

## Once Again 601

### Chapter 601

Park Hoon took his eyes off the monitor and stood up. The actors all looked at him.

“Cut. Let’s take a break. Also, Yeseul, Giwoo.”

When he waved, the two kids came towards him.

“It’s hot, isn’t it?”

“Eh? No, it’s not that hot.”

“If it’s not hot, why are you all wobbly like you’re having a heatstroke?”

Yeseul became quiet after his reply. Park Hoon then looked at Giwoo.

“Kang Giwoo.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think you have everything perfect since I tell you that you’re good? Maintain your emotions until the end. Don’t get loose just because you’re outside the frame. You’re not at a level where you can pick up and put down emotions in a blink of an eye, are you?”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Don’t do things you’ll be sorry about. You’re killing me because you stop when you can clearly do more. Okay? Also, Ahn Yeseul. Get yourself together. If I see you turn your head to the fans one more time, I will quit shooting today, you understand?”

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

He waved at them to go away. The two of them bowed before walking off.

“Director Park. Seems you’re giving those two the proper treatment now, huh?”

“Senior, don’t say that. I’m just scolding them because they’re dazed out.”

“That’s what I call proper treatment. How long do you think I’ve known you for? You don’t even talk to those that you don’t like. Seeing you pick specific people out and scold them, I already have an understanding. So you’re supporting those two.”

Park Hoon looked at Hwang Joonghoon, who came and sat next to him. He was the eldest member on the shooting set of New Semester and a senior he personally respected. He was one of the rare actors who could perform intense actions like rolling on asphalt despite the fact that he was nearing 60 in age.

“This is why I can’t say anything in front of you. I feel like you know me better than I do.”

“I can tell from looking. So the one you’re pushing is the boy side, huh? Kang Giwoo, that boy’s pretty decent.”

“Yeah, he’s a good seedling. When I touch him he shows change immediately. I don’t want to touch those that sulk when I point things out, but if I see people trying to improve like that, then I want to keep supporting them. Yeseul became okay recently, but she has a tendency to rely on Giwoo. That’s why, in order to raise Yeseul’s skill, I need Giwoo to do better.”

“You should compliment them from time to time. They’re still young kids. How are you going to handle it if they sulk without knowing that you did it for their sake?”

“If I can’t tell that much, I should quit being a director. Oh yeah, I have some chocolate. Would you like some?”

“I don’t eat such things because of my blood sugar.”

“Oh, looks like I’ll have to prepare some tea next time then. It’s become quite warm since we entered May. Are you doing okay lately?”

“Me? I’m nothing without my health.”

“I saw you on TV yesterday. Are you okay with doing another historical drama? I saw that you’re going to have to roll around in the mountains.”

“Isn’t that my specialty? It’d be bland if a historical drama with me in it didn’t have such a scene. The directors seem to want that as well.”

“Still, you should use a stuntman if you want to look after your body. If you get injured, you’ll be in a world of trouble.”

“It’s been 38 years since I’ve been doing this business. If something was going to happen, it would have happened a long time ago. Rather than that, those kids seem like they don’t get tired of standing there all day.”

Park Hoon looked at ‘those kids’ that Jonghoon was talking about. He saw some students gathered at the entrance of the school. Most of them were girls, and they had cheering messages written with highlighter on banners that were tied around their necks. They were Ahn Yeseul’s fans, who had been showing up every weekend for a while.

“They’ll tire themselves out soon enough.”

“Shouldn’t you at least give them water or something? It should be hard standing there all day.”

“Sheesh, senior. Your generosity is your greatest downfall. If you give those kids something, they’ll bring more next time. These days, girls like that are scary. They claim themselves to be fans but they practically stalk the people they like, and sometimes, they appear at shooting locations that we’ve scouted even before we get there. I wonder where the information is leaking.”

“They’re thankful people. What do you think an actor lives off of? It’s the interests of those kinds of people.”

“Honestly, isn’t it the money paid to you by the TV stations?”

“Hey, you know what I’m getting at here. Anyways, Yeseul has it good. She has so many fans already.”

"I'm worried since she keeps getting distracted by them. It's not like I want her to look stiff all the time, but like this, she's all wobbly like molten ice cream."

"That happens to everyone who's receiving attention for the first time. You know that better than anyone. You shouldn't be so cruel."

"I'm telling her about it so that she doesn't get a celebrity complex. You know that they don't know what's right and wrong if they attract attention at such a young age. I've seen too many promising kids who fell from popularity after thinking that they were bigshots just because the adults around them complimented them a little."

"There are kids like that."

"So don't act so generously towards the kids either, senior Hwang. These days, I can see that the kids go look for you after getting a scolding from me."

"Maybe they like me."

"You're turning me into the villain?"

"It's fine, isn't it? You've always been evil. It's not the first time this happened."

"Someone might misunderstand that I've been evil since I was born if they heard you."

Yeseul! - he could hear the fans shout from afar. Yeseul waved her hands at the fans before looking his way and turning around.

"Don't scold her. It's not like she can completely ignore them."

"Hey, little one! Aren't you going to restrict them properly!"

Park Hoon shouted at the youngest recruit of the direction team. The quick-witted member ran towards the school entrance.

"If I was under you, I would've quit already."

"Senior, I'm not such a bad guy, you know? I just have a slightly louder voice than others, and I'm a little more sensitive."

"Sure you are."

Joonghon laughed before pointing at someone else.

"That one, the one that joined us recently. He's pretty good too."

"You mean Song Siwoo? You know early education is the trend these days, right? Unlike when you were in your prime, kids get educated starting at five, you know? I was flabbergasted when I was introduced to a kid, who turned out to be a trainee at a pretty famous company. These days, these agencies just take anyone they think is promising. I wonder where they get all their money from."

"You don't seem to like that, director Park?"

“It’s somewhat funny for me to talk about who is and who isn’t a proper actor in front of you, senior, but the basic criteria for actors in my opinion is that they must have experienced life. Being young is completely fine and all, but do you know what I think when I see kids who have received top-quality education like a flower raised in a greenhouse? I think, ‘wow, so robots with elastic skin can make expressions huh’ - just that. Even if they’re young, they can polish a splendid foundation with a variety of experiences. However, when I see kids acting in front of me like they are something after being fed their food their entire life like some rich young master, I get frustrated to death. There are definitely good ones among the young actors. When you have a close look at them though, they’ve experienced a lot of ups and downs in their life. I’m not saying that a good actor cannot emerge from a good environment, but kids like that don’t have that raw tastefulness. What would they know when they’ve been treated like an actor their whole life?”

“There you go again. Eating good food and seeing good things can allow people to do good acting. It’s not like you think that experiencing hardships is everything, do you? You’re way too old fashioned. If it’s your brain, I think it’s even older than mine.”

Park Hoon sighed softly.

“I know that the trend is teaching them at an early stage, and I can’t help that, but child actors are appearing by the dozen like they’re some mass-produced goods. When I look at them, it makes me wonder if it’s me or the world that’s going crazy.”

“Be more flexible. If you keep living like that, you won’t live a long life.”

“Don’t you think it’s worrying, senior Hwang? When you see all of the kids acting like they’ve learned from the same book?”

“It’s the era that changed, so don’t keep bothering yourself with it. Director Park, you already know what kind of actor survives in the industry, don’t you? No matter how much the world changes, the public only wants one thing when they watch TV. That is, actors that make them excited. If they have the talent, even if they look like they’re injection-molded plastic, they’ll show their unique acting one day, and if they don’t, then they’ll just become one of those so-so actors like me.”

“If you’re a so-so actor, then there would be less than ten actors in the country who can call themselves that. Try telling that to the kids, they’ll be in an uproar.”

“I knew it, you’re the only one who cares about me.”

Joonghoon smiled in satisfaction before massaging his shoulders.

“Don’t do that. The kids will swear at me if they see this. They’ll think that a young person like me is ordering around a senior.”

“Stop grumbling. That’s what you do to me all the time. Anyways, how long are you going to keep doing this?”

It was rather sudden, and there was no context, but Park Hoon could only smile bitterly.

“I wonder about that too.”

“Don’t you like deeper stuff, director Park? Like thrillers. I wonder why you’re holding on to such a cheerful one like this one.”

“I do it because the president told me to. Plus, there was no one to do it too since the mini-series lineup was screwed. Above all, I don’t see any good works from any good writers. Well, I am contacting one, but it’s still unknown if that will come to fruition or not.”

“You were contacting one?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the genre?”

“A romantic thriller.”

“A what thriller?”

“A romantic thriller. Don’t you think it sounds cool?”

“Cool my ass. Did you change your tendencies since you’ve been doing flowery dramas lately?”

“Senior Hwang. One of the biggest elements of a successful drama is the twist, isn’t it? I tried reading the novel, and it was pretty interesting. The writer never worked on writing scenario scripts before, so I would probably have to have a proper script writer work with her, but the story progression is really good. If it does come to fruition, I’ll start preparing from the 4th, no, the 3rd quarter even if it means that I hand this over to someone else.”

“Your eyes are sparkling. You seemed to have taken a liking to it, huh?”

“You sure got that right. If I do it, help me out a little, will you? It’s a minor one, so we won’t get a lot of funds, meaning I can’t pay you much.”

“Why don’t you rip me off instead? Well, if it’s something you’re trying seriously, I can’t miss out. I want to do something proper with you while my body still lasts.”

“A verbal promise is still a promise okay? You can’t come to me and say no later.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll do it.”

Joonghoon yawned before looking at the school field. Park Hoon also yawned. The sunlight in May was in itself a strong sleeping drug. There was even a cool wind, so he felt like he could sleep until the next day if he closed his eyes right now.

“That one, that one over there,” Joonghoon pointed at a boy near the goalpost.

“I like him too. He’s a kid, but his acting isn’t too overdone. I’m not sure about veteran beauty, but he looks like he knows what acting is.”

“If it’s him, I’ve already been taking note of him. One of my colleague producers used him for a brief moment as a minor actor. It was the role of a murderer, which is hard for a kid to do, and he did really well. It did feel like Ahn Joohyun received it well, but without a solid foundation, he couldn’t have acted like that.”

“You said that the one you’re planning to do is a romantic thriller, right?”

“Yes. If I do it, I’m taking him as well. If I give him a role, he’ll do better than I expect him to.”

“What about Kang Giwoo then?”

“He’s good too, but how should I put this.... He’s good at acting, but he doesn’t have that attraction. You know how people prefer infighters when it comes to boxers even though they get beaten up horribly? Outfighters can become popular, but they’d have to be really good, but Giwoo isn’t on that level yet.”

“Why? I like him because he’s polite.”

“Acting isn’t based on politeness, is it? Also, I don’t like people who are too clean. Maybe because I’m not that clean myself, but looking at someone who’s too clean makes me feel like they aren’t human. In that sense, that boy is moderately not clean. Well, he said he’s going to be an actor for money, so that says a lot about him.”

Park Hoon turned his phone on to have a look at the time. It was about time to resume the shoot.

“Senior, I’m going to resume the shoot. Please get ready.”

“Alrighty.”

“Assistant director! Have everyone on standby!”

“Yes!”

Park Hoon dusted off his pants and stood up.

## **Chapter 602**

“The director is looking at us.”

“I slightly bit my tongue when I said my line, did he notice that? Man, he has the ears of a bat.”

Dongho avoided Park Hoon’s gaze and turned around. Joomin also seemed to have done something wrong as she was fidgeting while pulling on the net on the goal.

“I think both of you did pretty well though,” Maru said as he turned around with the script.

He personally didn’t find anything wrong with the two people’s acting. Dongho said that he screwed up his line slightly, but from how the director didn’t stop the shoot and continued, it was either a small mistake that the director didn’t mind or a mistake that looked natural even through the camera. The director wasn’t someone who would be okay with mistakes in his work, so the fact that he continued rolling the camera without stopping it signified that there were no problems.

In fact, what caught Maru’s eye was Yeseul’s acting. At the beginning of the shoot, she was clearly way too tense, and now she looked way too loose. She seemed to be trying to show herself as an actress who can do things at a leisurely pace, but to Maru, she looked like an athlete after running at full speed. There was no way the director couldn’t notice her bad acting. The fact that he called out Giwoo and Yeseul privately was probably to warn them.

The reason Yeseul couldn't act properly was probably due to the fans that came here to see her. Maru had a look at the students who peeked from everywhere throughout the shooting set despite the shouts from the assistant director. There were fans who passionately cheered for her. It wasn't that he couldn't understand why Yeseul was slightly agitated. It was an actor's desire to do well in front of an audience. Perhaps it couldn't be helped that Yeseul couldn't get used to the change in atmosphere on the shooting set. It was the director's job to set her straight and guide her down the right path since he was responsible for the whole shoot.

"They're still here," Dongho said as he looked at Yeseul's fans.

They were waving panels that contained Yeseul's name, character by character, above their heads. They seemed to have some sort of a fan chant as well. He couldn't hear it because he was too far away, but he could definitely make out the three characters Ahn, Ye, and Seul. Despite being girls, their voices sure were loud. Maru thought that they should strive to be singers.

"What's so good about Ahn Yeseul? And why are they all girls? Don't girls usually have guy fans?"

