

Once Again 591

Chapter 591

"Sheesh, I really can't stop you, can I?" She asked as she looked at Maru standing in front of the door.

This man, who was smiling as he lifted the plastic bag he was holding slightly, was way too whimsical. The problem was that she didn't dislike that daring part of him. Thanks to him, she had to use a hair straightener to straighten out her messy hair and even get clothed properly. She sighed, thinking that she was doing so much at 9 p.m. in the evening, but she also found herself slightly despicable for smiling as she looked at herself in the mirror.

"I haven't seen that t-shirt before."

"I bought it a while ago. Come on in. It's a bit like a war zone though."

She took the plastic bag from Maru and turned around. Maru came in and whistled when he looked at the scenery in the living room.

"Looks like they got drunk pretty bad."

"Not really."

"Where are the two who caused this mess?"

She put the plastic bag on the table and slightly opened the door to the bedroom. She saw her mother and Hanmi lying on the bed. They were sleeping while still hugging each other. She closed the door quietly so that it didn't make any noise before turning around to Maru again.

"They're asleep."

"Really? Then tell them I was here when they wake up."

She nodded before taking out the things that Maru bought. Dry snacks, some fruits, and hangover drinks. She put away the drinks and the snacks and then put the fruits on a tray before taking them to the living room.

"Eat some before you go."

"Give me the knife. I'll peel it."

"I'm going to do it. If you're so bored, you can clean this place up a little."

"Is this how you treat your guests?"

"I did tell you not to come, you know?"

"Fine, it's my fault for barging in."

While Maru cleaned the living room, she peeled the fruits and put them on a dish. As she was peeling an apple, she suddenly found this situation pretty funny. This guy came to her house late at night and was cleaning, while she herself was peeling some fruits for him. There were also two people sleeping in the bedroom. It all felt like some weird messed up orchestra.

“Want some?” Maru asked as he picked up a can of beer after finishing cleaning.

She shook her head when Hanmi offered her a drink, but she was quite tempted when Maru was the one offering her a drink instead.

“Isn’t this situation quite funny?”

“It’s good if it’s funny. It’s better than being sad. You’re going to drink, right?”

“Just one glass.”

“Where did you put the dried squid I brought?”

“Drink with some fruits. Or with this.”

She pushed the almond chocolates to him. She thought that he wouldn’t buy them since he said that he hadn’t paid for them yet when she called him, but they were in the bag regardless.

“These are nuts, too, I guess.”

Tss, along with a refreshing sound, the can of beer opened. Maru, who tilted the glass about halfway down to pour the beer, smiled in satisfaction when he saw the beer filling up the glass with a suitable amount of foam.

“It always makes me feel good when the ratio is just right.”

“You look experienced.”

“Don’t take me for an alcoholic. I’m not even close to being one.”

“Lies.”

She got the chilly glass. Perhaps due to the warm house, moisture formed droplets outside the beer glass. She drank the beer with the foam. The first taste was a bit bitter, and the aftertaste was bitter as well. She really didn’t understand why people drank alcohol.

“Serious talk is always the way to go when drinking.”

Maru held up his glass. She grinned and clanged the glass against his. Along with a clanging sound, the droplets on the outer surface of the glass fell off.

“Today, I’m a persistent man. Thus, I’m going to act quite stubborn.”

“I thought you were here for the VCR.”

“Promises are meant to be broken.”

“Wow, what a bad guy.”

She looked downwards. Maru was probably waiting for a continuation of the conversation they had on the phone. She felt complex right now. Half of her wanted to spit everything out, while the other half wanted to hold everything in. She found out from Maru that relying on someone wasn’t something wrong. People relied on others when they were in a difficult situation. She also realized the joy of relying on others thanks to Maru.

"I got an offer," she said as she looked at the beer glass.

"An offer?"

"I mean an agency."

"Really? That's good."

"But I don't know, I mean, whether this is a good thing or not."

She fiddled with a slice of apple with her fork.

"Looks like it's related to the acting problem you said before," Maru said.

She didn't say anything. She needed some time to think. She turned on the TV with a remote. Currently, a drama was airing. She fixed her eyes on the female lead acting inside the box TV.

"Hanmi-ahjumma, I mean, the writer told me that she can establish a bridge between me and an agency. She knows an agency that's looking for a new actor or an actress to nurture and said that I would have an easier time if I work with them. The agency has Han Mijeong, Yoo Jihoon, and Park Jungho, as their main lineup."

"Sounds like a good place."

Like what Maru said, the agency was more than suitable for her to choose as her first agency. The actors there also had solid careers. She felt good since she might get to be in the same agency as actors and actresses that she looked up to, but then an unavoidable problem found its way to her.

"Will my acting really be good enough? In the first place, is it even right for me to join an agency like this?"

"So acting aside, you're more concerned about using your connections to join an agency, huh?"

She slowly nodded. She wanted to be evaluated based on her skill. That part of her was definitely there. However, it was also likely that she would not receive good gazes from the people around her if she joined an agency through Hanmi. What troubled her even more was that there might be some people who would lose their opportunity just because she took their spot through her connections. How terrible was that? If a trainee who had prepared for an audition for a long time saw her, who had managed to easily pass with her connections, the shame and apologetic feelings she would have would be unimaginable.

"Man, I have a really kind girlfriend."

"This is not about being kind. It's natural."

"You're thinking about other people who might fail to make it because of you, right?"

"Is it on my face?"

"It was easy enough to read."

"I wish I could do that. I really have too many worries. What you said aside, I'm more worried if it's really okay for me to join an agency with my lacking skills."

She heard that her acting lacked personality. She did well, but there was nothing more than that. She felt this clearly when she shot the sitcom. Actors who received the love of the masses possessed a different aura from the ordinary folk. It was hard to explain in words, but when she looked at such people standing in front of the camera, it was pretty easy to see that they were people who were standing on a completely different level.

And that applied to Maru as well. When she went to Woosung High and shot the film with him, she found out what kind of face Maru made during shoots. He showed incredible concentration and analyzed the script to extreme depths. He would look at her with a smile if she tried talking to him, but when they finished talking, he would give off an aura like a wild beast about to hunt, making him unapproachable. She had a hunch that Maru would definitely become a respectable actor. At the same time, she felt afraid. Would she ever be able to stand next to him as someone doing the same job?

Acting was the link that connected her to her father. The only memories of her childhood, Daehak-ro, had now become a stage where she had to make her dreams come true. I will become an actress - this resolution she had never wavered even once. However, the drama scene that she had experienced for herself was nothing like the small stage at her acting club, and her acting did not work there. She felt like she was just one of many people who finished their lives in the entertainment industry after showing their face once on TV.

“It will be great if everyone can become happy, but that’s an impossibility.”

Maru emptied the beer in one go.

“Also, there’s nothing more stupid than being worried about something that didn’t happen yet. Though, I find that part of you lovely as well.”

“But it’s a bad thing to use connections to join an agency, isn’t it?”

“Most of the time, yes. People usually don’t see them in a good light since most of them don’t have any skill and just ruin everything.”

“I really feel like I should take a proper audition.”

“Well, I think that you should accept that offer instead.”

“Even if I take an easy way in, I will get left behind in the end. That will be even more tragic.”

“You don’t have any confidence in your skill?”

“For now, I don’t. I’m sure you’re different though.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you’re good.”

“You see me in a good way.”

“I’m not seeing you in a good way. It’s just the truth.”

“Your acting is not lacking either.”

“Don’t lie.”

“Why are my words lies when yours aren’t?”

“Because you are not me. You don’t know everything about me.”

“So you can’t trust my judgement?”

“N-no, it’s not like that.”

“Then what are you so afraid of? You really were someone with a lot of worries before, but it wasn’t to the point that you would worry about something that didn’t even happen, right?”

“...Maybe it’s because the opportunity came to me all of a sudden. Moreover, it’s the opportunity that I’ve always wanted. I want to grab it, but I’m afraid because I might regret it later. I should improve my skill and challenge it by myself, as I will fail if I use someone else’s influence to succeed - that kind of thinking will definitely haunt me later.”

“You really are overly worried, huh.”

“That’s not a bad thing though.”

“It’s not. It definitely reduces the chances of failure. However, it doesn’t make sense to doubt the opportunity right in front of you and miss it. You must grab this. It might become the foundation for you to leap as an actress.”

“I don’t think my acting skills are on that level yet.”

“Then don’t believe in yourself.”

“How can I not believe in myself?”

Maru walked towards her on his knees. She stared at Maru’s face, which was right in front of her nose.

“Let me ask you one thing.”

“What?”

“Who do you think has a better eye for actors, you, or writer Lee Hanmi?”

She was momentarily at a loss on what to say. She realized what Maru wanted to say.

“I don’t know what kind of personality writer Lee Hanmi has, however, I believe that a person of her status won’t just recommend a random person to an agency. After all, her name value is at stake here. If you really think that she’s introducing you to an agency purely because you’re the daughter of a close friend of hers, then yes, it’d be better for you to give this opportunity up. But if it’s not like that, then grab onto it. Ignoring a shortcut and choosing a path filled with hardships is something only a monk does.”

“I don’t want to be disappointed. If I challenge something and fail, it would be me who would be in pain, but if I use connections....”

“Can I tell you something really ordinary? You just need to prove yourself. You should go in there and show everyone else that you have the skill.”

“I’m worried because I might not be able to.”

“You just have to make it happen like your life depends on it. There’s no one who pursues failure. If you have time to be worried about failure, then think about how you can do better instead. Your acting is definitely not lacking. No, you might even be cocky by thinking that you’re lacking. You showed up in a sitcom that airs during golden hours. You already have experience going on a TV program that countless people want to be on. If you are lacking, then you just have to improve yourself.”

His eyes were clear. Maybe this was too fundamental. If it was Maru, he would make it happen. The problem was with herself - can I really do it?

“I’m not a third-rate writer who uses anyone at random!”

She suddenly heard a loud shout behind her and saw that Maru had a big grin on his face. She turned around thinking ‘no way’. Hanmi was standing there, glaring at her.

“There you have it.”

She got played really well this time. Maru grinned and stood up.

“You must be writer Lee Hanmi, right? My name is Han Maru.”

“Ah, I see. Han Maru, I know you.”

“I really like the character Lee Chan that you created.”

“Of course you do. Who do you think made him? Rather than that, I’m really glad that this is the only drama I didn’t have any influence over the casting for the characters. If I did, I wouldn’t have picked you. I don’t like your eyes.”

“I do get that I look quite cold quite a lot.”

Hanmi burst out into laughter.

“Hey! I’ve taken a liking to you! Unni! Your son-in-law-to-be is here!”

Hanmi staggered her way back into the bedroom again.

She fell into a panic as she watched as all of this happened.

“Phew, is it time to meet mother-in-law now?”

Maru’s shameless face could be seen. She frowned and threw a cushion from the sofa at him.

Chapter 592

“How can friends be so different?”

“It’s because we’re different that we became friends. There’s nothing more boring than two similar people getting together, you know?”

"I am always surprised because that naive-looking Daemyung throws sharp questions at me from time to time, and that seems to be your influence, huh."

"I think you're wrong about that. He might look dense at first glance, but his thought process is thorough. He's a smart guy."

She looked at Maru and Hanmi alternately, as they talked to each other. 10 p.m. It was around the time when the lights on the tall buildings started turning off one by one, but the fire of conversation that was lit up in this space was burning brightly. Maru was on his third can of beer, while Hanmi was sipping on her first can.

"Hm? You finished that? You're drinking more right?"

"If you're giving me more, I will have to."

"You'll be in big trouble if you keep accepting drinks like this, you know?"

"If this much was enough to put me into trouble, I would've encountered it already."

"Are you trying to score points with me? You're a smooth talker."

"I've been trying to do that since the beginning."

"I didn't feel good since it felt like you were trying to use me, but well, I'll let you be since it was for her. Though, you still are despicable."

She quietly looked at Hanmi, who was patting her head. Hanmi smiled pleasantly when *she* met eyes with her.

"I told you before, right? I'm not thick-faced enough to introduce a half-assed actor to an agency. Well, yes, my work has been horrible recently since I've hit a block. I will admit that, however, I'm doing that under my own name. Even if it goes horribly wrong, it's me who ruins it, so I can endure that. Lending my own name to someone else is a different story. I will be much more meticulous when it comes to that. Recommending you to an agency simply out of pity or friendship or just because you're unni's daughter? Don't joke with me. I'm not that cheap. Well, I might write cheap writing, but the author definitely isn't!"

She still seemed slightly drunk. *She* poured a cup of cold water and gave it to Hanmi. Hanmi smiled.

"You're so gentle. Hey, can you be my daughter? I'll treat you nicely."

"My mom will probably say no."

Hanmi nodded and drank the water. Then, she sighed before semi-lying on the floor. *She* got a cushion from the sofa and pushed it beneath Hanmi's waist.

"How did a picky woman like unni give birth to a pretty daughter like you? It's such a mystery."

After giggling, Hanmi abruptly sat up.

"This isn't the time for this. Hey, Han Maru. I was about to give a touching speech to this girl. How dare you take that away from me?"

“I’m sorry. It looks like I was out of my place.”

“Yes, you were out of your place. This old woman was about to tell this girl that I am recommending her because I trust her, and then give her a touching hug, but you took that away from me.”

“Should I give you a hug now?”

She interrupted since Maru looked like he was in a pinch. Hanmi spread her arms wide immediately. She gave Hanmi a light hug.

“Pat my back, will you?”

“Yes, yes.”

“This ahjumma will never get married, right? There’s no man in this world who would like a mischievous woman like me, right?”

“Of course not. Mom was joking with you. I’m sure you’ll get married to a splendid man.”

“If I grow old without getting married, you have to play with me, okay?”

“I’ll be your conversation partner.”

“Thanks. I feel much better after your consolation.”

Stepping back, Hanmi looked for some water. This time, Maru gave her a cup.

“But hey, you’re not normal, coming to this place at this hour.”

“There was something I needed to borrow, and I wanted to see her. So, I came here.”

“How daring. That’s right, a man should be like that. Though, I don’t know what ‘like that’ is since I never got married.”

It seemed that she really felt sullen. Although she acted like she wasn’t interested in marriage when talking to her mother, maybe she wanted to get married after all? She looked at Hanmi for a while before turning around to look at Maru. This boy talked about marriage whenever he had the chance. She knew that he was joking, but sometimes it did sound like he was serious. Was he really thinking about marrying her? Despite the fact that they were still too young to talk about marriage, she felt strange whenever she heard him talk about it. She still dreamed about such a scenario from time to time even though she treated it as a joke. The house the two would live in, the scenery outside, their neighbors, and a new member of the family. They would quarrel with each other from time to time, but then make up and confirm their love towards each other again. Even though she had never experienced a married life before, she could imagine one in detail as though she had experienced it before. There were times when she was surprised at how much detail she could imagine. She would also feel rather absurd since that made her seem like she was looking forward to their marriage.

