

Once Again 621

Chapter 621

“Should we try expressing an object?” Gyeonmi asked after looking at her bag, which was in one corner of the practice room.

“An object?”

“Yes, an object. Thanks to our reckless fellow Lee Heewon, who did the wrong homework, we can’t exactly proceed with the class as I planned. I can’t let that fellow play around though, so let’s have a refresher and become objects.”

Refresher - that was the word she used. Gaeul noticed that this assignment was definitely not going to be easy after seeing Gyeonmi’s smile.

“I’ll give you one minute. Go look for an object nearby that you want to try expressing.”

As soon as she said those words, Heewon lay down on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“I found mine.”

“Already?”

“She said an object. Everything around us is an object, so there’s no need to go looking for one. I’d rather just lie down for a minute.”

Heewon put his face on the floor as he laughed. Even a sloth would tell this guy to move a little. Gyeonmi was drinking water without saying anything. It didn’t look like she had strict standards when it came to choosing objects.

Gaeul looked around the practice room. She couldn’t find any object that she wanted to express, so she left the practice room. When she walked through the colorful corridor and arrived at the lobby, something entered her eyes. It was a recycling bin, and it was shaped like a frog.

‘Maybe that?’

After engraving the figure of the frog crouching down into her eyes, she returned to the practice room.

“Have you all decided?”

Heewon and Gaeul both replied yes at the same time.

“Then shall we start with Gaeul first? Heewon started off last time.”

Gaeul nodded and stood in front of Gyeonmi. She was at a loss on what to do now that she had to do it, but she decided to embody what she saw as it was. She curled her body slightly and made a ring with her arms like a basketball hoop before sitting down. She could feel Gyeonmi staring at her. She thought about adding elements to it, but nothing came to mind.

‘It’s still a trashcan after all.’

This should be enough to represent an immobile object, no? She decided to be confident about it.

“Are you done?”

Gyeonmi asked about 20 seconds later. Gaeul curtly replied before standing up.

“Haewon, what do you think Gaeul was trying to represent?”

“The trashcan in front of the elevator. There’s one shaped like a frog.”

Gaeul smiled at Haewon before showing him a thumbs up. She felt happy that he recognized it immediately.

“Were you reminded of the trashcan after what you saw Gaeul do? Or did you think about what she was trying to do and the trashcan came to your mind?” Gyeonmi asked.

Haewon made an awkward smile before slowly speaking.

“I was reminded of the frog trashcan immediately. It’s something I see every time I come here after all. It’s quite eye-catching too.”

“You’re saying that you’re reminded of it because it’s something you’re used to seeing. Does that mean that Gaeul’s expression itself doesn’t easily remind you of the trashcan?”

“Honestly speaking, yes, you’re right.”

Gaeul also nodded as she listened to Haewon’s answer. Actually, anyone not familiar with that frog trashcan would be hard-pressed to know what she was doing from just that. In fact, some might think of toilets instead.

“Was there a standard that you chose your object on?”

“No, I didn’t find anything suitable in the practice room, so I left, and the recycling bin was just what caught my eyes.”

“I also know what that frog trashcan looks like. If someone in the know saw your actions, they should easily be able to deduce the frog-shaped trashcan. I won’t say much since we didn’t set up any conditions, but personally, it’s a little disappointing.”

I feel that way too - Gaeul inwardly replied. She wondered if it might have been easier if she expressed a moving object. Of all things, it was the trashcan that caught her eyes. As disappointing as it was, she had to take a step back for now. Once Heewon does his, Gyeonmi would probably explain more in detail.

“Lee Heewon.”

“Yes.”

Heewon stood in the center and suddenly lay down. It seemed that he was about to begin.

“Fuuuuuuuu.”

Jutting his lips out, Heewon made an air leaking sound and started rolling from side to side. Gaeul jumped in order to avoid Heewon who was coming her way. Those mysterious actions continued after that. Heewon, who rolled around everywhere in the practice room, returned to the center.

“Haewon, what do you think that was?”

“At first, I thought he was trying to be a vacuum cleaner, but there isn’t one in the practice room. Hm, I don’t know.”

“What about you, Gaeul?”

Receiving Gyeonmi’s gaze, Gaeul fell into thought. What Heewon showed just now definitely shouldn’t be a prank. He was someone who couldn’t be bothered to do anything, but he wasn’t the type of person who would half-assedly do something he had to do. Heewon rolled around everywhere in the practice room in random directions. Besides that, there was that weird sound he made. Just then, something came to her mind. Gaeul looked up at the ceiling. There was cool wind flowing out of the ceiling air conditioner which had air vents in four directions.

“Don’t tell me it’s the wind from the air conditioner?”

Pfft - she couldn’t help but laugh. Should it be called ingenious or strained? However, compared to her, who stayed still in one posture, his act was definitely more liberal and irregular.

“Ding dong. That’s correct,” Heewon said.

“Teacher, I believe that Gaeul-noon’s act was splendid. I understand after seeing my brother’s,” Haewon commented.

“Gaeul, what do you feel?”

Gaeul looked at Heewon, who looked like he was fine with anything, as she spoke,

“Leaving aside whether he expressed it well or not, I think he is definitely interesting whenever I look at Heewon. That just now is the same. I had to look around to guess that it was the air from the air conditioner, but that doesn’t mean that his way of expressing it is strange. In fact, I think that’s the correct way to do it.”

After hearing that, Gyeonmi loosened her crossed arms.

“First, Gaeul focused on the external looks. You expressed what you saw. Meanwhile, Heewon put more focus on the properties. He brought to sight what cannot be seen.”

Bring to sight what cannot be seen. Gaeul thought that Heewon was a step ahead this time as well. Perhaps what Gyeonmi wanted was that. Even a grade schooler could imitate something externally. As an actor, realizing what was abstract was much more...

Just as she was about to continue that train of thought, Gyeonmi asked her a question.

“Gaeul, which one do you think was better?”

"I think I have to say that Heewon's was better. My method is something that anyone can do after all, and I didn't do a good job at it either. On the other hand, Heewon's method was novel and ingenious. I've never even thought that wind could be expressed like that."

She gave her honest opinion. However, Gyeonmi's expression wasn't that bright. Although she had a stiff demeanor about her usually, it wasn't to the point that it was unpleasant, but her current expression was enough to startle her.

"What about you, Heewon?"

"Is there something better? I think they're the same."

That answer sounded like him.

"Both of you, well done. Let's take a break. Also, Gaeul, can we have a talk for a second?"

Gaeul followed Gyeonmi out of the practice room. Gyeonmi headed to the 5th floor without even looking back. There were a few employees resting on the nice and warm rooftop.

Was she angry? Just looking at her back made her feel that Gyeonmi's expression was on edge right now. Gaeul had a vague understanding of why. Self-confidence. This was probably the problem.

"From your expression, I think you know what I'm trying to say. That's why I like you, Gaeul. You can think for yourself. Dumb people are honestly quite hard to deal with."

"Was my answer wrong after all?"

"What part of your answer do you think was wrong?"

"I think it's a matter of self-confidence. I think I might have answered that vaguely because I didn't have confidence in my own acting."

"So you do know about it after all."

Gyeonmi gestured to her to come over. Gaeul leaned against the banisters. Behind her, she could see the road and cars.

"Gaeul."

"Yes?"

"Do you understand what it feels like to see color from emotions?"

So it was about Heewon - Gaeul shook her head.

She felt that Heewon was a peculiar guy the first time she met him at the agency. Leaving aside the way he acted, she felt like he was looking at the world in a different way than her. That assumption turned into assurance when she took the same class as him. Heewon said himself that he saw colors from emotions. Gaeul could neither understand what that meant nor even begin to grasp what that would feel like. At best, she only assumed that warmth was red and coldness was blue.

"I don't know either. Usually, emotional things are represented by red, and rational things are represented by blue right? This is the same for all things like literature and art. But Heewon, that kid, is

different. He sometimes says that he sees green when he sees someone angry, and sometimes even purple. Even if I ask him what those colors mean, he can't answer. Perhaps those colors contain too many meanings and can't be expressed in words. It's something that ordinary people can never understand nor sympathize with."

Gyeonmi looked away. Gaeul followed her gaze.