"You don't get it. The most loyal fans are mostly women. Why do you think TV stations usually target women in their 20s and 30s when they make their programs? It's because men don't open their wallets that easily. Girls, however, open their wallets without hesitation for the content they like," Joomin said.

"You know a lot, noona. So you used to chase around actors like that too, huh?"

"Well, it wasn't for an actor, but I did camp outside a TV station to see a singer I liked. That was back in middle school."

"Wow, you were a girl too, huh? I thought you were a bro until now."

"Hey, if you don't fix your attitude, you'll live alone for your entire life. This noona is advising you out of concern. You don't want to go to the afterlife after living a solitary life without a girlfriend, do you?"

Dongho became quiet. He probably felt something from that. Maru faintly smiled and walked up to the two.

"Looks like the shoot should begin soon. Give me the cups, I'll put them away."

He got the empty cups from Dongho and Joomin and placed them behind the goalpost. It was outside the camera frame.

"Actors, please stand by! We're resuming the shoot!"

The camera started moving left and right on the rails. The camera director checked the camera feed before looking at Park Hoon. Maru saw some hand signals between the two. It seemed that they were ready.

"Dongho, have fun out there."

"God, this will be tiring."

This scene was a soccer scene. It was a mixed-gender match, and they just had to run around with the background actors who had been waiting since morning. As for Maru, perhaps due to his character's

personality, he was given the role of the goalkeeper. Thanks to that, he could stay comfortable at the goalpost and just get into posture whenever the camera looked at him.

“Hey, it’s going your way!”

“Run!”

The ball was mostly passed between Giwoo, Jichan, and Dongho. The camera busily slid across the rails to capture the three. After that, the ball was passed to Yeseul who started dribbling by herself. She looked pretty cool when she kicked the ball once and started running after it with all of her might. Pretty girls looked pretty no matter what they did. She seemed to have done some sports when she was young as her running posture looked quite convincing. Okseon and Joomin marked each other and were at odds even when neither of them had the ball. The writer seemed to think that it was interesting to put these two together as they seemed to be at odds with each other quite often in recent episodes. This was on top of the conflicting relationship between Yeseul and Okseon.

Removed from the fierce and flowery atmosphere was Siwoo, who was running on the school field with a dejected expression. As he had the role of the transfer student who’s getting bullied, he was, directly and indirectly, being bullied by the other kids. The three main characters, Yeseul, Jichan, and Giwoo were unrelated to the bullying. The main characters had to be cool even when they were evil. However bullying was an act of maliciousness that could not be packaged with the word ‘cool’, so the main characters weren’t directly related to Siwoo’s bullying problem yet.

After running around, the actors all stopped. While everyone caught their breaths, Siwoo’s acting began. The minor actors, like Siwoo, had joined for the bullying episode and they all pushed Siwoo as they ran past him. They were the perpetrators of the bullying. Siwoo, who tried to participate in the whole match with his classmates until the end, was eventually pushed out of the field. Siwoo looked at the others running inside the field like a lighthouse on a solitary island. The camera, which had filmed the whole process, stopped in front of Siwoo and the director made a cut there. Maru stretched his body out as he walked towards the center of the field.

“Han Maru, don’t you think that you have it too easy?”

“I want to just stand there too, doing nothing.”

“Maru, wanna switch?”

The main characters all spoke to him. Maru shrugged before looking at the director, who was coming towards them.

“You were good, everyone. It does look better now that you all aren’t being conscious of the camera. Jichan, you seem to have kicked some balls when you were little, huh?”

“Yes. I quite like soccer.”

“I’m planning to add a scene where you dribble with the ball, so have fun kicking the ball from the goal line to the half-line. Dongho and Giwoo should take either side. You can shoot too, right?”

“Yes!”

“That’s some good confidence. Han Maru, you bored?”



“No, I like it this way.”

“Today, you look like you’re having an easier time than me.”

“This isn’t bad from time to time.”

Park Hoon chuckled before continuing,

“After we shoot the shooting scene at the goal, we’re going to switch over to the faucet scene. There, the three of you will find out that something bad is happening to Siwoo. Now, you gotta bring that part to life. It’s not a conviction, but a suspicion. I’m going to close in on your faces, so don’t put on too much makeup. I know that the boys put a lot of strength when washing their hair, but wash your hair so that it looks like you’re taking it easy.”

“Yes.”

“Let’s finish things off nicely before we eat lunch. Now, get ready for the shoot. Oh, Han Maru. Try clenching your fists and jump.”

Maru clenched his fists while wearing the goalkeeper gloves and jumped. He even shouted ‘yes!’ in an energetic voice.

“Good, we’re going to take a cut of that, so do exactly that. Well then, get into positions!”

The director went back to his monitoring position.

“You get a cut too, huh?”

Dongho came up to Maru and giggled. Maru smacked Dongho’s chin with his fist.

“You go do your thing.”

“Fine, I’ll run around like hell.”

The shoot resumed amidst a liberating atmosphere. There was an energy of freedom from the kids who ran around with all their might without being conscious of the camera. Some of them couldn’t have ordinary school lives because of their work as actors and those people seemed to be really enjoying this moment as they just laughed even when they fell over before getting up and running again. The director did not shout cut and captured everything on video. He looked pretty satisfied.

After dribbling the ball and shooting it into the net, Jichan caught his breath while Maru was being shot. There were no detailed instructions and it seemed that the cut would only be used as a montage. Maru decided to jump high and cheerfully and bring out the most of Lee Chan’s personality. Maru did just as the director instructed him to. He jumped with all his might and then fidgeted in embarrassment.

“Well then, let’s clean up and go to the next part.”

The staff moved the equipment in a hurry. It was 1 p.m. They would only be able to eat after finishing this scene. The actors gathered at the faucet area installed in one corner of the school field. They washed their faces and hair just as the director told them to. The girls had water sprayed onto their hair since they could not tolerate their hair looking like seaweed.

“Siwoo, you’re going to have to fall back. You can do that, right?”

“Yes.”

A camera was located behind Siwoo. There was a mattress right below the camera, and the opposing actor just had to push Siwoo over and Siwoo would fall onto the mattress.

The progression was pretty fast since it was right before lunch time. After doing one rehearsal, Park Hoon started the shoot immediately.

Maru stood opposite Siwoo and observed his expression. Personally speaking, he quite liked Siwoo’s acting. His movements were clean without any unnecessary movements and his pronunciation was clear. Leaving aside a unique character, there was a lot to learn from him when it came to acting skill alone.

Siwoo was pushed back and he fell over. As expected of an idol who had a harsh training regime, he had no hesitation when he fell over. Siwoo fell over on the mat and he stood up again when the director gave the cut sign.

“Siwoo, I like that you don’t have any hesitation, but you’re trying to show off too much. Remember that you’re supposed to get pushed powerlessly and then fall because you misstep. It’s not about falling over in a cool fashion.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Good, let’s do that again.”

They did the same shoot and the director once again shouted cut with a sour expression.

“Song Siwoo. Come over here.”

The director looked at Siwoo and the monitor alternately. They talked about something and Siwoo’s expression didn’t look that good.

“Can you do that again?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. Let’s do that once again and go with the best one.”

Please take care of me - Siwoo said to the opposing actor before falling over on the mattress again. This time, he seemed to have pushed off quite strongly unlike before. The director shook his head as soon as Siwoo landed on the mattress.

“You’re overdoing it. Let’s just go with the one before. Still, you did well. Let’s wrap things up and have lu...”

Park Hoon paused mid-way. Maru was stretching his arms out, wondering what the menu was for lunch when he noticed a stare from Park Hoon, which made him blink several times.

“Hey, Han Maru.”

“Yes.”

“You’re good with your body, aren’t you? I think I heard something about you.”

“I’m not that good.”

“So you are good to a certain extent. Hey, take your glasses off and stand in front of the camera. You know how to fall over, right?”

“Do I just have to fall over?”

“If you know, then do it.”

It seemed that Park Hoon didn’t like the cuts he took. Maru took his glasses off and handed them to Dongho before standing in front of the camera. His hairstyle was similar to Siwoo’s so it wouldn’t look that strange if it was just the back figure that was being filmed. His build was slightly larger, but it would only last an instant, so that shouldn’t be a problem either.

“One, two, three, cue!”

At the signal, Maru took a step back before falling down. He imagined that the mattress wasn’t there and twisted his body as much as possible. When falling over, a person was bound to reach out towards the ground. There was no one who just fell over on their backs. The white mattress reached his face. Maru was now lying down on his stomach when he heard Park Hoon’s voice.

“Hey, that’s good. Let’s go get lunch!”

Park Hoon tapped Maru’s head.

### **Chapter 603**

Maru had gotten used to eating lunch boxes at the shooting location now. He opened the plastic lid and started eating when he felt a presence behind him.

“Can I eat with you?”

It was Song Siwoo.

“Do whatever you want. It’s not like anyone owns this place.”

As soon as he said those words, Siwoo sat next to him. Dongho, who sat opposite to him, twitched his eyes and spoke,

“What made you come here today? Instead of going to Ahn Yeseul’s side?”

“Uhm, if you don’t want me here, I’ll go somewhere else.”

Siwoo didn’t seem flustered at all and looked straight at Dongho’s face as he said those words. Instead, Dongho was the one who made some weird hand gestures before saying ‘that’s not what I mean’. As pouty as he was, Dongho was kind at heart and compromised with himself as soon as his opponent acted upright.

“I did get used to it, but it does hurt me to see other people looking at me like that. Sometimes, I wonder if idols shouldn’t be acting,” Siwoo said in a small voice.

"It's not like there's a law that forbids idols from acting, so don't worry about it. Dongho's just a bit twisted, and he doesn't actually hate you so just be understanding. Isn't that right, Dongho?"

"Of course. I'm not that petty."

Dongho told Siwoo to quickly start eating. Finding that funny, Joomin continuously slapped Dongho's arm as she laughed.

"Maru, isn't this guy pretty cute from time to time?"

"Dongho is pretty cute."

"He's like a total kid. When are you going to grow up?"

"You're both bullying me again. Just get eating."

Dongho hurriedly picked up his lunch box and started eating.

You're gonna choke - Maru pushed the drink in front of him over to Dongho's side before looking at Siwoo.

"So there are similar happenings in other places too?"

"It doesn't happen that much, but when I meet people who don't see me in a good light, I kinda end up regretting that I started doing this. Despite the fact that I'm putting a lot of effort in, you know?"

"You're like a mutant who popped out of nowhere after all. You suddenly barged into an already stable ecosystem and started eating everything in sight, so there are bound to be people who won't look at you in a good light. Rumors always circulate around rich households. It's proof that things are going well, so just ignore what you don't want to listen to."

"My president said something similar. That half of the words from adults are from pride and the other half are from their conservative nature. That's why I don't need to listen to them that deeply."

Only after Siwoo finished did he smile and pick up his chopsticks. They ate while talking about trivial stuff like the weather.

"Uhm. Can I ask you something?"

Maru looked at Siwoo as he stuffed his mouth with some rice. What entered his view was Siwoo's lunch box. Siwoo had left all the fried food untouched.

"Aren't you going to eat those?"

"Hm? Oh, these? I have to maintain a strict diet. I'm only going to eat fried food after the debut. I'm going to have to shoot a debut soon after all."

"Then I'll take it, okay? As compensation for answering your question."

Maru poked one chopstick into the shrimp tempura and put it in his mouth. He suddenly had a thought when he put it in his mouth - that he should not take up roles that had to look skinny. He seriously didn't have the confidence to control his weight.

“So, what do you want to know about?” he asked after swallowing the shrimp tempura.

“Back there, at the faucet.”

Dongho and Joomin, who had almost finished their lunches as well, also took interest in their conversation. They closed in with drinks in their hands.

“Why do you think I wasn’t able to get an okay sign?”

“Everything other than the falling over part was okay. Falling over is something that’s not that related to acting. Well, in a broader sense, it is, but it’s more about using your body.”

“That’s what I don’t understand. I thought that I fell over really well, but the director said he didn’t like it. Falling onto a mat is something that happens often when I’m practicing choreography, so it shouldn’t have looked that awkward.”

“Do you remember what the director said to you?”

“That I’m trying to look cool? I never intended to.”

“He put it that way, but he probably meant something different.”

“What did he mean?”

“You weren’t afraid. You fell over too cleanly.”

Maru closed the lid of his lunch box since he finished it. Siwoo seemed to be thinking about what happened back then as he was staring at his own legs.

“Dongho, give it to me if you’re finished. You too, noona. I’ll collect them and throw them away at once.”

He stacked the lunch boxes and stood up before moving. He handed over the trash to the car that brought the lunch boxes and went to grab four cups of coffee from the vending machine inside the school. He grabbed one cup with his mouth and the other three with his hands. Just as he approached the three who were sitting on the platform, he heard Siwoo’s voice.

“Then how should I have fallen over?”

“Just throw your body.”

“I think I did that.”

“Should I have looked afraid like what Maru said? No, that can’t be right. It shouldn’t matter since my face wasn’t in the camera.”

Maru joined the three people who were talking among themselves.

“You’re still talking about that?”

“What do you mean by I wasn’t afraid? I took a few steps too before I fell back,” Siwoo asked.

“Take this first.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“Dongho and Noona, you too.”

“Thanks.”

Maru sipped on the coffee before starting to talk.