“Since you’re here, let’s hear your opinions as well.”

Hanmi, who jerked her head backwards to flip her hair, took a big gulp of cold water before speaking.

“Opinion about what?” Maru asked back.

She could predict what Hanmi was about to say next.

“About going to the past.”

Yes, that. She nodded. The discussion between her mother and Hanmi never reached a conclusion and just ended in a drinking fest, so Hanmi brought this topic up again when there was a new person to talk to.

She looked at Maru. She felt a bit curious as well as to what kind of an answer Maru would give.

“You’re still young, so let’s imagine that you grew up a little. You’re going to the past in that state.”

“Do I have to go?”

“Why, you don’t want to?”

“If I am living a satisfying life, I want to keep that going. Going to the past is definitely a tempting thing, but tempting opportunities like that are bound to have consequences.”

“You know your stuff. We were quarreling about that as well. Well, then. How about this? You have to go back. You have all the memories of when you were an adult. What are you going to do first when a fifty-year-old you returns to your current age?”

“Earn money of course. Then I’ll buy stocks for major companies like SC, DK, and YM. Otherwise, I’ll buy a bunch of new entries that will become big later. I’ll sell them when they become big and buy a building.”

“These days, kids have a frightening sense of economics. It’s all about money.”

“I heard a saying that goes: You can’t buy happiness with money, but it’s much more comfortable to cry in a Benz than on a bicycle.”

Maru shrugged. Hanmi seemed to like that answer as she faintly smiled.

“I’m sure it won’t be that easy though.”

“Why?”

“Going back to the past means that some supernatural power has intervened, right? For example, a transcendental being. Usually in movies, it’s the god who pities the protagonist and sends them back to the past, right? They tell them to right their life again. However, god fundamentally pursues equality. They have already given the protagonist a special right to return to the past, but giving knowledge that might shake the economy as a whole, albeit by little, is being a bit greedy, I think.”

“Sending you to the past but not allowing you to do things that will make you easy money? That’s funny. It’s not like people working in the financial world aren’t doing labor. We’re long past the age where sweating is the only form of labor. In an era where white-collar jobs earn plenty of money, is taking interest in the stock market and real estate and studying about them not considered labor? Above all, stock trading is the ultimate capitalism, isn’t it? Wouldn’t the god be biased for preventing that?”

“I feel that god can be biased. No, maybe it doesn’t matter that much. After all, it’s about getting another chance at life. It’s about getting a beginning at a life that was supposed to end, so I don’t think

anyone would be dissatisfied just because they can't use some financial tricks. They have the knowledge, so they should use it to do something else. The important thing is that you're still breathing after all."

She agreed with Maru's words. Money was important, yes. People could not live apart from economics after all. However, as Maru had just mentioned, living was more important. Having another chance at fulfilling what they couldn't do would make them feel endlessly thankful for just that.

"I like your answer. Good. We reached that point as well. The problem is this. It involves the person you like, say, this girl, since you like her now anyway."

Hanmi hung her arm around *her*. She ended up looking at Maru face-to-face, but she moved her gaze up to the ceiling, feeling embarrassed for some reason.

"Let's say that things went well and you got married to her in the future."

"That's how it will be."

Hanmi was at a loss for words momentarily.

"Hm, well, that's for you two to sort out. Anyway, you were living a happy married life, but then returned to the past. Are you going to like her again?"

"That's what I'm doing right now," Maru replied with a smile.

"Fine, Mr. Han Maru-from-the-future. That's all fine and good. However, the god we talked about just now is a petty person and gives you a trial."

"Like, slowly losing your memories, for example?"

"You're quick. How did you know that?"

"I'm actually from the future, so I know most of this stuff already."

"I'm sure you get called out for being crazy. Though, I like such people. Fine, like you said, you slowly lose your memories. In the future, you might have been deeply in love and couldn't live without this girl. Furthermore, now that you returned to the present, you still have your memories and still love her. But as time passes, your memories of her, your memories with her, slowly fade away. Now here's the problem. Will your love still continue to be? Or will she turn into just one of your acquaintances like everyone else?"

"Losing my memories will definitely change things. But that won't include my feelings of love towards her."

"How can you be so sure about that?"

"Because memories are like this."

Maru showed her his hands interlocked with each other.

"I think that an event doesn't exist independently. I think that events are intertwined with each other in countless ways. Losing memories does not equate to losing all the imagery, momentary feelings, and

impressions disappearing as well. Maybe, yes, some memorable events might disappear. Things like going out on a picnic, having a quarrel, or crying together. The events themselves might disappear, but other memories linked to those events will still remain behind. Even if it's a really small memory that's trivial at best, as long as they remain inside me, I will continue to like her."

Her face felt hot. Maru said words that made her feel embarrassed without batting an eyelid. If Hanmi wasn't holding her, she might have punched him on the chest already.

'But still, it doesn't feel bad.'

Even if memories disappear, I will keep loving you as long as there's still a speck of memories within me - those intentions entered her heart.

At that moment, Hanmi spoke again.

"But a god is an omnipotent being. That was the assumption after all. Without omnipotence, a god wouldn't be a god either."

"That's true."

"If god is omnipotent, it should be possible to snap all the connections between those memories and take only them out, right? You'll perfectly return to your past self. Right now, at this moment, you might like this girl as a girl, however, it is not as someone you promised your life to. It is now as a change-up to boring school life, and as a fresh experience. It might change into that. Why? Because if your memories of the future cleanly disappear, the fact that you loved her at all will disappear with them."

"That won't happen."

"Do you also believe that there's a storage media that goes beyond memories like the soul?"

"Even without such a thing, my feelings will not change."

"You're being illogical at this point, huh. That's no fun."

"Well, talking about impossibilities is no fun in the first place. Isn't going back to the past outdated in the first place?"

"Why? It sounds fun as long as you can get the balance right."

"Maybe."

"Come to a conclusion anyway. I'm on the side that your very being will change if all your memories of the future disappear. The woman sleeping over there says that there's something more powerful than the brain, with which information can be exchanged."

"If I have to take a side, I also believe that memories don't control everything. I believe that there's something more than just the physical body."

"I thought you were a realistic kid, but you're an occultist when it comes to that, huh."

"I'm well-rounded."

After speaking, Maru looked at her as though he was telling her to feel at ease. I won't forget about you - he seemed to be saying. At that moment, she felt uneasy. That was because Maru, who always looked to be at leisure, seemed like he was being chased by something.

"Even if memories disappear, people don't change. I believe so."

Maru said that as though he was making a resolution.

Chapter 593

-One, two, three - Hello, everyone! We are Redday. I'm Hana, the leader, and this is Jiyong, the main vocalist. Then this...

"Hey! Move your head out of the way. I can't see my Hana!"

"Hey, honestly speaking, Jiyong is much better than Hana."

"Shut up. Seul-i is the best. Man just look at her volume."

"Quit yapping and just watch."

It was lunch time. The boys gathered in front of the TV in the classroom and sang along to the idol music. They shouted the names of some members when there was a break with a perfect sense of rhythm.

"This place is chaotic too, huh."

Maru closed the book he was reading and turned around. Daemyung was standing there with some drinks in his hand.

"Are you guys watching that as well?"

"Yeah. Apparently, they're quite popular these days."

Maru had a glance at the screen. Unlike the girl idols he had seen until now, the girls on the screen had very powerful moves. Breakdancing, back tumbling - they were better than most boy bands out there.

"They do look different from the rest."

The boys in front of the screen suddenly crouched down. The girls' skirts were waving around on top of their thighs. Their inner trousers could be glimpsed at.

"Just a little more!"

"Camera, go down a little more!"

Perhaps this was proof that people gained not collective intelligence but collective stupidity. Maru shouted at the boys that wouldn't be able to see what they wanted before turning back around to Daemyung.

"Man, they're devoted."

"That's just how they are. I guess they must have startled you from time to time, huh?"

Maru could not understand what Daemyung was saying. At that moment, the others shouted the names of the idols in unison. Maru smiled faintly when he heard the names hitting his ears.

“So that was what was bothering me this whole time while I was reading.”

“Oh, take this. I met Aram on the first floor and she bought it for me.”

“What’s gotten into her?”

“Apparently, it’s natural for the club president to look after the aged members.”

“I guess aging has its merits then?”

“Thanks to her, it has gotten a lot easier for me. The others follow Aram well too. In fact, I think we’re doing even better than when I was the president.”

“Aram is the type to gain full control after all. Even the ones that were secretly defiant should have changed their attitudes now.”

“True.”

After taking a sip, Maru spoke,

“I met writer Lee Hanmi yesterday.”

“Really?”

He briefly explained what happened yesterday. Daemyung trembled when he heard that Hanmi asked him all sorts of questions while drunk.

“Once she starts, there’s just no end. Teacher Ahn Pilhyun also bombards me with questions when he drinks strong alcohol, but he doesn’t really expect an answer from me, right? But Miss Lee Hanmi wants an answer from me until the very end. If I give her a vague answer, she will nag at me for that too. If I think of a decent one, she will say it’s boring. I mean, I’m sure she’s a good person, but I get stomach pains whenever she asks me something.”

“So that’s why you didn’t go yesterday.”

“I-it’s not like I didn’t go. I had no choice because of practice.”

“Same thing. She was looking for you yesterday too. She said something about how she was disappointed since she has fun teasing you.”

“You didn’t tell her anything, right?”

“Who do you think I am? I told her that you like her very much. She’ll give you a call soon enough, so try your best to look good in front of her.”

“Looks like I might have to turn my phone off for a while....”

“It’s a good opportunity, isn’t it? Have her teach you.”

“The mental damage is too much. I want to train my mind for it before I go to her.”

Daemyung sighed. It seemed that he had a hard time handling Hanmi.

Maru also talked about how she might join an agency.

“That’s good. She’s coming today for the film shoot, right?”

“No, not today.”

“There’s no shoot?”

“There is, but she won’t be coming. She’s meeting the president of the agency today. Writer Lee Hanmi is incredibly quick when she sets her mind on it.”

“Reckless, you mean. But an agency huh. I hope it goes well.”

“Yeah. When I heard about it, it sounded like a really solid place. Since it’s her first workplace, I hope they can lead a new actress like her well.”

Maru turned around to look at the TV again. The new idol group was introducing themselves. Their stiff smiles and shaky voices were followed by their performance.

“I wonder how many idols can make a living off their work.”

“I heard that it’s only a handful of groups out of hundreds of thousands. I saw it on TV before.”

“We aren’t that different either. Joining an agency is merely the first step, and I guess only a handful will become able to start running by themselves, just like idols.”

“I’m sure it will go well for the both of you.”

“Thanks. Call us when we don’t get any jobs in the future. What good are friends for? That’s when friends come to save the day.”

“Hey, I don’t know if I will ever get to direct a film either. You two both appeared on TV, so it’s me who should be asking you instead. If I ever do become a director, I will have to ask you two to join me without any guarantees.”

“Park Daemyung, you’ve become quite shameless, eh?”

“Who do you think I’ve been learning from?”

Daemyung looked at the clock before saying that he would leave. Maru waved at him before turning around to look at the TV again. The artists who just finished their performance took a bow before leaving the stage. Despite the fact that the stage was open to the public, no one applauded. When the idol group left the stage amidst silence and the camera switched to the show host, the TV turned off.

“HR is coming.”

The one with the remote control shouted. Maru looked at the screen which had turned black, for quite a while, before picking up his book. Would I be able to leave amidst applause? - he suddenly had that thought.

* * *

She drank a sip from the teacup in front of her. She saw people walking around busily through the whole-glass wall that had a hint of blue. Some of them were people she recognized. Though, they wouldn't know her.

'It's the actor Lee Seokcheon.'

She met eyes with Lee Seokcheon who was walking on the other side of the glass wall. He faintly smiled at her and waved. She quickly took a bow. She felt quite weird, having a famous actor like him greet her first. She had seen numerous professional actors in shoots until just a while ago, but this felt different. She felt rather excited when she thought that she might be working in the same agency as such people.

"Did you wait a long time?"

The door opened before a woman came in. She was wearing a dark brown office suit and a fedora. She blankly stared at the woman for a brief moment after seeing that the woman looked very stylish.

"Why? Is it strange?"

"No, it really suits you."

"That's a compliment that doesn't feel too rushed. I like that."

The woman took off her fedora and sat down on the president's seat. Her eyes landed on the glossy black nameplate. Yoo Ahyoung. She was the president of the entertainment agency 'Hwan'.

"Not many people get a recommendation from writer Lee Hanmi."

Ahyoung faintly smiled. She made an uncomfortable smile back. There were thorns in the president's words.

"I really like writer Lee Hanmi, because she's an interesting person. She has skills too. If she ever wants me to recommend to her a person for a character she wants to use in her work, I am willing to give her the best actors I have. However, this matter is completely unrelated to my friendship with her. This is about choosing someone who would be working with me after all. So, even if you end up not being able to work with us, I hope you don't resent writer Lee. A recommendation is, after all, just a recommendation, right?"

She nodded. In fact, it would make her much more comfortable if she was given a strict examination. If she was told to join without a second thought just because of the recommendation, she might have thought a second time about this contract instead.

"Good then, shall I have a look? I'm not sure if you know this, but our company really gives a lot of support for new actors. Do you know Ahn Yeseul?"

"Sorry. I don't."

"That's disappointing. Oh, I don't mean that I'm disappointed with you. I'm disappointed in myself. It's me who failed to raise the name value of my own actress. Do you know about 'New Semester' then? She's the heroine there."

"Oh! Ahn Yeseul from New Semester? I know her."

“You do? That’s good. I almost got dejected. I was about to boast about my company, but it’s no good if the start isn’t good.”

“Is she in this company as well?”

“Yeah. She’s the same age as you, 3rd year of high school. Also, ‘supporting’ you naturally doesn’t mean I’ll use underhanded means to get you into something. I don’t have such tendencies. By support, I mean things like auditions. In this industry, even opportunities for auditions are given differently to different people. Think of yourself as a producer of a movie. Would you notify a third-rate agency that there’s an audition?”

“I think I will,” *she* replied honestly.

“Hm, why?”

“Because just because the agency is third-rate doesn’t mean that the people there are third-rate too.”