"In the end, Heewon is definitely different from us. His character, his immersion, his acting skills. Everything about him is special. Though it's not too special that it looks out of place among normal people, and he has the potential to mix in with the others. No, he might be able to lead the trend. In other words, he's a genius."

"Ah..."

"Gaeul. What do you think about taking classes separately from him?"

"Eh?"

"I know the depression you get when you stand next to a talented person as an ordinary person. If it's someone you can chase after, then you might try harder, but if that gap is too wide, most people just give up. Then, they'll either admire or disrespect that person. These days, I kinda think that putting you two together might have been the wrong decision."

Gaeul sealed her lips. She was envious of Heewon's character. She even felt jealous when she saw him come up with awesome answers for every assignment. Perhaps those kinds of emotions piled up inside her, and made her feel dejected recently?

After pondering, she spoke,

"I want to keep taking classes with him."

"Are you saying that out of stubbornness?"

"No, it's not like that. It's just that I think that avoiding talented people doesn't make me do better."

Gaeul clenched her fists.

"Heewon is definitely different from me. He's an amazing guy. As you said, perhaps I was jealous of him, and maybe that's what made me turn timid. No, if I look back at it now, I'm sure that's what happened. However, that's all the more reason I want to keep taking classes with him. I feel like I would be stuck walking on the same spot if I take a step back now."

"So you're going to try to catch up to him, are you?"

"I might not be able to, but I want to try at least. Actually, Heewon told me this before. He acts because he wants to."

"You do realize that you might subconsciously compare yourself to him and become dejected if you keep taking classes together, right?"

"Yes."

“And you’re still doing it?”

“Yes. I might be able to learn a thing or two if I stay next to a genius, you know? Plus, now that I have a clear understanding of how I feel, there’s no need to be depressed either. I’ll do things properly from now on. I’ll focus on my acting and my acting only.”

After hearing those words, Gyeonmi faintly smiled.

“I see. If you feel that way, I will not mention this again. Do your best and make Heewon feel uneasy because of your skills.”

“Yes, I’ll do just that.”

“Now that I look at you, you have a bold side to you, huh? I’ll go down first, so you can take a breather and come down after a minute or so. I think you’re a little too agitated right now.”

“Yes!” Gaeul replied energetically.

Gyeonmi turned around and started walking away. At that moment, a question popped up inside Gaeul’s head.

“Uhm, teacher.”

“Yes?”

“In your eyes, how was Heewon’s expression of his object? I mean, the wind from the air conditioner.”

“Oh, that.”

Gyeonmi smirked.

“It was utterly pathetic and I could clearly tell that he did it because he wanted to lie down. But it was quite eye-catching.”

Gaeul nodded after hearing that answer.

Chapter 622

“I’d send them off.”

Maru said to Daemyung, who was next to him.

“Competing against someone full of talent is a stupid thing to do. If you overpace yourself to catch up to a person running on a different track than you, then you’re bound to end up exhausted. That’s why you have to send them ahead. When you see geniuses running far ahead of you, you have to look at them and learn what you can, instead of actually trying to run next to them.”

“I guess that’s one way of thinking about it.”

“You’ll get hurt if you try to chase them. I don’t like the saying ‘know your place’, but there is definitely a need to keep that in mind to a certain extent.”

“Don’t you want to try going against them once?”

Maru turned his head to the left. It was Jiseok who said those words.

“A genius is not a genius in all aspects, are they? There should be something they’re bad at. Don’t you think you would be able to find a way to win if you dig into that part?”

“Maybe, but there’s no need to clash, is there? I clearly know that I’m going to get hurt, so I should avoid it if I can.”

“There are definitely things you can earn by being defeated.”

“If you can’t take care of the aftermath of the defeat, then you get into trouble.”

“Challenge always comes with the risk of failure. It might hurt, but it’s also an opportunity to change yourself, isn’t it? Whether it’s a genius or not, you might hurt your pride if you suck up to them, but you’ll be able to gain a lot of things too.”

“That’s how you become Icarus. If you have wings that let you enjoy yourself, then you should know how to be satisfied with them. The moment you seek to play with those above you and fly higher, what little you might have will be gone.”

“If you don’t have wings, you can just ride the plane.”

“What am I even talking about with you? Why don’t you just ride a spaceship then?”

“Spaceships are good. But you know the saying: A genius cannot win against a hard worker, and a hard worker cannot win against those that enjoy.”

“When you call something ‘talent’, it means that it’s beyond the scope that can be covered by hard work alone. It’s just like how I can’t become Michael Jordan no matter how hard I try. Above all, those who have the talent are probably hard workers as well. To catch up to a genius who is also a hard worker and enjoys their profession, you just have to give up on competing and chase from behind.”

“I can win against Michael Jordan.”

“Why don’t you say that again after winning against a neighborhood kid?”

“You’re way too pessimistic.”

“And you’re way too optimistic?”

Jiseok, who was listening, suddenly ran forward. Maru looked at what he was up to, and it turned out that he was approaching an elderly.

“He hasn’t changed.”

“He looks like a polite kid.”

“To be precise, he’s a meddling guy.”

Jiseok, who was talking to the elderly, returned while scratching his head.

“He told me he’s not old enough to receive help yet.”

“Elderly people who are still healthy often don’t like being helped. So do something about that meddling personality of yours. It’ll come back to haunt you later.”

“Even if it’s like that, I can’t help it. Also, wouldn’t that grandpa be happy to see someone like me? He might say something like ‘kids these days are so cocky, but there are at least boys like him’. He might also say stuff like ‘the future of this country is still bright.’”

“As if you weren’t delusional already.”

“I’m delusional? No way. I’m just seeing the world in a slightly better light. Though, I kinda stand out because you’re way too pessimistic. Daemyung, don’t you think so too?”

“It hasn’t even been that long since you two met and you’re trying to split us up already? Park Daemyung, don’t get influenced by him. Optimist Virus doesn’t have a cure.”

As soon as he said those words, Maru looked at Jiseok and chuckled. Leaving aside what he was saying, this fellow was definitely an interesting fellow. The way he trusted those that gave him goodwill was also rather manly, so Maru looked at him as a good guy. Of course, he managed to reduce the RPM of the motor behind his mouth.

“Should I not have called him?”

“Oh, no. When else would I meet an actor besides you who’s on TV?” Daemyung said.

Jiseok brightened up and got closer. Maru, who was pushed to the back, saw Jiseok and Daemyung putting arms around each other’s shoulders and laughing.

“Hey, it’s this way.”

He pointed at the building to their right as he called out to his two friends who were endlessly walking forward. Jiseok nodded and turned.

“What is all that that you’ve brought with you?” Maru asked as he looked at Daemyung and Jiseok’s hands, which were holding large plastic bags.

“Some gifts.”

“I bought some light snacks.”

Light snacks huh - Maru shrugged as he looked at the plastic bag which was filled to the brim. Perhaps it was okay since the fridge was empty anyway.

He climbed the stairs and stood in front of the door.

“Wait a sec.”

Maru opened the door and went inside first. His father was currently living somewhere else. He went to a factory in another province for a few months because of a new production line, and his mother would cook some food and bring them to him every weekend. Last week, the entire family went there and had a family meeting. After seeing the news about a migratory bird father on TV, she kept texting every single night.

After scanning the empty kitchen, he went to Bada's room and knocked on the door.

"You there?"

Bada slightly opened the door.

"Yeah?"

"I brought a couple of friends so it might get a little noisy. We're going to watch videotapes in the living room."

"Okay. I'll be in my room so consider me non-existent. Also, are the people coming handsome?"

"They look just like me."

"Oh my word. How can they live such sad lives? Should I get some tissues ready?"

"Maybe."

Bada grinned before closing the door after saying that she would stay quiet. Maru sighed a little before opening the door.

"Is your family inside?"

"My parents aren't here, but there is a sensitive high school girl, who I'm worried about since I wonder who will take her as a bride in the future."

"What the, you had a sister?"

"Didn't I tell you?"

Jiseok chuckled before coming inside.

"I think I told you a lot of things, like how I have a brother in the military, that I don't have a good heart, and that I don't have a lot of friends due to transferring quite often. What did you do while you listened to all of my history? You didn't even let me know about your sister."