“It generally varies from director to director according to their preferences. While there are some that like falling over refreshingly and don’t look at other things, there are people who place importance on detailed expression even if the movements look a little awkward. Director Park Hoon is sort of in the middle since he’ll be fine with any extras as long as the actor expresses the things he wants them to. Trying to look cool, exaggerating - when he uses these words, he’s not asking for the clarity of the movements. He’s for the actor to describe the situation the character is in a little bit more.”

“I think I did what the director told me to do.”

“You did, but it wasn’t enough. I’m not entirely sure about this either, so do you still wanna hear it?”

“You got an okay from him. I want to know what I did differently from you. Honestly speaking, I don’t think there was a difference between you and me when I watched you.”

“If it’s just about falling over, maybe. But you know....”

Maru suddenly pushed his hand towards Siwoo’s face. Siwoo was startled and pulled his body back. The coffee in his cup started sloshing and some of it spilled out.

“W-whoa! That startled me.”

“I thought you finished it, sorry about that.”

“I almost finished it and nothing got on my clothes, so it’s fine. But why did you do that all of a sudden? Was there something on my face?”

“No, I thought it’d be easier to show you than to explain to you. This is what I mean by ‘afraid’. It is the most core element that your character needs to have. Throughout the shoot, you shrunk your shoulders and stared at the ground. You were trying to express that you were lacking confidence and that the character was in an extremely defensive state, am I right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Continue that line of thought. Just because something is an action scene, doesn’t mean you can just look at it independently. This is something I’ve heard numerous times when I learned acting. When shooting dramas, the camera usually focuses above the shoulders, right? The camera is angled like that because facial expressions are very important. When the camera is in front of you, you act so that you reflect what the character’s emotions are as much as possible, don’t you? I mean, not just you, but everyone here should be like that.”

Maru looked at Dongho and Joomin after saying those words. They nodded. Siwoo did the same.

“But adding an action scene into that sometimes makes people forget about the context because they’re too focused on the action itself. In your case, you were too focused on falling over, so I think you

probably forgot about the basis of your character. This is just my opinion, so you have to ignore most of it, okay?”

“Okay. Please continue. I think I’m beginning to understand.”

“You’re in a situation where you’re surrounded by bullies. Faltering back is just a device to express your emotions, which is fright. However, before that, you have to express what kind of situation made you feel afraid. If I, who doesn’t have any malice towards you, suddenly reach out towards you during our conversation, you’ll falter back in surprise, right? If you didn’t have anything in your hands, you might have put up your hands to defend yourself. That’s a reflexive action. It’s the most principal reaction that does not go through the thought process. If you think back to your acting now, you will find what you did strangely.”

Siwoo contemplated before standing up and walking in front of the platform. He faltered back like there was an imaginary person in front of him before falling on his butt. It seemed that he chose to fall down on his butt since there wasn’t a mattress here.

“I get it. So this is why he told me not to try to look cool.”

Siwoo returned and had spoken with a much brighter expression.

“Continuity is important for acting after all. Even if it’s split up into different cuts, what you need to show in the end is the flow and the context. The director probably didn’t repeat the scene because of the falling part. He was probably dissatisfied with your actions before you fell over.”

“I don’t think I would’ve okay’d that either. I wonder why he didn’t explain it to me though. He only asked me if that was all I could do while monitoring.”

“That’s just director Park Hoon’s style. He doesn’t overly interfere with acting. Even when he gives out directions, he only mentions the general gist of things and leaves the details to the actors. No, rather than leaving it to us, he might not be saying anything because it is our job, not his.”

Maru gave Siwoo some tissues because he saw that the coffee that splashed onto the back of his hand had dried out.

“Shooting for real is definitely different from practice alright. There are a lot more things I need to be concerned about.”

“If you understood that much from just that, I guess you won’t be scolded for your acting wherever you go. You’re much better than me.”

“No way, what are you saying? I only understood thanks to your explanations. If it weren’t for you, I would’ve been stuck thinking about my falling posture, you know? It really was the right thing to ask you. It’s just as Haewon said. You’re like a problem solver.”

“Haewon called me a problem solver?”

“He did. He said that he did the right thing when he consulted you about his worries. Uhm, can I ask you more from time to time?”

“But you won’t be here since it’s your last day here, isn’t it?”

“Just in case. Or am I being too annoying?”

“That’s not entirely false, but...”

Maru reached out with his phone. There was nothing to be lost by making more connections. Moreover, this guy belonged to the same agency as Gaeul. He thought that it would be good to get to know him.

“Thanks. Your explanations were really good. I think I had an easier time understanding than in the classes I received.”

“That’s all I can do. Don’t compare me to fully fledged instructors. It’d be rude. It just so happened that I could explain it to you, so don’t expect any more from me in the future.”

“You know? Hearing that makes me expect even more. Anyway, thank you so much. I feel much more refreshed now. I hope I can see you next time, with Heewoon and Haewon at that time.”

Siwoo thanked him until the end before leaving. Whether it was his agency that taught him, or if that was just his nature, it was really good to see him. Even if it was just a mask, if he maintained that without being found out, that mask might become the truth.

“Han Maru, what’s up with you today?” Dongho said from behind him.

“What?”

“Your explanations were really kind, unlike usual. When I ask you something, you’d usually reply with ‘look at the script’ or ‘think about it yourself’ or ‘is that all you know?’ or something like that. Are you discriminating just because he’s an idol?”

“I did? Am I not the same as always?”

“What the heck are you saying? When Jichan came to you for advice before, you made your face like this and told him ‘my advice will be meaningless to you’. You were so cautious about explaining things to others, yet you’re spilling all the beans today. Are you planning to get close to him and get an idol girlfriend? If it’s like that, let me in too.”

Maru laughed before waving his hand in denial. He was different from his usual self? He scratched his eyebrows and thought about it. When he thought about it now, he did think that he was a little bit harsh. He thought that interfering with other people’s lives was crossing the line, and above all, had no benefit for him.

‘Well, this much advice is fine I guess.’

Wouldn’t it be fine as long as the listener just took what was necessary? He even thought that he restrained a little too much from talking. He thought that there was no reason to actually go that far. Now that he thought about it in retrospect, his actions did feel quite stuffy.

“Maybe this is the original me. The kind Han Maru.”

“Wow, that really doesn’t suit you. Don’t you think so too, noona?”

“Yeah. He definitely isn’t like his usual self.”



Maru shrugged.

He changed? People were bound to change. Staying still without changing was the same as regress, so changing was something positive.

“Never mind that, let’s have a look at the script. We have two scenes left.”

“Right. The phantom of the script wants to look at the script, so we have to look at the script, yes.”

“Shall we start from this point?”

Maru looked at the two people and opened his script.

## **Chapter 604**

Changed, huh. Maru thought about it as he looked at Dongho, who was acting. The words he didn’t think much about during lunch kept reverberating inside his mind. He felt unpleasant as though he was watching his room being messed up. The negative emotions he didn’t know the reason for did not become bigger or smaller. They just exuded their presence as though to prove that they were there, sitting on one corner of the desk in his mind. He tried meditating in order to clean up the desk in his mind, but that minute displeasure did not disappear. Even when he looked at the script, it kept bugging his mind as though someone was calling out to him softly from behind.

Change. In retrospect, it was the thing he wanted the most. Escaping the death of a miserable middle-aged man and creating an environment without any deficiencies, even if it did not look beautiful was far better. Although he maintained passiveness until now, it was still a series of challenges for him, and some of his choices were bold to the point that they could be considered reckless. As a result of them, however, he was where he was right now. He was steadily gaining career experience and connections. There were no problems anywhere. He even managed to play a supporting character in a public TV program before he was even twenty. It wouldn’t be exaggerating to say that he got on the elevator that led to success. It was a series of contradictions where he chose to escape being ordinary to live an ordinary life, but the result was golden, so he could say that there were no worries.

Then why - Maru pressed his fingers between his eyes. It wasn’t that he was tired. He didn’t have a headache either. He needed some pain. Usually, he would’ve stopped thinking about trivial things like that due to the pain. Maru sighed softly when he felt the unpleasant sensation that kept sticking to him. Was it because he didn’t get enough sleep recently due to watching all those videotapes? He glared at the innocent Dongho before picking up his script. The camera did not care about whether he was in a good condition or not. It was crucial for an actor to display their full capabilities no matter the time. He repeated the few lines he had several times to wait out the waiting time. He could feel a part of him still concerned about the word ‘change’ in a corner of his mind, but he intentionally ignored it. It would negatively affect the shoot if he kept thinking about it. It would be enough to think about it after the shoot.

“Han Maru, get ready!”

“Yes.”

He put down the script and entered the camera frame. As soon as he saw the black camera and the transparent lens, he calmed down as though he had never had any of those thoughts. Regardless of the characteristics of the space, he liked stages.

“We’re starting the shoot. Joomin, come a little more inside. Jichan, make sure you make your movements clear. Three, two, one, cue!”

\* \* \*

“What were you thinking about so deeply before?” Joomin asked Maru after finishing the shoot.

This was the first time she saw Maru thinking about something instead of looking at the script during waiting time. He had looked up at the sky, then looked at the ground, shook his legs before calming down again. She found it so unusual that she glanced at him during the shoot as well.

“There was something I needed to think about.”

“Is it something serious? It might be just me, but you looked a little uneasy.”

“I did? Was I that strange?”

“You were. I was even wondering what you were thinking about that it made you like that. But you look okay now. Did you get it cleared up?”

“When I thought about it for a while, I found myself rather pathetic for worrying about such a trivial thing. So I just shook it off.”

“That’s good. I was slightly worried thinking that it was something big.”

“Well, what kind of big things would I be worried about at my age? I just thought about whether changing is a good thing or a bad thing. Earlier, I felt like it was a complex problem that made my head hurt, but from some time onwards, I started thinking that it didn’t matter. It’s not like clinging onto such a useless topic is productive either.”

“Is it because of what Dongho and I said to you before? If it’s like that, you don’t need to mind it. I was just joking. Dongho probably didn’t mean anything much either. We did that because you were just slightly different from usual.”

“So I *was* different from usual?”

Joomin looked at Maru’s eyes. For some reason, she felt that this boy’s eyes, which contained no hesitation before, seemed to be wavering and unable to find the right direction to go. She thought that this was the moment for her to set him straight as a senior.

“It’s not like that. It’s not like we meant anything much when we said it. If you’re still worried about what we said, then just forget about it. You haven’t changed. Of course, you’re changing in the sense that your skills are improving to the point that I can’t find any flaws, but your personality is still the same. I’m saying that you’re good. You treat us well. Dongho was just playing a joke on you when he said that you were coldhearted. Try grabbing anyone here and ask if you are a coldhearted person or not. You’re a good guy, so don’t worry about such things.”

She felt a little proud after saying those words. Maru was always the reliable sort, so it was rather refreshing to see his feeble side like this. Joomin smiled as she looked at Maru.

“Right? It’s not like a person’s nature would change that easily. Thank you, noona. I think you cleared my head up a little.”

“Nah. I am still a senior who has lived a few years more than you. I can tell you things like this anytime. I’ve once worried about the same thing after all.”

“I’ll come to you for consultation from time to time then. Oh, it’s our scene this time. Let’s get ready.”

“Yeah.”

Maru walked forward with his usual faint smile.

“But he really is different from usual,” Joomin said to herself as she looked at Maru getting farther away.

The Maru she knew was proficient in everything which was unlike a high school student. He was someone who sometimes reacted a little too well that it made her feel slightly scared. She never thought that someone like that would have such worries just because he was told that he was ‘different from usual’. Was it because of his age?

In any case, it did look like things went well, so Joomin followed Maru.

\* \* \*

“Thanks for your work. See you next week!”

“Yes, please have a safe trip home.”

Dongho and Joomin waved their hands as they got in the taxi. Maru watched the taxi drive off and turn at a junction before starting to walk. It was 3 p.m. Unlike the main actors, who had shoots until late into the night, the supporting characters had finished all their scenes. Although the shoot ended earlier than usual, Maru felt that today was longer than any other day. It was because of the train of thought that he had.

Fortunately, he no longer had a headache now since he got things cleared up, but until just an hour ago, numerous thoughts filled his head to the point that he was worried about his brain melting from overloading.

Thousands of thoughts popped up into his mind without any commonalities before disappearing at once. As though to reply to the topic of ‘change’, his current and past memories branched out infinitely and brushed past each other at crossroads. In that process, he embraced the excitement of a new challenge that he had forgotten about, tasted the infinite possibilities of youth, and saw the goodness of mankind.

It was to the point that he felt strange for being so cautious when he approached the world until now. Was there a need to draw such a clear line? Why did he suspect people first without first treating them with an act of goodwill? A stable future was good and all, but since he only had one life, shouldn’t he have been more proactive about what he did?

It was the same for interacting with those around him as well. Couldn't he have talked to them more? Why did he not tell his juniors his own experiences and knowledge? What was he so afraid of; what scared him so much that he ended up drawing a line between him and others, and staying away from approaching them more than necessary?

It was a foolish thing to not approach people because of worries of being injured by them. It was fine to hit a wall and break. It didn't matter if people made him disappointed. Why? Because he was still young. While it might not be infinite, he still had a lot of time ahead of him. He could try sidetracking and escaping from ordinary life for a little. Wouldn't it be fine to experience the numerous things he couldn't in his previous life?

