a youth drama. The interview that she did when she still had the confidence to accept the younger people's senses and dissolve it into her own writing had dragged her down.

During the beginning stages of the planning, it was pretty okay. However, the more episodes she wrote, the less confidence she had. Writing something without confidence was like torture. In the end, Hanmi

went around internet forums like she always did, and took inspiration from novels posted there. The novels posted on internet forums had a unique taste, and Hanmi did not have the confidence to do something like that. In her haste, she borrowed a plot from one of the novels and when she came to herself, she had already handed the script over. She rested a bit due to the relief that she was not late, but when she woke up, she realized what she had done.

She had told the producer not to fix the script or comment on it at the beginning of production. She had always said those words, but she regretted it dearly this time. However, she couldn't give in and ask the producer for consultation first. After all, the writer known as Lee Hanmi had to be perfect.

“Phew.”

Hanmi closed the notebook. When she looked next to her, she saw Daemyung who had fallen asleep. When she looked at the clock, she saw that it was 3 a.m. She felt like she had read that novel 7 times. It was really bad writing, but it was too fun. The story was bitter but the writing itself was interesting. It was writing that felt raw and one where she could gleam the face of the writer. The structure was unstable, but the contents were weighty. She hadn't felt like she had read such powerful writing in a long time.

“Bullying.”

Hanmi went into the room where Pilhyun was lying down and took two of the blankets on top of Pilhyun before coming back to the living room. She put one over Daemyung and the other over Haesoo before sitting down in front of the sitting table in the living room. After that, she turned on the power of the laptop that she presumed to be Pilhyun's.

‘That's right. There was no need for me to chase others. It's something that only I can write after all. Good, I'll make it more perfect. Who am I? I am Lee Hanmi.’

Hanmi glanced at Daemyung's notebook before turning to the laptop monitor.

\* \* \*

Daemyung, who woke up early in the morning, could see Hanmi sitting in front of the laptop. She was tapping away at the keyboard with fierce eyes, and he kept watching her in a daze because she looked like a master delicately baking a piece of pottery.

“If you want to keep writing in the future, learn the basics at least, okay?”

Hanmi said that without even looking at him. Daemyung nodded subconsciously.

“Also, that novel. It was really interesting. I mean it.”

Daemyung smiled like a fool when he heard the compliment. He didn't know what happened during the night, but it seemed that things went well.

\* \* \*

“What? A re-shoot?”

Maru hung up after writing down the schedule. He looked at his phone in a daze. It wasn't a supplementary shoot for an episode that was already shot, but a whole re-shoot of the majority of an episode? Moreover, he was even told that he would get the script on the day of the shoot. Even the assistant director, who was adjusting everyone's schedule, sounded flabbergasted.

"What the heck is happening?"

Supplementary shoots occurred quite a lot, but this was the first time an entire episode was scrapped.

Maru scratched his head and got off the bus. He had to go to school for now.

## **Chapter 546**

"Aren't you supposed to be busy?"

"I have some free time now, thanks to Sooil overworking himself until he got sick. I heard that you're going to shoot immediately?"

"Yes."

Maru got in the car. Byungchan stepped on the gas pedal and drove off.

"A re-shoot?"

"Yes. A re-shoot of the entire episode, apparently."

"Writer Lee Hanmi is big alright, including the scale of her accidents."

"Why do you think she suddenly changed it?"

"I wouldn't know. That woman is known for being a pain in the butt as well after all. Though, it looks like she changed the direction of the whole story if she's changing an entire episode."

"Right? I did find the script slightly weird when I studied it, and it seems like the writer thought the same."

"It's good that she changed it before the episode aired. There are tons of dramas that went downhill because the writer was swayed by the viewers' opinions. The internet really is a problem. If you listen to their opinions, you'll drive the ship up the mountain, but if you ignore them, the media will cause a fuss."

"I guess the only way is to stick to your roots."

"Veteran writers have experience and character, so they are affected less, but apparently, the new writers have it hard. The older generation aren't really close to the internet, but the younger folk are different. It's not like the writers can hole themselves up somewhere to write like before."

"There's nothing easy, huh."

"There sure isn't."

"Oh right, what happened to that audition you were going to do?"

“The short play? I screwed up badly. I listened to the director’s advice as I monitored my own acting, and man, it made me so embarrassed that I wanted to escape that place. I screwed up so hard. I get worse by the day.”

“Do your best. You always say that there’s always a next chance,” Maru said as he looked at Byungchan.

Although Byungchan kept doing auditions while taking care of young actors, no good news ever came out of that. The president apparently connected him to the audition this time, so he should feel incredibly disappointed that he didn’t make it.

After tapping the wheel with his fingers, Byungchan looked his way. There was a relaxed smile on his face.

“You know? I got business cards now.”

“Business cards?”

The car was stopped by a traffic light. Byungchan took out his business card wallet from his chest pocket. One stiff business card that had a bluish tint, came out of it.

“Here.”

“You made one?”

“No, they made me one. The company, that is.”

Maru checked Byungchan’s position on the business card the moment he received it. Head manager Lee Byungchan. There was a big JA Production logo on the top. Maru noticed the meaning behind the business card immediately, and did not know whether to congratulate him or not.

“Why don’t you congratulate me, huh? I finally got an official position.”

“Can I?”

“Yeah. Now my dream is to own a building in Gangnam.”

“That makes becoming an actor sound more realistic.”

“I had to shut down my old dream and find a new one, so it should be bigger than the one before it, no? Dream big. ‘Boys, be ambitious’, don’t you know these words?”

“You know that the words after that are ‘be ambitious not for money or for selfish aggrandizement’. Right?”

“People only listen to what they want to hear. Let’s be ambitious. Whether it’s for money or selfish whatever-that-thing-was.”

Maru smiled faintly and put the business card in his wallet. Byungchan shut off his dream to become an actor and as compensation, he gained a position. Only Byungchan knew whether it was a good thing or not, but he was smiling right now, so it should be something to be congratulated.

“Congratulations, head manager Lee.”



“Looks like I won’t be called actor Lee anymore in the future.”

“You won’t know for sure. You might stumble on a chance. Anyway, you got a pay raise and even got a decent-looking business card. I guess you levelled up as a man of society.”

“True.”

“All that’s left is to pay off your mortgage, get married, loan money for the marriage, childcare, and have your child be taken by someone else after you worked your ass off for that child. Congratulations. You just got on a really rocky road.”

“That’s one substantial blessing right there. But at least I finished my military service. Thinking about how you’ll be entering that gate in a few years, I’m much better off.”

Maru felt pained when he heard those words, so he looked outside. Thinking about standing night duty gave him a headache.

“Maru. Do you know what cold weather training and guerilla training are?”

“Guerilla training is where you say ‘Oh, I’m dying’, and cold weather training is where you say ‘Oh, please save me’.”

“...You’re quite knowledgeable.”

“That’s true, I am knowledgeable, sadly, that is.”

Maru smiled as he looked at Byungchan. Byungchan looked much more relaxed today. His speech, actions and even his voice. Perhaps due to having let go of the weight of his dream, or because he was given a balloon of success, he became pretty good to look at.

Byungchan turned on the radio.

Maru thought back to what happened during the day as he listened to the calming music.

‘I think something definitely happened to Daemyung.’

Daemyung, who came to school two days ago in baggy clothes kept yawning during lunch and even during practice. Thanks to that, he was scolded a lot by Miso. He looked like he had stayed up the night and when Maru asked him about what happened, he just replied that he met some other writers and talked about different things. Today, Daemyung came to school with a better expression and asked Maru if he knew writer Lee Hanmi first thing in the morning. Maru nodded. Hearing those words, Daemyung made a dazed expression before saying ‘okay’. Seeing his rather strange attitude, he asked Daemyung why he asked such a thing, but Daemyung smiled and said that it was nothing.