Ahyoung clapped.

“You’re right. That’s true. A dragon might be born from a small stream. But you know? Dragons usually arise from the cleanest waters. Yes, a dragon might live in muddy waters. There are people like that from time to time. There are people who stay in a place that’s not on their level, but stay there because of a contract gone wrong, or because they don’t know what they’re capable of. But that’s also a form of skill. Do you know why the top businesses in this country take importance in the college their applicants are from? Because the ones from those colleges are capable? Maybe, but the main reason is different. It’s efficiency and connections.”

Ahyoung stood up.

“This field is not that different. A good agency doesn’t necessarily have good actors. There might be some half-assed people who have a high name value but no skill. But on average, there are better people in better agencies. It’s natural. The fact that an agency is popular means that they manage their business well with decent actors. That’s why when the producers create a good scenario, they either directly give a copy to an A-grade actor or distribute them to agencies that are classified as A-grade. Of course, the majority goes to the former. There are producers who do all sorts of things to sneak a script into the hands of top actors. After those scripts make rounds but do not fill up the cast, they will get distributed to companies like us. That’s when the first round of auditions happens. Hey, you’ve seen a lot of what’s called ‘open auditions’ right?”

“Yes. I saw a lot of leaflets looking for actors.”

“Have you ever seen one that was looking for lead or supporting actors?”

She shook her head. *She* had never seen one before.

“Very rarely, film producers who are reckless might pick supporting actors through such auditions. However, even for such films, the lead characters are decided with an internal audition. An open audition is the same as an audition picking dregs. Anyways, if the producers hand out their scripts to every single agency, they’ll get calls from everywhere, right? Going through every one of them will take

a lot of time, and precisely because of that inefficiency, A-grade films are usually given to A-grade agencies. B-grade to B-grade, C-grade to C-grade. Now then, what grade do you think we are?"

"...A-grade?"

"A plus-grade I would say. We're pretty well-known. Well then, through that efficiency, we got a script and managed to successfully shoot that film. What does that create?"

"New connections."

"Right, connections. Backers, influence, or whatever you want to call it. You've heard of the term 'director brigade', right? In this field, there are teams where actors or directors have a team they frequently work with. This means that there are outsourcing teams for lighting, arts, costumes, music, and sound effects who always work with some director. And companies like us stand in between them. Movies aren't shot by just one person, right?"

"Yes."

"The places left after the lead and supporting characters - where do these teams find people to fill up those roles? It naturally is likely that the agency the director feels comfortable working with will get those roles. The lead and supporting roles might differ according to the director's preferences, but below that level, most of them are at a similar level, so most of the time, they just make do with just one agency. Lee Hoseok, Choi Joonggeun, Park Joongjin, Yang Woonjoong. Park Changyung. Baek Joonyeol. Don't you find it quite tempting to get an opportunity to work with such people even as a minor actor?"

They were famous directors with famous works under their names. She felt her lips go dry but still nodded.

"You have a basic understanding of why actors seek good agencies, and why agencies seek good actors, right?"

"I do."

"Well, then. What I'm about to do now is similar. First up, I will show you the reason you have to join us. After that, you have to be the one to show me what level you are on as an actress. Stand up for now. Let's take a tour around the company. I'll be the one guiding you because writer Lee brought you to me."

Think of it as an honor - Ahyoung added with a smile.

Chapter 594

"At heart, we aren't a company that focuses on actors. If we only had actors, we wouldn't need a building this big in the first place."

She followed Ahyoung down to the lobby on the first floor. Although *she* had walked past this place when she was heading to the president's office on the 4th floor, she didn't take a closer look because of her nervousness.

"The lobby is the face of a company. It's a place where artists play around, so you know, it'd be somewhat iffy if it looks boring, right?"

The people walking past the lobby greeted Ahyoung. Among them, one even approached her and gave her a hi-five. *She* was slightly impressed by the fact that the atmosphere wasn't overbearing here. Some people that she encountered while visiting shooting locations were filled with authoritative pride, but none of that could be seen here. The employees didn't have any difficulties greeting the president. *She* was given a fresh shock.

"Our building has separate facilities from the 1st floor to the 5th floor. The first floor is, as you can see, a space for guests. The restaurant is also on this floor. We have great food, you know? Let's go eat together later."

"Yes."

"The 2nd floor is filled with practice rooms. There are large ones and small ones. The 3rd floor has musical equipment, and it's where most of the mixing and recording happens at our company. Though, the ones with their personal studios use their own. People who can't afford them come here to do it. The 4th floor is the general office. It's quiet and cozy. It might sound strange coming from me, but our company has really good welfare you know? If you feel like it'll be hard to succeed as an actress, then come back as an office worker. I'll accept you at that time. Oh, the 5th floor is the terrace. It's a place to rest. Honestly speaking, most of the building is set aside for musicians. The actors usually come to the 4th floor whenever they have business here, or hold small parties on the roof. Most of the actors and actresses usually stay at home. After all, you know how hard their work is, despite how fancy they look. That's why most of them rest at home or carry themselves out of the country. Wait, is that expression usually with bad connotations?"

She looked at Ahyoung in a daze. Her pronunciation was perfect throughout the whole time. All of her lines were catchy and her gestures were eye-catching.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Your pronunciation is really good."

"Are you flattering me?"

"No. I'm just telling you my honest opinion. I even want to learn from you."

"Really? That makes me feel good. I also aspired to be an actress once. You know what this is, right?"

Ahyoung took out a pen from her chest pocket and put it in her mouth. She jokingly said a few lines.

"Yes, I do that all the time."

"I did that to death too. Thanks to that, I got something out of it. An attractive voice is necessary for a businesswoman, you know?"

Ahyoung put the pen back into her pocket.

"But unfortunately, I don't seem to have any talent in acting, so I quit after a few years of being nameless. I hope you don't become like me. I mean, if you're going to do it, being a star is better than being dirt poor, isn't it? A shining star."

Ahyoung raised her hands above her head and spun around her wrist with a smile. *She* subconsciously imitated her. It was as though *she* was infected by Ahyoung's cheerfulness.

After that, *she* took a tour throughout the building with Ahyoung. Just as she had said, the majority of the facilities here were tailored towards musicians and singers. Sometimes, people that looked like singers greeted Ahyoung. There were some that *she* felt like *she* had seen somewhere before.

After the tour, she was brought to the 5th floor terrace as the last course. There was a field of grass on top of the building. It was quite refreshing to see greenery in the forest of buildings.

"I told you about how our agency is A plus-grade, right?"

"Yes."

"Unfortunately, that is only when we consider actors. If we include actors and singers alike, I guess we're B-grade? We don't have any power in the singer department. And here I thought I invested quite a lot too. Well then, sit down here for a moment."

She sat down on a colorful beach chair. She put her feet together on the ground and sat down in a proper manner, but when Ahyoung told her to lie down, she just gave up and lay down on her back. She saw the clear skies. The wind she couldn't feel until just now started blowing.

"When you rest, you gotta rest lying down. Feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does."

"This space is always open, so many of our workers come up here. Freedom is the motto of the company after all. If we try to roll a stiff rock, we'll only get stiff ideas, right? We can't have that when we're supposed to be working with entertainment."

She thought about the things she saw after coming here. The neat-looking interior, the self-proclaimed but still good-sounding welfare, a recording space that was filled with equipment she had never seen before, as well as the overwhelmingly large practice room. However, what she liked the most was the smile from the employee who gave Ahyoung a hi-five. She might have just seen the good side of things, but she really liked the vibes that this company gave off. It flashed in her mind that she wanted to work here.

"It might be impossible, but my dream is to create a company where I can quit working with a smile."

"You sound incredible, president. Also, I feel like you've achieved your dream to a certain extent."

"I'm still far from it. If I want people to quit the job with smiles on their faces, the severance pay should be more. If I want to do that, I have to dig deeper into the pockets of the investors. And to do that, we must become an A-grade agency in both aspects. We have really good actors. I wish that I could do something about the singers, but I can't do anything about that. In that aspect, Yellow Star acted really quickly. You know what Yellow Star is, right?"

"Yes, I do. One of the three major agencies."

"If we went against them with actors alone, we won't lose that easily. However, once you count the singers, I'd have a hard time showing them my business card. Honestly speaking, I didn't know that idols

would become so big. I thought that traditional singers would never step down from the music market. But what do you know? Who would've thought that those brats could have so much power? NL Company, Jewel - They all have two to three idol teams that represent their companies, but we don't have that. We can't bring in existing groups either since their ties with their current companies are too sturdy. I wish someone like that fell right in front of my eyes. On that note, do you want to try being an idol?"

"I want to become an actress."

"It might be better for you to raise your popularity as an idol and switch to acting later. I heard that you appeared in a sitcom before, right? Your face is known already, so it should be easier for you to enter the market. You'll be an actress as your main image and have being an idol as your sub-image. It will be a fresh change of things."

Ahyoung stood up and started dancing lightly. It looked like some kind of idol dance, and her movements were very snappy as though she had been practicing for a long time.

"Pretty good, aren't I?"

"You are. Did you practice?"

"I do it in secret when everyone else is practicing. Rather than that, what do you think? I was planning on releasing a girl idol group, and honestly speaking, you don't look that bad. You might be able to stand in the center if you change your character to be more daring."

Ahyoung came closer to *her*. She ruffled her hair and nodded.

"Looks like a short haircut should suit you too."

"Uhm, president."

"What?"

"I have no intentions of becoming an idol. I want to start as an actress and end as one."

"Is it because you don't want the idol tag on you for life?"

"No, it's not like that. I know how hard idols have their lives, and how hard they practice. There's one around me."

"An idol? Who?"

"A member of Blue. Though, they disbanded."

"Blue, huh. They were pretty good. It was good to see them because they all had unique characters. You know someone from that team?"

"She went to the same school as me. Though, she has graduated now."

"You're from Myunghwa High, right? Let's see Myunghwa High, that means... Oh! Lee Chaerim, am I right?"

"You're quite knowledgeable."

"I have basic info on all the people that became big at least once. I should try to buy their goodwill whenever I meet them after all. I'm the president for a reason."

Ahyoung sat down at the edge of the beach chair.

"Since we're at it, let's talk about her. She started off as an idol, but she's growing as an actress too. Before, idols received a lot of hate for shooting movies with their popularity alone instead of with their skill, but how is it now? We're in an era where idols aren't sinning by acting. Of course, people around them might not look at them in a good light. Some foreign fish are trying to play in their own waters after all, so the lofty ones don't like that. Do you know why they don't like it? It's because those idol actors do better than them. They're snatching away the food from all the traditional bigshots. Now, they can't really blame the popularity of idols, since their acting skills are improving really fast. Once, the realm of actors was really solid and impenetrable. Actors who do not have experience in theater troupes and did not work in Daehak-ro were practically unable to gain the title of 'actor', especially in Chungmuro. But it's not like that anymore. It's showing signs of reversal. People are saying that the quickest route to becoming an actor is to become an idol first."

She listened to Ahyoung until the end. She really had an urge to interrupt mid-way, but she couldn't do so when she thought about writer Lee Hanmi who introduced her to this place.

"Wow, speak of the devil," Ahyoung said as she looked at the entrance to the 5th floor.

She also turned her head around. A woman wearing slim-fit white pants, a semi-transparent sky-blue blouse, and a necklace with black beads on it came in, carrying a clutch bag.

"Unni, wait a bit. I'm in an interview right now."

"Well, I'll just sit here for the time being then. Continue with whatever you were doing. I'm here to get some sun."

The woman put on the glasses she put in her pocket and smoothly took a beach chair for herself before lying down. Ahyoung laughed when she saw that woman.

"Unni, can you come to places like this when you have your own company to deal with?"

"It's between you and me. Go on, continue with your interview. Hear out my frustrations after that."

"Are the kids bothering you again?"

"Don't even start. Those TTO brats, guh, they were cute when they followed me like puppies. Anyways, she has a good face. Do you want to come to my company if you get rejected here? My company's much better than this place, you know?"

The woman lying down faintly smiled. She stared at the woman for a while before turning around to look at Ahyoung. She needed an explanation of who this woman was.

"She's the president of NL Company, which has been gaining rapid popularity as of late. Her hobby is to come to a competing company and cause havoc on their rooftop. Geez, and you are so calm when you go over to JA."

NL Company. She widened her eyes and looked at the woman lying down in front of her. *She* had a hunch when she heard the words ‘those TTO brats’, but *she* didn’t think that she was the president of their agency. Park Narim - even she, who had little knowledge about management agencies, knew her name. She was just that famous. She was the lady who was at the top of one of the three major agencies in the country and appeared frequently as a model in women’s magazines. She also saw her name in the chart of ‘50 most influential people in Korea’.

“Ignore the rude lady. Let’s finish what we were talking about before.”

“You’re talking about being an idol, right?”

“Yes. It’s not a bad idea for you. It’ll be quite hard for you if you want to sign a contract with me as an actress. I told you right? We’re an A plus grade when it comes to actors. However, if you wish to join the company as an idol I’m willing to write a contract right now.”

“But you have never heard me singing before.”

“The main vocalist is the only one that needs to sing well. Plus, once a singing instructor teaches you, you’ll be able to sing the basic harmony without trouble. As for the album, machines will do most of the work, so don’t worry about it. What era do you think this is? There’s no one who relies solely on their vocal cords to do the recording. Even if you read it like a book, we’ll get decent results as long as you get the pitch about right and we touch up the rest.”

“I want to join as an actress.”

“Hm.”

Ahyoung crossed her arms and sat down.

“Honestly speaking, I think it will be hard for you.”

“How can you be so sure without watching me act?”

“Acting, huh. Yeah, that’s important. But the media these days isn’t all about acting.”

“Then what is it about?”

“It’s about image, and image consumption. If you want to get treated well based on your acting skill alone, you have to reach the level of those that you think are ‘famous actors’. That’s what it means to live off your acting. However, living off your image is a different story. Even if your acting is terrible, you’ll still sell if you look cute and pretty. If you gain a fandom, then you’ll be able to go on TV even if you lack acting skills. When you do that, you’ll gain skill. In that sense, you look a little lackluster. I’m not saying that you aren’t pretty. It’s just that you’re ‘just’ pretty which isn’t anything special.”

“I... want to become an actress. I want to continue acting.”

“Why do you want to walk down the hard path? I’ll let you act all you want. Just allocate some of that time to learn singing. You can act all you want in the remaining time. Support? I’ll give you everything you want. I can tell from your figure. I’m sure you’re strictly controlling your diet and I’m sure you’re doing gymnastics or dancing. I can tell from your thighs and calves alone. You aren’t simply skinny. With a figure like that, you’ll be able to learn to dance in no time. Isn’t that good?”