"Phew...."

Maru clenched his teeth. He put his hand against the wall of the building right next to him before smashing his head against it. A sharp pain arose. The vortex of thoughts broke apart and his mind became empty.

He leaned against the wall and slid down.

"Just what's the problem?"

Treat others with goodwill? Love challenges and escape the highway to experience many things? What kind of nonsense was that? Those were the kind of thoughts that could only stem from na?vety.

Challenge was a privilege for those that had a place to return, and goodwill was something given when a person had the power to endure betrayal. Didn't he choose to try acting because there was a 300 million won condition to act as a safety device? Why was he trying to package that as a beautiful challenge and induce himself to try out more challenges?

He felt like his head was about to burst. A 'Maru' that he didn't know about kept whispering to him. Return to your pure youth, back to the days when you were a student without any knowledge, back to the days where you enjoyed yourself. And then, withdraw yourself.

Maru closed his eyes and took out his phone. He then deeply pressed his shortcut number. The signal to Gaeul rang inside his ears.

The signal sounded especially long today.

\* \* \*

"Hello?"

Gaeul picked up the call with a smile. A call on the weekend. It seemed that his shoot ended early.

-I was just wondering what you were up to.

"I'm just resting at home of course. My lessons start on Monday."

-Yeah, I guess you should be. You're going to get busy starting Monday.

"Yeah, I will. Anyway, it seems like the shoot ended early for you, huh?"

-Yeah, it did.

After that, Maru didn't say anything for a while. He was probably waiting to play a prank on her again.

"Since you finished early, should we meet up?"

-No, it's fine.

"Really? What's gotten into you? You used to be naggy about definitely having to meet up on weekends."

-Sometimes, we need some time by ourselves. Oh, the bus is here. I'm hanging up then.

"Already?"

-Yeah.

"What the heck? That was boring."

-I had a lot to say before I made the call, but strangely, I now can't find anything to say.

"What happened to you? That was unexpected."

-It's not that surprising, is it...? Anyway, get some good rest.

"Okay, uhm.... What the. Did he just hang up?"

Gaeul quietly stared at her phone. She felt strange since the boy who would never hang up on his own accord ended the call just like that.

"...He must have done it to get on the bus."

It wasn't anything much, but it strangely nagged her mind for some reason.

Gaeul grabbed onto her phone for a long time. She thought about texting him, but she felt like she was getting fussed up over something trivial so she decided not to.

"Why must I care about this? Gosh, I'll forget about it."

It was a problem that she kept adding meaning to everything related to Maru.

Gaeul lay down on the sofa, thinking that she was overthinking things.

## **Chapter 605**

Was her mother going to be late again today? - Gaeul wondered as she opened the door to the refrigerator and took out the salad she made in the morning.

Lately, her mother was spending more time outside than at home. Every weekend, she would usually be wondering whether she should be writing her novel or doing housework, but these days, she kept telling her to look after the house before quickly going out to meet someone. She wondered if it was a man, but it wasn't like that. No, it was a man, but it was purely for work. You can look forward to it - her mother made a suspicious smile as she put on her shoes at the door. Look forward to what?

She put a slice of apple covered in mayonnaise and ketchup in her mouth before going into her room while munching on it. She turned on the power for her computer and opened the messenger program. She said hi to her friends who were online before opening a web browser.

“Is this the one we’re applying to?”

In the middle of the web portal was a banner ad about the Seoul Youth Film Festival for 2005. When she clicked on it, she was greeted by the official homepage, which had a clean blue theme. She moved her mouse cursor to the application section.

“So anyone who's a student can apply. Oh, the actor doesn't have to be a student, huh.”

It was split up into different categories. There was a category that only young people could participate in, and a category that adults could participate in with a topic related to youths. Gaeul looked at the bulletin board for the youth competition, but there weren't any articles. The participating works would be displayed here after the 23rd of May, the deadline for the application, after a simple selection process. The film she shot with Maru should be one of them.

She heard that only the latter half was left now.

Gaeul pushed the walnuts in her salad to the edge of the bowl with her fork. Mayonnaise and walnuts? She thought that it was a really unfitting combination, but her mother always put in walnuts.

She put her fork down and placed her hands on the keyboard. She entered the URL for her blog and logged in. She was greeted by the main page for her blog, which she used the default theme for since she didn't have any talent at decorating. Gaeul clicked on the 'greetings' section of the menu on the left side. This was a space where the visitors of her blog could leave behind some words.

-I have an opportunity to go to Daehak-ro soon. It was really hard to go since I live in Daegu, and I'm going to watch plays until I get bored of it. I hope I can see you, Black Swan.

-You haven't been writing much for your blog recently. I guess you must be busy. I had a really interesting time reading your posts about plays, what a pity. Remember to write something when you return. Oh, my school got an acting club recently. Now I get to try acting myself with my friends.

-Black Swan. I went to the restaurant in Daehak-ro that you posted about before, and it was really good. Their curry really was different from the instant ones like you said. I hope you can recommend me more in the future.

Gaeul read each and every one of the posts before replying to them. Until she started shooting the sitcom, she came to her blog and managed it once every two days at least, but ever since she started working, she was so busy that she couldn't log into the blog for a while.

After deleting all the advertiser comments, she wrote a new post. As the blog guaranteed anonymity, she only revealed herself as a high school girl here. When she passed the audition for the sitcom, she felt so happy that she almost wrote about it for the blog, but after contemplating for a while, she just wrote that something good had happened to her. She felt the need to be cautious since it was related to the TV media.

“Hello, it's been a long time.”

She spoke out loud as she typed. Her habit of typing with just her index fingers and reading what she typed out loud now felt like she would never get rid of it in her lifetime. She wrote down her impressions of the play she watched with Yoojin last time before putting a period. It was a short post, but she had a hard time writing.

She checked her post one last time before posting. Although it was a small blog without a lot of visitors, she was always concerned whenever she uploaded a post. She rested her chin on her hands and read through her previous posts. There were a lot of things in the blog she created when she was in her first year of high school. When she read her old posts and saw the glee and regret she felt from her first ever play performance, as well as her future resolve and results, she ended up chuckling. You tried hard - she wanted to compliment her past self. She thought that she was only here because she didn't give up when she was having a hard time.

A familiar name entered her eyes. It was a greeting post from two years ago, and it was written by a person with the ID 'Maru'. It mentioned that he was happy to see a blog about acting. The two were already saying hi to each other through blogs when they hadn't even met yet.

-We also decided to participate in the winter acting competition. Maybe we'll meet each other there, though that's if we both pass the preliminaries. Do your best, Black Swan.

It was the post Maru left before the winter acting competition. Thinking about it now, it was quite funny. So there could be such a coincidence.

"No, wait. I guess we did meet."

Gaeul faintly smiled. She remembered how she went to Daehak-ro with the people from Myunghwa High's acting club when she was in her first year. There was a boy that stared at her on the streets. Now that she thought about it, that boy was Maru. When she thought about every event that happened, she thought that there couldn't be a weirder series of coincidences. At first, she really didn't like how nonchalant he acted, but at one point, she realized that there was a completely different person inside, and when she realized that, she already liked him.

Gaeul tried going onto Maru's blog. The blog entry with the huge banner 'Life, Once Again', was still there, however, there were no new posts starting last year. There seemed to be almost no visitors either.

Maru was busy too after all. Gaeul grinned before leaving a post in the greetings section.

-Mr. Maru. Do you know what the meaning of a black swan is? It's the happening of something impossible. The reversal of what was perceived to be absolutely impossible. I hope everything goes well for you like a miracle.

She wondered what kind of expression Maru would have on his face when he stumbled on this later and felt proud just by thinking about it. Life's energy didn't come from anything special. Drinking a cup of cold water in hot weather, discovering a flower by the roadside, or even a post like this. She hoped that Maru could smile when he opened his blog again before closing the browser.

\* \* \*

It was immediately obvious that it was a dream.

A street crossing with the paint starting to peel off, the blinking traffic lights, the students walking by while eating ice cream, a driver holding the wheel with a bored expression, a woman consoling a grumbly kid, and a man looking forward in a daze. The damp smell from the ground that was cooled off by the rain, the moderately hot weather, and the noise from a truck engine that clearly seemed like it needed maintenance. Everything was a scene from ordinary life, and despite the fact that there was nothing strange with it, he realized that this was a dream when he took in everything.

Maru quietly turned his head around. The scene he could see outside his house unfolded out in front of him. It was an ordinary scene from an ordinary day in an ordinary town in the afternoon. Maru walked when the light turned green. He did not know where he needed to go nor what he had to do, but his body walked forward without hesitation as though his steps knew of his destination.

Was this what a lucid dream was? Just in case, he tried imagining flying through the skies, but his two legs on the ground were definitely following the rules of gravity. He momentarily forgot about the movements of his two legs, which seemed to be moving on someone else's accord, and looked around him. Why was he having a dream like this? Was his desire for ordinary life creating the dream?

"Han Maru, we're late. Aren't you going to run?"

A boy spoke as he brushed past him. It was Daemyung.

"Yeah. I will."

His mouth uttered the words by itself. A smile appeared on his face. His footsteps became lighter, and the wind hitting his body became warmer. So he was on his way to school? He exited the alley and turned around at a supermarket when he saw the school in the distance.

"Seonbae, let's go quickly."

"We're going to be late."

"Quickly!"

The juniors from the acting club stood in front of him. Maru nodded and joined the group. They talked about trivial stuff like what they ate for dinner last time, what movie they enjoyed, and things like that, as they moved forward. Maru joined in on the conversation from some time onwards. I had a hard time levelling up in a game, I acquired a good item, I watched soccer throughout the night; whenever he talked, the people around him laughed.

This was the first time he had so much fun going to school. He decided not to worry about dreams or whatever. He found it too much fun talking to his friends about trivial things that he couldn't think about anything else.

"So there, I got...."

Just as he was going to talk about what happened yesterday, a man looking at him while standing still entered his eyes. Maru knew this man, who was wearing worn-out clothes. He was Kim Seokjoon, the man he met during the street performances and led to the stage. Now, he had become an actor who played main characters in dramas with considerable skill.



But why would that man be here? Just as he thought about such a thing, Seokjoon's clothes changed. His clothes magically turned into a full suit, but Maru didn't find it strange since he knew it was a dream. Seokjoon's clothes kept changing. His face was changing as well, ranging from a face that did not know the hardships of life to a really aged face.

What was curious was that Maru was too familiar with all of those faces even though he couldn't have seen most of them. He was standing still and looking at Seokjoon when someone pulled on his arm. When he turned his head, he saw the people from the acting club, his friends, as well as the people he got to know through acting. When did they all gather?

"Let's go, Han Maru. We should go."

"It's this way."

"You should go to school since you're a student."

Maru slowly nodded. He had to go to school. He was a student after all. The thought that he should go to school with the brightly smiling people filled his mind, but for some reason, he couldn't take a step. Maru turned his head around again. There was a grown up version of himself standing next to Seokjoon. Just like Seokjoon, that figure's clothes kept changing as well. Among those clothes was the vest he wore when he was a bus driver. Next to his figure, an unfamiliar woman appeared. Again, she changed into different figures. Next to the next figure, and next to them again, different people he had never seen before appeared.

They were unfamiliar people, but for some reason, they felt familiar. It was a strange sensation he couldn't describe with words. He had never seen them, but it felt like he did.

"Han Maru, I said we should get going."

"Seonbae, we should go to school."

The pulling strength became stronger. When he looked at the school gates, he wanted to forget everything and just laugh together with his friends. He felt like that was the shortcut to happiness.

However, he couldn't take his eyes off the people standing on the other side. They were still increasing in number. Just when and where did he see them before? What was this sense of déjà vu he was having?

At that moment,

"...A rabbit?"

The cars on the road disappeared and a rabbit stood there instead. The rabbit was wearing a grey fedora and holding a pocket watch in one hand. In its other hand, it was holding a rather cute-looking staff that was black. The tip of the staff had the shape of a bird, and it seemed like a cute carving of a swan. Since it was black, it could be called a black swan.

The rabbit sniffed a few times before walking towards the people on the other side of the road, where Seokjoon and the others were standing. Maru subconsciously walked to the middle of the road. He heard his friends call out to him from behind, but for some reason, he couldn't stop.

In the middle of the four-lane road, he regained control of his body. To his left were the people whose clothes were constantly changing, and to his right were his friends and the entrance to the school.

“Han Maru, there’s a car coming! What are you doing!”

“Seonbae! It’s dangerous over there!”

“Come here quickly! What are you doing!”

The sounds felt like they were traveling through water.

Maru felt the flow of time slowing down as he looked at both sides. Just what was this dream? The rabbit with the pocket watch walked past Seokjoon and went into an alley. Maru felt his breathing being stifled. His head started hurting, and he felt like the skies and the earth were flipping over.

At that moment, a bus appeared on the road out of nowhere. There was a metal beam stuck on the windshield, and that metal beam had penetrated through the driver’s seat. Maru looked at the bus that slowly approached him. When the bus arrived right in front of him, Maru could see himself desperately trying to turn the wheel in the driver’s seat.