The day he was notified of the re-shoot, Daemyung mentioned the name of the writer for New Semester. Was there a relation between the two events?

‘No way, huh.’

He was clearly overthinking. How would Daemyung meet writer Lee Hanmi? Even if he did, there was no room for Daemyung to influence the overhaul of the script. He probably asked about the writer after hearing that Lee Hanmi was one of the writer’s acquaintances.

“We’re here. Good luck.”

“Yes.”

Maru picked up his bag and got out of the car. The gates to Seokjin middle school, the shooting location, could be seen right in front of him.

\* \* \*

“Although we have room when it comes to episodes, you never know what will happen when it comes to broadcasting media, so we have to shoot this as quickly as possible. I know that it’s hard to act with a script that’s fresh, but I’ll have to ask you to bear with it. Once we start lagging behind the schedule, we might actually end up having to edit the episode on the day of the airing itself. Let’s do this, everyone!”

Hearing Minjoong, the assistant director, shout, Maru opened the script. It was 7 p.m. on a Friday. Usually, the supporting actors had no scenes or only a couple of scenes, but it seemed that they were going to have to shoot late into the night today.

“What’s up with the overhaul so suddenly?”

Yeseul grumbled as she opened the script before walking away. Giwoo and Jichan also followed her to the front of the class. Okseon had disappeared from the classroom as always.

“I think it was pretty decent. Why do you think it was changed so suddenly?”

Joomin pouted as she sat next to Maru.

“Noona, I did hear something.”

Dongho said that as he sat down. Maru looked at him. He heard something?

“Apparently, writer Lee Hanmi told the director that she’d give up the payment for one episode, so they should re-shoot the 13th episode. She apparently threatened him by saying that she’d quit if the 13th episode aired like this.”

Dongho glanced at the staff members. It seemed that the source of the rumor was the staff.

“Wow, a tough person as always. If it was me, I wouldn’t have been able to do that because I’d feel too apologetic.”

Joomin clicked her tongue.

“She has a lot of self-confidence. She probably doesn’t care about the efforts and pains that other people go through if it doesn’t meet her standards. Rich writers have it good alright. She can make a week’s worth of effort useless with a word from her.”

Dongho flipped through the script in a temperamental way. Joomin also sighed before looking at the script.

“I guess this weekend’s full.”

“What can we do? We just do what we are told to do.”

Going along with Joomin's grumbles, Maru opened the script in his hand. The background hadn't changed, the field trip episode was still there. However, everything other than that had undergone a complete overhaul. The conflict between the characters especially, was completely different from the previous script.

"Lee Chan has changed to being an onlooker huh."

"Well, that's more like Lee Chan."

Maru faintly nodded as he heard Joomin and Dongho's words. The drastic change in the personality of the character that he felt while analyzing the previous version of the script for the 13th episode was all gone. Giwoo noticed that he liked Yeseul, but did not end up confessing, and Lee Chan had changed from being the cupid between the two to being an onlooker. Now, it was changed so that the hesitant Jichan used his straightforward personality and showed his interest in Yeseul.

"Wow, so this is how it's going to go?"

"Looks like Jichan's popularity will rise. The lines in the script are good today, aren't they?"

"You think so too, noona? Me too. Maru, what about you?"

"I like the new one much better as well."

The rather hasty progression of events returned to the norm. Why did someone who could write such a splendid story write the previous episode 13 like that? Was she in a bad condition or something? Or was it the political struggle between the writer and the producer that he had only heard about in rumors? From how she gave the producer a fitting script at this point in time, it did sound like there was some trouble between the writer and the producer.

'Is she trying to tame us?'

Maru looked at producer Park Hoon, who was preparing for the shoot, from afar. A writer who could control the producer as she wished, huh. He could somewhat imagine such a person. Sharp eyes, graceful hair, and a silver pair of glasses. A middle-aged woman who would spit out frost with each word. It felt quite reasonable after he covered the stereotypical 'elegant female writer' figure with the right authoritative power. She was probably a woman who didn't speak a lot and wore fashionable clothes.

That was enough delusion though. Maru threw away the distracting thoughts from his head and focused on the script. Regardless of what kind of person writer Lee Hanmi was, or what trouble there was between her and the producer, none of it concerned him. She was someone who he wouldn't be able to meet for the foreseeable future. Unless he became famous, there was no reason for a mere supporting actor to associate with a big-shot writer. Also, if she really was someone who was bossy and tried to make those working with her submit to her as he had imagined, he wouldn't want to meet her. Just meeting someone like that would be very stressful.

\* \* \*

Daemyung was in a pinch. It was because of the name on his phone. Writer Lee Hanmi. His phone started shaking for some reason.

When he found out that the title of the script that Hanmi wrote overnight two days ago was 'New Semester', Daemyung blamed his idiocy. When a writer who had to have others confirm for her that she was famous, asked about New Semester several times, he should have deduced that it was her work. That morning, Hanmi suddenly told him to write his number on a memo with a refreshed face. Not daring to refuse, Daemyung hurriedly wrote down his number before heading to school in Gwak Joon's car. That day, he was quite relieved since he didn't get any calls but....

"Y-yes."

-Son, we should hold a celebratory party today.

She definitely said 'son' with a nonchalant speech tone.

"Ye-what?"

-Haesoo-unni will pick you up so wait for her. Pilhyun-oppa and Joon will be coming as well. I feel very good thanks to you, son, so I'll treat you to something nice.

"S-son, you said?"

-Anyway, come. Don't ask questions.

The call suddenly ended.

Daemyung blinked several times and looked at the club members practicing in front of him. The juniors looked at him in confusion.

"What's up with you, seonbae? You look really bad," Aram asked.

Daemyung shook his head.

"I-it's a prank call, it must be."

"What?"

"It must be a prank call."

"What do you mean by that? You were dozing off yesterday too. Jiyeon, your hubby is not looking good today."

Jiyeon worriedly approached him. Daemyung smiled and said that it was nothing. There was no way she actually called him for real, right? And son? She had to be teasing him. That's right. Of course, she was just teasing him.

At that moment, he got a call from an unknown number. Daemyung picked up the call nervously.

-Is that you, Daemyung? It's me. You remember my voice, right? No wait, that's not the important thing. What time do you want me to go pick you up?

It seems that it wasn't a joke after all.

\* \* \*

"Okay. Maru, thanks for your work."

“Thank you for your work. I’ll be going first.”

Maru said his goodbyes to the staff before leaving. Lee Chan didn’t have many appearances in the new version of the script, so his shoots were finished quite quickly. He was prepared to shoot throughout the night, so it felt like he had lucked out. Of course, the main actors, Dongho and Joomin had more to shoot. It was 11:14 right now, so fortunately, he could catch the train home.

“I guess I’ll be shooting late tomorrow as well?”

After the Saturday classes at school, he would have to come to the shooting location immediately and shoot until late into the night, or throughout the night, get some sleep, and then shoot again. Although they had about 5 episodes of leeway, this intensive work schedule was decided by producer Park Hoon who said that they can’t be too sure. He might have to come on weekdays as well.

Just as he was about to pick up his bag and leave through the school gates,

“Han Maru,” he heard a voice.

A person walked out from the dark shadows. Maru stroked his chest. He was a bit scared just now.

“I thought you were a ghost,” Maru said as he looked at Okseon standing there with an expressionless face.

## **Chapter 547**

“Going home?”

“I just finished, so yeah. Didn’t you finish a while ago?”