"There wasn't any opportunity for me since you were confessing your sins all the time. Well, now you know I have a sister."

Jiseok twitched his eyebrows as though he didn't like it and grabbed Daemyung, who followed him in.

"Daemyung, did you know that Han Maru had a little sister?"

"Y-yeah. I did."

"Wow, I feel betrayed now. Daemyung's closer to you than I am, huh."

Of course, duh - Maru replied before organizing the shoes the other two took off. Jiseok was saying that he was disappointed, but his expression was all smiles. In fact, it was Daemyung who was at a loss as he was without an understanding of what was going on.

"Just ignore most of his words. He's the type to say stuff without going through filters in his brain."

"R-really?"

Only then did Daemyung make a relaxed smile and sit down.

“Is your sister pretty?”

“I was wondering when you were going to ask that. Just think of my face, but with longer hair.”

“Oh my word. Aren’t you being way too cruel to your little sister?”

Jiseok spoke in a serious voice. Just then, Bada’s room abruptly opened.

“Now that’s not something I can pass. I’m much better than you, oppa.”

Bada moved out of the room. Maru never believed that she would stay quiet in the first place, so Maru just looked at Bada before going to the kitchen.

“Ooh, you must be Maru’s sister?”

“Yes. I’m that ugly Han Maru’s sister.”

“You’re quite pretty. Maru was lying.”

“Right? How do I look anything like him? It makes me puke just thinking about it.”

Jiseok and Bada had something that clicked and got along even though this was their first meeting. Daemyung just sat in front of the sofa neatly and was laughing dryly.

‘I guess this is the first time he’s seeing her properly, huh.’

Daemyung had seen Dowook on a date with Bada inside a bus and had seen her face through photos that Dowook took, but had never met her directly like this before. He still became stiff in front of girls. Maru brought some cold water for Daemyung.

“It’s the first time you’re seeing her directly, isn’t it?”

“Y-yeah.”

“She’s just as you heard, isn’t she?”

“T-true.”

“Dowook, that guy, he might look like that, but he has a deep heart. Or, he must have betrayed his country in his previous life. Man, I feel sorry for him whenever I think about how she makes him suffer.”

“She doesn’t look that bad.”

“Really?”

Daemyung didn’t answer. Bada, who was talking with Jiseok, stared at Daemyung. Being conscious of that gaze, Daemyung turned his face away and Bada looked at him as though she had found something interesting.

“Han Bada, aren’t you going back inside already?”

“I will. But what’s that?”

Maru opened the plastic bag that Daemyung brought. Inside were some snacks and drinks that he bought from the convenience store.

“I’ll give her some to shut her up, okay?”

After saying that to Daemyung, he threw a few snacks to Bada.

“He’s the one who bought it, so thank him.”

“Thank you, chubby oppa.”

Bada grinned before going to her room.

“I thought you were becoming okay since you’re with Jiyeon all the time, but I guess you are still awkward around girls.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to them.”

“Man, how are you ever going to go travelling together if you’re like that?”

Hearing the word ‘travelling’, Daemyung visibly flinched. Oh? His reaction was as though he had already made plans with Jiyeon.

“Who’s Jiyeon?”

At that time, Jiseok interrupted. There was a possibility that they might get distracted so Maru quickly stood up and brought the videotapes.

“Oh, these are the ones you were talking about?”

Jiseok picked up one of the videotapes and had a closer look at it.

“Why are you acting like someone who has never seen videotapes before?”

“It’s just been so long since I last saw one. I rented quite a lot when I was young too.”

Daemyung had a similar reaction. Now that they were used to CDs and downloading, videotapes had become a relic of their memories.

“So that genius actress is on this tape, right?”

“Whether she’s a genius or not, we’ll have to see for sure. Circumstantial signs all indicate that she’s an incredible person, but there are cases where old memories are blown out of proportion. So, we’ll have to see for ourselves.”

He received the videotape that Jiseok was holding and put it in the VCR. Meanwhile, Daemyung laid out some food on the table.

“Remember that you aren’t here to watch a film, but to study,” Maru said as he picked up the remote.

Both Jiseok and Daemyung turned serious and nodded. Maru sat on the sofa and pressed the play button. 1988. This was the year that Jung Haejoon and Lee Junmin met. Wondering if the change that occurred within Haejoon was on this tape, Maru felt slightly nervous as he picked up a cup of water.

“Can I watch as well?” At that moment, Bada opened the door and spoke.

She seemed to be bored by herself and peeked out.

“We’re not watching a movie.”

“I know. I’ll quietly watch from the side. It’s a little awkward for me to stay in my room by myself, isn’t it? Eating by myself is also a bit boring.”

Maru pointed at the empty spot next to him while looking at Bada, who was waving a bag of snacks. Bada tiptoed and walked over quietly before sitting down.

“Ooh, it’s on now.”

Color filled the monochrome screen, showing the familiar building. Maru tensed his eyes at the same time the video started. There was a man who was barely inside the frame. He was wearing a suit that seemed to be worn-out and had a very bland expression.

President Lee Junmin. He, who was in his thirties, was in the frame.

“Ah!”

Hearing an exclamation, Maru spat out a short breath before pausing the video. After seeing that the video had stopped, he looked at Bada.

“What is it?”

“I was wondering where I saw this oppa before. He’s actually someone who was in the same sitcom as unni, right?” Bada said as she pointed at Jiseok.

Jiseok thanked her for recognizing him.

“A celebrity.”

“Nah, I’m no one that good. Hm, should I give you an autograph?”

“I’ll be able to sell it for quite a lot once you become famous later, right?”

“Of course. Should I give you one? I’ve practiced mine, you know?”

Maru looked at the two before making a thick smile.

“Would you two like to go to a corner? Or be quiet and watch this?”

“We’ll be quiet.”

Jiseok and Bada smiled awkwardly before looking down.

Maru glared at the two before grabbing the remote again.

Chapter 623

He always appeared wearing a suit with the sleeves worn out. I noticed him, who was only a guest since he stayed in the theater even after the play ended, or to be precise because he was staring at me. That persistent gaze happened again and again for a few days. At first, I thought he was an ordinary

salaryman, but he appeared in the theater regardless of weekday or weekend, morning or afternoon. Around that time, my thought that it was simply my misunderstanding that he was looking at me turned into assurance.

He came today as well. He always sat on the same seat, placed his briefcase of unknown contents on his lap, and looked at the stage. I showed up for a brief moment before the play started, and indeed, he looked this way. Rather than feeling unpleasant, curiosity came first. At first, I thought he was simply a fan, but his gaze wasn't entirely gentle, so I changed my mind. Why would a man in his early thirties visit this specific theater so often?

"That man came here again today."

"Right."

The people of the troupe started noticing his presence as well. As he always sat on the same spot even when the seats were almost empty, it was natural for the other members to be conscious of him as well. He quietly watched the play and kept his seat until the very end before disappearing without a word again.

By this point, worries that he might be a threat had been thinned out, but the curiosity still remained. Did this place have an importance to him? But then, how would you explain the stare he always gave me?

The man once again sat on the same spot as though to indicate that he would be there next week and even the week after that.

"It's a bit strange."

"He's staring at you weirdly too. Should we report him?"

The opinions of the other members of the troupe became worse by the day. The other members had also found out that he was staring at me until the very end.

"He doesn't look like a bad person."

I calmed down the others who asked me if I was okay. I might get an earful that I'm immature, but no malice could be felt from that man.

"If you say it's okay, then it should be fine, but he's still suspicious. He came here so many times already and is always staring at you. There's nothing bad to be gained from being careful."

"Anyway, if you feel like anything's going to happen, call out to us, okay?"

Those were Jincheol-oppa and Jinjoo-unni's words. Everyone in the troupe, including those two, did not look at the man in a good light. He was an appreciated customer who raised their sales, but everyone agreed that they should be suspicious since he always looked at one person.

"Okay."

That evening, after the play ended and they said hello to the audience, I did not step back and walked towards the audience seats instead. Leaving behind the panicking troupe members, I walked up to that man, who sat down on the very left seat of the third row. He slowly raised his head and looked at me.