The moment the bus crashed into him, it dissipated like smoke. Maru put down his arms that he raised instinctively. Just what was happening?

As confusion kept piling up inside him, he heard a voice behind him.

He saw a man collapsed on top of a desk with piles of paperwork. The man had bled from his nose and was still as though he was dead. Maru gulped before approaching the man. The collapsed man looked familiar to him. Maru reached out and grabbed the man’s ID card, which was swaying sideways. He flipped it around with shaky hands.

‘Steel Logistics Team 1, Manager Han Maru.’

The ID card in his hands disappeared like a mirage. The collapsed man had disappeared as well. Maru looked around.

“Who?”

## **Chapter 606**

Manager Han Maru. If he didn’t see it incorrectly, that was what was written on his ID card. He didn’t see the man’s face, but Maru was sure that the collapsed man was himself.

No way - Maru shook his head. Manager? In his previous life, he never climbed up to the position of a manager even once. When he worked at a company, his position as an assistant manager. Not only that, he had to quit without being able to work much since he ended up whistleblowing due to an employee who entered through the president’s connections. He had never spent enough time at a company to rise to the position of a manager. He worked as a road manager for an entertainer, then entered a small-scale company and spent his time as a salaryman for a while, before quitting and becoming a bus driver. Nowhere in his career history was he a manager at a logistics company.

Then who was the man he saw just now?

To treat this as a simple dream was impossible since the meaning behind this situation wasn't that light. He was in the middle of a road, and there were people looking at him from either side of the road. One side was quietly staring at him, and the other side was telling him to come back. Which side was he supposed to choose?

Despite the fact that he was in a dream, his breathing slowly became hurried. He wondered what he was like currently in reality. Perhaps he was breathing heavily while sweating coldly.

Maru moved to slap his cheeks with all his might, to the point that it wouldn't be strange if he dislocated his jaws and broke a few teeth. However, before his palms hit his cheeks, someone grabbed one of his hands. The hand that grabbed his hand belonged to a man. Maru blinked and looked next to him.

There was a foul stench. He even lifted his hand reflexively to block his nose.

"Hey, you little shit, this is my place. Why are you rubbing your body all over? Move!"

The man who was talking about 'his place' in the middle of the road had ruffled hair and a dirty face as though he hadn't washed in days. He was wearing a thick winter jacket, which had the cotton padding inside spilling out through some rips. His shoes had greyed out to the point that the original color was unrecognizable.

"Your place, what do you...."

Just as he was about to shake the man's arm off, he felt slightly dizzy and closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes again, what he saw was a train station which had turned dark. In the middle of a large train station that was presumed to be Seoul Station, he was standing there.

"Where do you think you are looking? Hey, don't act crazy and get out of my way."

The man pushed him away strongly. Maru was powerless to resist. The scenery had changed in an instant, and there was this man. Just what was this dream trying to show him?

He turned around to look at the man. That man, who took a bench next to a pillar all for himself, put down some newspaper and some cardboard in a proficient manner before sitting down on top of it. He took out a bottle of soju and a plastic cup from his jacket.

"Oi, Lee. Get the ramyun over here."

The man called 'Lee' walked over from the other side. He also looked quite dirty. The two men, who sat facing each other, started eating ramyun out of its packaging over some soju. They had a conversation as well, and most of the time it was about how they could escape their situation soon.

Maru looked down at his body. He was wearing a dark grey suit with the elbows worn out as though it was quite old. His watch had a tattered leather band that looked like he could rip it with some force. Furthermore, from how the noses of his shoes were wrinkled, his shoes seemed pretty old as well.

What was this now? Maru stroked his face with his hand. The first thing he felt was his cheeks, which had lost their elasticity. His two eyes had sunken, and on his forehead were numerous thick grooves that seemed to have appeared with the passage of a long time.

His body suddenly felt heavy. He felt hungry, and his knees felt numb as well. Maru followed the signs to the bathroom. He met eyes with the cleaning lady, and the lady clicked her tongue as though she had seen something she didn't want to before walking away. He stared at the lady's back for a while before standing in front of the mirror. He saw his clothes. He also saw the light blue-colored necktie that did not fit the dark grey suit. However, the thing he had to see couldn't be seen.

He couldn't see his face. His face in the mirror couldn't be seen as though it was hidden behind a thick mist. He could make out the general features through touch, but it felt stifling not being able to confirm it with his eyes. He turned on the tap, but no water came out. When he left the bathroom with a burning thirst, he saw the two drinking men. The station had become filled with people now. Everyone had depressed faces without any life in them, and they were all leaning against the wall or were lying down. Among them were men who were wearing suits just like he was. There were over a dozen of them.

Anyone who's not an idiot would know why they were here. Maru put his hand on the wall. Just what was this dream trying to show him?

Strength drained from his body all of a sudden. An immense sense of loss suddenly overwhelmed him.

"Look at that. He's wearing something like that in this cold weather. No wonder he's collapsing. Oi! If you don't wanna die, then get some clothes to wear. Also, you should tell your family that you got fired, you know? It's kinda obvious that you're trying to pretend to go to work while looking for work instead, but that's really not something you should do."

One of the drinking men shouted at him. Was he saying that to me? - Maru felt his ears go numb. The sounds became distant.

"Oo-uh? What the heck is up with him? Hey, hey!"

"Holy shit, he's trying to die here. If you die here, the station staff will block the entrance again, dammit! If you wanna die, die outside. Or jump into the Han River or something!"

People ran towards him and violently shook him. Maru felt as though he was standing on top of a ship in stormy weather. His insides were churning, and he couldn't prop himself up properly. He felt like he was going to die just like that, when,

His closed eyes suddenly opened. He intuitively sucked in a deep breath. The foul stench that haunted him until a moment ago had disappeared. Instead of a bad smell, what tickled his nose was the scent unique to disinfectants. Maru looked at the white ceiling before sitting up. He was in a quiet ward. There wasn't anyone around him. It wasn't that he was in a private room. There were four beds, there just wasn't anyone occupying them. The news was flowing out of the large TV on the wall. It was talking about how the first ever electronic retina transplant was successful. It was then followed up by the fact that it could connect to the network with some peripheral devices.

He blinked and looked around him before he realized that he was having a hard time breathing with his mouth open. His breath circulated around his mouth. He wanted to breathe in deeply so that his lungs would puff up, but for some reason, such a simple act felt very burdensome.

He tried touching his forehead with the back of his hand. There was nothing on it. He thought that he would have been sweating cold sweat, but what he felt through his hand was a texture akin to dried tree bark. He raised his hand to touch his face. He understood what 'skin and bones' meant from just a single touch. He moved his fingers according to the shape of his skull that was clearly outlined on his skin. He felt like a thin hide was covering his bones. Maru quickly took his hand off his face in fear that he might poke a hole through his face. He knew that this was a dream, but the frightening sense of reality pushed him into the depths of fear.

Haa, haah. He kept breathing dryly. Was this not a ward? Why wasn't he getting any treatment even though it looked like his body was in a bad state?

Just then, the door to the ward opened and a man came in. The skinny man smiled at him before sitting on the bed next to his. The man that Maru seemed to remember, yet did not, opened his mouth,

"I'm going to go home now. Forty-seven years huh. I've lived a fierce life until now, so I guess I'll spend my last at home at ease."

"Go home? What do you mean?"

He subconsciously talked to the man without any polite speech. The man opposite him laughed.

"Of course, I'm talking about hospice. But this country is pretty good too, eh? Just 110,000 won a month will get a doctor and a nurse to visit you every month. My family seems to be at ease too. I mean, you know? There's a man with terminal cancer alone in a house. What kind of family would be at ease knowing that?"

"Terminal cancer?"

"What's up with you, fella? You had a dream? Well, I guess you do talk about weird stuff from time to time."

The man sitting opposite him talked about some things after that, but none of it entered Maru's ears. Terminal cancer. These two words blocked his ears. Only then did his twig-like arms and legs enter his eyes. Perhaps this was a body that relied on porridge to live on, if it could even.

This is a dream, this is a dream - he felt like vomiting. What did he have to do in order to escape this nightmare? After looking around, a window entered his eyes. He pushed himself up and walked over to the window.

"Getting some fresh air? Sounds good to me. There's nothing better than spring wind. It might be our last spring, so let's do everything we want."

Immediately after that, a smashing sound could be heard behind him. Maru slowly turned around. The man, who seemed to have given up everything in life as though he was enlightened, had grabbed the table clock and smashed it against the corner of the bed.

"Stop fucking ticking. Just stay still, goddammit. Dammit. I'm not even fifty yet. I haven't even seen my kids get married. Why, just why..."

It was tragic. Maru couldn't bear to look.

If there was a gentle hell, it would be this place.

He opened the window wide. The room seemed to be around the 4th floor. It was a tall enough height that he would die instantly if he fell on his head. Maru stepped on the window sill without hesitation. The wind made his patient clothes flutter.

“H-hey. What are you doing!”

“Waking up. I’m going to wake up from this terrible dream.”

“You crazy? What about insurance? You know that you won’t get paid if you commit suicide. What about the family you boasted about so much! What are you going to do about them!”

The man who was cursing at the flow of time until just moments ago was now worrying about him. How cruel was that?

“I’m fine. This is a dream after all.”

“This is reality, you know? Reality!”

“No, this is a dream. I’m sorry to say this, but this is a dream. Don’t worry about it. You won’t die either. Because this never happened in the first place.”

“H-Han Maru! Hey! No, you can’t do that!”

He hurled his body outside as he listened to the despair contained in those words. Now, I should be able to wake up from this horrible dream - just as he thought that,

“If you’re tired, you should go inside and get some rest. A chief mourner always has it the hardest.”

There was a person who propped him up as he was shaking. Yet again, it was a man he did not know. Hearing the word ‘chief mourner’, he reflexively looked at his arm. He was wearing a band around his arm.

“A funeral?”

“This fella, you’re out of yourself. You should get some sleep. I’ll keep watch over this place for you in the meanwhile.”

The moment he stood up while clutching his aching head, he saw a photo in the black frame beyond the thick smell of incense. In the photo was a lady with a bright smile.

Maru laughed as though he lost it.

“Why don’t you... kill me instead.”

It was her photo. He stared at the photo of her, who wasn’t even in her mid twenties yet, before laughing in vain. Was this god’s prank? Did he have to pay the price for the blessing of living another life? He looked at the calendar. It was 2010.

He felt tired, he wanted no more of this. Maru smashed his head on the floor. He wanted to escape this dream now since it only showed him despair. This damned dream didn’t end even when he died. It was

a horrific maze without an exit. He suddenly felt that this dream might never end. A chill ran up his body. He lost strength in his legs, and he couldn't stand up again.

When he smiled like a lunatic amidst a group of strangers, people wearing black clothing clicked their tongues in pity and told him to cheer up. What was the meaning behind this dream? Whose product was this? If it was god's will, he wanted to say that it was too cruel.

Just then, he saw the rabbit from before amidst the people walking by. The rabbit sniffed while holding the pocket watch and stared at him. Then it started hopping away as though it was telling Maru to follow before looking back again. Maru stared at the rabbit hopping away in a daze before hurriedly following after it.

"Hey, Han Maru! Where are you going!"

He shook off the hand that grabbed his arm and desperately chased after the rabbit.

### **Chapter 607**

He ran across the long corridor. The people that looked at him with weird gazes became distant behind his back. The sounds that mourned for the dead faded away and he entered a space without any sound. Now, he was no longer in the corridor of the funeral hall. He ran recklessly through the now long tunnel that was made of concrete. In front of him was the rabbit, which seemed like the symbol of hope. He felt like he would fall into the depths of this nightmare if he missed it, so he followed the rabbit like his life depended on it. The distance between him and the rabbit seemed like it would shrink, but it did not. The rabbit turned around from time to time and nodded as though it was checking that Maru was following him properly.

After running for god knows how long and just as he felt the limitations of his stamina, the rabbit in front of him disappeared. Maru looked around him. Where was this place? For now, there was nothing he could see around him. Even light didn't exist, so he couldn't make out his arms. The sudden blackout was enough to paralyze his reason. All of his thought processes stopped in an instant, and just as he felt afraid due to the loss of direction, he heard the sound of heartbeats. Only then did he realize that there was no sound around him either. Instead, the sounds coming from inside the body became so loud. He could even hear his stomach vigorously churning. Thinking that this was the perfect environment to faint, he tried to regain his calm as much as possible, but the sounds of physical metabolism inside his body kept eroding away his reason. When he lost his hearing, his minimal sense of position, which relied on his sight, disappeared as well. Feeling that his body was leaning towards the back for some reason, Maru laid on the ground. If this was a torture room, Maru wanted to give the designer of this room the Nobel prize for torture.

He didn't know how long he spent lying down like that when he started to feel a warmth that he had been longing for. It was the warmth of a person. He smelled the fragrance of a person. Maru slowly opened his eyes.

"What is it? Did you have a dream?"

She - Gaeul - was lying next to him. Gaeul, who was wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt, sat up before turning on the light next to the bed. Maru touched his face with his right hand. His face was drenched as though he had been through a rainstorm.

“Look at all that sweat. Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Wait a moment. Drink some warm water.”

Maru strongly hugged her, who was about to turn around and stand up.

“Mr. Han Maru, don’t act like a kid.”