She looked at Ahyoung's eyes. Ahyoung seemed to be serious here. Her hands tensed. She wanted to shout and stand up. At that moment, Maru's face appeared in her mind. She calmed down her breathing and started talking.

"Do I not have an opportunity as an actress then?"

"Hm, probably?"

"Then I shall take my leave."

"Really? You're going just like that? Don't you feel pity about the recommendation? Do you know how many people knock on our doors to just talk to me?"

"I can guess. This place is a really good company. You're a splendid person as well, president. I really wanted to act in a place like this, but it won't do for me if it's not acting. I'm not saying that becoming an idol is a bad thing. It's just, I don't want to awkwardly do both of them. Actually, I'm quite lacking, and you might be correct about me. I know that I'm lacking. I'm really thankful for your offer. But I want to continue acting. If I can't do that, there's no reason for me to stay here."

"Writer Lee will be disappointed."

"I will tell the writer about this myself. I'll tell her that I was stupid and rejected a really good proposal."

She bit her lower lip. She wanted to leave this place this instant, but when she thought about the nonchalant smile Maru would have on his face, she thought that it wasn't the right course of action. It was unknown when she would be able to meet such people again. She had to leave behind a good image of her. You've gotten better - she felt like she could hear Maru's words.

"You're quite young. In this world, you need to take shortcuts when you can. Only fools choose the hard path."

"Then I'll choose to be a fool."

"Why are you so hung up on acting like that? I told you I'll let you do it to your heart's content later."

"...It's because I feel like I will run away again later if I run away now. Also, there's a person I want to stand next to on stage. If I want to chase that person, I have to try my best starting now. I have no time to be singing."

"What a pity."

"Sorry."

"Don't be."

Ahyoung reached her hand out. *She* closed her eyes and opened them again before grabbing her hand. She didn't know how she should apologize to writer Lee Hanmi. Perhaps this was her last opportunity? Should she just take up that offer instead? - she had such thoughts even as she shook Ahyoung's hands. It was a charming offer after all.

"Are you really not going to regret it?"

"I will come back later once I feel confident in my skills as an actress. I will try my best to reach your standards."

"So you like this company?"

"Yes! I especially like this chair."

She forcefully joked around. She felt a lot better now. When she tried to let go of Ahyoung's hand after a light handshake, Ahyoung did not let go.

"President?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"Can you let go of my h...."

"No."

"What?"

"I have to start explaining to you about the contract, so I can't let go. I have a bad feeling that the bad woman over there is going to take you away from me," Ahyoung said as she looked at Park Narim next to her.

She stared at Ahyoung in a daze.

"Now, then. Let's get down to the real stuff, shall we?"

Ahyoung's smile became a bit thicker.

Chapter 595

"About work?"

Ahyoung replied with only a nod to her question.

"Unni, have you had lunch yet?"

"No. I was planning to eat here."

"Then shall we all go down?"

Ahyoung led the way. She thought about what was happening right now as she walked. They came down to the first floor and entered the corridor to their right. There was a glass door at the end of the corridor, and in front of the door was a hand-written menu. The Korean menu item was Ugeoji gukbap(Cabbage rice soup), and the Western menu item was pork cutlets. Ahyoung entered the cafeteria and took out her ID from her pocket.

"What are you going to eat?"

"Korean for me."

"How about you?"

"I'll take Korean as well."

“So I’m the only one getting pork cutlets huh. Don’t you like fried food better?”

Ahyoung bought the food tickets from the ticketing machine. She thought that Ahyoung would just show her face and ask for food since she was the president, but she just bought the tickets like everyone else did and lined up. The employees who were lining up in front of her talked to her from time to time. They didn’t look like they were uncomfortable with talking to her. They seemed to be having fun talking about trivial things.

“I can never get used to this place.”

She looked at Narim, who had whispered in her ears. This person was also the CEO of a company. Did NL Company have a strict hierarchy? She followed Ahyoung to an empty table with her food tray.

“I went to a lot of places to find the best food service company. I can proudly say that this food service company is top class when it comes to food.”

“Yeah, I have to admit,” Narim said.

She first smelled the savory smell from the gukbap before putting a bit of her rice in it.

“You put your rice in the soup?”

“Eh? Ah, yes.”

“You know your stuff. Hey, why don’t you come to our company instead? If you work with this girl, who keeps probing other people out like she did to you before, you’ll have a hard time, you know? I’m quite direct so there’s nothing like that. Yes is yes, and no is no. I tell people clearly.”

Narim said that with a smile. She couldn’t tell whether Narim was joking or not.

“She’s going to join me so don’t even think about it. Also, writer Lee recommended her to me.”

“Writer Lee? Writer Lee who?”

“Writer Lee Hanmi.”

Narim abruptly turned around when she heard the name Lee Hanmi. She flinched and leaned away from Narim. Narim’s eyes were a bit scary when she looked straight at *her*.

“I am Park Narim, the president of NL Company. I should have introduced myself properly before. Oh, would you like my business card?”

She took out a business card from her clutch bag. She looked at Ahyoung and Narim alternately while fidgeting nervously. She felt sorry towards Ahyoung if she receive it, but she felt like it wouldn’t be polite of her to not accept it. As she was hesitating, Ahyoung told her to take it.

“Take it and ask her to treat you to a meal later. Don’t go over to that company though. Big companies are big for a reason. Our company is much better than a stuck-up place like that.”

“Excuse me? What part of my company is stuck-up?”

“The fact that you’re the president says everything that needs to be said. Well then. Let’s get some food. I’m hungry.”

“There’s no company that’s better than mine, you know?”

“Oh, there’s one here.”

“I won’t accept it.”

“Should I ask my employees which one they like better?”

“After you reveal the base pay for both companies, sure.”

“That’s cheating. A company listed in the KOSDAQ shouldn’t do that.”

“Having a higher base pay isn’t a bad thing, though.”

“Fine, you pay a lot, okay? I admit that. But your terrace is on the 5th floor. How about that?”

“I guess I’ve lost when it comes to that. Should I expand the resting area in the company? Or should I just modify the rooftop to a grassland like you did?”

“It’s expensive, you know?”

“Oh, you want to talk about money in front of me?”

“Forget it. Goddamned money. Is money all you care about?”

“Who was the one who said things about being an A-grade agency or whatever?”

She lowered her head slightly and picked up her spoon. Bullets made of words were flying right above her head. She couldn’t follow what these two CEOs were talking about. If they were ordinary people, she might have thought that they were joking, but they looked very serious because of their titles.

“The food here is really good though. I really wanted this company to sign a contract with our company too.”

“The president doesn’t plan to expand though. I got the golden egg-laying goose. As long as we have this good food, the welfare at our company will be top class. Don’t you think so too?” Ahyoung asked around her.

The employees, who were eating, all said ‘yes’ in a cheerful manner while raising their spoons in the air. The president was cheerful, and the employees were cheerful as well. She looked at herself, who had also raised her spoon. Being next to Ahyoung, *she* subconsciously imitated how she acted. What was funny was that Narim was also shouting the same thing.

After that, they didn’t talk for a while. Everyone focused on eating. She also tied up her hair and focused on eating. Just like how Ahyoung praised it, the food here was really nice. After finishing their food, she drank some coffee that Ahyoung brought. It was from a small vending machine that worked by inserting coins, but the coin entrance was blocked off. *She* tried to go get coffee with her, but *she* had to wait awkwardly since Ahyoung told *her* to sit.

“You’re still a guest for now, so I have to treat you like one. You should take one too, unni.”

She accepted the paper cup. Ahyoung crossed her legs as *she* drank the coffee and looked like she was about to get to the serious stuff. *She* felt slightly nervous and straightened her posture.

"I'm going to ask some personal questions, but you don't have to answer them if you think they're too sensitive. People are sensitive to different things, right?"

"Yes."

"Good, then let me get to know you better. When did you first start acting?"

"I first started acting in my first year of middle school."

"When did you take interest in it then?"

"Since I was very young."

"What made you interested? TV? Or is a member of your family a celebrity and you wanted to be like them?"

"I watched a play with my father and it was just too fun. When I was young, that was the only impression I had, but when I entered middle school, I thought that I wanted to do more than that. That's when I started practicing by myself while watching my favorite dramas and movies."

"Did you ever go to an acting school?"

"No."

"Then you mostly practiced by yourself?"

"When I started off, yes. Eventually, I met a few friends that I got along with and practiced together with them."

"May I ask why you chose not to go to an acting school? You could have had an easier time learning the basics if you did."

"When I was in middle school. I had plenty of fun with my friends practicing by ourselves with the scripts we found. That's why I didn't think about applying for one."

"So you didn't want to do it that much, huh?"

"Maybe you can see it that way. I only thought that I should start learning properly when I got to high school. I joined the acting club after all. There were seniors who were fundamentally different from me with their movements and pronunciations. A lot of people at my school wanted to be celebrities or work in that area, so everyone had solid foundations. That's when I started getting taught by my seniors and the instructor."

"I don't mean to look down on your acting, but if you join my company, you'll have to start getting basic training first. You understand why, right?"

"Yes, in fact, I was going to ask for an instructor if you didn't."

"I like your attitude. Well, I guess that's enough questions."

Ahyoung finished her coffee in one go.

“From now on, I am going to talk one-sidedly. Even if you think I’m wrong about something, just hear me out.”

“Okay.”

“You said that you wanted to be an actress no matter what, right? You don’t want to take a detour by being an idol. For now, I’ll talk about the reality of things first. There are actually quite a lot of kids who join an agency and make their debuts in dramas and movies. There’s a trend where they get their first, or even second piece smoothly. The problem occurs after that. Let me be clear with you. Actors who don’t have recognition earn less money than part timers at cafés. There are loads of people like that in this field. If there’s a list of people who do part time jobs even though they are actors, I can probably read off that list for days without rest. And that’s only among the people I know.”

She nodded heavily. She was prepared for this when she came here. She knew how hard it was to receive the love of the masses.

“You have to remind yourself that you might be throwing the most important moments of your life away by doing this. A trainee’s practice is worthless by itself. The worth of their practice is only shown when they catch the eyes of the public and become a product. Before that happens, everything is just a waste of time. You might want to retort, however, I’m not talking about acting here. I’m strictly talking about business. As cruel as it might sound, actors who don’t become big are not actors. That’s because no one calls them that. This applies to you as well. There’s no guarantee that you will become successful. What I’m doing is just giving you support to increase the probability of that happening. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Yes, I do.”

“As for the details of the contract, I’m going to go through it with your parents. It’s an important step after all. But the most important thing is your willpower. I’ve seen numerous people who gave up after years of circling around the industry. Do you think they were bad at acting? No, at least I don’t think so. There were many that had much better skills than the child actors that show up on TV. However, they never became big. This is what I mean by image business. The public looks at a person’s image before they evaluate their acting skills. As long as an actor has an image that they’re good at acting, that actor’s acting skills will be evaluated higher than it actually is. It doesn’t sound like it makes any sense, does it? You might ask: shouldn’t you be good at acting to have an image that you’re good at acting? To tell you the answer, those two are completely separate things. Of course, if a person is stupefyingly good at acting and can enchant anyone that looks at them, then movie companies will treat them like a VIP. What I’m saying though, is that it usually isn’t like that. Most actors are around the same level. Then how do you make that image? The answer is character.”

Ahyoung sighed.

“If we officially sign a contract, I will definitely include this clause. Your first piece will be decided by the company. Before that, you are not allowed to do any work.”

“Nothing?”

"I'm not going to allow you to participate in auditions either. I'm going to reduce your exposure as much as possible. Right now, there's the unnecessary image you got from the sitcom. I'm going to remove that first."

"Was my acting bad in the sitcom?"

"It's not about being good or bad. The problem is that it sticks to you. Especially for people like you, who caused quite a stir by appearing intermittently."

"I caused a stir?"

"A miserly girl who's quite cute. There were rumors in the industry that quite a decent rookie has joined. But that's quite troublesome. If you really want to succeed as an actress, we need to reset that image."

"I don't specifically want pretty and feminine characters. It's fine if I'm funny. Isn't that what acting is about?"

Ahyoung slowly shook her head.

"I told you, didn't I? What I'm talking about is business. You still don't know how terrifying an 'image' is for an actress. Later, you can act like a madwoman all you want. But you can't do that now. I told you, didn't I? A daring character should suit you."

Ahyoung approached her and grabbed her hair. She then pulled out her hairband and lifted her hair to look at her nape.

"Cinderella heroines are past their time now. You need to ride a different line. I got a few ideas when I looked at you. If we get a piece that has a suitable character, that's when I will put you in front of the public. Image is consumable. You can't look cheap from the get go."

"If I sign the contract, will I really not be able to do anything until a suitable piece comes in?"

"At least not within my sight, no. I'll allow school club activities though, but no more than that. That's the strongest condition and my final condition."

"...Did you do that with Ahn Yeseul as well?"

"I told you, didn't I? That being good at acting and having the image of being good at acting are separate things. Yeseul, that girl's acting skill is about B-tier? No, perhaps she's even below that. But the public likes her. She has already had two heroine roles in two dramas. There was a slight controversy about her acting skills, but that soon died down. You probably know about it since you have experience shooting, but under an atmosphere like that, anyone can reach a decent level, or other people will make you look like you are at one. Of course, I'm not sure if Yeseul can become a top star in the future. The funny thing is, what puts people at the top of the ranks comes down to acting skill again."

"Can I have some time to think about it?"

"Of course. It'd be strange instead if you decided right now. I am going to do some image-making for you. I can't have you be a doll that's thrown away without being able to stand in front of an audience even once. I will put you on the stage, but you will have to put your full trust in me. After you get on the stage, you're the main character, so you can do whatever you want. That's my condition."

She clasped her hands. It was just one condition, but she couldn't take it lightly. She wanted to focus on acting without being worried about anything else, but society wasn't that easy.

"Oh, and there's one more thing."

"Yes?"

"You need to use a stage name. Your name is really good, but it's kinda common."

"A stage name...."

"Think about it for now. I really like you. How can I hate you when you're willing to run forward even if you break your legs? Think about it carefully and call me back. Talk to your parents or other people around you who are related to this line of work."

She smiled heavily and replied that she would.

Chapter 596

"Aren't you going to go?"

"I don't know, don't ask."

"I thought you came here just to make a visit, but you actually have some problems, huh."

"I told you I was here to complain. Rather than that, I need some water. You have carbonated water, don't you? Give me some with lemon extracts."