“You have something to say to me, don’t you?”

I don’t know where I got the courage to do that. The leaving audience members gave glances before moving towards the exit. Listening to the quiet footsteps of the other people, I stared at him. From up close, I found out that he had a sharp-looking face. Just changing that worn-out suit would make him give off a much better impression.

“Hello? Didn’t you have something to say to me?”

Looking at him, who didn’t speak a word, made me a little annoyed. He definitely should have something to say. At that moment, he stood up with the briefcase. I had to tilt my head backwards from looking down. Having stood up, he had quite a tall stature. I was momentarily at a loss because he felt completely different from when I looked at him from the stage, but I soon got myself together. Since I decided to make a judgement today, I wanted to get an answer out of this man regardless of what I had to do.

The man, who was staring at me, turned around. He then walked in large strides as though to run away. Looking at the man heading for the exit in a daze, I snorted before following him. I’m seeing the end of this today.

“Hello!”

I walked out to the streets without even changing out of my costume. It didn’t look that out of place since it was a contemporary play, but thanks to my thick makeup, I attracted a lot of gazes. I chased the man walking in large strides and grabbed his shoulder. The man slowly turned his head around before walking forward again. Having been ignored twice, I felt annoyed. What frustrated me above everything was that this man clearly had something to say to me, but kept trying to avoid me.

I lifted my skirt a little and started running. I blocked the man’s path and stared at him while panting. The emotionless expression on the man’s face finally turned into panic. Seeing that expression, I felt good since it somehow felt like I won.

“You have something to say, don’t you?”

I asked once again. The man’s gaze started wavering everywhere. It was quite unexpected. Unlike how he looked, the man became flustered quite easily. I thought that he’d be more rational and heavy, but the way he panicked was kind of flabbergasting and somehow relieving.

“If you don’t talk to me now, I will never talk to you again. If you’re a man, then be a man and talk to me. I’ll listen to you.”

I tensed my eyes and glared at the man. The man’s tightly sealed lips slowly parted.

“...small for you.”

I couldn’t hear what he said at the beginning.

“What?”

I somehow ended up sounding nitpicky, but I had no time to think about that. The man’s words were just too unexpected.

“That stage is too small for you.”

* * *

-This is the man who said to our Haejoo that the stage is too small. Well then, why don’t you go ahead and introduce yourself?

The camera turned to Junmin in his younger days. Junmin looked at the camera with a cold expression.

“Wow, that man looks scary. If I actually looked at him in real life, I might have turned my eyes away. Heck, I’m doing that now too,” Jiseok said.

Daemyung, who was staring at the screen in a daze, put down the sliced bread and spoke,

“M-Maruu. Is that president Lee Junmin?”

“Yes.”

“So he was like that back then too, huh.”

“Human nature doesn’t change that easily. He looks like he became a lot softer over the years. The president in the video looks like he’s on edge.”

“You’re right.”

It felt like Junmin’s sharp aura was being scattered in this space, transcending ten-something years of space and time. It was clear from the video, so it would’ve been even worse for the people there. Most people probably avoided Junmin.

-You’re making that expression again. Uhm, bro, everyone here knows that you can’t lift a finger against Haejoo, you know?

-Oppa, why don’t you act like you look? You look like the kind of man who would subdue back alley delinquents with just your eyes yet you just melt in front of Haejoo.

The conversation was completely different from what he expected. Junmin also seemed to have felt awkward and left the frame. The camera tried to follow him, but he seemed to have run out of the practice room as only the doors could be seen. The conversation between the members continued out of frame for a while. Like that, about two minutes passed before Junmin appeared at the entrance again, seemingly being pushed by someone. The one who was struggling to push Junmin’s wide back was none other than Jung Haejoo.

-Stop running away. It’s been more than two weeks since we’ve known each other. Why do you keep running away every single time? Is it okay for the man who told me that he’d help me become a superstar to be so shy?

Haejoo stood in front of the camera while holding onto Junmin's wrist. Maru pressed the pause button there. Junmin in an awkward posture and making an awkward expression was something unimaginable right now. As the representative of JA, Lee Junmin always met other people with smiles, but he was the kind of man to harbor several snakes inside him, wasn't he? The man who even had the devilish Suyeon under his complete control, was helpless against a woman, and had that sort of expression? That was beyond fresh, it was shocking.

"That was unexpected."

Maru looked at the two people on the screen for a while before pressing the play button. He was expecting to see Junmin leading Haejoo with meticulous planning, but the reality was that Junmin looked rather shy and Haejoo looked rather bold.

"That's the president, right?"

Daemyung asked in a very different tone from before. Maru couldn't reply. He was also wondering if that man was a doppelgänger or something.

"President? Wait, do you mean president Lee Junmin from JA?"

"Yeah, him."

"He feels very different. I've never seen him in person, but I've always thought of him as a scary man. But he looks like a rather gentle person in reality, huh?"

Probably not - Maru and Daemyung replied at the same time. Jiseok tilted his head before focusing on the video.

"So that ahjussi over there is your president, oppa?"

"Yeah, he is."

"Looks like he wasn't well off back then. Look at that, his suit is all worn out."

Like what Bada said, the Junmin on the screen looked quite far from being rich. Compared to the current him, who always wore neat clothing, albeit not 'brand name' stuff, there were a lot of differences. Perhaps the only thing the two had in common was their stubborn expressions. However, even his expression turned weird like it was a malfunctioning computer whenever Haejoo was next to him.

'So you become such a simpleminded man when you stand next to the person you like.'

Jung Haejoo loved Lee Junmin, and Lee Junmin likewise loved Jung Haejoo. This was something he heard from director Park Joongjin. Of course, he couldn't find out what they felt for sure back then. He couldn't transcend space and time to go back to that time, so he could only try to arrive at a conclusion as a third person.

Despite that, Maru could sympathize with the two people, no, with Lee Junmin on that screen. A man who loves one woman is bound to show their emotions through their eyes after all.

"It looks like the president likes that lady, right?"

"I have to agree."

Those were Jiseok and Bada's words. Daemyung didn't say anything, but he probably had the best understanding of the exchange of feelings shown in the video out of all of them.

"We're not trying to watch other people's love history, so let's focus on the content."

Maru watched on. After a commotion, everyone except Junmin and Haejoo, who were in front of the camera, left the practice room. What was funny was that Jincheol said that he turned the camera off before leaving. Making assumptions, it seemed that the other members were playing a prank on them to peek at what the two were doing.

-You should get used to it now. How can you be so hesitant when you told me you'll teach me?

-Like I said, we shouldn't do it here and find somewhere quiet to...

-What? Do you know that you sounded very indecent just now?

-I didn't mean it that way.

-Yeah, I'm suuure you didn't.

-I said I did not.

-You're trying to be angry again. Fine, I'll trust you this time. Anyway, let's start practice. It'll be hard for you to coach me once the other people come back.

Haejoo smiled before distancing herself from the camera.

-Should I continue what I was doing yesterday?

-Yeah, go ahead.

Maru focused on the screen. Would Haejoo's acting have changed after Junmin's coaching? Haejoo started acting the prostitute that she played before. She tried to seduce an imaginary man with a smile on her face, but her unique clean image still remained with her, making her not seem like someone who sold her body at all. It felt like a child was wearing adult clothes and was trying to play a prank. The tone of her lines, her gestures, and her expressions didn't look wrong, but the combination of all of them simply couldn't be called good in any way.

-How is it?

-It's still terrible.

Junmin spoke firmly without hesitation. For that moment, he looked like the man who founded the current JA. Haejoo shrugged without a shred of disappointment.

-Ahjussi, am I no good after all?

-No, it's not like that at all. You're filled with potential. You just need to learn how to bring that out.

-Really?

-I don't come here just to play around. My life's on you.

Maru almost dropped the remote from his hand. Having said something tremendous like it was nothing, Junmin also seemed to have realized the meaning behind his words and started explaining.

-I-I don't mean something personal, no wait, I guess it is personal, but not anything romantic, nor am I saying that you should leave your life in my hands.

While he was making excuses, Haejoo suddenly burst out laughing.

-Ahjussi, you know that you look very stupid now, right?