“Just a moment, let me stay like this for just a moment.”

“Honey, what is up with you? Did something happen?”

“No, it’s not like that. I just had a terrible dream.”

“Dream? What dream?”

She stroked his face with her hands. Aah - Maru felt a deep sense of relief. He felt like his two legs finally landed in reality. The nostalgic smell of the duvet, the faint shampoo fragrance, and the 5,000 won clock he bought at a discount store couldn’t be more welcome to him.

“Do you feel a bit calmer now?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“Then why don’t you let me go already?”

She smiled mischievously and shook off his hands.

“I’ll get some water and aspirin for you. It looks like you’ve been pushing yourself too much recently. Wait a sec.”

Light entered through the opening of the door. Maru looked at her, who was rummaging through the cupboard in the kitchen as she put her hair behind her ears. A dream, yes, it was a dream. Maru looked down at his hands before clenching them. There was a sharp pain from his palms.

“Did I finally wake up?”

He pinched his cheeks as well just in case. It hurt. For some reason, he couldn’t help but smile.

“Here, say ah.”

Maru opened his mouth. She put some medicine inside his mouth. He accepted the cup of water she gave him and drank the lukewarm water. He felt a lot clearer after the water entered his body.

“Are you not feeling well?”

“No, I’m okay now.”

Maru grabbed her hands.

“Are you really okay?”

“I’m fine. I just had... a cruel dream.”



“A cruel dream? If you put it like that, it makes me want to know what it was about.”

She made a devious smile. She climbed onto the bed and leaned her head against his shoulder. Maru lightly hugged her with his right arm.

“I died, and then.”

“That’s a bad start.”

“I told you it was a cruel dream. Anyway, I died, and I went back to my high school days with the god’s help.”

“That sounds good. What happened after that?”

“I tried my best to live. Oh, and I found you as well.”

“Back when we were in high school? Dang, you should’ve let me meet some other boys too.”

“Should I have done that?”

She shrugged.

“Just from that, it doesn’t sound like a nightmare to me. Or, don’t tell me, was meeting me that cruel of an event for you?”

“When I think about it now, I think it might have been.”

“You’re looking for a beating.”

She slapped his back endlessly. Maru twisted his body to avoid her hands. He wondered why he felt so thankful about quarreling with her like this.

“So, after that...”

“Nah, don’t say it. It was a bad dream, wasn’t it? You should forget about things like that as soon as possible.”

“Is that how it is?”

She nodded.

“Get some sleep. You should sleep early if you want to wake up early tomorrow.”

“Yes, I should.”

“Should I sing a lullaby?”

He lay down again with his head on the pillow. Next to him, she started humming a song. He felt relaxed as though the nightmare didn’t exist at all. He thought that if he woke up tomorrow, he would start another ordinary day.

Just as he closed his eyes, feeling the warmth from her body,

‘Wake up tomorrow?’

Maru moved his hand and grabbed her wrist. He sighed as he made out the outline of the thin wrist. From one moment onwards, the sensation of her skin had disappeared from his palm.

He slowly opened his eyes and looked around him. He was in a place with a lot of empty chairs. He looked forward. He saw a stage that was sunken in darkness.

Tap tap - the sounds of a shoe rang across from the center of the stage. Eventually, the white pin light shone on the center of the stage.

“Was the play fun?”

At the center of the stage was a masked man. Maru knew who that man was. He was the man he had seen several times in his dreams. The man, wearing a mask that was colored in black and white, walked around the stage with quick steps. It started raining on stage, and the masked man took out an umbrella from nowhere. The song 'Singing in the Rain' faintly started flowing out in the theater. Maru watched as the man tap-danced on the stage according to the rhythm for a while before jumping onto the stage. He then grabbed the collars of the man doing the musical right in front of him.

“What do you want from me? Just what the hell do you want from me!”

“Nothing. I told you. It's your choice, but the choices will be given by me.”

Maru intensely glared at the man who shook his hands off. He could no longer tell what was a dream and what was reality; whether he truly went back in time or not. He couldn't even tell if he was still dreaming right now.

“Was the play fun?”

“Get me out of this place now. Make me wake up from this goddamned dream.”

“I'm sorry to tell you this, but that's not something I can do. That's because I'm an incompetent creature who can only do things like this.”

The man started tap-dancing again. He threw away his umbrella and started running across the stage while getting hit by the rain. Although it was only for a brief moment, Maru felt that the man's movements felt sad. He soon came to himself and chased the man before grabbing him.

“I'm against violence.”

“It wasn't your doing?”

“I can only live on this small stage that you provided for me. I'm a puny existence. I only know what you know.”

“Then what the hell is up with all these dreams! Is this the damned god trying to screw with me? Or did I finally go crazy and start hallucinating?”

“No, you didn't go crazy. You are talking to me properly like this. However, this won't last that long either. Don't worry. You'll wake up soon. Probably.”

“How do you know that when you said you don't know anything?”

“Because I know a few things. I humbly said that I was incompetent, but I’m not that incompetent.”

“Didn’t you say you are giving me the choices? That sounds like you have some power.”

“That’s only a play on words.”

“Tell me properly. What the hell are you?”

The masked man took a step back before taking something out of his pocket. It was a long object - a necktie. The masked man wore the blue necktie around his neck and tied it in a proficient manner.

At that moment, Maru was reminded of the tarot card. The clown wearing a tie on a stage. It was the same as the man in front of him.

“What is it that you want to say?”

“Was the play fun?”

“Why do you keep asking me that question?”

“Because that’s the only thing I have to ask. I can only live on this small stage, and I’m a pitiful creature who can only breathe when you are consumed by the monster known as acting.”

“If you want to bullshit like that, you better do it after taking your mask off. If I hit you while you still have it on, it might hurt more.”

Maru violently reached out and grabbed the mask. The masked man did not resist at all. He put his hands behind his back and even leaned forward as though he was telling Maru to take it off.

“It’s quite embarrassing to meet you like this. Even though it’s about time I get used to it.”

Hearing the man’s voice, Maru pulled on the mask. Snap - he heard the string that tied the mask to the man’s face snapping off before the mask fell off his face.

“...”

Maru couldn’t say anything. He looked at the man, who was smiling in embarrassment before taking a step back.

“I really can’t get used to this.”

“You are...”

“You make the decision. I will give you the choices. Do you finally understand what I mean now?”

Maru started making out the facial features of the man in front of him with shaky eyes.

The exact same face appeared opposite him as though he was looking at a mirror.

“Should I introduce myself properly? My surname is Han from the Yangjeolgong faction and my name is Maru, as enforced by mother’s strong request to not use the same characters for siblings. Because of the reason that pure Korean names sound pretty, my younger sister was named Bada. Anyways, it’s good that my name is not Haneul. Maru is much better than Haneul, don’t you think so?”

The man reached out his hand and smiled. Maru stared at that hand before looking into the man's eyes. Unfortunately, he couldn't see any speech bubble that reflected the man's thoughts.

"I am you, and you are me, so you don't need to mind things like that. You don't usually use it, right? Against an enemy, it might come in handy, but you don't use it that often on the people around you. That's because looking into what someone else is thinking is very uncomfortable. You know that better than anyone else."

"What are you? Is this the god's prank as well?"

"Well, I'm not sure either. What I know is that I've been acting on this stage for a very long time now. But I'm still happy to see guests from time to time. Though, it does feel strange that I myself am the guest."

"What do you want from me?"

"Want?"

The man smiled before speaking,

"Can you take me out of this boring place?"

"What?"

After saying those words, the man shrugged before putting on the mask again.

"This is much easier for the both of us, right? It's not like we're doppelgangers. Talking to yourself is the same as talking on your own."

At that moment, the rabbit from before appeared through the slit of the stage curtains.

"It's here again."

The rabbit hopped its way over before climbing onto the man's shoulder and rubbing against his cheek. At that moment, Maru could hear a girl's voice. I'm sorry, I'm sorry - the desperate voice echoed on the stage for a while before disappearing.

"So it's about time to leave. I hope this is the end, but it won't be, right? Let's meet again, in your heart, that is. Also, set me free for a while. That's my only form of leisure."

The rabbit climbed down from the man's shoulder and hopped off the stage.

"What are you doing? Go," the man said as he pointed at the rabbit.

At that moment, Maru saw that the man was crying through the holes of the mask.

"She's a lovely woman. So..."

The moment the man's words flowed out of his mouth, Maru felt his body float into the air. He focused on the man with all of his strength. He felt like he needed to hear the words that would come after this.

His body slowly became distant from the stage, and the man as well. The side curtains slowly closed and just before the man disappeared, the man took off his mask and threw it away as he shouted.

Don't hate her too much.

That was what the man said.

## **Chapter 608**

When he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was a book with a bookmark in it. A ray of light entered the dark room, shining down on that book. He looked at the cover of that book in a daze for a while. He started regaining his hearing when he blinked about four or five times. He heard some sounds of war and many gunshots. It seemed that the movie of choice for his neighbor today was a war movie. He sat up and looked outside the window. Boom, boom. Whenever a loud cannon noise could be heard, the large TV in the house across from his flashed. He yawned as he quietly watched that TV for a while. Large-screen TVs were really good for watching stuff.

At that moment - "Turn your TV down" - he heard the deep voice of a man, presumably from the house above. Hearing the loud voice, his neighbor immediately turned down the TV volume. Maru smiled faintly and moved away from the window.

This is a mess - Maru thought as he went over to the kitchen and looked at the clock. It was 1 a.m. These days 1 a.m. wasn't even that late. Maru would also usually watch a videotape or read a book around this time.

He wondered when he fell asleep since he didn't remember feeling tired even once. He picked up the bottle of water on the table and went to the living room before sitting on the sofa. The sunken air of the night put him at ease for some reason. He took a sip of the water before leaning back on the sofa. Maybe it was because he only slept for a short while, he felt really drowsy.

This had never happened to him before. Did he gain too much fatigue? Maru stroked his face dryly. He felt the remnants of drowsiness slowly disappearing. He took a sip of water and tried to sleep again, but when he came to himself, he didn't want to lie back down again. He thought about turning on the TV and picked up the remote before putting it back down. Instead, he hugged a cushion on the sofa.

Tick tock. The clock on top of the TV sounded especially loud today. Did it need lubrication for the second hand or something? For some reason, he felt really annoyed by it. Was it the influence of the short sleep? Or did he become sick or something?

He licked his dry lips when a black dot appeared on the cushion he was hugging. Maru wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He was sweating profusely. The face which felt dry when he stroked his face was now covered with sweat. He put away the cushion and went to the bathroom. He turned on the lights before going inside.

"Am I really sick?"

The reflection of his face in the mirror looked terrible. He looked at the fatigue-stricken face for a long while before turning on the cold tap. He dipped his hands in cold water and stayed like that in a daze before crouching down. He cupped his hands into a bowl and scooped up a handful of water. The moment the water touched his face, the faint images in his head became vivid again with loud snapping noises as though several light switches were being turned on at the same time.

Maru roughly washed his face. Water sprayed everywhere, but he did not care and just washed his face over and over. Blurry memories popped up inside his head chaotically. Maru could not remember them properly, but he intuitively realized that they were horrible things. After washing his face until he completely woke his mind up, he felt like his figure reflected in the mirror felt much more like a human.

He wiped his face before leaving the bathroom.

“What the heck was that just now?”

He clutched his aching head and sat back down on the sofa.

It was clear that he had a dream, a vicious one at that. Normally, the contents of a nightmare would be vivid right after waking up before fading away into the depths of memory after a few breaths. However, right now, he was remembering his dream little by little as though he was dragging out an old memory from his mind. Maru calmed his breathing and focused. If the dream was something absolutely absurd, he would have just ignored it and gone back to sleep, but the fragments of memories that were popping into his mind right now felt very important as well as something that he must never forget.

He clasped his hands as though he was praying before putting them against his nose. The more he calmed down and focused, the faster the pieces of the dream fell into the right positions.

The first thing he saw was a stage. Maru knew that stage very well. He saw a man as well: the masked man. That man jumped around the stage in joy, and inside that dream, Maru grabbed the collars of that man in agitation. As for why he became agitated, he could not remember. It was something he had to think about after revitalizing this portion of the dream.

He closed his eyes. With his vision replaced by a black curtain, the world of the dream became much clearer. The masked man’s voice slowly became clear again. Maru honed his senses as much as possible in order to hear that man’s voice. When he did, the man’s voice became clear, little by little.

-So it’s about time to leave. I hope this is the end, but it won’t be, right? Let’s meet again, in your heart, that is. Also, set me free for a while. That’s my only form of leisure.

He didn’t know what that meant just by itself, but a while later, when he remembered what happened that led to that situation, he could understand that man’s words. The face behind that mask, it was definitely himself. A pitiful creature that could only live on the stage.

Maru put his hand on his chest. When he became immersed in acting, he always felt two egos. One was always rational and observed the surroundings to react properly to the changes in the environment, while the other only looked at acting emotionally and did not care about anything else. The ‘me’ behind the mask inside the dream should’ve been his ego drunk on acting. That interpretation made sense.

At that moment, he felt like there was something else other than himself on that stage. He focused a little more. The masked self was crying at the last moment. Why was he crying?