Okseon nodded at Maru’s question. This was unexpected. Okseon had never taken the initiative to talk to him until now. She looked like someone who innately refused to join a group. She appeared in places she deemed necessary and liked to stay alone otherwise. Of course, this might be all wrong. She might actually be someone who had a shy personality around other people. The reason Maru had to deduce even such a simple thing was because he knew absolutely nothing about her. Okseon even quietly disappeared during meal times and only came back just in time for the shoot, so there was no opportunity to talk to her.

“Yeah.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because I had something to ask you.”

Maru looked at his watch. Okseon’s last scene should have ended 20 minutes ago.

“You should’ve texted me. It seems you’ve been waiting for quite some time.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, if you say that, it doesn’t matter to me either. So? What were you going to ask?”

“Kang Giwoo, what do you think of him?”

“Kang Giwoo? Kang Giwoo is Kang Giwoo.”

“You haven’t noticed?”

Maru scratched his eyebrows.

“Okseon.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, but I have a train to catch, okay? There’s not long left until the last train. So if you have something to ask, ask properly. I don’t like puzzles.”

“Good, then I’ll ask right away. Giwoo seems to be copying you, what do you think about that?”

“If he’s copying me, then he’s copying me.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. Is that all you wanted to ask?”

Maru looked at the time. If he missed the last train, he would have to take a taxi and pay nighttime fares. He wanted to avoid that.

“Was I wrong this time? I thought you weren’t like this.”

“I don’t know what kind of Han Maru exists in your head, but can I get going if you’re going to keep beating around the bush? Nighttime taxi fares are scary.”

“Don’t you need to solve the problem?”

“Is the fact that Giwoo is copying me a problem? If it’s that, you can just ignore it. Whether he copies me or not, it’s up to him.”

“I thought you were more mature than the others, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Me? Of course not.”

“There’s that time with Dongho as well - you proactively solved trouble that other people created. You handled it maturely too. I thought I had a lot to learn from you based on what I saw. However, it seems that I was mistaken. You were just cocky. You don’t know the real problem.”

“You sound so serious, but I’m fine. I’m thankful if you’re worried about me, but you don’t have to mind it at all. Like you said, if it’s a big problem, I’ll take care of it by myself.”

“No, you don’t know how serious this is. Giwoo isn’t just imitating your acting. He looks like he’s imitating everything about you. Recently, Giwoo’s acting skills rose a lot. I can tell that from how the producer doesn’t say much about him. That’s all thanks to him copying you.”

“That’s good. If Giwoo’s acting skills improve, New Semester’s viewing rates will rise and our faces will become more well-known as well. I don’t see what’s bad about that?”

“You are a really stupid kid, huh. You didn’t calm Dongho down back then. You are just both stupid and somehow just clicked and synergized with each other.”

“Well, this makes me thankful. This is the first time we talk like this after the months we spent shooting together, and the conclusion is that I’m stupid, huh. I always forget that I’m stupid, so thanks for reminding me of that. Is that all you had to ask? Your question should have been answered with the conclusion being that I’m stupid. I think I’ll have plenty of time to catch that train if I go now, so can I get going?”

Maru looked at Okseon’s mouth. He thought that she was some female monk who chose to be mute outside of work, but she turned out to be some alien girl from the 4th dimension. He thought that she didn’t have any interest in the others, but it turned out that she had actually been observing everyone this whole time.

He already knew that Giwoo was imitating him. All forms of studying started from imitation, did they not? Maru didn’t mind it since it would be laughable for him to scold Giwoo over copying something abstract. It would be much more beneficial for him to research facial expressions if he had the time to do something like that.

“I told you all this, and yet you’re going to stay still?”

“Please, I beg you. Tell me what you want from me. I want to stay friends with you as much as possible. We are coworkers after all, aren’t we? Even if we can’t be friends, I don’t want to be at odds with you either. But, if you keep beating around the bush like this, I have no choice but to ignore you. You don’t want that, do you?”

Hearing those words, Okseon’s lips twisted. Whew, so she could make expressions like that. She always stayed expressionless except when she was acting, so Maru thought that she switched her emotions off when she wasn’t acting, but it turned out that she could make expressions after all.

“Go up to Giwoo and tell him to stop copying you.”

“You want me to tell him that?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

“I think it would be strange instead if I understood.”

“You are really stupid, aren’t you? Don’t you know the meaning behind what I just said? He improved his acting by imitating you.”

“I got that, but I think I’m a bit stupid after all.”

“Then you should obviously make him stop.”

“Like I said, why? You don’t want the reputation of the drama to rise?”

“The problem is not the drama. The problem is that Kang Giwoo is getting the focus. You really can’t calculate, can you? Are you naive? Or are you stupid to the point that you can’t take care of yourself?”

Okseon walked out from the shadows under the school gates. She had returned to being expressionless, but her eyes were still fierce.

“This is why I don’t want to hang out with kids like you. It’s hard to give you advice. What else would I talk to you about?”

“Okseon, did you perhaps lie about your age?” Maru asked with a smile.

“What do you mean?”

“You said ‘kids like you’, so I just asked. If you’re older than me, I’ll treat you as such. If that’s what you wanted, you should’ve told me sooner.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Of course not. I’m just asking purely. I’m a bit stupid after all, so I don’t know the underlying meaning behind words so I just interpret them as they are. You understand that, right?”

Okseon sucked her lower lip inwards before biting on it.

“Anyway, you must say that to Kang Giwoo. We are all creating this drama together, but the popularity will be divided among us. Looking at the interviews and news articles recently, I can see that they’re all focusing on Giwoo. Until about episode 4, the child actors were lumped together, but after that, the spotlight is going to Giwoo and Yeseul, these two. This is because Giwoo’s acting skills improved. Yeseul is just riding his popularity.”

Okseon stepped a bit closer to him. The light from the lamp cast a long shadow over her face.

“You might not know because you’re young, but this is a fierce competition. If one person becomes a star, then the actors beside that person will just fall to being extras. The viewing rate for this drama is pretty high. From the way it’s gaining more and more views with each episode, it’s clearly gaining momentum so we need to suppress Kang Giwoo before he gets even more attention. Okay? Popularity is limited. The more popular Giwoo becomes, the less known we’ll be, you idiot.”

“So the conclusion is that you’re dissatisfied with the fact that you aren’t popular, and the reason is Kang Giwoo?”

“This is why kids are no good. I’m not talking about my popularity.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

Maru quietly looked at Okseon. Okseon tapped on her chest as though she was feeling stifled.

“You are just a fool who’s a bit good at acting, huh. If Giwoo’s popularity rises, yours will fall in comparison. In this field, there is no such thing as two similar characters. To actors, being number one is important, but being the only one is just as important. Do you understand? The more popular Kang Giwoo becomes, the less your worth will be. Do you know what lies at the end of that? You’ll never make it past being a child actor. Why? Because rather than using you, they’ll decide to use the much more popular Kang Giwoo. Because you two are similar after all. It doesn’t matter what you say at that time. Even if you go around telling people that Kang Giwoo stole your acting style, you’ll just get mocked by the others. You understand, idiot?”



“Yeah, I do. You’re really smart. Also, I was a little surprised. You can talk so well, so why did you stay silent this whole time?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I don’t talk to you guys because you’re kids. I’m not working half-assedly like you guys are. I’m serious. I found out that the world isn’t a place where many people can climb to the top together.”

“So you aren’t on the same level as us, huh. You’re amazing, I’m amazed.”

Maru clapped loudly. Okseon frowned and told him to stop.

“You get it now? If you don’t say it, you’ll never receive attention. And that’s critical as someone reliant on the media.”

“I understand you now. So can I get going?”

“Honestly speaking, you probably didn’t understand anything I just said. You might be wondering what kind of nonsense I’m saying. However, you’ll thank me later.”