Maru wondered how Junmin would react if he saw this video. He was very curious, but Junmin might dissolve the contract there and then, so he decided not to try.

"Your president seems like an interesting person."

Jiseok spoke while giggling.

"Looks like time changed a man a lot."

To be exact, it was a certain incident that changed him. Ice age probably overcame his face after Jung Haejoo's death. Lee Junmin should've changed after that incident.

Maru leaned back on the sofa.

Lee Junmin and Jung Haejoo, the story between the two had just begun.

Chapter 624

"Then let's do it that way, yes. Thanks for your work. Dinner? Oh, it's that time already. You should eat. I will take care on my own."

Junmin put down his phone and pressed firmly between his eyebrows. His body felt like a lump of lead, as he hadn't had much sleep recently. He leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath before looking at the clock. It was 5:49 p.m. It was time for dinner. He briefly thought about going home and cooking his own dinner, but he didn't feel like he had the energy to drive himself home. He picked up his wallet and left his office. He said goodbye to a few of the managers who were waiting inside the company before going to the kimbap restaurant in front of the company.

"Tuna kimbap?" The lady asked as soon as she saw him.

Junmin nodded before taking a seat. Back in the days when he used to wear the worn-out suit every day, he swore that he would eat the delicacies of the world for every meal when the number of digits on his bank account surpassed ten, but after achieving that goal way too easily, the restaurant he frequented the most was still a kimbap restaurant and one that was located in front of his company. He could go to the restaurant in his company, but when he ended up making a subconscious decision, it always turned out to be kimbap.

As he ate the tuna kimbap with the miso soup, he looked at the TV on the cabinet. He looked at the ad that was airing out and compared the image of some actors in his mind. When his mind was filled with a rather decent-looking business plan, Junmin shook his head. At this point, he was obsessed with work.

He wanted to forget about work when he was eating at least, but whenever there was a TV or a radio around him, his stream of consciousness naturally flowed towards the entertainment industry.

“Thanks for the food.”

“Goodbye.”

It felt like he was leaving his house. These days, a lot of people asked him if he was going to get married soon. It made him tired of retorting to them every time that it was already too late for him since he was in his fifties.

He returned to his office and took off his shoes before lying down on the sofa. He kept training to stay fit, but he could feel his stamina decreasing every year. Wondering whether or not he should try to quit smoking, Junmin put a cigarette in his mouth. That was definitely not happening.

He puffed a short one before looking at his laptop. There were tons of emails regarding advertisements. Despite the fact that the head manager had filtered them once, there were more than forty of them. Most of them were for Suyeon. After that was Sooil. There was nothing for Geunsoo or Ganghwan.

“Well, these two will become big soon.”

Suyeon was currently the face of JA Production, but Junmin thought that it would soon change. Junmin had excavated and nurtured many actors until now. However, most weren't a part of JA right now. Although he kept a good relationship with them, Junmin did not choose them. Geunsoo, Ganghwan, Suyeon, and the child actors who were still growing right now - Junmin decided to house them in JA. Not the best, but the irreplaceable. Junmin set a clear path that JA was going to take.

Perhaps his dream might have strayed off, but Junmin still wanted to achieve it. That was because the only way he could atone was for him to pave the path that Haejoo should have walked on.

Junmin took out a phone from his chest pocket. The light from the phone screen colored the dark office in a hazy white color. He pressed a few buttons to bring up the photo gallery. When he clicked next a few times, some old photos filled his screen. Junmin zoomed in on one of them. Haejoo was standing with a prankster smile and he was standing next to her. Junmin faintly smiled as he looked at his past self that was at a loss on what to do since Haejoo had hooked her arm around his.

The gallery on his phone was a treasure island that he could visit at any time. There was no need to worry about losing directions, no need to go past the rocky waves, and yet he could still come across treasures that couldn't be compared to anything else in the world. Junmin rubbed the smiling Haejoo's face with his thumb.

“If she was still alive, would I have gotten married?”

I am going to confess one day - Haejoo's whisper rang inside his ears. Junmin reminded himself of the two regrets that changed his life. One was that he made an appointment with Haejoo on that rainy day, and the other one was that he did not reply to that shy question. If he acted differently in any of those two scenarios, would that girl's fate have changed?

Junmin looked around his office. A thirty year-old nameless actor with no assets had now achieved all this. Ironically, Haejoo's death brought a drastic change to his life, and that became the motivation that

led to his success. Perhaps due to that, Junmin would sometimes want to vomit when he looked at the building that he named after Haejoo. It wasn't just once or twice that he wanted to turn his back to this place and leave, thinking that everything here was built on top of another person's life as the foundation. But, whenever he felt like that, he scolded himself. He told himself that running away right now would make Haejoo's death even more meaningless.

'Though, even that is just an excuse and self-justification.'

In retrospect, he lived a dream-like life. They say a story of a hundred different people was equivalent to a hundred different dramas, but how many people would actually live a drama-like life? Most people just joined the rail that society wanted them to. They would come across a few opportunities that could be said to be a turning point in their life on their narrow railroad, but that did not change the fact that they were still on the rails. Before he met Haejoo, he was also following along the ordinary rails. It was because he met her that he came to doubt the rail, stopped, and eventually escaped it. The start of the change definitely stemmed from Haejoo.

"Where am I heading now?"

His objective was still clear now. It was to nurture another actor like Jung Haejoo. Well, it was unknown whether an actor like her would ever exist again, but the ones growing under him right now definitely had the potential.

After gazing at the photos for a while, Junmin felt his vision go blurry and closed his eyes. He felt like fatigue was piling on his eyes. He wondered if he should sleep like this. When he sighed and opened his eyes again, he had a sharp sense of déjà vu. Junmin quickly stood up and looked at his work desk in front of him. He felt like he had seen the same desk somewhere before.

'What am I thinking...'

Obviously, he would have seen it before, since he came here every single day. However, it also felt like there was a slight difference. He felt like it looked redder before. Before? Junmin stroked his face. His head felt hazy and he couldn't continue thinking properly anymore. Was a lack of sleep this frightening? Feeling a floaty sensation, he opened the fridge. After he drank a cup of cold water and turned around, a heavy headache overwhelmed him.

At the same time, he experienced the scenery in front of him changing all by itself. His office, which had a blue overall theme turned grey for a moment before it changed into an extremely ordinary-looking office. He could see his own figure looking at the computer with a bored expression. No, could it be expressed as 'seeing'? He felt like he was being reminded of an event in the distant past. Was he hearing things? Seeing things? Did something bad finally happen to his mind? Perhaps it was his body's way of telling him that he should quit the goddamned alcohol and cigarettes.

He clutched his head and sat down on the sofa. The scenery in front of him was still changing. He could see himself working while wearing more informal clothes like he was wearing now, and he could also see himself running around busily with a necktie tightly strapped around his neck. Everything in this space changed except for the sofa he was sitting on. Even the people changed, whether it was their faces or their clothes. Some of them were people he knew, and some of them were people he did not know at all. However, these seemingly unfamiliar people felt incredibly familiar to him. It was an

indescribably complex and strange, nay, rather horrifying sensation if he dug into those feelings more deeply.

The scenery, which was rapidly changing like switching TV channels, was eventually fixed on one scene. Junmin heaved out a deep breath and focused. Did people go through this kind of strange phenomenon when they were tired? He was reminded of his friend, who was a doctor and had told him that he should get some rest.

“Is it finally time that I rest?”

He did feel like it was about time to rest since he had been working non-stop for the past twenty years. Junmin lay back on the sofa again. It would be a huge problem if he kept standing up and collapsed and injured his head or something. He clutched his still dizzy head and forced himself to sleep.

Fortunately, he calmed down when he closed his eyes. He felt like he could fall asleep quite soon at this rate.

‘Looks like I really needed some rest.’

His body felt very drowsy immediately. When he felt a little better, his brain, which had stopped working because of all of the chaos, started working again. He was slightly worried that the strange phenomenon from before would happen once again, but the blue-themed office looked deadly still. While he sighed in relief, his brain replayed the fifty years of life he had experienced. Junmin watched his own life happen in his mind as though he was watching a movie. An elder who was struggling to live because of the failure he experienced in youth, the love that came to him too late after an early farewell, and even his middle ages when he burned even more passionately than his youth. It was riddled with trials, but he smartly overcame all of them and arrived at where he was now. Looking back, there were quite a few decisions he made that could only be described as luck. The past him made choices that the current him couldn’t understand at all, but as a result of that, he always saw profit. To be precise, he never made losses.