Ahyoung blankly stared at Narim, who boldly asked her for a drink while lying on the beach chair. She could tell that Narim was giving her glances through the sunglasses.

"Why don't you get it yourself?"

"How cold-hearted. Unni is asking you for a favor, but you're glaring back at me instead."

"Why don't I make you feel cool by spraying you with some water instead?"

Ahyoung walked up to a hose. Only then did Narim stand up in a hurry and enter the building. She came back with two bottles of carbonated water in her hands while grumbling before sitting down on the beach chair again. She gracefully stretched out her legs.

"You keep posturing like that, but it doesn't look good you know? Sometimes, you get all hung up on putting on a front."

"Front? Please, just call it a facade."

"That's a bit harsh."

"Good on you for being so nice. Also, who else could I even be this open with? Out there, I'm the definition of charisma, so I can't put it down around other people."

"Why don't you take it easy a little? Don't try to look too heavy."

"If I put those weights down, those weights will all go to the people below me. Do you think I can accept that?"

"And you're acting like the good guy again."

Ahyoung stretched her arms out and lay down on one of the beach chairs. A parasol was shielding her face from direct sunlight. As for her body and arms, they were being scorched.

"Is that how you usually do your interviews?" Narim asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Telling her every little detail."

"I have to. It'd be too pitiful if she challenged the industry without knowing anything and then got horribly burnt from it."

"I thought you were talking from a business perspective. Don't you have to lure her in no matter the cost? From what I saw, I thought you were trying to stop her at all costs."

"It'd be too pitiful if she challenged the industry without knowing anything and then got horribly burnt from it, wouldn't it?"

"It's her who has to bear the risks, isn't it? If you're going to take her in, you should urge her to be energetic. You're supposed to be the president, yet you show her the shithole reality of things first. Don't you think she's gonna be scared and not come?"

"Maybe not coming will be better for her."

"She has a pretty decent face though, and she seems resolved. I'm not sure about her qualities as an actress, but that's not something you can find out in a short time. The person herself isn't lacking by any means, so it'd be good to accept her. Why did you make her turn around by telling her all those things?"

"She said she likes acting. It's been a long time since I met someone who didn't have any ulterior motives. She is uneasy about becoming successful, but she has values she prioritizes above that. For girls like her, it would be for the best if acting stayed a hobby."

Just as Ahyoung was about to take a drink,

"Aha, I was wondering why you were treating her so emotionally. You found your younger self in her."

"Unni, why don't you stop being a CEO and open a fortune telling business? I think you'll earn a lot of money that way."

"Maybe I will once I get old. Rather than that, are you going to accept her if she wants to sign a contract?"

"I will. As long as I'm doing business, I can't keep acting like that. I definitely did tell her though. That countless people disappear from the industry while practicing."

Ahyoung had a look at the empty bottle. As pretty as it was, it no longer had any value. A bottle was only fulfilling its job when it contained something inside.

“So, what’s the real reason?”

“For what?”

“For scaring her like that.”

“You were the one who told me. I was emotional because I saw my younger self in her, and because I pitied her.”

“How many years do you think we’ve known each other? You’ve never even done acting properly. Why don’t you tell me the real reason now?”

“Hey, I was praised by her for good pronunciation, you know?”

“That wasn’t because you were practicing acting. You only practiced like that for your career as a businesswoman. Hey, did you lie to her and say that you were acting when you were young?”

“That’s good for the flow of the conversation. There’s no need to break that misunderstanding, is there? It’s something that both of us can talk about.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her that I was a nameless actress for a few years before I quit. I wasn’t entirely lying. I’ve seen so many people doing that, so I know what it’s like. I just never experienced it for myself.”

“She looked like a good girl though. You shouldn’t tease her like that.”

“I never did. I only gave her a reason to accept. Rather than as a woman who had a fantasy about neckties since young, don’t I give off a much better image when I say that I used to pursue the same thing as her?”

“What are you going to do if she finds out later?”

“If that happens, it happens.”

“Sometimes, you’re a really bad girl.”

“Deceiving someone isn’t a bad thing. Illegally doing things is obviously not good, but deceit of that level is just some condiments to spice things up. In fact, it’d be weird if I showed her everything about myself. Don’t you think so? Miss Charisma?”

“I don’t dare retort.”

Ahyoung threw away the empty bottle into a trash can next to her beach chair. The plastic bottle made a low bumping noise.

“And I wasn’t entirely lying. Like what you said, I did find a nostalgic figure in her. It’s just that it’s not me.”

“Who is it?”

“Someone who belonged to the theater troupe I used to be in.”

“Was that person an actor too?”

“No, she was more like the manager. She was the one who managed the funds so that we could buy the props we need to perform plays. Man, it feels like yesterday when we were quarreling with the owner of that building all the time, and now, here I am, lying on top of a rooftop of a building.”

“That was unexpected, I mean, you belonging to a theater troupe.”

“Unni, I’m running an agency here. It doesn’t make sense to not have worked in a related field even once. I even went up on stage a couple of times. Though, I was a passerby.”

“So there was someone who’s similar to that girl in that theater troupe?”

“They were both similar in the way they were honest about acting. She was four years younger than me, and she loved dogs. Though she had a weird preference when it came to dogs and liked the vicious-looking ones. No matter how hard I look at them, they’re ugly, but she found them so cute. When I think about it now, maybe the reason I stayed in that shabby theater troupe that didn’t have a future was because of her. When I looked at her putting in so much effort, I wanted to give her a share of my own time.”

“The lofty Yoo Ahyoung even thought about doing that? Is this the same Yoo Ahyoung I know of, who has a special attachment to her own time?”

“Why do you keep making me out to be some heartless person? Unni, I’m also a woman who has a warm heart.”

“I acknowledge that you’re a woman, but I’ll pretend that I never heard anything about the warm heart.”

“You just listen to the parts you want, huh.”

As Narim put down the bottle on the floor, she spoke.

“But this is a bit disappointing. I don’t know the person you seem to cherish so much. Why don’t you introduce me to her?”

“If you want her greeting, you gotta go pretty far away, you know?”

“Where? Does she live overseas?”

Ahyoung pointed up at the sky. Narim blankly stared at the sky before looking down again.

“She died?”

“A long time ago. After I left the troupe to start my own business, there was an accident. When I first heard about it, I thought it was a terrible joke. Unfortunately, it turned out to be real. Back then, I went home and threw the bible into the trash. I had been a faithful person since I was born thanks to my parents, but after I visited her ashes, I couldn’t find it any more disgusting. The people that deserve to die are alive and well, yet that pitiful girl went ahead just as she was about to unfold her dreams. If God exists, he shouldn’t do his work like that.”

“Didn’t you introduce yourself as a faithful Christian in a private meeting? I thought you were one too.”

"I told you, didn't I? I choose whatever has a good image for business. There's nothing better than the Church when it comes to that. If God wants to test my faithfulness, then he's gotta come himself. But he probably won't. Because. God. Doesn't. Exist."

"My Lord. What this little lamb just said has nothing to do with me. I have dire faith in you, so please bring me salvation."

"I am going to say that I believe in him just before I'm about to die. I mean, if I believe in him he'll give me a ticket to heaven, won't he? As God, he shouldn't retract his promises."

"Sheesh, I really can't stop you."

Narim shrugged.

"So what, you were strict with her because she has the same air about her as the one you cherished?"

"There are lots of things you can do other than acting to keep living."

"Who knows? She might become a superstar one day."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Why? Does your intuition tell you otherwise?"

"No, it's nothing like that. Also, if I had an intuition that can tell who's going to be successful, do you think my company will be so small? I would have put up a building in the most expensive place in Cheongdam, and then put my nameplate on it. I just wanted to stop her because she felt similar."

"Girlie. I get that you pity the dead girl, but you shouldn't force your emotions onto a girl who has a bright future."

"Do you think I told her everything because of a horrible reason like that?"

"Then what?"

"It's just, I subconsciously ended up comparing the two."

"Comparing the two?"

"Those eyes that seemed to be in love with acting itself... Both of them had similar eyes. When I looked at those eyes, I couldn't help but compare the two."

"Compare their skills, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"You don't know much about the girl that just came though, do you?"

"Of course I do. I looked into her the moment I got a call from writer Lee. I've read about what she was doing until now, what kind of pieces she participated in, and everything. There wasn't much, so it didn't take that long."

“You sounded like you didn’t know anything about her when you were talking to her. You were probing her about that as well then? So that you can interrogate her when she says something different to what you know?”

“I’m not that evil, you know?”

“There’s ‘evil’ written on your face. So, what is it in the end? Who’s better? Personally, I think that someone who has debuted on public TV would be better. You know the difference between street acting and TV acting. The fact that she made a debut at all is huge.”

“Unfortunately, you’re wrong. This is extremely subjective, but if I have to invest all of my money into one of them, I will invest all of it into Haejoo. She was really different after all.”

“The person that died was called Haejoo? She must have been really good, if you’re the one saying that.”

Ahyoung reminded herself of Haejoo, who quietly remained on stage and looked up at the lights. If there was one person that was receiving the love of the monster known as the stage, then it was probably her - that was what she thought back then.

“Sometimes, I wonder, maybe the reason I’m doing this work is because of her. There are actors like that hidden in the world. Maybe those people are just unable to find the stage they need to be on and end up leaving. I’m just providing a stage for such people. I’m just letting them be where they should be, while I get a small fee for doing so.”

“Small? Smaaaaaall, you say?”

“What’s up with you? You’re in the same line of work, so you should be consoling me instead.”

“Fine, who else could understand you but me?”

“Oh, didn’t you say you were here to complain? I think I’m about done, you know?”

As soon as she said those words, Narim abruptly stood up. She, who didn’t look like she was in her forties thanks to her skin care, turned into a vicious old woman in an instant.

“Unni, you look scary. Calm down.”

“When I just think about that man, I just....”

“That man?”

“I’m talking about Lee Junmin! Sungjae, who I painstakingly nurtured, is meeting him more frequently than he meets me these days!”

“I thought he was going to be in a film, no? JA is one of the investors, and they are putting their own actors in it as well. Hong Geunsoo, was it? In such a scenario, it’s not strange for him to be meeting president Lee Junmin. He’s kinda well known for meeting many people in private, isn’t he?”

“That’s exactly what I don’t like about him. At this rate, once Sungjae’s contract is over and he switches over to JA, I might end up fainting because of anger.”

“You should console him well so that he doesn’t.”

“If he does, I’m going to make an announcement to all the producers in the TV industry. That they’d better get prepared to become enemies with me if they use Ahn Sungjae.”

“There you go again. Calm down a little.”

“How much effort do you think I’ve put in to nurture him?”

“He didn’t even go yet, so why are you so worried? Even though you’re like this now, aren’t you going to tell everyone else that you’d let him go without any trouble?”

“That’s why it’s a problem. I really hate myself.”

“Why don’t you call him out in private and ask yourself? Or you can call him here, so that I can see him after a long time.”

“Should I?”

“No, wait. Forget I said anything.”

“No, I’ll try calling him here now. I have to get a concrete answer from him so that I can be at ease.”

Narim coughed a few times to clear her throat before taking out her phone. Ahyoung clicked her tongue when she watched the process of a whiny voice turning elegant.

“Mm, is this Sungjae? Why don’t we eat out together today since it’s been a while?”

“I bet ten thousand won that she’ll get hospitalized for mental illnesses later in life.”

Ahyoung faintly smiled and thought about the girl she talked to today.

‘She’ll probably say she’ll do it. Girls like her don’t know how to give up.’

What was left was how to package and decorate her.

“I don’t think it’s a bad idea to be a bit unconventional.”

Ahyoung started planning out the future.

Chapter 597

A notebook, an old pen, and a cup of thick coffee with two sticks of coffee in it. After setting up everything, he turned on the VCR. He heard the tape turning inside the device before he saw a grey screen appear on the TV. He took a sip of the coffee while listening to the noisy tape. The videotape should start playing soon.

-Get into position.

-Jincheol, you’re going to shoot today as well?

-Records are only meaningful if you leave them behind frequently.

Yecheon was as bustling as always. Maru felt a sense of intimacy with the people on the screen as though he had known them for a long time. He saw the members of the theater troupe acting awkward

and standing dazedly in front of the camera in the videos that were shot in early 1987, but they seemed to have gotten used to it since they were just doing their own thing regardless of whether Jincheol was shooting or not.

-Miss Ahyoung, can you have a look at this for a sec?

-Sure, but you gotta pay me extra.

-No way, you're joking, right?

-I never joke around when it comes to money.

-Can I just give you some snacks instead?

-Well, fine.

A woman's voice could be heard from outside of the frame. She seemed proficient in handling the camera. The screen shook for a moment as it was lifted off the tripod and then the camera angle was elevated a little.

-Should we do an interview or something?

-Nah. But Ahyoung. What happened to the monthly rent thing you were talking about?

-I managed to get 80 thousand won off after negotiation. I even had to cry to do it.

-What? 80 thousand won? You aren't kidding, right? Did you really manage to shave off 80 thousand won from our rent?

-Who do you think I am? I'm someone who does not go back on my words.

-No way. Wow! Everyone, Ahyoung managed to shave off 80 thousand won from the rent!

-What? Are you serious? 80 thousand won?

-Let's open some soju today. Let's fry some bulgogi too!

There was a ruckus for a while. The woman, who was dragged in front of the camera, smiled in confidence before the rest lifted her into the sky. The process was all captured in the video.

-What is this? What's happening?

Another voice came in late into the video. It was Jung Haejoo. After hearing about the circumstances, Haejoo also rejoiced while grabbing Ahyoung's arm.

-If it's 80 thousand won, I think I can take a breather.

-It's the four of us' turn this month, so we practically earned 20 thousand won each. 20 thousand, huh. Thanks to you, Ahyoung, I managed to earn this month's rent for my room.

-Everyone, stand in front of the camera! Miss Ahyoung, you stand in the center. If we don't take a celebratory photo on a day like this, this camera wouldn't have a point being here.

Jincheol held the camera. Every member of the troupe gathered in front of the camera.

-Wait! What's that? Let me in too!

There was a girl who jumped into the frame as though she was about to fall over. She was someone Maru hadn't seen before, and she looked quite young. She was also wearing a school uniform. Maru raised his cup as he focused on the video.

-Fine, you can join the photo as well. It's a good thing after all.

-But hey, don't you have any friends you hang out with? You come here all the time.

-I do have friends, you know? Plus, I'm not here to see you oppas, I'm here to see Haejoo-unni!

-There she goes again. Look at her talk. She has a bad temper.