“Of course, of course. I’m thankful. I’ll get going then. You should go home as well. It’s cold.”

Just as Maru smiled and was about to turn around, Okseon moved next to him.

“So, when are you going to tell him?”

“Well, I’m not sure.”

“Did you not listen to anything I just said? The later you do so, the more you’ll lose, you idiot. Do you want to make losses in life? No, right?”

“Of course not. I hate making losses.”

Maru started walking towards the station.

“So? When are you going to tell him?” Okseon followed him and asked.

“When should I do it?”

“As early as possible.”

“How should I tell him?”

“Just tell him to stop imitating you. Be strong. Only then will he stop.”

“Okay.”

“So, when are you going to tell him?”

“In about 30 years?”

Okseon stopped. Maru calmly kept walking forward. He was wondering what she was up to, and whether it had something to do with the ‘toy’ thing that concerned Giwoo, but it turned out to be nothing much.

“Are you really stupid? I said all that and you still....”

“Okseon.”

Maru stopped and looked at Okseon.

“I usually don’t give out advice, but allow me to give you advice today. If you don’t have confidence, you should quit this line of work. You clearly seem like someone who’ll ruin yourself while trying to do this job. Also, you should be more careful about saying words like that. What are you doing telling me everything when you don’t even know me? Have you thought about what would happen to you if I happened to be close to Giwoo?”

“I observed you all enough by now, and I saw no interaction between the two groups separated by main and supporting characters. There’s no way you guys are close.”

“We met up and hung out a while ago, did you know that?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We tried to call you too. Don’t you remember? That day when you just walked away when I tried talking to you. Oh, I guess you don’t remember it since it happened so many times, huh. The six of us met up quite often without you. Of course, like you said, it’s not proof that we got closer, but wouldn’t that make me at least closer to them than you? I mean whether it’s Giwoo or Yeseul.”

“You, so you’re telling me that you’ll tell him what I just told you?”

“No, I don’t plan to do that. That would be childish of me. Also, didn’t I tell you? I want to get along with you as coworkers. I’m willing to listen to you talking behind his back any day, so don’t worry about that.”

Maru took a few more steps before clicking his fingers and turning around to look at Okseon.

“Also, if you would allow the stupid me to give you a tip, if you want to use others, you better prepare some form of compensation. Trying to use only your words is well... childish. Plus, before you worry about your popularity, why don’t you try analyzing your character more? If Seri instead of Giwoo is getting edited out more, I think that’s because the actress’ skills are lacking, not because Giwoo is good.”

“You...”

“Don’t try to put down someone who’s doing well. I thought you were an adult, no? Have some generosity. See you tomorrow. You can ignore me if you like.”

“Wait! I said you’ll regret it, didn’t I? You just don’t know how scary this field is. Are you letting him go because he’s a friend? Is that what you think? Hey, you stupid idiot. There’s no other way of moving up other than by stepping on others!”

“I just don’t have to be stepped on.”

“What?”

“If I get stepped on by someone who’s imitating me, I might as well quit. If that’s all I amount to, I might as well stop this line of work and join a company. This line of work is definitely fun, but I’m not doing this

because I want to earn a small sum. Well, no, I can't be sure about that. I might still be doing it while earning really little."

Maru shrugged. Okseon looked like she didn't understand.

"And this is the most important bit, but."

I don't think Giwoo is good at acting - Maru added before turning around. He thought that he should walk to the train station and go home. Just then, he heard quick footsteps.

"...Gee, you are more tenacious than I thought, huh."

Maru looked at Okseon who fiercely glared at him before running towards the station. He heard something behind him, but he ignored it.

"Hey, Han Maru!"

"Sorry! I already have a partner, so I can't accept your love!"

He waved at Okseon who stood there in a daze before running again.

## **Chapter 548**

"The world sure has gotten cruel."

"What the heck, that was so random?"

"Why can't the young'uns grow up more brightly?"

"Park Daemyung, what did you feed this guy?"

"I-I don't know."

Maru patted Dowook's shoulder before picking up his food tray and standing up. He just got a text from Okseon. She told him to forget about the conversation they had yesterday in an imperative tone. It was cute to see her thinking that she could tell others what they should do with every word and every sentence of hers. Though, she might be thinking that she was being serious.

He talked with her a bit yesterday since he thought that she was impressive for trying to do something proactively, but her insufficient mindset and actions made him almost encourage her instead.

"It really doesn't matter what people look like on the outside, does it?"

"Are you picking a fight with me? You've been saying weird things for quite a while now."

"Even the angry-looking Dowook is actually a cute little brother in front of his big si... whoa there, put your hands down."

After sending off the steaming Dowook, he walked onto the school field with Daemyung.

"Have you picked the ones for the play?"

"Yeah. A total of 13 of them."

"I guess the ones that didn't get picked are disappointed right now."

“That’s why I’m planning to pick different members for the winter competition. Getting the prize is important but having everyone enjoy it is even more so. Oh, how’s it going with the shoot? We discussed that we should send people down, but we just ended up practicing because I didn’t hear anything.”

“We were originally going to shoot on Thursday, but something came up on the drama side. Thanks to that, I got an earful from Sora. Why am I being scolded when I’m volunteering for this?”

“You did break your promise, so you can’t help that.”

“Wow, you sounded quite firm there. I really have a good friend. Why don’t you stand surety for me later?”

“No.”

“Daemyung, you’ve become a lot crueler. Is it because of Jiyeon?”

“Wh-why would Jiyeon come up here?”

Daemyung turned red up to his ears in an instant.

“You know, that must be a talent you have there. Your ears turned red in an instant.”

“That’s because you said something like that. Are you shooting the drama today too, then?”

“That was an awkward change in topic, but I’ll let it slide. I have a full schedule on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I’m about to cry tears of happiness because I’m flooded with work.”

“Will it be like that next week as well?”

“Who knows? I’ll find out about it next week, but I think so. We’re practically overhauling an entire episode, so I think I’ll be busy if we don’t want blanks in the shooting schedule. It’s all because the writer suddenly decided to overhaul the script. I do like the new one better, but it’s hard to get adjusted to the new schedule.”

“I-I see. You’re working hard,” Daemyung said as he looked away.

Maru stared at him.

“Oh yeah, you look a little tired today.”

“I-is that so?”

“You’re wearing the same clothes as yesterday too. You’ve been looking after yourself quite a lot ever since you met Jiyeon though. This is pretty strange.”

“H-have I now?”

“Don’t pretend that you don’t know. You looked like you stayed up the night a few days ago, and it’s like that again today. Did something happen? I heard from Dowook that you left during practice because of some matters.”

“The thing is, I met them again.”

“Them?”

“The writers.”

“Oh, the acquaintances of writer Ahn Pilhyun?”

“Yeah.”

Maru smiled and patted Daemyung’s back.

“I thought there was a big problem or something, but it turned out to be something good. You should try to act affable in front of them. Meeting such people is a part of work too.”

“I-I want to do that, but...”

Daemyung looked at him before lowering his head. His reaction was somewhat down. Maru pointed at the gazebo in the corner of the school field. It was an octagonal one, and apparently, the head director bought one for the school for aesthetic reasons. Of course, it wouldn’t make a worn-out school look good just by itself.

After sitting down in it, Maru spoke,

“What’s up? If it’s something you can’t tell me, you wouldn’t have talked about it in the first place, and if you are going to tell me, you shouldn’t be hiding it so much. So what’s up with this vagueness?”

“So, the thing is...”

Maru quietly looked at Daemyung. Daemyung was capable of knowing what he could and could not say. From the way he hesitated a lot, it meant that he was wondering whether it was really okay or not.

“If it’s something you can’t tell me, you don’t need to...”

“I saw mom.”