He felt his neck stiff up at that moment. No matter how much he focused, he couldn’t find out the reason ‘he’ cried back then. Also, he couldn’t clearly remember the other presence that seemed to have been there. He only remembered that ‘someone’ was there other than his two egos.

Maru breathed in deeply. The dream ended there, but it did not begin there. There was definitely something before that. He focused again and again. He felt time flow backwards as he swarmed through the darkness. Unfortunately, there was nothing that came to him as clearly as the stage did. Nay, the moment he tried to dig through the memories below the surface, he was interrupted by something.

Hm hm hm - it was none other than her humming. Every time he tried to pull out the strand of nightmare from his memories, he heard her humming. His brain, which was trying hard, became drowsy the moment he heard her hums. It was to the extent that it made him wonder if there was any point in remembering that dream.

Was this her way of being considerate while telling him that he should not try to remember a terrible nightmare and that he should just go to sleep?

Maru did not give up despite that. He had a strong premonition that he should not stop there. This life was given to him after death. He couldn't take his dream lightly. Perhaps it might be a precognition of sorts.

He probed around the vortex of memories. He walked along the road mixed with reality and dreams, looking for a clue to that dream when everything flashed and a short scene appeared in his mind.

He was standing on the street, and the bus was coming from the other side. Inside the bus was himself, penetrated by a metal beam and slowly dying. Maru groaned as he watched that scene. Was this the identity of the nightmare?

Death was certainly something hard to handle. He knew it well since he experienced it. He knew just how much despair death brought. He shivered in fear even now when he thought about the moment he died.

But what was this iffyness? He felt like it was telling him that there was something beyond death. Maru frowned and remembered the moment he faced the bus. The bus was driving right at him who was in the middle of the road. Was that all that happened?

He shook his head in reality. Curiously, the scenery inside his dream also moved to the side along with his head. At that moment, Maru could see the two groups of people on either side of the road. To his left was a group of unfamiliar people. To his right were the people he met and got acquainted with in the current era.

What did this scene mean? Maru contemplated.

Just then,

*She wasn't here.*

Maru clenched his teeth until his jaws started making creaking noises. Among the people on either side of the road, Gaeul - her figure, couldn't be seen anywhere. For other people, he could remember them clearly to the point that he could draw their faces right now, but he couldn't find her face among them.

Who had the most important meaning in his life? It was none other than her. It was strange not being able to find her here.

Where was she?

Just where?

At that moment, Maru felt something twitching around his feet. His figure inside the dream slowly looked down his vision moving along with it. There was a small, feeble rabbit shaking. Maru slowly reached out and enveloped the rabbit with both of his hands.

When he did, the rabbit spoke,

-How?

The already big eyes became even wider.

Maru felt his mouth open by itself.

-This time, I will save you.

He said such in the dream.

\* \* \*

“What was that?”

Maru scratched his head when he woke up. Why was he on the sofa? He felt confused. He remembered falling asleep while reading in his room.

Was he sleep-walking now? He thought about things like that as he turned on the TV. It was still 7 a.m., and there was still time until he had to go to school. He went to the bathroom midway through the morning news. For some reason, his body felt strangely refreshed. Was the sofa right for him?

He faintly smiled and looked into the mirror. His eyes were all swollen. He felt quite curious since his eyes were in a bad state even though his body felt extremely light. At that moment, tears fell from his eyes.

“What the?”

It seemed that his tear glands started malfunctioning. Maru turned on the tap and washed his face. Even while washing, he kept crying for some reason, which made him panic slightly. Fortunately, when he finished washing his face, tears no longer fell, just like the faucet that was turned off.

‘As strange as it is, I feel great.’

He looked at his reflection in the mirror and smiled before leaving the bathroom. He saw Bada leaving her room after waking up.

“Han Bada, good morning.”

“What’s up with you this early in the morning?”

“I said good morning because it’s a good morning. Why don’t you return my greeting? You’re making me feel embarrassed.”

“I wonder what you’re trying to get me to do this time.”

Maru put down the hand he raised.



“Forget it. What would I expect from you? Get washed quickly. We’re gonna have breakfast.”

“What’s for breakfast?”

“The usual stuff.”

“I’m not eating then.”

“Are you going to eat after I hit you once, or are you going to eat obediently?”

“You’re not my mom.”

“If you have time to complain, get washed quickly. You’re gonna be late.”

“It’s still early. Fuaam. Make me a fried egg.”

“I’ll make you two.”

Maru lightly cracked his neck before getting breakfast ready.

When the soup was just about boiled, Bada came out of the bathroom. Looking at her patting her hair dry with a towel after just wetting the tips of her hair, he pitied the man who would eventually have her as his wife.

“It’s not like you have long hair. You should’ve just washed it.”

“It’s bothersome. Hm, nice smell. Good work, secretary Han.”

“I’m curious as to why Dowook is still dating you.”

“How laughable. Do you know how well I treat my oppa?”

“I’m not included in that ‘my oppa’?”

“You are you, and my oppa is Dowook-oppa.”

“Forget about the fried eggs then.”

“What a cheapskate.”

“Why don’t you go tell your great ‘my oppa’ to do it for you?”

“Fine. You can be my oppa too. But did something good happen? You’re all smiles, even though it’s the morning.”

Maru crossed his arms and thought. Something good, huh. At that moment, something vaguely came to his mind.

“I think I had a dream.”

“A dream?”

“Yeah. A really good dream.”

“Did a pig appear in it or something? Should we buy a lottery ticket?”

“No, it wasn’t a pig....”

“Then what?”

“A rabbit. A really cute rabbit.”

“What the, so it’s bullshit then.”

“Why don’t you watch your words a little?”

Maru smiled and put the cutlery down for Bada. He couldn’t remember the details, but he remembered the warmth he felt at that moment. That nostalgic temperature belonged to someone very familiar. It was the person that made him smile just by thinking.

“Tsk! Who told you to grin like that while eating?”

Bada cringed and spoke in a playful manner.

“Fine, let’s just start eating.”

Maru shrugged and picked up the chopsticks.

## **Chapter 609**

“So it’s today, huh. If we finish the shoot today, we can start the final editing. Once that’s done, we’ll be handing our work in for participation. Of course, we should have a screening session for ourselves, right?”

“French fries and coke for me.”

“Fried chicken for me.”

“Popcorn is the best for movies.”

Sora smiled in confidence as she looked at the people of the film production club, who were just as excited as she was. When they started, there were a lot of problems, but they finally reached this stage. Sora was confident in her scenario until they started shooting, but she changed her mind when she saw Maru’s acting. She felt that the story wasn’t up to par with the actor. It wasn’t like she could change the plot because of that though, so she decided to finish the film by changing the direction slightly. Today, there were two scenes to shoot. One was the conclusion, where the main character escapes being bullied and then bullies the transfer student to join the ‘mainstream’. They decided to shoot another scene, where the characters went to school, to add to the ending. She was going to produce a cheerful and bright school entry scene to contrast the gloomy school entry scene at the beginning of the film. She planned to show the subject of the film to the audience by blatantly exposing the contrast between the start and the end.

“Maru-seonbae will be here soon, right?”

“He should be. Most classes should have finished their afternoon HR now. We should get ready too.”

Ando instructed the juniors to get the equipment when the door smoothly opened and a smiling face came in.

“I’m here.”

“Maru-seonbae!”

“Let’s go shoot the last bit.”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to start editing as soon as you finish today’s work?”

“That’s the plan. I’m going to make it so that we can watch it tomorrow even if it means staying up the entire night. Oh, and also, we’re going to hold a screening session....”

Sora didn’t finish her words and looked at Maru’s face. The other club members were probably looking at him as well. The reason she didn’t finish her words was because the reply was too obvious. Maru would probably not participate in the screening. After all, he had said several times that monitoring his own acting was very hard for him. He also said that he wouldn’t participate in the monitoring at all if it wasn’t for the money.

Maru did not reply and just stared at her.

‘I knew it. So do I just have to tell him the results later?’

He was already a busy person, so there was no way he would participate in the screening. Maru had clearly drawn the line since the beginning. He said that this film was not at the top of his priority list. That was why they had to change the entire schedule of their staff when Maru’s schedule changed. That was the agreement they made when they started off after all. It was them who wanted Maru, and Maru was someone who deserved that treatment.

“Of course I will go. What do you think we should eat? Should I try cooking something? I mean, on occasions like that, it’s good to try hand-made food. I heard that Ando did that from time to time too. Am I right?”

Sora blankly stared at the man who made a refreshing smile in front of her.

“Maru...seonbae?”

“What?”

“N-nothing. I just thought that I have never seen you smile like that. Did something good happen today?”

“No, rather than something good, something bad happened instead. I stepped on dog dung on the way to school. I’m having a terrible day really.”

“Ha, haha... dog dung?”

“Yeah. Anyway, you weren’t planning to hold a preview without me, right? I might be a guest member, but I still did my best to participate in the film production club’s activities, so let me in, will ya?”

“Of course we were going to invite you. But I thought you’d refuse....”

“Me? Oh, I did think about that too.”

Pausing, Maru looked around the clubroom before speaking again.

“Since I started it, I thought that I might as well stick around until the end. I do want to watch it too. Anyway, I’ll visit the classroom for a bit. Homeroom hasn’t ended yet.”

“Ah, okay. We’ll be in the 3rd year classroom so you can go there after.”

“Alright, see you later.”

Maru even waved his hand and closed the door. Sora blinked a couple of times before turning around to look at Ando, who stood behind her. Ando also looked dazed as though he had seen something he shouldn’t have.

“Ando-seonbae.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m a bit confused, Maru-seonbae wasn’t such a character before, was he?”

“He definitely wasn’t. He was like that when he was with his girlfriend, but definitely not with us.”

“Do you think he fell over and hurt his head or something?”

“That sounds plausible. It’s kinda weird to see him acting so fresh all of a sudden.”

“Right? I was right, wasn’t I? He’s the same person as the guy who always opened his eyes like this and acted arrogantly all the time, right?”

“Rather than arrogant, I would say he was scary. Anyway, I think they’re the same person.”

“Something great must have happened for him to look that pleased. What do you think happened to him?”

“Maybe... he got an offer for a cast?”

“That sounds plausible... but when I think about it, I don’t think Maru-seonbae’s the type of person who would show that on his face.”

“That’s true. In the first place, he never talked about himself and talked just about the film whenever we were working on it. We asked him a couple of times about what a shooting set looked like, and he only replied that there was nothing much, didn’t he?”

“Today, though, he looks like he’ll spill all the beans if we ask him, doesn’t he? Let’s try that out later. Who knows? It might be an alien in a Maru-seonbae suit.”

“...I think that’s going a little too far.”

“A film producer must not limit their imagination!”

“But it has to be plausible.”

Sora made a sour expression before laughing.

“But really, Maru-seonbae is really curious today. Well, I like him better now than before.”

“Let’s just take what’s good as good. Get the equipment. Let’s go up.”

“Yes! Seonbae-nims, we’re moving!” Sora said as she waved her hand above her head.

\* \* \*

He smelled oil from his fingertips. He was becoming more and more like his father. It wasn’t that he didn’t like that, but when he laid his head on his arms to sleep, the slight smell of oil annoyed him a little. Perhaps he should look into some perfume?

Just as he was stretching his neck, getting ready to go home, Dowook became rather startled when he saw two hands on his shoulders.

“Wow, you must be working hard. They’re as stiff as a rock.”

An affectionate voice could be heard. However, the owner of this voice would never do something like this. He turned around with a complex expression. He saw Maru, who had a serious expression on his face.

“You should rest a bit. Even though kids our age are overflowing with energy, you’ll get sick if you overexert yourself.”

“Y-you, what’s gotten into you?”

“Stay still. This part makes you feel refreshed, doesn’t it?”

“Y-yeah, it does... but hey! What are you doing! You’re creeping me out.”

Dowook couldn’t endure it. It would be less surprising if this guy swore at him and started beating him up instead. He abruptly stood up and stared at Maru. He couldn’t possibly figure out what Maru was thinking by doing this.

“What is this. What’s up with this bullshit all of a sudden?”

“What bullshit? I just thought you looked tired.”

“Godammit, really? What is this? Are you trying to screw with me? Is Dojin in on this as well?”

At that moment, Dojin spoke with a sleepy voice next to him.

“I’m not. What’s up with Han Maru? What did you do wrong to him?”

Dojin seemed no less surprised. It didn’t seem that these two were in cahoots. That made things even more strange. Who was Han Maru? Spraying salt on an open wound with a smile on his face suited him more than this. Of course, he knew that Maru thought very deeply. He was willing to skip school to help Maru if Maru asked him to. Wasn’t he the thankful friend who recovered the relationship between him, his sister, and his father?

However, he was definitely not someone who would act friendly like this with a smile on his face. He was the kind of guy who would help others without them knowing or by leaving behind a very short, but helpful, piece of advice before leaving. He was definitely not the kind of guy who would say ‘doesn’t that feel refreshing’ while massaging someone else’s shoulders.

“Is it Park Daemyung?”

“Hey, do you think he would play a prank like this?”

“That’s true.”

“Then what the hell is it? What the hell has gotten into that Han Maru?”

“I dunno, but I can be sure that you, Kang Dowook, must have committed a grave mistake. Otherwise, Maru wouldn’t act like that. He’s blatantly toying with you. Oh, hey, did you do something to his sister?”