-I have a bad temper? No, I don't!

-Stop! Both of you, stop. Jincheol-oppa, what do we say?

Haejoo said that as she hung her arms around the girl who seemed to be a student. The girl, who glared at the man standing to the left of her, smiled brightly.

"Are they sisters or something?"

Maru took a sip of the cooled coffee, when.

-Haejoo, you move a little to the right, and Taewook, you too. Ahyoung, you should say something for all of us. And you over there, yes, whichever-schooler you are.

-Ahn Joohyun! How many times do I have to tell you that I'm Ahn Joohyun, ahjussi!

-Ahjussi? I'm not even thirty yet!

-If you look like an ahjussi, then you are an ahjussi! Hmph.

Maru almost spat out what was in his mouth. He coughed dryly and paused the video. He had a closer look at the girl on the screen. Her clear eyes, thick eyebrows, and well-balanced nose. Indeed, it was Ahn Joohyun's face, albeit a little younger.

"How refreshing."

He already knew from Jincheol's wife, Jinjoo, that Joohyun frequented Yecheon. So she was quite frivolous back then. When he thought about how she acted now and compared it to the girl on the screen, he ended up laughing. Would the people there at that time have known that the little girl they were talking to would go on to cause several big issues in the entertainment industry?

"Though, she still had a potty mouth back then, huh."

He resumed the video. After a few more mentions about the 80 thousand won saving, the scene switched. On one side of the stage were three women wearing long skirts. On the other side were two men wearing drill uniforms, looking at the three women sitting opposite them. Coquettish smiles and behavior - it seemed that the background was the red light district.

Maru focused on looking at Haejoo. She sat down on a chair and crossed her legs. She seemed to be acting like a sexy woman, but it looked awkward as though she was wearing clothes that didn't suit her. After a series of unstable acts continued, Jincheol's voice eventually resounded.

-This isn't good, is it? I don't think Haejoo fits this kind of role.

-Is it like that after all?

-Let's have a talk again after we see what we recorded later. We should change the roles or reduce them, I think.

-Well, Jincheol has good eyes. If you think that way, then I guess it's really not good. I do like the story, so I want to go with it.

Their lines and movements were perfect, but Haejoo couldn't get herself into the mood of the play. Maru repeatedly played back Haejoo's acting part and wrote things down in his notebook. Her walking motions, hand gestures, the changes in her facial expressions when she said her lines. As the videotapes were old, he sometimes wasn't able to observe her expression due to the low resolution, but he could get a close look most of the time.

He had watched eleven videotapes until now. Although he hadn't watched a lot of them, he could come to an understanding of Haejoo's acting. Her acting gave off a 'clean' feeling. It was different from a 'neat' image. Her acting skill was lacking, but he kept watching her because of the clean vibes that the person herself gave off. If someone hateful made a mistake, it would increase the urge of wanting to scold that person, but if it was someone likable that made a mistake, it would instead be the opposite - one would want to encourage and care for that person. If it was Haejoo who made a mistake on stage, not to mention the members of the troupe, even the audience might let her go. Of course, that was under the assumption that they knew what Haejoo was usually like.

If someone who knew about the usual Haejoo looked at her acting on the stage, they might just accept it and move on. That was the kind of person she was after all. That was just her character. However, an audience who had never seen her before might find her strange. What the heck is up with that actress who pops out from everyone else?

Haejoo maintained her unique character a little too much causing her to be unable to blend herself with the rest of the characters in the play, making her always a 'Jung Haejoo' on the stage. In the ten videotapes Maru had watched during the past few days while reducing his sleep, Haejoo always managed to overlay the characters of a prostitute, a parent of a student, and even a woman in immoral love over herself. While the other actors jumped into that character or brought out some of their own characteristics within them that were similar to the characters they were acting, Haejoo consistently acted a 'Jung Haejoo'.

That kind of phenomenon didn't just occur because her efforts were lacking, or because her understanding of the characters she was acting was shallow. Haejoo was the one who practiced the most while they were shooting. While everyone had gone off to rest, Haejoo quietly remained behind and checked her own pronunciation with the camera. She changed her expressions, checked her gestures, and even exaggeratedly put emotions into some of her acts, but the character that stuck with her on stage was Jung Haejoo herself.

The 'clean' vibe she gave off seemed to stem from that characteristic of hers. His senses that discerned acting skill wasn't able to find anything artificial-feeling from Haejoo's acting, which ended up giving him that 'clean' vibe from her.

Maru wondered what it would've been like if Haejoo chose to do a form of art that wasn't acting. Her character was unique and strong. The character that seemed to poke through no matter what you covered her with seemed like it would be a strong point in music. Like a violinist, for example. He subconsciously smiled when he imagined her showing off her might during a recital stage.

Acting was the act of revealing oneself, yet simultaneously hiding oneself and changing oneself. Haejoo, whose character revealed herself no matter whose figure she tried to borrow, didn't look like she was suited for acting. That was the case at least from the videos he had watched until now.

Many people would remember the actress Jung Haejoo, but the characters she acted wouldn't remain in anyone's memories. Currently, Haejoo's face was zoomed in on just as she heard that they should consider changing up the characters.

"Haaam, oppa, you're watching those videos again?" Bada came out of her room and said.

"Wanna watch too?"

"Nah, it was boring. Is that really going to help you learn though? I really don't get it."

"Maybe I'll see something if I keep on watching."

"Okay, good luck with that. I'm going to go to sleep. Have fun."

"Good night."

Maru stretched his arms out. It was just past midnight. He picked up his notebook again and had a look at the things he wrote down until now. He had summed up some of the things he liked, such as some movements, lines, speech tones, and facial expressions. One thing he realized while learning acting was that people don't actually use their facial muscles that much. When he imitated other people's expressions, some of his facial muscles would flinch at times, and he found out that focusing on moving those muscles would make his expressions look a lot smoother. They say the depth of emotions comes from a person's inner self, but it would probably be impossible to transmit those emotions without minute muscular movements.

"The charm coming from the person herself is incredible."

The moment this person receives Junmin's influence, the charm unique to her character would turn into a trait for acting and would charm many people, giving birth to the Jung Haejoo that enchanted many. He could imagine what kind of acting Haejoo would show at that time. She probably acted in a way that didn't overwhelm others with an explosion of emotions and focused more on calm acting. Calm wasn't the same as boring. She probably acted in such a way that people would end up falling for the character she acted without even realizing it.

He looked at the empty coffee cup for a while before standing up. It seemed that he was going to need another cup. Just as he turned the kettle on, his phone in the living room started ringing. He slowly walked over and picked up the call.

“What’s up? Calling at this hour.”

-Can you take the call right now?

“Sure.”

Maru put his phone between his ear and shoulder before picking up the kettle that finished boiling the water.

“So, how was your visit to the agency? Did it go well?”

-For now, I think so.

“You sound quite listless despite what you’re saying.”

Maru said that as he smiled. He would subconsciously smile whenever he talked to *her*. He listened to *her*, who seemed like she was about to start complaining to him at any second while picking up his coffee cup.

-I just heard a bunch of things.

“That’s good. I just made some coffee. Tell me some of those bunch of things, so that I can drink while listening to you.”

-I’ll be a bit long, though.

“It’s only midnight. We have plenty of time. But aren’t you tired? You usually tire yourself out to sleep by 11.”

-I just had a lot to think about.

“What a coincidence, I’m also worried because I’m thinking too much.”

-What happened?

“I was researching someone. I almost feel like I can get a grasp, so I end up thinking quite a lot.”

-I’m not sure what it is, but take it easy. Don’t push yourself.

“I am going to. Now tell me. What happened at the place you were recommended to.”

Maru sat down on the sofa and played the video. As he muted it, the video progressed without any sound. The person on the other side of the phone did not speak either for a while.

Feeling that the silence before the conversation was especially long today, Maru took a sip of his coffee.

Chapter 598

-Do you think it’s right for me to do it?

She spoke with very little confidence, which he had never heard her frequently do before. The voice even sounded a little tragic, which made Maru cautious with saying his words.

“I want to hear your decision first.”

-I want to continue acting. I also want to stand on the same stage as you.

“I’m with you on that. There would be nothing more enjoyable than working on the same piece as you. In that sense, I’m in favor of you joining an agency. That president, while she said those words, I think she’s a good person. No, leaving aside whether she’s a good person or not, I’m sure that she doesn’t treat other people lightly. Business skills are important, but sometimes, their character is important as well. The fact that she tried to scare you might be for your sake, or maybe she had a completely different motive, but I like the fact that she didn’t try to lure you into joining with sugar coated words.”

-I feel the same. She definitely looked like someone who makes her intentions clear. I also liked how she didn’t just push a contract in my face because of the recommendation. It’s just that...

“You’re concerned about the image making that she’s talking about?”

-It’s a bit iffy. I know in my mind. This is business after all. I know that I can’t act immaturely and demand that everything is done the way I want. But I get cautious since it’s related to acting. If, and I’m just assuming here, I don’t get any of the roles that the president has picked for me, I wouldn’t be able to act at all while I’m in the agency.

“If the president is like how I think she is, then I guess it would definitely be like that.”

-That’s what I’m a little concerned about. I will hear about the details of the contract on my next visit, but I got the general content through text. Wait a sec.

She hung up for a while before calling again.

-It will be an exclusive contract, and the contract period will be 7 years. During that period, everything related to the entertainment industry has to be done through the industry, and if I make a mistake during the contract period which damages the reputation of the company, I will have to pay the contract penalty that was agreed upon at the time of the contract. She told me that that’s the most important part.

“It’s usually around 7 to 10 years. How was the atmosphere at the company?”

-It was really good. It looked like there was no barrier between the president and the employees.

“Did they not look like they were on too close terms?”

-They looked like they respected each other. It was only for a brief moment, but I felt that they were treating everyone else like coworkers.

“If you felt so, then I guess the company itself must be very good. Honestly speaking, I don’t think a ranking system is always just good or bad. If there’s a clear hierarchy, it might not bring out the proactivity of the members, but it will definitely be more efficient. If it felt like there was no order because everyone treated each other like friends, it would be a bad thing, but if you felt that they had respect for each other as colleagues, it might really be a good place.”

-If I do sign a contract, I do want to do it with this agency. I will have to know more to be sure, but I think the president is a good person as well.

“When are you signing the contract? Did you get a specific date?”

-No, but I think I should do it as early as I can.

“You talked to your mother about it, right?”

-Mom told me that I should do what I want. She’ll just go with me to the company for the contract as long as I’ve made a decision.

“She raises her child strongly. So it comes down to your decision in the end. From what I’m hearing, I think you’ve already made up your mind though?”

-Like you said, this is an opportunity after all. I won’t know when I’ll get the chance again. If I do join, I will have to start over from the basics, but that puts me at ease instead. I’m quite lacking right now after all.

“Then sign the contract. The people there are decent, and there wasn’t any bad news about that place, was there?”

-I did look it up, but I didn’t find anything.

“Hm, can you wait for a little? You said the agency was named Hwan, right?”

-Yeah.

“I’ll call you back. Give me 10 minutes.”

After hanging up, Maru sent a text message to Joohyun. What he said was pretty simple - can I ask you for the favor you promised last time?. Instead of a reply, he got a call back. It didn’t even take 10 seconds.

-It’s midnight right now.

“Sorry, I usually would have never called you at this hour, but I had no choice.”

-I was a little surprised when I got your text. You’re quite sensitive when it comes to etiquette, yet you sent a text at this hour. So, what is it that you want help with? Considering what you did for Bangjoo, I am willing to do quite a lot.

“It’s just that the information I need is hard to access as an ordinary person, so you were the only one that came to mind.”

-What is it?

“Do you know about an entertainment agency named Hwan?”

-Hwan? I do. Ahyoung-unni is there after all.

“Ahyoung?”

Maru rewinded the videotape with the remote control in front of him. He then played it back again. He looked at the woman with the confident smile and spoke again,

“Is it perhaps the Ahyoung who used to be in the theater troupe Yechoen? I don’t know her surname, sorry.”

-She is, but how do you know Yecheon?

"I met director Lee Jincheol a little while ago. I got some videotape recordings of Yecheon from him."

-Director Lee Jincheol?

"Yes."

-That's a name I haven't heard in a long time. I did call him a couple of times, but after something happened, we never contacted each other. Is he doing well?

"He got married and is doing well."

-Ah, right. I heard that he got married to Jinjoo-unni. How nostalgic. It's a place that contains my studenthood after all. But wait, videotapes? Am I in them as well?

"Yep, you're here alright."

-That doesn't feel that good. Wasn't I like... a little cocky when I was young?

"Not really. You're completely the same as you are now."

-That doesn't sound like a compliment to me. Why did you get those videos?

"You know the person called Jung Haejoo, right? I wanted to have a look at her acting."

-...Haejoo-unni, huh. Do you perhaps remember what I asked you before?

Maru leaned on the sofa as he replied,

"Yes. You asked me if I know Jung Haejoo. Well, things happened and it reached this point. Can I ask why you asked me such a question back then?"

-Because you're similar.

"Similar?"

-Yes, you and Haejoo-unni.

"In what aspect?"

-Your acting methods. You told me back then right? That when you act, there's another self that looks at you from an objective perspective. Unni said a similar thing. She said that if she took a step back, she would see another one of herself and that acting with that girl was too much fun. This is interesting. So you ended up finding out after all.

"That's quite surprising."

-Speaking of videotapes, when were they taken? I remember taking quite a lot of recordings.

"I'm watching the ones taken in 1987 right now, and I received up to January 1989. There's about sixty of them."

-1987, huh. That's a long time ago. How is she? The Haejoo-unni on the screen, I mean.

“She looks like a charming person.”

-What about from the perspective of acting?

“I don’t know yet. I see some things that I can learn, but nothing that amazing. Once I get to 1988, I guess I will be able to see her polished acting skills that our president fell in love with.”

-You can look forward to it. She was incredible back then.

After that, Joohyun didn’t speak for a while. Maru waited patiently. He didn’t want to interrupt Joohyun as she was reminiscing about the past.

-Hm, let’s leave the old stories here for now. You said you wanted to know something after all. Hwan, huh. It’s a good company. I’ve talked to a couple of actors who belong to that agency, and they all have high opinions about it. I’m not sure about new actors, but as far as I know, the treatment there for veteran actors is very good. Also, I heard that they weren’t nurturing new actors because they are stressing the music side. Is someone you know going to join?

“She said she might sign a contract, so I thought I’d look into it.”

-Looks like she must be important to you. If you’re messaging me at this hour.

Maru replaced his answer with a small laugh.