“Mom? Whose mom? My mom?” Maru asked as he pointed at his own face.

Daemyung shook his head. Mom? Just what was he talking about? At that moment, an unexpected name came out of Daemyung’s mouth: Choi Haesoo.

“Mother-in-law?”

“M-mother-in-law!?”

“Oh, it’s just a habit of mine to call her that, so don’t mind it. Rather than that, you met mother-in-law?”

“Yeah. She is one of the acquaintances of teacher Ahn.”

“That was surprising. She can be quite mischievous at times. Were you okay with her?”

Daemyung only made an awkward smile and did not reply. The answer was obvious from just that. She was someone who could play high-level pranks. Moreover, she was impulsive as well. The words she said were all direct-to-the-point and might hurt someone weak-hearted. Of course, she was a good person. Probably.

“Actually, Haesoo-ahjumma is okay.”

“It is a bit strange to hear her name from you. Anyway, if you’re okay with her pranks, then there should be no problems, no?”

“...There’s one more person. Another friend of teacher Ahn.”

“So the reason you look so gloomy is because of that person.”

“That writer isn’t so bad. We’ve only met twice until now, but I can tell that much. In fact, it’s the opposite. I got a lot of helpful advice. A lot, like, really, a lot... really, really, a lot...”

Daemyung’s voice became quieter and quieter. Perhaps it wasn’t a coincidence that he looked like someone who was tired from work.

“Looks like that writer scolds you a lot.”

“Y-yeah. It’s a bit scary.”

“I see. I guess it must be scary if a middle-aged man shouts at you.”

“...She’s a woman.”

“Oh, really?”

“In fact, it’d be less scary if it was a man instead.”

“Just what happened last night?”

He asked for more details, but Daemyung no longer spoke. He just trembled once before staring at the ground. Maru decided to stop since he might traumatize him if he asked any more.

“You’re having a hard time.”

“Nah. It’s good since I have a lot to learn. Though, I do wish that she can take it easy on the alcohol.”

“Don’t force yourself to drink. If you keep accepting drinks, they’ll keep pouring you a glass thinking that you’re good with it. Even if you get scolded or insulted, you should firmly reject it at the beginning.”

“They aren’t people who would force me to drink.”

“That’s good. But who is this female writer?”

“Uhm....”

After hesitating, Daemyung slowly spoke.

“It’s writer Lee Hanmi.”

“No way. She shouldn’t be the Lee Hanmi that I know of, right?”

“She should be. She writes New Semester.”

“Hey, this isn’t the time to be grumbling. Bear with it and stick to her. She’s known to be a big shot writer, isn’t she? Such a connection has to be maintained at all costs. It seems like she takes good care of you from what you just said though, huh? They say scolding is a waste for hateful kids.”

“I’m not so sure. She did thank me, but from how I had to hear her scolding all night last night, I think she might hate me.”

“She thanked you?”

“It seems like she had hit a writer’s block or something. She told me about the situation while drunk, but the details... are a bit hard to disclose. You get me, right?”

“Yeah, those kinds of things aren’t supposed to be told to other people. It would be disrespectful.”

“Yeah. Anyway, while I was listening to her, I ended up showing her my novel.”

“Novel? Oh, the one you wrote?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised you decided to show her that.”

“I-it was really embarrassing, but I still wanted to show it to her. She said that writing is always supposed to be fun. When I wrote that novel though, there were many occasions where I felt agonized. That’s why I showed it to her.”

“Always having fun while writing, huh. She’s one incredible writer.”

“Apparently, she never failed. I also looked it up after I got back home, and all the works she wrote were huge hits. She also told me that it took her only 3 days to lay out the groundwork for some of them. And here, I’m having a hard time writing a single page over several days.”

“I don’t like this phrase that much, but I guess I can use it today. That writer must be a genius who enjoys working.”

“Yeah. I was really surprised when she read my novel. I thought that she’d just skim over it, right? But she read it very seriously. At first, I was really embarrassed to show her the novel, but I realized that I shouldn’t be when she read it so seriously. I felt like I would be betraying my own work if I thought of my work as embarrassing when someone’s earnestly reading it in front of me.”

Maru nodded as he listened. He didn’t know what that exactly felt like. He never wrote something, much less showed his writing to others. But this much was for sure. There was nothing more joyful to a content creator than the content consumer taking that content in with all of their heart.

“I fell asleep because it was late at night, and when I woke up in the morning, she was writing on a laptop. It looked very cool. Though... she went on to criticize my novel so badly and was insistent on telling me about just how horrible of a novel I wrote.”

“Consider her a good teacher and study under her.”

“That’s what I should be doing, right? But I don’t know if I can adapt to her personality.”

“There’s no free lunch in this world. A writer on her level should be earning tons by holding seminars and lectures. You get that for free.”

“Yeah, that’s what she told me. That her words are worth hundreds of thousands of won.”

“You lucked out then. Try to earn as much as you can from her.”

“It’d be better if she went a little easy on me. I feel like my soul is being dried out when I listen to her words. Yesterday, she made me wonder if it was okay for me to keep writing, you know?”

Daemyung sighed.

He didn’t know the specifics, but from this, it was clear that Daemyung was the reason why episode 13 of the drama was changed so suddenly. An aspiring writer who cleared the writer’s block of a genius, huh.

‘No, wait. If the thing she wrote overnight was episode 13, that means that she just wrote it in one day?’

Maru clicked his tongue as he thought back to the script for episode 13. The actors discussed and said that the new episode had a lot of good lines while going over the script. Thinking about how those lines were created in less than one day, he laughed like an idiot. An aspiring writer might go beyond the point of despair and start worshipping her.

“If you ever direct your own film, ask her to write something for you.”

“Even if I do become a director, I will never, ever, ask her to write something for me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll obviously have a hard time. I want to avoid that at all costs.”

“Just how hard was it...?”

Daemyung smiled bitterly before standing up.

It was about time for 5th period.

\* \* \*

“Good night.”

“Good night sounds so weird.”

“Then should we call it a ‘let’s-go-home-early night? I think I like that better.”

“That’s good.”

Maru greeted Joomin as he walked inside the classroom. Okseon watched them from behind. Maru talked for a bit with the people gathered around as he put his bag on the desk. He then looked at her before approaching her.

“Good night.”



Okseon did not reply. When she didn't, Yeseul, who sat at the front, said 'oh my' while widening her eyes. Okseon did not feel the need to react to such a childish reaction. Did she act like that at school as well? Yeseul was really beneath her level as always.

Maru shrugged before walking over to Dongho. Dongho also looked at her before turning away.

Okseon observed Maru for a while after that, but fortunately, it didn't seem like he talked about the conversation he had with her yesterday. He was an idiot, but it seemed like he could tell what was right from wrong at least.

"Good night."

The door opened and Giwoo came in. He kept smiling as though he wanted to infect the others with his bright smile. Okseon thought that he was really a viper at heart. She had to admit though, Giwoo knew how to act in society. He was worth observing. He sometimes had others see through him, but that should be because he was still young.

"You're saying good night as well?"

Jichan grumbled. Giwoo laughed before sitting down. The adult actors were waiting in the next classroom over. In the beginning, they all shared one classroom in an awkward manner, but they naturally split apart after some time. Both groups created a space that was more comfortable for them.

"Okseon, let's practice our lines together," Giwoo said.

Okseon did not reply and just picked up her script before walking over to the others.

"Okseon, isn't it about time we became friends? I'm worried about you."

Yeseul said that with a faint smile. Okseon maintained her expressionless face.

If you want to use me to raise your value, go ahead, do what you want - Okseon had no plans to follow along with childish things like that.

## **Chapter 549**

"Why is she so frustrating?"

"Who?"