He wisely walked the curvy road that was his life as though he had been on it once before.

“Like a person who’s lived once again...”

Those words subconsciously escaped his mouth.

This life, in which he had gained clear success, despite the ups and downs, suddenly felt unfamiliar to him now. The life he lived until now felt like a well-made script all of a sudden. Thinking that he was following a script of a perfect life that was written over several iterations of editing, Junmin uttered.

“Looks like I’ll have to visit the hospital.”

He had heard of a mental disease that made one suddenly feel unfamiliar with oneself. Depersonalization, was it? He had just experienced realities where he was detached from himself. The sense of alienation and deprivation made him think that it might actually be symptoms of an illness rather than simply being tired.

Junmin called for his head manager, who should still be at the company. It was a stupid thing to ignore something that happened as nothing much. As sorry as he felt for his friend, he needed medical attention.

“Head manager Lee, can I ask you to drive?”

Calling the internal line, Junmin looked at his cell phone on the sofa. Haejoo’s face was still on the screen, which hadn’t been turned off yet.

* * *

“Were you always a good eater?”

“Don’t talk to me. I feel like I’m gonna burst.”

Maru looked at Jiseok and Daemyung, who tapped on their bellies. They ate lunch after watching one video, and these two ate tremendous amounts. Even Bada, who actually liked eating, declared forfeit midway in front of these two.

“I’ll get some sleep.”

“Sorry, Maru. I feel sleepy too.”

Jiseok went to the sofa and lay down on it, while Daemyung lay down in front of the window. Bada also crawled back to her room.

Maru shook his head and put away the dishes. He thought that there would be quite a lot left over after seeing all the food that Daemyung bought, but they actually managed to finish it all. When he returned after cleaning up, the two had fallen into a deep sleep. Maru brought some duvets from the bedroom and covered the two of them.

“Sleep. I guess that’s for the best.”

Maru put the next videotape in the VCR and played it. The previous video only contained the awkward-looking Junmin and Haejoo. There was a brief practice moment, but there weren’t that many differences as though it hadn’t been long since the coaching started.

Like always, Jincheol’s face appeared on the screen after a buzzy screen.

-Doesn’t Haejoo feel different now?

-Well, I didn’t notice.

-Really?

-How can her acting improve in just a few weeks? Also, honestly speaking, I don’t trust that Lee Junmin guy. He’s a nameless actor himself, and he wants to coach someone? Haejoo is way too nice to him. If it was me, I would’ve kicked him out without a second thought.

-Yes, yes. He looks quite capable though.

Just then, Jung Haejoo’s voice could be heard from outside the camera frame.

-There, there. Talk after you eat this kimbap!

-That again? Sheesh, you really like them, huh.

-There's nothing better than it though.

People started gathering in front of the camera.

Chapter 625

-Then I'll leave this on, so practice as much as you want. I'll also leave the power cable attached, so you can press this button to shoot whenever you want. There's a video overwrite function built in, so you can reshoot, but if you do it more than three times, there will be noise in the video. Bear that in mind. Then Haejoo, I'm leaving. Junmin-hyungnim, also....

The screen slowly moved. Haejoo and Junmin became further away from the center and a man standing in the right corner was captured by the camera.

-Joongjin-hyungnim. I'll be leaving first.

-Okay, Jincheol. Thanks for your work.

The young Jincheol put his face close to the lens and waved once before pointing the camera back at Joongjin and Haejoo again. Bye - Jincheol's distant voice was caught by the microphone.

-Joongjin-oppa. Don't just stand there and come here.

-I'm okay. I'm fine with watching from here. Also, don't mind me when you practice.

-There's a person, so how can we not mind? You're a precious guest, so come here.

Haejoo left the screen. A moment later, some metal clashing sounds could be heard right next to the camera. It seemed that they were setting up some metal chairs.

-Try moving next to the camera. That's where we can see you the best.

-Thanks.

-Don't thank us. It's us who should be thankful. Then Junmin-ahjussi, shall we start?

Hearing the word 'ahjussi', Junmin faintly smiled, but soon returned to his stiff face.

-Did you practice what I told you yesterday?

-I did.

Haejoo went up on stage. The lights on the stage slowly turned dim. It seemed that there were other people helping out with their practice other than the three people on stage. Maru turned up the volume with the remote. When he did, he could hear some small sounds from a conversation. It was from the rest of the theater troupe.

-Before you start, draw a clear picture of what you want to do. I want to laugh, I want to cry, I want to be angry. It can only begin with showing a relatively simple emotion. Don't try to do something complex. Do it one by one, like you're learning to walk.

-Okay, I know that much.

-If you do, then show me.

Haejoo coughed a few times before starting to get her emotions together. Maru rested his chin on his hands and watched Haejoo on the screen. He once again realized that the energy given off by this Jung Haejoo was tremendous. Her expressions and actions made other people focus on her. Separately, they were nothing special, but after combining them together, Jung Haejoo had turned into a charming person. That charm multiplied when Haejoo was on stage.

However, it was still the person herself that gave off the fun and enjoyable aura; it couldn't be said to be from her acting. When Junmin instructed her to express joy, she was flawless but other than that, there were still parts that were lacking. It was incredibly good to watch, but if he was asked if she was perfect in regards to acting, he would tilt his head.

-How is it?

-It's good to look at.

-Really?

-Yes. It's good to look at. Like a doll. You know, those things that make you smile when you see them on a display. However, if you keep looking at them, you'll eventually get bored of them. That's because dolls only smile. An actor who only excels in one area is just like a doll.

-As always, you say stuff that hurts others without batting an eyelid.

-...Sorry about that.

Maru couldn't get used to seeing this Junmin. He looked at Junmin's figure from the side, as captured by the camera. He was slightly embarrassed, but he apologized without the slightest hesitation. He could see just how much Junmin cherished Haejoo from how he consoled Haejoo after saying harsh words. If he didn't care about her, he wouldn't have said those harsh words in the first place. Whether then or now, Junmin always talked only to people with potential after all. It was slightly strange to see him apply ointment to a wound after lashing out, but Haejoo, who didn't lose a word against him, was also quite impressive.

-What was the problem this time?

-I say this every time, but you look like you're enjoying it too much.

-Can't I? I'm doing something I like, so of course I'd be enjoying it.

-That's your business. The people watching you are there to indirectly experience the story through you. The actress they're supposed to be in the shoes of though, looks like she's enjoying it regardless of the flow of the play. Of course their immersion would break.

-So, did your immersion break?

-Honestly speaking, it made me keep watching you. That's your charm after all.

-Did you get fed up with me while watching?

-No, in fact, it felt refreshing.

-Doesn't that mean that there's no problem then?

-You, the person, won't have any problems. The person known as Jung Haejoo will be loved by all. However, you'll never become big as an actress. People will look for you not for your acting, but just as a celebrity. You might be able to shoot countless commercials. All the major companies will call out to you, and you'll become busy to the point that you won't have any time.

-No way. Aren't you going too far with that?

-No, I believe that you will become like that. If you debut in your current state.

-I'll earn a lot of money, huh.

-You will. Your image will be very effective in advertising products. People will like you, and therefore will feel positive towards the products that have your image. You will become successful, at least.

-But you're saying that I will be successful not as an actress but as a celebrity, am I right?

-That's how things will go. The market just works that way. Of course, that doesn't mean that you won't be able to keep acting. You'll get numerous scripts. However, you won't be able to play the roles you want, nor would there be roles that you could digest. A director who only chases money will use you, but those who want to make their work a piece of art won't use an imperfect actress who only excels in one area.

Maru nodded. That was the correct notion. In the movie field alone, there were numerous celebrities who kept working in the advertising field without shooting any movies at all. It wasn't that they were wrong to do so. Their value was acknowledged, or they had an image that was preferred by the advertising companies. That was why they were called by the advertising companies, and the actors just simply responded. Of course, someone might ask if it was correct to call someone who only worked in the advertising field without appearing in dramas or movies an 'actor', but considering the limitations of the occupation of an actor, as well as the reality that there was no precise definition of it, it was just a shout in the void.