-For now, they have a good reputation here. I haven’t heard of them having any discord, and above all, Ahyoung-uni is someone worth trusting. She’s a little overly sensitive when it comes to money, but she doesn’t let money direct her ways. In fact, she’s the type who controls the money. Hm, her strong point is that she doesn’t fear losses. Though, that’s pretty obvious from the fact that she’s investing in singers even though it’s not going well. As long as that person doesn’t make a mistake, she will keep holding onto that person’s hands. I’m planning to switch to that place once my exclusive contract with Yellow Star is over.

“You just said something that puts my mind at ease. If it’s a place you can trust, I guess I can rest assured.”

-Don’t trust me too much. I might be slightly biased since Ahyoung-uni is someone I know. I can tell you for sure though, that it’s not one of those trashy companies who run off with the money, so tell the person signing the contract that Hwan can be trusted.

“Alright. I’ll tell her that.”

-Is your business over now then?

“Yes. Sorry for calling you late at night.”

-It’s fine. I was watching TV anyway. Just keep watching over Bangjoo so that he doesn’t cause trouble. I’ll hang up now then.

“Have a good night.”

Maru sighed in relief as he hung up. The reason he called Joohyun was because she had once been wounded by the entertainment industry. She was still active in the entertainment industry, but her

despise towards trashy companies shouldn't have disappeared. Yet such a person said that the agency was trustable. From the impression she got from looking around the company, Joohyun's evaluation, as well as the articles about Hwan in the news, it seemed to be sufficient to be her first company.

He called her back again. As soon as the signal sounded, she picked up the call.

"I asked someone I know, and she said it's a reliable company."

-Can I ask who you asked?

"Senior Ahn Joohyun."

-Really?

"Yeah. She seems acquainted with the president there as well. She's not someone who would be biased because of personal connections, so I think it's worth trusting. The only thing on my mind is her opinions about your first work, but honestly speaking, I agree with the president."

-Why?

"Since you're doing it, don't you want to become an actress that sells well?"

Maru continued speaking after picking up his coffee cup.

"I definitely want to. Art is good, but to me, acting is a form of labor that I enjoy, and it would be troublesome if it doesn't become a splendid means of income. I would one day have to feed my family with it, so I wouldn't want to become an actor who doesn't have value."

-I'm the same. I mean, everyone would be like that. No one wants to stay being a nameless actor.

"That's why the president suggested such a thing to you. It might be bias or even discrimination against women, but the reality is that image still matters a lot to actresses. Not just anyone can be like senior Joohyun. I believe that she managed to make a splendid comeback only because she had proven her acting skills by the time she got caught up in something bad. Without popularity, you can't even prove yourself in the industry. That's just the way it works, and you should know that."

-What if I never get to do anything decent for seven years?

"You aren't going to be doing nothing for those seven years. In seven years, you'll be 26. Don't you think you'll be in your prime as an actress? It's the age where mature charm coexists with the purity of youth. Even if you end up not doing any activity for the next seven years due to a series of absurd coincidences, it doesn't mean that it's over for you. Also, if the agency is intentionally not letting you do anything, you can sue them as well. Once you start worrying, it will never end. You have to start something one day. What do you think? I think you're plenty ready to start things off."

-Do you think I can do it?

"You can do it."

-Good, I'll do it then. I'll try.

"You actually made your decision before you called me, didn't you?"

-Not entirely, but I was leaning towards it. I wanted to hear your opinion for some reason though.

“Would you not have done it if I told you not to?”

-I’m not sure. But I think that I might not have done it.

“That makes me happy, and a little awkward.”

-Why? You don’t like me relying on you?

“No. It’s awkward because I feel way too happy. I feel like it’s the first time you told me your worries of your own accord. Now I feel like you’ve opened up to me. I guess the only thing left now is to open up when farting, huh.”

-You always stray off to weird directions, you know?

“That’s what’s good about me.”

-Right, that’s your charm. Oh, one more thing. Actually, I’m gathering some opinions about this since it’s a pretty important thing.

“What is it?”

-A stage name.

“A stage name?”

-I heard that a lot of people use the same name as mine. Apparently, there’s also an actor who used the same name as me before.

“Ah, right. I guess it is pretty common. So? What did you decide on?”

-Nothing yet. I thought about it, but nothing really came to mind. Mom’s the same. Actually, my mom might be good at writing novels, but she has a terrible naming sense.

“Don’t say that. Your name is really cool. I really like it because it feels similar to mine.”

-Dad named me.

“Did he?”

He felt like he heard this once before. Maru felt like there was a vague error in his memory, but he didn’t think deeply about it.

-Did anything come to your mind? I’m going to come up with a few and talk about them when I write the contract.

“Now that you say it, I don’t think anything comes to mind.”

-Right?

“Are you going to change your surname as well?”

-No, I’m going to leave it be. Just my given name.

“So I guess, it’s still Han, huh.”

-Yep.

“I think about this sometimes, but if I met you ten-or-so years ago, we wouldn’t have been able to get married because we have the same surname and lineage.”

-You’re always on about marriage. I forbid you from talking about it from now on.

“It’s one of my only joys in life though.”

-Quit joking. Anyway, don’t you have anything good? Just tell me one. I’ll go to sleep afterwards.

“Well, then.”

He faintly smiled and looked at the ceiling. A name popped up in his mind. He was surprised by the two characters that filled up his head. He was even given the feeling that this has to be the one.

“I got one. It’s the commonality of our two names.”

-I wonder what it is?

“Gaeul. Han Gaeul. It’s a pure Korean name. Don’t you think it’s pretty?”

-Han... Gaeul. It’s pretty. It sticks to the mouth too.

“It’s just one option, so think about other options as well. There must be many good names out there.”

-Okay. But I quite like Gaeul, you know?

“I’d be honored if you use it.”

Then good night - Maru whispered before closing his phone. The night winds slightly blew into his house from the slightly open window. Perhaps due to the fresh air, he felt a slight pain in one corner of his heart. It was quite weird.

“They say you become emotional with time.”

Maru sipped some of his cooled coffee before picking up the remote.

The night was still young.

Here, ‘lineage’ refers to your family descent. Most commonly noted by ‘region’ then ‘surname’. For example, “I am a Choi from XX region”. Marriage between those of the same ‘lineage’ was forbidden until it was officially changed by law officially in 2005 (same year in the novel) but people have been ignoring it for quite a long time, since this ancestry/lineage was never a rigorous concept in terms of genetics (A child would blindly follow the father’s lineage; it was possible to ‘buy’ lineage with money; and many records were lost in the 20th century due to war.). In this case, Maru and his GF must be a Han surname from the same region. If they are two different Hans from two different regions, the law wouldn’t have applied to them.

Chapter 599

“This is a neat-looking company.”

She grabbed onto her mother's arm, as her mother looked around all over the place. Somehow, they were gathering a lot of attention. After waiting for a while in the lobby on the 1st floor, they were guided to the president's office on the 4th floor.

"Welcome. I am Yoo Ahyoung, the one managing this company."

"Oh, yes. I am this kid's mother. The interior design is really good."

"I put a lot of effort into it. Also, nice to see you again. And thank you for contacting me back so early."

Ahyoung offered for them to take a seat. She sat down on the sofa with her mother.

"You have heard about the general gist of things, yes?"

"Yes. But are you really okay with accepting my girl?"

"Of course I am. In fact, I'm looking forward to it. I am sure that she will raise the value of our company. Would you like some tea first?"

"Sure."

Ahyoung left the room after telling them to wait for a while.

As they waited, her mother looked around the president's office. For a brief moment, she saw her mother smiling faintly. She looked as though she met a friend of hers. She wondered what her mother saw.

Not long later, Ahyoung returned with some pretty-looking pottery.

"It's a hobby of mine. I hope you like it."

"I like tea too. Is it red tea?"

"Yes. If you want, there's milk too."

"No thanks. I like tea by itself."

"You have similar preferences to mine."

Red tea was poured into the transparent cup. *She* took in a sniff of the fragrance that wafted into the room and felt her tense body relaxing a little. She met eyes with Ahyoung who asked if it was good. She curtly replied 'yes'.

"If she was an adult, I would have asked *her* to sign a contract on the spot, but in the case of minors, a parent or guardian needs to be present. There are cases where this isn't the case, but it is the tradition, so please understand."

"In any case, doing everything neatly is good. Like this tea."

Her mother and Ahyoung smiled at each other.

She found the eyes of sharp observers between the two warm smiles. The two people seemed to have started probing each other out. Whether it was in an official place or not, she never saw her mother lose in a battle of wits. Even when the editor sometimes comes to their house to beg her mother for a

manuscript, her mother would always put on her neat smile and maintain her usual calmness. Her editor would become more and more fatigued as time went by, and it was to the point that *she* would sometimes give her a drink in secret and cheer her on.

“For now, this is the contract form.”

“May I read it?”

“Of course. Let’s talk again once you’re done reading.”

There were two copies of the contract. While her mother carefully went over the contract, Ahyoung pushed the other copy to her side.

“You should read it as well.”

“Yes.”

When she read the words ‘exclusive contract’ at the top, it finally came to her that she was stepping into the entertainment industry. She took a deep breath before reading the form below. The wall of text that filled the entirety of the page made her feel suffocated. There were many difficult words and terminology that made it hard to understand if she did not read it in detail.

“You don’t write standard contracts, huh?”

“That’s because we include intangible assets. Also, to be clear, she is not in a state where she can bring us profit. It’s not like she’ll be working at our company either. Most of her time will be spent on education, so standard contracts are meaningless.”

“That’s true. Then what happens to the deposit?”

“The exclusive contract deposit is 14 million won. It’s paid in one go, but will be taxed over 7 years, 2 million won each time. It will be amortized under activity fees after her debut.”

“What’s this clause about development expenses?”

“It’s money we invest in her. This money will also be amortized after the debut. Of course, most of the time, we just ignore it when we extend the contract. She’ll get treated according to her name value.”

“So it’s a conditional debt in a sense?”

“Yes. It’s a debt for us. Even if she does not produce any profit in the 7 years after she signs the contract, there will be no monetary losses for her. However, that’s not in the best interests of either of us. Gaining as much as the investment, if not more, is how people feel after all. Since we’re doing it, isn’t it better to earn a lot?”

“Money is not always right, but it’s right most of the time. Now that I actually see it, the entertainment business is pretty risky, huh. There must be cases where you don’t make money off your investment.”

“That’s why over a dozen agencies appear and disappear every year. Perhaps an entertainment agency is similar to gambling. Doing things little by little doesn’t guarantee that you’ll make it, but if you do make it, it’s a huge jackpot.”

These two looked like they were at each other's throats. She put down the contract after reading it until the end. The contract was just like what she had heard, and there were no major differences. Her mother, who had stamped several contracts, said that there were no problems, so it was definitely a normal contract.

"Hey, you seem to like that book, huh?"

Her mother pointed at the one book that was placed on the display case next to the president's desk. The moment she had a look at the cover of that book, she understood the meaning behind her mother's smile from before.

"That book? It's a new work from a favorite writer of mine. It's a romance novel, and I end up reading it without noticing the passage of time once I start."

Ahyoung said that while brightening up. Her good feelings towards the book could be felt from her words. *She* could see her mother's smile becoming thicker. It wasn't surprising, since it was her own writing that was being complimented.

"As awkward as it is for me to say it in a place like this, I wrote that book."

"What? Really?"

"Yes."

"You are writer Choi Haesoo? Oh my god, wait a sec."

Ahyoung stood up before hurriedly moving somewhere. After a while, Ahyoung returned with her hands full of books. They were all her mother's novels. There was even an essay.

"You bought all of them?"

"Of course. You won't know how much I advertised these books to my friends."

"Thank you for that. Perhaps the slowly increasing income of mine might have been thanks to you, president."

"Uhm, can you give me an autograph right here? I really enjoyed this book. I was thinking that it would be really good as a drama."

"Hm, actually, there are already talks about publication rights on adaptations. This is not set in stone though, so don't go talking about it to others."

"Really? Tell me once the adaptation is decided. I will put any actor you want in the drama."

"Thank you for that. Oh, I saw Mr. Yoo Jihoon's photo just now."

"He's with us."

"If it ever does happen, I'd like to ask for him. I really like him."

"Don't worry about that. As long as the script is good, I will definitely make him do it. But oh man, I would have never imagined that you were my favorite author. Uhm, shall we eat out somewhere? There are so many things I want to ask. The contract matter is done after all."

“Rather than eating out, I’d like a light drink.”

“A light drink, huh. I’d love to do that. But your daughter....”

“Let’s just finish up with her first and have a get-together with just us adult women, shall we?”

“I think I’m about to become a passionate fan of yours.”

Ahyoung smiled and put the two contracts side by side.

“If you don’t have any objections, shall we stamp the contract for now?”

Her mother looked at *her*, as though the final decision was up to her. She took out the stamp that she brought with her.

“If it’s someone who has signed multiple contracts, I or the head manager would be the one to do it, but since it’s your first contract, you should try stamping it yourself. It feels different after all. Oh, you can use this stamp ink.”

She put her stamp on the red stamp ink. She pressed deeply before placing her hands above the contracts. Her hands shook. She took a deep breath before stamping in the middle of the two contracts placed side by side. She stamped deeply to the point that her hands were shaking before lifting it up again. The moment she saw her name stamped between the two copies of the contract, she sighed out in relief.

“Hey, there’s more to go, you know?”

Ahyoung smiled and flipped over to the next page. *She* smiled awkwardly before stamping all the pages. After stamping everything, Ahyoung put one copy in an envelope before handing it over to her. *She* looked at Ahyoung’s hand for a moment before grabbing it.

“I will definitely make sure that you won’t regret coming to us.”

“Please take care of me.”

After shaking hands once, *she* let go. Only then did she realize that her palms were sweaty.

“Oh, and about your stage name. Did you think about it? It’s not that you have to decide on it now, but the quicker the better. There’s a superstition that calling people by their stage names will make them lucky.”

“Uhm, there’s one.”

“What is it? Tell me.”

“It’s Han Gaeul.”

“Han Gaeul?”

Ahyoung contemplated for a while before smiling.

“That’s decent. If it was something strange, I was going to go to a naming center and get one from there. Han Gaeul, Han Gaeul, huh. There’s no one who uses the same name, and it’s easy enough to pronounce. Above all, it’s an actress-like name. What do you think, writer?”

“If my girl’s okay with it, I’m okay with it too.”

“Then I guess I should call you Han Gaeul from now on. Also, tell the people around you to call you that from time to time. If you get famous, you’ll get called by that name more often than your real name. It’s also to get more luck.”