"Who else? Kim Okseon of course. How can she lack sociability so much? I've never seen her speak of her own accord first. That's not the only thing. She always eats alone, away from the rest of us unless we're all in a restaurant or something. It's like we're ostracizing her."

Dongho shook his head. Joomin, who had been listening, spoke,

"Okseon doesn't necessarily lack sociability."

"Noona, what do you mean?" Dongho asked as he turned around.

Maru also closed the script and looked at Joomin.

“You guys don’t know huh. Well, I guess so since you have never followed her before. Okseon is actually a bright girl.”

“No way.”

“I think it was around a month ago when I tried to talk to her since I was quite worried as she kept eating by herself. That was when I saw her talking to senior Kim Suyeon in a nice manner. She also talks a lot with the other seniors as well.”

“Now that I think about it, sir Hwang Joonghoon also greeted Okseon first, right? I thought it was a coincidence, but after hearing that, it doesn’t seem like it was.”

Dongho crossed his arms and frowned.

“So what. She doesn’t say a word when she is with us, and yet she talks to the seniors, huh? That’s absurd.”

“Is it really so absurd?” Maru asked as he opened the script again.

From his experience with Okseon yesterday, it wasn’t that surprising. Though, he might have been surprised if he didn’t know about it before he heard this.

“It is absurd. We tried to treat her so well, didn’t we?”

“Do you have to get back as much as you did for others?”

“No, not really.”

“Then just let her be. Let’s look at it from the opposite direction. Do you think you’ll feel good if Okseon comes and talks to you in a friendly manner right now?”

“That sounds freaky in its own way.”

“Unless you have feelings for her, just forget about it. Let’s have another look at the script.”

“Wh-why would I be concerned about her!”

“From the way you’re shouting, I think you’re serious here. What do you think, noona?”

“Well, as much as I want to tease him, he might get upset if I actually do, so I’ll just let it slide.”

Joomin smiled and picked up her script. Dongho, who was announcing his innocence also eventually quietened down and opened the script.

“It does feel a little disappointing though. Like what Maru said, there’s no need for us to be on close terms, but I wish that she’d at least reply to our greetings.”

Joomin had a tired smile on her face. Maru glanced at her. It was probably only Joomin who could express her disappointment in Okseon’s cold attitude. There was no one else who put as much effort into getting close to her after all. Even Giwoo, who consolidated his position as the group leader, had given up on talking to Okseon, yet Joomin kept trying to talk to Okseon with some coffee in hand. Maru had seen her do so several times.

“So the bullying episode comes out after all,” Dongho said as he looked at the script for episode 14.

As soon as the main characters of the drama went through a sweet love story, the main story became one about bullies, the cancer of the classroom.

“It’s somewhat awry to end it like that. What do you think, noona?”

“I think it’s better than ‘and then everyone lived happily ever after’ like fairy tales. Writer Lee Hanmi used to write revenge stories, right? New Semester isn’t supposed to be a light-hearted youth drama, so I think this kind of ending is pretty okay. Though, the viewers might think otherwise.”

Maru nodded as he listened to Joomin’s words. If the bullied student eventually led a healthy school life in other youth dramas, New Semester seemed to be trying to break that fantasy and show the reality.

“That’s why I hate it even more. This is way too vague, isn’t it? Like, what’s this about? Is it saying that the bullied kid became happy because he transferred to another school? Or is he still sad?”

“It’s not a happy ending, but I think the conflict is resolved at least,” Joomin said.

“Noona, look at this last part. There’s a letter of apology, but the bullied kid never expresses anything after reading it. If it’s supposed to be a sad ending, then it would be much better if it was clear about that. This just leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“I think the emotions get across though. He does call at the end.”

“He does, but the script says that he just hung up without saying anything. How do you know if he wanted to say words of forgiveness or curses?”

“According to the flow, it should be forgiveness. It’s not a perfect happy ending, but isn’t it an acceptable ending?”

“I would’ve poured insults.”

“I would’ve forgiven.”

“That’s why you aren’t good enough. I’m sure that he tried to swear at the bully, but hung up because he was scared.”

“It’s because he became emotional. He did receive a letter of apology after all.”

“It doesn’t even make sense that an apology can make up for it.”

“I believe that the kid was kind and gentle at heart.”

The biggest change during the past 4 months should be how they interacted. Dongho and Joomin always disputed over the script whenever it came out. Maru would’ve stopped them if it was meaningless, but they were constructive and helpful when it came to interpreting the work, so he opened his ears to their conversation when they started talking. He thought it was quite fun to watch the two people using their different values to dispute with each other since it felt like he was learning about human nature.

“Han Maru, what do you think?”

“What’s your opinion?”

After going round and round, the question arrow didn't find a target so it shot itself at Maru instead. This happened all the time, so Maru just looked up at the ceiling and spoke in a small voice.

"I think it's a compromise. If we show the real state of bullying on TV, the forums will be on fire, but if we go with a happy ending, the writer won't be satisfied with that. I heard that censorship of TV media was really harsh these days, so maybe that's why the writer just went with the 'I will leave the interpretation of the ending to you'-ending."

After saying those words, Maru looked at Dongho and Joomin again. A moment later, the two spoke simultaneously.

"The bullied kid must be sharpening his sword of revenge!"

"I'm sure he's a kind boy and has forgiven the bully!"

Phew - Maru sighed as he shrugged.

This kind of discussion never reached one clear conclusion. It even made him wonder why they were having this dispute even though they never cared about what the other party said. Well, it was helpful for him, so that wasn't an issue.

"But did something happen to the writer? We haven't finished shooting episode 13 yet, but we got the script for the 14th one already."

"It's a good thing, but it does feel strange," Dongho and Joomin conversed as they looked at the script for episode 14.

Maru did not say anything. There was no reason to make matters worse after all.

"Actors, please be on standby!"

The staff opened the door to the classroom and spoke. Maru stood up with the script. It was 7:40 p.m. The shoot finally began again today.

\* \* \*

"Cut! Let's move on to the next scene after a 10 minute rest," producer Park Hoon shouted.

The lights that lit up the classroom to make it seem like day were switched off, and the line-men started collecting the cables.

'Just one more scene.'

He would get to go home once he waited for the main characters' school field scene to end and shot the going home from school scene. He wished for the going home scene to be done first since that involved all the characters, but it probably wouldn't happen because of the schedules of the main characters. He still had to wait a long time even though he was a supporting character instead of a background character.

He left the crowded classroom and stood in the corridor. He saw the leader instruct the background actors to go home. Maru said goodbye to all the background actors that walked past him. He couldn't look down on them since he was aware of their efforts.

“See you next time. Yes, noona. You, too, hyung-nim.”

Since it was a youth drama, a lot of the background actors and minor actors were around the same age since they had to fill up the classroom. Most of them quit after just once, considering it as a part-time job, but there were some who participated in the drama until the end. It had been four months since he started working with them. He got used to calling them.

After saying goodbye to the leader, he was about to go to the waiting room on the 1st floor when he saw Okseon looking inside the classroom from the middle of the corridor. At that moment, Suyeon walked out of the classroom.

Unni - Maru was a little surprised when he heard Okseon’s voice hit his ears. So she can act cute. As Joomin said, Okseon seemed to be quite sociable in front of Suyeon and the other senior actors and actresses.

“What are you doing? Let’s go down and get some rest.”

“Yeah, we should.”

He nodded and walked down the stairs.

“Did you see her just now? Kim Okseon, that girl was talking to senior Suyeon.”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t think she was like that, but she’s really sneaky.”

“What’s so sneaky now?”

“She’s so expressionless when she’s with us, yet she’s smiling like that as soon as she’s in front of a senior. I was wondering where she was all this time, and it seems she couldn’t be seen because she was looking good in front of the seniors.”