However, Haejoo wanted to live as an actress. Not as an advertising star, but as an actress who does good acting. Junmin just responded to her wishes. He was saying that she was no good as she was now.

-Can you try again?

-Sure. Uhm, Gwangsoo-oppa! Fix the lights just like this. Also, you can go home first. I can clean up afterwards. The rest of you can go home too. Don't keep watching this terrible acting and go rest at home. Ahn Joohyun, you too.

-I have plenty of time!

Joohyun's voice could be heard from outside the frame. After that, Haejoo did a few more skits. Whenever she did, Junmin gave her directions, but Haejoo's acting did not visibly become better. Maru could feel just how hard it was for someone who had a strong unique energy about themselves to hide it. Actors had to show themselves perfectly to the audience, yet paradoxically wear a mask at the same

time. For someone who naturally made other people smile, he or she would have to learn to hide first in order to make others cry.

Just as he was concentrating on the video, he heard a choke next to him. Jiseok, who was sleeping on the sofa, snored heavily before becoming quiet again. He shouldn't have sleep apnea at his age, but Maru still put his ears against his face, and heard that Jiseok was still breathing properly. Daemyung, who was sleeping by the window, was now sleeping with his stomach exposed. He had long since kicked the duvet away.

-Is this how I do it?

The volume from the TV suddenly became louder. Maru quickly turned the volume down. The camera, which showed the stage from the front until just moments ago, felt like it was tilted to the right slightly. It seemed that they turned off the camera once before turning it back on again.

-Are you really not leaving? It's ten o'clock already.

-I'm going to stay a little longer.

Joohyun said while yawning softly. It seemed that the person handling the camera was Junmin as his face suddenly appeared in front of the camera. He nodded in satisfaction.

-I think it's working.

-Then let's start again. Are you going to keep staying here as well, Joongjin-oppa? Don't you need to go to work?

-It's okay. I'll go after I watch just a little more.

-Well, okay then.

10 p.m., huh. Quite a lot of time had passed. Haejoo went up on stage again. She looked slightly tired as she smiled at the camera. Assuming that she kept practicing even after the camera was turned off, it meant that she had been practicing for five hours now. It was no wonder that she was tired.

-Let's stop here today.

Junmin spoke first.

-What are you saying? There's still plenty of time.

-It's too late. We have tomorrow and the day after that. We can just take it slow.

-Ahjussi, you know what? You've been saying the same thing for weeks now.

-Acting is a slow process. If you could improve in a short time, then anyone would have become an actor. It's because that's not possible that actors are treated well.

-We just turned on the camera, it's such a pity, isn't it?

-Resting is important too.

Junmin filled up the screen and approached the camera. Just then, Haejoo's voice sharply flowed out from the speakers.

-Ahjussi, tell me honestly. I don't have any talent after all, do I? You're actually regretting what you said to me that day, aren't you? They say anyone can make mistakes. I know that my acting is terrible. I know about it, but I can't quit because I enjoy acting. That's why I was really happy when you told me that this stage is too small for me. I thought that I might have something called potential.

Junmin slowly turned around. Next to Junmin's waist, Maru could see Haejoo walking to the side of the stage.

-Let's stop. I think that will be for the best. Joohyun, let's go home. Joongjin-oppa, you should leave as well.

The camera captured the smiling Haejoo's face. For the first time, the person who looked like she was enjoying herself on the stage, looked rather sad.

At that moment, a sharp voice filled the theater.

-Ahjussi, you've clearly gone too far! What did you say when the oppas chased you out the first time? You said to the troupe that they can't act in a place like this, didn't you? I was really angry when I heard you back then. Who are you to say that? I was really angry to the point that I had to hold back from hitting you. What did you do after that? After you were chased out, you shamelessly returned and bought tickets and kept watching the play every time, didn't you? Because we couldn't chase you out if you're a customer. Honestly, I was really annoyed. After watching you though, you didn't look like you were doing it as a joke, and that's why the others listened to your story, didn't they? Thanks to that, we resolved the misunderstanding between us. But you know what? I've hated you since the beginning. It's not like I don't talk to you for no reason. I never smile at you, do I? That's just how much I hate you. But at least I didn't show it on my face, since you're someone who helps unni out. Now that I look at you, that was fake too, huh. I knew it. Bad first impressions simply don't change.

They were Ahn Joohyun's words.

* * *

"Let's stop here for today."

"Should we? We still have plenty of time," I said as I went down from the stage.

There was tomorrow, and there was the day after that as well. Taking my time was the best.

"Let's try again tomorrow. And you should go home now."

Junmin pointed at the yawning Joohyun.

"Is it over now?"

"Yeah, we finished. We're going to try again tomorrow. But I feel hungry now. Uhm, Joongjin-oppa. Let's eat together before going home."

"I'll leave first. Let's eat together next time."

“Okay, then. Have a safe trip home. Don’t be late to work tomorrow.”

I waved at him with a smile. Joongjin slightly nodded before leaving the theater.

“Ahjussi, give me your hand.”

“What now?”

“Just give it to me. I’m too tired to stand up.”

Junmin sighed and pulled Joohyun up.

“Ahjussi, I don’t want to walk, so can you piggy-back me?”

“You have two intact legs, why would I do that?”

“Geez, I know you’ll piggy-back unni if she asks you.”

“N-no I wouldn’t.”

“It’s as clear as day, you know?”

Joohyun teased Junmin. Looking at them reminded me of a father and a daughter. When I watched them with my arms crossed, the two looked at me.

“Nothing, I just thought you two had a good relationship. You two got along great when you first met too.”

“No way. I was afraid of this kid. She tried to be so close to me.”

“Ahjussi, is this how you want to do things? Don’t you remember what happened when you came here for the first time and ran away after seeing unni? All of the people at the theater mocked you, and only I treated you like a human being. But you know? That was really weird. You ran away as soon as unni talked to you.”

“I didn’t run away. I was just a little flustered.”

“That’s called running away. But thanks to that, the unnis and oppas who looked at you like a strange man became relieved. We thought you were a stalker since you came every day and quietly watched the play, but you turned out to just be head over heels for unni!”

“Like I said, it’s not like that.”

“Like hell it isn’t. You really are an interesting guy.”

Looking at the two made me smile subconsciously. Everyone at the troupe now liked Junmin as well. Joohyun especially followed him quite a lot. Well, she was the only one who took Junmin’s side from the get-go.

“What would you have done without Joohyun, Junmin-oppa? You know that it’s because Joohyun took your side that everyone else accepted you easily, right?”

“That’s right. You should be thankful to me, ahjussi.”

“Joohyun, do you really like Junmin-oppa that much?”

Hearing that question, Joohyun pondered for a moment before replying with a smile.

“Hm, maybe I like him. Of course, it’s not like I have any intentions of intruding on the romantic relationship between you two!”

Joohyun pulled Junmin’s arm. Junmin awkwardly let himself get dragged. Watching that from the back, I made a faint smile.

Chapter 626

“This is fresh. I didn’t think that you were the type of person who’d intrude at this hour.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s not something that you need to apologize for. It’s bothersome, but what can I do? It’s not like I can see you if not for something like this. Come, have a seat.”

Junmin was led by his friend to sit down.

“So, you must have a reason to come to a single lady’s house at this hour, right?”

Junmin nodded as he received the tea that his friend gave him.

“I was wondering if we could have a talk,” he said as he looked at the teacup.

His friend, who was enjoying tea on a chair, quietly spoke,

“As a friend? Or as a psychiatrist?”

“If possible, the latter.”

“Don’t tell me you’re unable to sleep like before?” His friend narrowed her eyes as she asked.

Junmin shook his head.

“I reduced my sleep because of some work, but I’ve never had insomnia.”

“That’s good.”

Junmin remembered back to 16 years ago. To be precise, the 23rd of April, 1989. Ever since he heard the news of Haejoo’s death, he hadn’t been able to sleep for a while. Whenever he closed his eyes, the sound of the car horn, the friction of the tire, as well as the smell of burnt rubber haunted his mind. Even though he had never seen the scene of the accident, the accident vividly appeared in his mind as though he was a witness. The urge to vomit followed afterwards, and thanks to that, he couldn’t sleep at night and had to spend night after night by the toilet.