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

“I guess that’s done now then. Well then, shall we go out to have a drink, writer?”

“Sure.”

The two looked like long-time friends. *She* blinked a few times before standing up with the contract in hand.

“Han... I mean, dear Miss Han Gaeul should go back first. Mom will talk with the president here before going home.”

“Gaeul, take a look around the company. If you put this around your neck, you won’t be stopped from going anywhere, so you can visit anywhere you like.”

Ahyoung gave her the company ID card she was wearing.

She - Gaeul - looked at the company ID card in her hands. The two women had already left the room. Alone in the president’s office, Gaeul looked around and took in the scenery into her eyes.

“So I really signed the contract.”

Her heart raced. She lifted the contract in her arms up high. It’s not a dream, right? - she tried pinching her cheeks. The pain told her that it was indeed not a dream. She stared at the contract for a while before coming to herself. She left the president’s room. As the 4th floor was an office space, the entire floor was quiet. She looked at the people standing at their desks drinking coffee, and happily chatting to other people before heading to the staircase.

“It was this place, right?”

She used this staircase to go to the 5th floor with Ahyoung last time. She looked at the colorful stairs before climbing up step by step. Eventually, she was greeted by a door painted blue. She pressed down on the doorknob before pushing it. A cool wind brushed past her body. The green grass, the beach chairs.... There were quite a lot of people resting on the grass. Some of them were even eating. No one seemed to mind who came up here. There was a sense of liberty, so Gaeul boldly stepped outside.

She walked up to the banister and looked around the scenery. To the left were towering buildings, and to the right were houses and shopping complexes. She never knew before this moment that standing in the middle of Seoul was such an exciting thing. Ah, so this place is my agency now - she thought.

She embraced the strange feeling that was mixed with expectation and unease. Just then, she heard a voice behind her.

“Hyung, get up.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“This is why I never let you come here. The president also said that you were forbidden from using the beach chair, didn’t she?”

“I can’t help it. It’s so warm up here. I might as well live here. This place is better than our house.”

“It’s true that this place is better than our house, but you’re being a disturbance by being here. Other people should rest too. Now, get up!”

The boy that seemed to be the little brother dragged the big brother onto the grass. The people around looked at them and giggled. They seemed used to seeing it.

“My little brother, you should lie down as well. This place is heavenly. Ah, I really want to live here.”

“You’re almost late for practice.”

“It’s fine. It will be fine. Time is generous, isn’t it?”

“Who said that? Stop being lazy and move!”

When the little brother glared at the big brother, the big brother, who was lying down on the ground like a sloth, finally stood up slowly. It was a little funny to see that the big brother was submissive to the little brother. Just then, Gaeul subconsciously bowed to them to greet them. The two greeted back, and the little brother’s greeting was the very definition of politeness, in contrast to the big brother that greeted while almost leaning sideways like a deflated balloon. He looked very tired.

“Hyung, this isn’t good. You should wash your face first.”

“Can I not get washed?”

“Really? You should wash your hair as well.”

“I just washed my hair yesterday.”

“If you’re human, you should wash it once a day, or even twice.”

“You know what? You’re being too cruel to me lately.”

“I can’t help it since I’m your manager. Just accept it. Now, stand up.”

The big brother was dragged by the little brother. Gaeul giggled and looked at them until the door closed behind them. This company seemed to have some very interesting people.

Chapter 600

“Why are there so many people who are good at acting these days?”

Joomin sat down while sighing. Dongho also nodded.

“Apparently, he’s training to be an idol.”

“An idol?”

“You didn’t know that, noona?”

“I didn’t.”

“I asked and apparently he’s going to make his debut soon.”

“An idol, huh. Is that why he looks polished?”

The two people looked at the boy they were talking about. Maru also followed their eyes. Ever since New Semester started its school bullying arc, they got a new character, which was played by him. He had joined them a while ago and was shooting with them.

“Are idols equivalent to general entertainers these days?” Joomin wondered as she rested her chin on her hands.

“They do everything. Don’t you think he’ll gain quite a bit of popularity when he makes his debut? What do you think, noona? Does his face work on girls?”

“Well, he does have a pretty face. It’s not a face that I like that much, but I don’t hate it either. It’s just moderately good, I guess?”

“Looks like he’ll definitely make it big then. I should’ve tried to be an idol too.”

“With a face like that?”

“What’s so bad about my face?”

“Nothing, I mean that you’ll do well. You should definitely make your debut later. Oh, yeah. You remember the last time we went to the noraebang together, right?”

Hearing Joomin’s comment, Dongho shut himself up.

If it was about the noraebang, Maru remembered that as well. The always confident and proud Dongho was strangely quiet at the noraebang and thinking that it was strange, Joomin forced him to take the microphone. Following that, a song that completely ignored pitch and rhythm could be heard. Ever since that day, Dongho wouldn’t give a glance to such places.

“Maru, what do you think? Don’t you think he’s pretty good at acting?”

“He is. Producer Park Hoon didn’t make comment about him either.”

“That’s true, he scolded all of us once.”

Joomin seemed a little dejected when she thought about how all of them were scolded before.

“A friend of mine is also preparing to become an idol, and it’s really no joke. Noona, you haven’t seen aspiring idols during training, have you? They learn something every single hour like squirrels on squirrel wheels. There are those that only prepare their singing and dancing, but these days, the trend is for them to compose and write their own songs or even do acting.”

Dongho locked his fingers and put them behind his head.

“That makes me worried. Do you think we need to learn some specialties too?”

“I thought you majored in chemical engineering. Why don’t you go with a smart image? You should go to Seoul University then.”

“Seoul University isn’t the name of someone’s dog’s house. It’s not a place you can get into just because you want to. Anyways, Dongho, why don’t you go with an actor who’s terrible at singing?”

“Stop teasing. There are only four verses in the national anthem, yet you were trying to sing a fifth. I’m never going to a noraebang again.”

“Let’s go again. I think that was the biggest laughing moment in my life. Where would I see something like that again?”

While Joomin and Dongho quarrelled with each other, Maru read the text he got from her yesterday.

-I signed the contract. I guess this is the beginning for me now, too. I feel uneasy, but I’m more excited than uneasy. I feel like I’m getting a sense of belonging here already. Since I’m doing this, my aim is to be an actress with 10 million views!

He could imagine her jumping around while making that text. Everything had changed now. While they might have started off on the same line, her life had definitely taken a different path now. The steering wheel of the car that was driving down the road of life had been turned. It turned onto a new road, and ahead was the unknown. Her life of entering a theater troupe had been erased. What was left was a blank diary that would be written over.

“What is it? Did something good happen?” Joomin asked.

“A friend of mine signed a contract with an agency. Her dream was to become an actress, so I’m relieved. I was actually quite worried.”

“Which agency?”

“Hwan.”

“That’s a good place. I’ve never been there, but there are many good rumors about them.”

Joomin’s words put him at ease one more time. He checked over and over again, but since this was related to her, he couldn’t help but be concerned about it. Whenever people around him said that Hwan was a good agency, he felt relieved, and at those times, he realized just how much he loved her.

He was about to put his phone away after checking the text when his phone vibrated. He got another text from her.

-There’s something I didn’t tell you yesterday. You probably won’t be seeing this right away since you’re in a shoot, right? It’s about the stage name. It’s been decided that I’ll go with Han Gaeul. The president likes it so call me Han Gaeul a lot in the future. Apparently, being called by my stage name will make me lucky. While I don’t believe in things like that, now that I’m in such a situation myself, I end up believing

it. You're the first one to know that my stage name is Han Gaeul. Of course, except mom and the president. Work hard during the shooting. Also, thanks.

"Han Gaeul."

Maru rolled that name several times in his mouth. It was a name that made him smile warmly. Han Gaeul. He decided to call her that loudly the next time they met.

"Uhm, Han Maru, right?"

Maru raised his head when he heard a voice interrupt his thoughts. The actor that was participating in the drama as the bullied kid for three episodes was standing in front of him.

"Uh, yeah."

While they were introduced to each other as a group, he never got to know this person personally. Other than the fact that his name was Song Siwoo and that he was an aspiring idol, he knew nothing about him. The fact that he was an aspiring idol was also something he just found out thanks to Dongho.

"Do you perhaps know Heewon and Haewon?"

"Heewon and Haewon?"

Just as he was thinking that they were unfamiliar names, the name Hwasoo High flashed past his mind. He was reminded of the faces of the brothers he met last year. The lazy-looking big brother and the very quick-witted little brother. The big brother was Lee Heewon and the little brother was Lee Haewon.

"I do."

"I knew it. A couple of peculiar kids entered our agency last year. Lee Heewon and Lee Haewon. It was pretty peculiar since the little brother is the manager of the big brother. I talked to them out of curiosity and we ended up talking about you."

"Really? So he got into an agency too, huh. Why would you talk about me though?"

"Haewon said that it was thanks to you that they could join the agency."

"I didn't do anything. I just told them the location of Film, the academy. The fact that he managed to join an agency probably means that he stood out even at Film."

Lee Heewon. He was a peculiar guy. He didn't have a clear image of the guy since he only met the guy a couple of times, but the acting he showed was deeply engraved in his mind. Perhaps that was what it would look like at the epitome of instinctive acting. His acting did not use any of the standard methods or gestures of acting and yet still managed to pop out. It was something that only he could do. If another young actor tried to imitate the way he acted, it would either be overly exaggerated or look strange.

"Do you know Heewon well?"

"No, I only met him a couple of times."

"Really? From what Haewon said, it sounded like you were close."

"I talked to Haewon for a bit, so I guess I'm closer to him than I am to Heewon. But I still can't call it 'close'. We've never contacted each other since last year. Oh, I guess I did receive a message of thanks. Anyways, why would you come to me to ask about Lee Heewon?"

"Because he's pretty strange. We get the same acting lessons, and what should I call it... it feels like he's living in a world of his own. The instructor doesn't touch him either and just gives him assignments."

"Why didn't you try talking to him?"

"He couldn't be bothered with anything in life, so I don't get a satisfying answer even if I ask him something. Having Haewon next to him makes it a little better, but Heewon is the only one there during practice. Oh, yeah. Did you hear this from him as well? That he can see colors from emotions?"

"I did. He said it himself."

"Do you think that makes sense?"

"I don't see why it would not."

In a world where a dead man comes back to life, what wouldn't make sense? Maru smiled as he looked at Siwoo.

"Acting is something hard to describe, isn't it? Heewon should feel like that too."

"Is that how it is?"

Siwoo scratched his head before flinching and taking a step back. He seemed to have realized that Dongho and Joomin were staring at him. Siwoo, who probably had no idea that he was the topic of conversation until just now, looked at the two people alternately, clearly clueless.

"Uhm, can I ask you one thing?" Joomin asked.

"Ah, yes."

"I heard that you were an aspiring idol, am I right?"

"Yes. We formed a team and we're getting ready. I think we'll be able to make our debut soon."

"Idols usually sing and dance, don't they? Do you have to learn acting too?"

"Hm, these days, the boundary between the two has thinned quite a lot. It's thanks to the seniors of TTO. Before, everyone glared at idols when they were trying to do acting, but it's not like that these days. In fact, I believe that making a debut as an idol has its advantages."

"That's true."

Joomin nodded. Her expression wasn't that bright. Rather than being dissatisfied with idols, it seemed that she was worried about the fact that the position of actors was being narrowed.

"Isn't it hard to act while being an idol?" Dongho asked.

His words contained thorns. Siwoo also seemed to have noticed the dissatisfaction in his gaze and smiled awkwardly.

"I've never taken acting lightly. I'm putting in just as much effort as the others, if not more. I can't have people swearing at all idols because of me."

"No, well. It's a world where focusing on one thing is hard enough, and focusing on two things is a bit...."

Just as Dongho got up to that point, Maru covered Dongho's mouth. Dongho flinched before moving his head backwards.

"You were good. I'm sure you'll become a good actor."

"Ah, uh. Thanks. I'm also watching your acting a lot. I think I have a lot to learn from you. It'd be good to talk again later. We're friends who are both learning acting, aren't we?"

Siwoo slightly bowed before returning to Yeseul and Giwoo. Yeseul, who was glaring at this side, probably because of Siwoo, turned her eyes away. Giwoo was maintaining his polite smile.

"You should've been harsh on him at this opportunity!"

"You know well that that's no different from embarrassing yourself. He's good at acting. Isn't that good enough? Not only that, he can dance and sing as well. You said it yourself, didn't you? That idols have a huge amount of practice to do. If you look down on something he's practiced so hard to gain, what does that make us, who are on a similar level to him?"

"I know, but it's annoying. You know it too, don't you? That acting is only a form of insurance for them. If it doesn't work out for him, he'll just change lanes to singing and dancing and come back later. I don't like that."

"Do you think he's going to beat you at acting?"

"Me? Hell no!"

"Then there's nothing to worry about, right?"

"That's true, but still."

"Now then. Let's have a look at the script one more time. Being harsh on him when he came here to greet us with a smile is something you shouldn't do. If you want to tell him that acting is not something you do on the side, you should prove that during the shoot. You should just get the producer to tell you that you're on a different level. Of course, I can't do that, but what about you, noona?"

"I think Dongho's going to do something big today. I'll be cheering for you. Should I tell the director that Dongho's resolve is different today?"

"F-forget it! I just tried saying it. Do you have to go this far?"

Dongho turned his head away violently like a horse. He was really easy to handle. Maru exchanged gazes with Joomin and smiled.

"Ah! Hwan!"

Dongho suddenly shouted when he just started reading the script.

"What the heck was that all of a sudden?"

“It’s Hwan.”

“What?”

“He’s also in Hwan.”

Dongho pointed at Siwoo who was sitting behind Maru.

“His agency is Hwan?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you say that a friend of yours joined Hwan? That person is not going to start off as an idol and switch to being an actor later, right?”

“You’re being too worried. It’s not like that, so don’t worry about it.”

Rather than that, if she was in Hwan, she might have met the brothers already. Maru texted with one hand to her, Gaeul, about the two brothers.

-Is there someone named Heewon there? If there is, try to stay close to him. You should be able to learn a lot of things from him. You won’t understand him since his acting is peculiar, but it will still help to broaden your horizons.

He hit the confirm button. A winged-envelope special character appeared on the screen before it disappeared.

“Shall we go through our lines?”

That was Giwoo’s voice. Maru looked at the two next to him before standing up. Gathering at Giwoo’s signal before the shoot began had become a routine for them. Giwoo was now clearly at the center of the young actors.

“Let’s go,” Maru said