“So, you feel jealous?”

“Me? No. I am going to become an actor who lets his skills do the talking. I don’t want to suck up to others like that to get something. That’s how an actor is supposed to be, right?”

“You were a lot cuter when you grumbled by yourself. Don’t you feel embarrassed saying that out loud?”

“Wh-what? Don’t you think so too? If you’re an actor, you should battle with acting.”

“It’s not like Okseon lobbied anyone, so why are you overreacting? You’re being really strange now. Are you really sure you have no feelings for her?”

“Me? For her? For that block of ice? That’s funny.”

“There’s an old saying that goes ‘strong rejection is strong affirmation’ ....”

“Shut up!”

“I don’t think my voice was that loud. In fact....”

Maru did not finish his words and just pointed at the top of the stairs instead. Some staff members, who were carrying down some equipment, were looking at them. Dongho was startled and quickly apologized to them.

“Ah, youth.”

“...It’s embarrassing, so let’s get going quickly.”

He followed Dongho to the 1st floor waiting room. The three main characters, as well as the minor actors that appeared in the next scene all moved to the school field.

The lights were installed on the school field and drove out the darkness from it. As he was looking out the window, he got a text. Come to the back of the school - it was from Okseon.

Maru immediately replied.

-Why?

He got another one 5 seconds later.

-I told you to come.

Maru could somehow hear an upset voice. He closed his phone and put it in his bag.

“Should we go through the script for episode 14 together?”

“Again?”

“We should do it until we become proficient at it. It’s a bit wasteful to daze out while we’re on break, isn’t it?”

Dongho sighed and opened the script. Joomin was shooting on the field.

“So, do we start from scene 3?”

“Let’s start and go from there.”

They took turns doing the lines. They had to make guidelines for themselves about the emotional state of their character during the read-through. It was impossible to bring out emotions during the real deal without having handled the emotions even once. They had to polish it during the read-through and burst out with them during the shoot. A lot of the top-tier actors often had sharper emotional expressions during read-throughs than the actual shoot. If 100% of their skill came into effect during practice, 80% was practically the limit for the real shoot. This was why it was necessary to break that limit during practice if one wanted to bring out 100% of their skills.

“Don’t you think you should say that a little slower?”

“You think so?”

Just as he was about to say his line again while keeping Dongho’s remarks in mind, the door to the classroom quietly opened before Okseon walked in. Maru smiled at Okseon faintly before focusing on the script again. Okseon, who sat at the edge of the classroom, did not say anything.

Instead, Maru got a text.

-What are you doing? You're being childish. Why are you ignoring me when I'm trying to help you?

Maru sighed a little and told Dongho that they should take a break. He left the classroom. When he leaned against the wall in the corridor, he saw Okseon stepping out.

"Han Maru, you...."

"If it's about Kang Giwoo, let me make this straight. You go tell him to stop copying me."

"What?"

"If you mind it so much, and if it's for me, then you tell him. If Giwoo is a considerate person, he should change his ways."

"Why would I? This is your problem."

"Like hell it is. It's yours, not mine. I can tell that much from how you're so hung up over it even though I'm saying it's okay. I've been wondering, but do the senior actors compliment Giwoo a lot?"

"...That's."

"If that's the reason you're being hasty, then try to solve it by yourself, because I sure don't plan to say it. Also, if you want to ask me to do something in the future, tell me in person. One more thing. I'm fine with you thinking that I'm childish, but please stop thinking that I will blindly listen to whatever you have to say and do everything that you want me to do. You should know with a bit of thinking that I have zero reasons to listen to you."

"I told you, your character is...."

"Okseon. Your words don't sound that attractive to me. Didn't I tell you yesterday? If you want to lure me into doing something, then get a suitable bait for it. I'm an idiot, one that only moves when there's food to catch."

Maru yawned.

"Oh, and while we're at it, let me tell you one more thing. Don't try to act kind in front of the actress Kim Suyeon. It doesn't matter if you're really honestly talking to her, but if you have other thoughts, she might just bear her poisonous fangs at you."

Maru bore his own canine tooth at her before turning around.

"If you have anything else to tell me, let's do it with words. Text messages cost money."

He shook his hand before returning to the classroom.

## **Chapter 550**

"Black coffee is way too bitter."

"You'll get used to it if you keep drinking it. While we're at it, wanna have some?"

"Hell no, noona. Give it to Maru instead."

“Noona, give it to me. This guy has childish tastes and doesn’t know what’s good for his body.”

The three ‘pathetics’ were chatting with each other. Do they not know that they can’t be at leisure for too long?

9:40. Okseon closed the script for a bit and took out her English vocabulary handbook. Many books said that using free time was the key to success. This was an era where English skills graded people. Being good at English would allow her to receive more attention. She flipped over the pages and memorized the words. Memorizing words was a boring thing, but effort was always rewarded. While those three pathetics laughed and chatted with each other, she would study. Even a dog would know who was closer to success.

‘So pathetic.’

She looked at a word, closed her eyes, and reminded herself of the word several times in order to memorize it. What a perfect life this was? She was not being complacent just because she was working as an actor, she kept studying. Okseon was proud of herself. She could feel that she was leading a much more fulfilling life than others of her age. I am different from you - Okseon shook her head as she looked at the three people laughing with each other.

“Uhm, Okseon.”

She raised her head when a shadow was cast over her. Joomin had approached her with coffee in hand.

“Would you like to drink some coffee?”

“I’m okay.”

“Do you hate black coffee?”

“I drank some during the day. Plus, too much caffeine isn’t good for the body. An actor should take care of their body, right?”

“R-right. But hey, what are you looking at right now?”

“English vocabulary.”

“You’re studying?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I believe that actors should be perfect in all aspects. Only then can they act properly.”

Okseon tried to criticize her even more but decided not to. If it was anyone else, she would’ve just ignored that person, but it was a waste to ignore Joomin. She was a 3rd year in college, so she was definitely not young. Even she herself, who was a 3rd year in high school, was putting so much effort into preparing for the future which was still unclear to her, yet someone who had lived a few years more than her was talking and laughing with those that were younger than her. She should be leading the others to the right path, yet she was instead pushing her future into the depths of failure. Looking at her, Okseon had the urge to preach to her.



However, there was no need for her to do that herself. It was much more useful to get one more word memorized or to have another look at the script if she had the time to do that. After all, she'd never meet her again after this drama.

"I interrupted you, didn't I? Sorry."

Joomin faintly smiled before turning around. Do you have the time to care about others? - Okseon barely managed to swallow these words back down. Joomin was a stifling woman. She couldn't be any more idiotic.

"Actors, please come out. We're starting the shoot."

A scene where people come out of the west entrance while talking, and a scene where they were leaving the school. These two were the last scenes for the day. Although she didn't get good treatment because she was a supporting actress right now, she would soon become a lead actress. Okseon had the confidence. She was putting in more effort than anyone else, so the important people should soon recognize her efforts and then reach out to her. She just had to polish the sail in preparation for the wind. Of course, there was something she had to solve in order to do that.

Dongho and Joomin left first. After seeing Maru leaving a step behind them, she walked next to him.

"You'll regret it."

"If there's an award of the year for being tenacious, I think you'll win it," Maru said as he raised his thumb.

An immature kid who can't even take care of himself. She had thought that he was someone who had the same ideals as her once, but when she pried into him, he turned out to be all talk just like Seong Dongho, who only acted cool. Well, pathetic people really got along well with each other. Out of goodwill, she told him what the future held for him, but Maru just smiled it off. It was really pitiful. Was it that hard to see the impending future with a dumb mind? He uttered confident words like Seong Dongho, trying to look cool, but he really was pitiful. Why can't he understand even after she went through the effort to explain in detail? Even dogs could understand human speech with enough training, yet here, a human could not understand human tongue.