“Are you crazy? There’s no way I’d do something like....”

“Oho, something like what?”

Dowook palmed Dojin’s grinning face.

“Dojin, should I massage your shoulders as well? I know that culinary arts are tiring.”

“I-I’ll refuse this time. What’s up with you today? Did something happen?”

“Did something happen? No, nothing happened.”

“Then I wonder why you’re doing this.... If you continue like for just a bit longer, I think I can show you what I ate for lunch right away.”

Maru chuckled before shrugging.

“Both of you, watch out for your bodies when you work. Don’t forget your studies too. I’m leaving.”

Just as Maru turned around to leave the classroom, Dojin shouted in a loud voice,

“I heard Dowook and Bada are going on a 1 night trip over the weekend!”

Dowook turned around to look at Dojin. There was nothing like that. Just as he was about to snap out at him, Maru spoke in a small voice as he was leaving the classroom.

“Then you’ll die.”

He left those words before waving his hand and leaving.

“Hm, that sounds more like the Han Maru I know of. See? He’s trying to mess with you.”

“You bastard! Bada and I are going where?”

“You’re going to go somewhere. Anyway, we can be sure that Han Maru didn’t go crazy. It’s fine since we checked, isn’t it?”

Dojin stepped backwards with a grin on his face. Dowook grabbed the pencil case right next to him and threw it at Dojin’s face.

“I’ll fucking rip your mouth apart.”

“Oh? You aren’t a match for me.”

Dowook clenched his teeth as he looked at the sneaky Dojin.

\* \* \*

“So you acted like that the entire day?”

“Yeah. There were all sorts of reactions.”

“Of course there were. They just can’t match your current image to the usual you. Even I would’ve been in a fix.”

“Was I that cold?”

“You weren’t always like that but with her... Gaeul, was it? Compared to when you were with Gaeul, there was definitely a difference. People who have seen you with your girlfriend must have been surprised, you know? After all, they would have never seen you talk so gently and kindly to someone before. Thinking about it now, I feel like you always put everything down only when you were in front of her.”

“Park Daemyung, that makes me feel disappointed. I think I treated you pretty well.”

“I know, I really do. But I can tell when I look at you, that you take a few steps back when you talk to others, figuratively, I mean.”

Daemyung looked out the window. Today as well, there were a lot of big guys playing soccer on the school field. Whether it was raining or snowing, there were always people kicking balls in that field. This was a rare sight for normal academic high schools. Balls could be seen every break time, which said a lot.

“Maybe I should play soccer with the people from the acting club.”

It was Maru who said those words. Daemyung spoke as he put his backpack on one shoulder.

“What made you change your mind so suddenly?”

“Nothing, I mean, literally nothing. I did hear about it from time to time. Even the president told me that putting too much distance is not good. In truth though, that’s more comfortable for me. There’s no worry about getting caught up in trouble, I can ‘moderately’ be happy for someone, I can ‘moderately’ be sad for someone, and the fatigue that comes from human relationships is also pretty small.”

“That sounds like Han Maru to me. And?”

“I don’t know. For the past few days, I’ve been thinking that a dry relationship is too sad considering that I only have one life.”

“I guess that’s true. You’ve been changing ever since you entered 3rd year.”

“So you noticed? I only noticed it recently.”

“You have changed the way you treat other people after all. You were like that with Chihwan too. That was the first time you replied to other people’s questions so passionately, wasn’t it?”

“It was.”

Maru leaned against the wall.

“But is it that strange?”

“It is definitely strange.”

“Should I just act like usual then?”

“It’s strange that you’re asking me such a question in the first place. If it was the old you, you would’ve made the decision by yourself.”

“It’s not bad to listen to other people’s opinions. Especially if it’s yours.”

“Honestly speaking, I don’t know. To me, you were, uhm, don’t take offense for this, but how should I put it, uh, you were pretty desolate. I’m not saying that in a bad sense. You were putting distance between yourself and others in order to minimize the damage that would come your way, and that even made you look cruel at times.”

“I still haven’t changed my mind about that.”

“R-really?”

“Yeah. It’s just that... I wanted to know more about the people around me. Also, I feel like it’s not a bad thing to be reckless from time to time. I just realized that there’s a place that can care for me when I’m exhausted. I thought that she was someone I had to protect, but it turns out it wasn’t like that.”

Maru, who made a faint smile, looked more amazing than before. There was a sense of instability about him, but it was the kind that could be seen from someone who was moving forward.

“But it is a little tiring.”

Maru erased his smile and returned to his calm expression.

“Doing things I’m not used to doing.”

“Are you going to keep trying?”

“For the foreseeable future. Oh, I’ll be going off first. The film production club is waiting for me.”

“Okay.”

Maru stretched his arms out and turned around. Daemyung waved at Maru.

“I’m not entirely sure what’s happening, but good luck.”

Daemyung checked the clock once before leaving the classroom.

## **Chapter 610**

People do not change. His thoughts on that still did not change. He could tell just how static and unshakable human nature was, from just looking at the news. Those that were imprisoned for fraud would aim for other people’s pockets even after they leave. Sexual criminals would also chase the weak again in order to prove their superiority. Prison might be a very special experience, but that special experience did not change the evil nature of mankind. There might be some rare cases where a strong



experience changes a view a person has on life as a whole, but changing one of their views and changing their ways was definitely different. "I didn't intend to do it" - this excuse that appeared on the news every time just showed how hard it was to change a man.

That was why he always maintained a minimum distance. That distance was an insurance of sorts to minimize damage in case something happened. Being close to the center of the explosion would mean a higher degree of burn. People were all walking explosives. The reason they didn't explode was because a strand of reason suppressed primitive instinct. Despite the 12 years of education from elementary school to high school, the reason there was no end to accidents was proof that there was something violent and impulsive laying inside humans.

He always kept a safe distance in order to not get hurt, and in order to run away. When he approached something without putting a safe distance between them, he did it with a sense of duty; the resolve to bear the burden of the danger in that person's stead. Only when he had the confidence to not regret being with that person in the face of an explosion, did he remove that minimum insurance and enter the range of that person.

Ever since he came back to life, the number of people he did that with could be counted on one hand. He had already experienced the pains given to him by other people. He knew that there were people without ulterior motives, but the likelihood that it was the opposite was much higher. People would split up into different factions even under a forced grouping like a class. In society, he smiled in front of other people and insulted them from behind. He couldn't be an upright person, he was sneaky, petty, and narrow-minded. From the view of a narrow-minded person, the world was filled with similarly narrow-minded people. He became even more cautious, and became even more wary; so that he didn't get hurt; so that he did not make losses.

"I'd like pizza bread and milk."

Maru handed the cafeteria lady the money before getting the food. Now, he just had to go up to the 3rd floor and meet the people from the film production club. It was like any other meeting and any other shoot, but today, Maru would take a big step towards them.

A world of narrow-minded people that a narrow-minded person sees. Until just a while ago, that frame the world was in was too sturdy and nothing seemed able to break it. He thought that it was natural to meet other people with a mask on his face and that the expression of his hostility towards people that approached him without being on their guard as a method of survival. He returned from the end of his life to the beginning, so his defense mechanism declared that he must not fail again. However, a crack appeared in the frame of that world. He didn't know where it came from, nor when it happened, but what he could be sure of was that he was different from before.

When he realized that, he felt a little afraid. After all, the entity known as 'myself' was approaching something completely different from what he intended to aim for unbeknown to him. What would've happened if he did not realize the change that occurred within himself? It was just an assumption, but he might have become a gentle young man. He had the feeling that that would be the case. He would be kind to everyone, would help other people out, and be praised for stepping up for things that other people did not want to do. In other words, a model Han Maru.

"Han Maru, where are you going?"

“To shoot a movie.”

“What the, you’re working again? Let’s play soccer. We need a winger.”

“Let me in tomorrow. I can do tomorrow.”

“Really? You can really join us tomorrow?”

Then I’ll make a bet with the mechanicals class! - his classmate added before walking down the stairs. Maru threw the bread at the fellow that was getting further away.

“Thanks!” the guy said with a weird pronunciation.

A tenderhearted Han Maru. Maru thought for a long time about why his nature changed without him knowing it. He was living in a world that was only possible through a miracle, so he couldn’t really ask anyone else. The only thing he could do was to contemplate and look for an answer by himself. What was fortunate was that he wasn’t that stupid.

The conclusion he arrived at after some deduction was that he noticed the change in himself after something strange happened a few days ago. The day he opened his eyes on the sofa, Maru had a warm dream. He woke up from the dream after acting like a baby in the warmth that enveloped his whole body. In that dream, he saw a white rabbit. It was a happy dream. However, that morning, he kept crying for reasons unknown to him.

A happy dream and tears. These two definitely didn’t fit together. Some people might cry out of happiness, but Han Maru was definitely not such a person.

A happy dream, tears for reasons unknown, and then the change in his personality that was occurring outside of his conscious. Just as he was thinking about these three seemingly independent clues, he was reminded of the conversation he had with writer Lee Hanmi. Where are memories stored?

Memories. The moment he focused on that word, he came up with a hypothesis. Ever since he came back to life, his memories were slowly fading away. According to that angel-like woman, the memories weren’t disappearing. They were sinking below his subconscious, but that didn’t change the fact that he couldn’t remember them.

Slowly disappearing memories.

Tears that appeared without reason.

An inner change that occurred without him realizing it.

He experienced the miracle of reliving his life thanks to the god’s help, but there was still a sense of order and logic in that process as well. This phenomenon should have been caused by something as well. When he played around with some fragments of his memory and fit them together like a puzzle, he came up with a plausible progression.

If human emotions - including love, which is said to transcend everything - are based on memories, then human nature, or personality, should also be rooted in memories as well. Maru believed that his loving heart would not change even if he did not have his memories. That was why he replied confidently

during the conversation with Hanmi, that his feelings towards her would not change even if his memories disappeared.

However, it seemed that he was wrong. If the foundations of what made up the human known as Han Maru collapsed along with the disappearance of his memories, he couldn't guarantee anything.

The proof of that should be the change in his nature. He was turning into a more open-minded self without him knowing it. Thinking about it now, it was pretty strange. Giving other people advice, talking to other people on his own accord, being kind to others more than necessary were all definitely not in line with the way of living he maintained until now. What made him feel afraid was that he couldn't notice that change despite the fact that he was at the center of it.

Tears that appeared without reason.

On the day Maru opened his eyes on the sofa, he came to a potential conclusion that he had lost something very important to him. Something unimaginable must have happened before he had the happy dream with the rabbit that seemed like Gaeul. If some of his memories were rooted out, and the only thing that remained was the tears with the emotions erased, then just what was the dream he had back then?

Right now, he couldn't think of anything no matter how hard he focused. He just remembered the warmth. The warmth similar to Gaeul's.

He might be taking things a little too far, but he may actually have realized the dangerous change that occurred within himself precisely because he felt her warmth in his dream. If he acted normally that day like he always did, Han Maru might have become a completely different person. Of course, this was all an assumption. It was impossible to find a concrete formula for a life that could only exist because of a miracle.

'The change has already occurred.'

He believed that humans could not change, but the god changed his nature as though to toy with his thoughts.

He noticed the change in his nature and acted accordingly, but he was already feeling a lot more leisurely at heart. His wariness towards others also relaxed considerably. If he consciously sharpened himself, he might be able to act like before, but acting like that at this point would make him feel very fatigued. It had changed from a reflexive and mechanical response to conscious action.

He also realized that he would never be able to return to how he was in the past. Since that was the case, he was only left with one option.

Adaptation.

He had to suppress that dramatic change as much as possible to protect the ego that was himself and change only within the realm of tolerability. At the same time, there was now one more thing he had to do alongside that.

It was to make memories with Gaeul.

He felt fear from the disappearance. That was why he had to prepare. If it was the god's will that made his memories disappear and change his nature, even if it was something he could not resist, he should at least struggle.

He would consolidate the ties he made with Gaeul so that he could keep loving her even if all of the memories of his previous life became blank. Maru chose to stand on the same stage as her as the method of doing that. He would work on the same piece as her, breathe the same air as her, and spend time together.

He might be being foolish. Gaeul might despise him if she found out. She might get fed up with him trying to artificially create a tower of love.

Despite that, Maru did not want to let go.

He did not want to let go of the woman named Han Gaeul.

"I'm here," Maru said as he opened the classroom door.

The people from the film production club welcomed him.

"We can start shooting immediately, right?"

"Of course."

"Let's finish it off well and get that prize."

"Maru-seonbae. You want the prize?"

"I do now. I think I'm going to need it in the future."

"I'd love to get it too. Well then. Our main character's will to act is burning up! Let's start immediately!"

Maru spat out a short breath when he heard Sora's shout. He then walked up to Ando, who was looking at the camera.

"If you don't like the angle, then tell me anytime. I'll try to match you as much as possible."

"Oh, alright. But looking at how things are going right now, I don't think I'll have anything to say to you. I mean, you've been doing great until now. Also, what would a beginner like me know?"

"Everyone has the same eyes. Since it's the last bit, we should make sure to end things cleanly. If you want to ask me to do something while shooting, then tell me immediately. A camera director is also a director."

Ando stared at him before slowly nodding.

"Please take care of me."