'I do need to do something about Kang Giwoo though.'

There was something Okseon did every day. It was to read all the news articles regarding the entertainment industry regardless of the outlet. She did so in order to keep up with the latest trends in the industry.

'We were too sidelined.'

The interest of the media was wholly focused on Kang Giwoo, and Yeseul was getting popular due to the reflected benefit. It couldn't be helped that the main characters became more popular since they were the main characters, but due to the characteristics of youth dramas, the supporting characters could also become popular as long as they had a firm character. This was proven in previous youth dramas. Yoo Joonsung, Lee Minha, Ha Jimin. They were all popular actors right now who were also supporting characters in youth dramas when they were younger. There were many people who gained popularity beyond the main characters'.

If Kang Giwoo was the same as when he just started New Semester, he wouldn't be as popular as he is now. As his previous work was a historical drama, his acting was a bit unnatural, and Okseon was sure that Giwoo would never see the light with that kind of acting. However, as the episodes progressed, Giwoo's acting skills improved rapidly. To be precise, he gained stability by becoming similar to Maru. Until two months ago, his character in the drama was unable to find its unique traits due to imitating Lee Chan all the time, but now he had his unique character as well.

If left alone, Giwoo would continue imitating Maru's acting, polishing it and improving it even further. If Giwoo was simply good at imitating, she wouldn't be worried like this. That boy had the talent to copy others and make it his own.

Of course, as Maru mentioned, all forms of learning started from imitating, but this wasn't the time to be talking about such idealism. Okseon was worried sick because she couldn't find her name anywhere in the news articles. Even though she had the character of Seri, who was the main opposition of the female lead, she didn't get a single mention, which made her feel wronged.

If Giwoo kept that vague position, Yeseul wouldn't have received the spotlight either. Yeseul's acting was terrible. When shooting the previous version of episode 13, she made everyone waste hours because she couldn't act like a girl whose heart was racing with first love. Okseon had watched the two of them hugging each other in front of the school gates, where the staff were absent. Giwoo hugged the awkward-acting Yeseul several times, and the moment she saw that she admitted that Giwoo knew the method to improve unlike everyone else here. Yeseul managed to finish the scene safely after that. That day, Yeseul received applause. It was all thanks to Giwoo's lead.

If left alone, Giwoo would continue to shine. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow, and as a supporting character, she would only have a meaningless line on her career record that stated 'appeared in New Semester'.

If Giwoo wasn't here, the spotlight that was currently aimed at Yeseul would be hers. Okseon hated that correlation. Yeseul was receiving so much attention despite her lacking skills just because of the fact that Kang Giwoo was next to her.

'I need to make Kang Giwoo falter.'

She read from a book that minor details were very important. If she wasn't able to outdo herself in the first drama she appeared in as a supporting character, she might become one of those one-shot entertainers who appeared and disappeared in batches every year. Even at this hour, there were many other child actors who were preparing themselves. In order to survive this silent war, she had to not let her guard down and do everything within her power.

"It would be much easier if that idiot moved according to my will."

Giwoo was mindful of his public reputation. As long as Maru told him not to imitate him, Giwoo would definitely stiffen up. For the maximum effect, it would be for the best if Maru declared that in front of everyone, but it was frustrating since Maru didn't look like he had any intentions of telling him at all.

That didn't mean that she should tell Giwoo herself. She would be laughed at if someone other than the person in question told him that. She had to be cautious. She had to look for a way to blow her nose without using her own hands.

'Should I write a memo then?'

No, based on Giwoo's personality, he would definitely ask Maru. If that happened, it would be revealed that she was the one who did it. Okseon wanted to prevent an unnecessary relationship of conflict with Giwoo. Giwoo was someone who would forge ahead. It would be foolish for her to be at odds with someone who was gaining popularity.

Okseon had already thought of a way to get close to Giwoo. It had been four months since she kept her distance. This awkward distance definitely had the potential to turn into romantic feelings. Once she talked to him and talked about what she hadn't revealed to anyone else, Giwoo would definitely have romantic feelings. She read about this in a psychology book, so it couldn't be wrong.

Okseon neatened her uniform before going to the platform. The background actors wearing school uniforms were waiting nearby. This was the scene where they went home after self-study sessions after school.

"Why do you always go around by yourself? It's about time you became used to us now, don't you think?"

Okseon looked at Yeseul, who spoke to her with a slightly mocking smile on her face. She didn't smile like that in front of the others. How childish was that? It was pitiful to even see her trying to cause conflict between factions.

Okseon was about to say something to her before deciding not to, as usual. She felt angry but thought that she should endure. As the mature one, she thought that she couldn't give in to a taunt like that. She made a calm smile before looking at Yeseul.

"You're an idiot aren't you? Why do you choose to be alone? You're so strange."

At that moment, she felt a rush of anger. This girl couldn't even tell who was lacking. She breathed deeply to calm down her anger. She had the urge to shout because of the frustration.

After looking at Yeseul smile like an idiot as she walked over to Giwoo, the rehearsal began. As there were no lines in this scene, the shoot didn't take long.

She finished a cut where she glared at Yeseul leaving the corridor with Giwoo in just one go. Hearing producer Park Hoon's okay sign, Okseon made a confident smile. Her acting was flawless after all.

As she watched the equipment being moved over to the school gates, she saw Suyeon, who had untied her hair after her shoots had ended, walk to the back of the school. Okseon joyfully approached her quickly.

"Senior, did you finish your scenes?"

"Oh, Okseon. I just finished mine. Also, stop with the senior. I told you to call me unni when we are alone."

"Ah, yes. Unni."

"How about you? You done?"

“I still have some left.”

“Okseon’s working hard, I see.”

Suyeon pinched her cheeks before letting go. Skin contact was a sign of intimacy. Okseon smiled to the point that her teeth showed a bit. Suyeon was her role model. She had climbed her way up from being a supporting character, and her acting skills were acknowledged. She even played main characters from time to time. Although she was not at the level of a top star yet, Okseon was impressed just by the fact that she had climbed her way up steadily while building up her foundation. A smart actress. She had to act like Suyeon if she didn’t want to become a star that twinkles once, never to be seen again.

“Uhm, unni....”

This was a pleasant time where she got to confirm her bond with Suyeon. Just as Okseon was about to say some words in excitement, Suyeon suddenly raised her hand before speaking,

“Hey, Han Maru. Geunsoo-oppa wants to meet us after this.”

“U-unni?”

“Sorry, Okseon. I’ll be right back after talking with him for a little.”

After patting her shoulder to wait, Suyeon walked over to Han Maru. Okseon bit her lips. It was because she saw Maru look at her before pointing at her. It was as though he was telling Suyeon to continue her business with her. A sense of shame and anger welled up in her body.

‘Why does she smile like that so pleasantly? Just why?’

This was the first time she saw Suyeon smile at ease like that. The two looked like old friends. Just then, Okseon saw Suyeon try to pinch Maru’s cheeks. Maru avoided her hands with a sour face. The two looked to be at ease as though this happened all the time.

“Okseon, got something to say?”

Suyeon asked her that after coming back. Okseon slightly frowned. Did she make the wrong judgement about her? This unni played around with an idiot like that. She thought that Suyeon was a reasonable person who only talked to people that benefited her.

“Unni, are you looking after him because you two belong to the same agency?”

Maybe she was doing that out of kindness.

However, the reply she got disappointed her a lot.

“This isn’t looking after him. I’m refraining because he’s telling me to pretend that we don’t know each other.”

Okseon looked at Suyeon with her lips firmly sealed.

It seemed that this woman didn’t have a good eye for people.