By the time ‘I’m going to die at this rate’ turned into ‘it won’t be too bad if I die like this’, he got help from this friend here. His symptoms became better thanks to mental consultation and medical treatment, and he was able to return to his ordinary life. After that, he worked non-stop until he reached this point.

“You look nervous. Drink that tea first for now. We don’t offer warm tea for no reason when we do consultations. There are many cases where the body affects the mind. Just warming up your body will allow you to regain your calm.”

“I guess I can’t ignore a doctor’s advice.”

Junmin drank the tea for now. Just like she said, he felt a little better after warmth circulated around his body. When he regained a bit of his calmness, he started taking in the scenery of her house. He had never been here since his last visit about a year ago, but nothing had changed at all.

“Generally we should start from the outside, but you don’t like things that way, so let’s hear what the problem is first.”

“I saw something strange. A scenery I could never have seen flashed in front of me. I could hear sounds as well.”

“Was it a one-off thing? Or did it happen frequently?”

“I’ve never experienced something like that before.”

“You aren’t on drugs, are you?”

Junmin stared at his friend. She just shrugged.

“There are an uncountable number of causes for hallucinations. It might be a psychological thing, or it might be a problem with your nervous system. It could be a problem from the increase of brain pressure, too. In your case, there are so many potential causes. It’s not that strange for such things to happen after fifty too. On top of that, there are reports of mental illnesses recurring after decades even after being completely cured in the past.”

“I see.”

“How did you feel when you experienced that situation? Did you get into a panic just like in the past?”

“No, it wasn’t like that. It was just confusing.”

“How about your breathing?”

“I didn’t pant heavily or anything.”

“In my personal opinion, you should get diagnosed not only in the psychological area but physically as well. Your body is honest. It’s sending you signals because there is an anomaly. You’re still smoking these days, aren’t you?”

“I can’t quit.”

“Doctors don’t tell people to quit for no reason. There is nothing proven other than the epidemiology of it, but it’s pretty clear that it’s not good for the body. Stop thinking of it as a cure for the soul and think about it seriously. Next time, it might not end with just knocking on your neighbor’s door at night. I’m saying that it will be too late once you’re in the ambulance. No, you don’t even have someone who could call an ambulance for you. You aren’t married after all.”

“Don’t you think someone married should be the one saying that?”

His friend raised her teacup and faintly smiled. There wasn’t a ring on any of her fingers.

“On the surface, you might look okay, but you never know what’s happening on the inside. Don’t ignore my words and get proper medical attention. What you can solve with consultation is extremely limited. Most of the time, it’s medicine that resolves the clump in people’s hearts, not the words of a consultant.”

After saying that, his friend sighed.

“That’s it from me. I think you still have more things to say, so go on. This reminds me of the old times. You always came to me even after the treatment and grumbled to me.”

“It’s always good to have a secret place.”

“Do the people at your company know that you’re like this? From what I hear, you’re known as the iron-blooded man.”

“Maybe that’s how they want to see me.”

“Sheesh, I wonder why there are so many stubborn people around me. There’s Seonwoo, and then there’s you.”

“What happened to lawyer Park?”

“Hey, aren’t you two treating me like some kind of ever-giving tree? Do you think I feel good when you guys come to me and complain about stuff whenever you are having a hard time? Do you know what kind of people look for psychiatric consultation most often? It’s none other than psychiatrists themselves. Sheesh, I wish you could take your confessions to the church.”

“Well, sorry about that.”

“Don’t apologize so easily. It makes me seem like a bad woman. Man, why don’t I have any luck with friends?”

She chuckled before leaning forward.

“Tell me about it. I know that you aren’t the type to come to me just because you’re afraid of some illness.”

“It was for a brief moment, but I felt so unfamiliar with myself. I felt like what I achieved was something I just received from someone else.”

“There are many causes and symptoms for depersonalization as well. Most of the time, it’s a result of a big wound, but that shouldn’t apply to you. You didn’t get into an accident without me knowing, did you?”

“No.”

“Have you ever felt paralyzed?”

“No.”

“Did everything look unrealistic to you? Did the hallucination you mentioned earlier seem far from realistic?”

“That’s the strange thing about it. Leaving aside the fact that I felt unfamiliar with myself, the things I saw were way too familiar to me.”

“Don’t you think it’s from your memories? You know, maybe a drama, or a movie, or a book that you’ve seen before.”

“No, I can guarantee that I’ve never seen those things in my life.”

“It’s the first time you saw them, yet you felt familiar with them?”

Junmin nodded.

“The degree of realism you felt is important. You were normal in your ability to check for realism, and it didn’t feel unrealistic but familiar huh. The answer is simple then. You should seek medical attention.”

“So that’s the conclusion after all?”

“Obviously. If I could correctly diagnose you with a few questions, why would we need medical equipment? We should use machines to look into what we can’t.”

His friend stood up.

“Sleep over.”

“You don’t have to....”

Just as he was about to stand up, his friend pressed his shoulders down. Junmin raised his head. He could see that she was looking at him worriedly.

“You really don’t look good right now. If I send you off now, I fear that I won’t be able to sleep in peace.”

“Sorry for being a bad friend.”

“You just found out?”

When she returned after putting away the teacups, there was a bottle of wine in her hands.

“You’re giving wine to a patient? I thought a certain someone was telling me to quit smoking just moments ago. Isn’t alcohol similar?”

“I would feel terrible to hear that from you but you don’t even listen to the doctor’s words. Here, have a drink. You haven’t been here in ages, so it’s such a pity to just sleep like this.”

He smiled as he accepted the glass, and she sat down right next to him. Seeing her sitting right next to him, Junmin couldn’t help but smile.

“So you really aren’t planning on getting married.”

“This isn’t the first time you’re saying this. I’ll just die lonely.”

“Then what about me?”

She leaned against his shoulder. Junmin just drank the wine without saying anything.

“A forty-nine year-old woman is no good after all?”

“Much better than a man in his fifties.”

“Didn’t you notice my feelings a while ago?”

“I did.”

“What a bad man.”

“Sorry.”

“Jung Haejoo, is that girl still in your heart?”

Junmin smiled bitterly instead of replying. His friend’s face became closer and closer to his face.

“I’ll take the consultation fee now.”

Her lips touched his cheeks. Junmin looked at her.

“What, were you expecting something?”

She giggled before touching her lips.

“Now that I think about it, the kid that you introduced me to last time.”

“Han Maru?”

“Yeah. Have you heard?”

“I’ve only heard that there were no anomalies after a detailed medical check.”

“I am obliged to keep things secret, but I’ll give you a hint since you’re like his social father. That child said something similar to you.”

“Similar to me?”

“His sense of depersonalization, that is, being unfamiliar with himself, was fainter than you, but it was the same in regards to the fact that the scenery around kept changing. It was even down to the fact that it felt familiar despite the fact that he had never seen it before. Of course, the change in surrounding scenery is something separate from depersonalization, but the fact that the two occurred at the same time is definitely a strange thing. I’m thinking that there’s an environmental element at your company causing the symptoms, but that child doesn’t commute to the company or something, does he?”

“There’s no way he does.”

“There are no contacts between you two either. There’s nothing similar about you two, yet the peculiar symptoms match. What’s interesting is that even after a detailed diagnosis, the result is that there are no external or psychological problems. You might turn out to be the same.”

“That’s quite a coincidence.”

“It is a little surprising to be a coincidence, but since the results are normal, I had nothing to say as a doctor.”

She yawned softly.

“It’s somewhat wrong for me to say this to a patient, but can I get some consultation as well?”

“If it’s just listening, I think I can do it.”

“Then just listen. This is the thing I want to consult about. A cocky man suddenly came to my house and is stirring my heart. What do I do with this man?”

“Get him to drink and have him sleep.”

“What a really cocky man.”

Junmin could only repeat the word sorry.

* * *

“Be careful on your way.”

“Sorry about that. I was going to watch with you, but I ended up sleeping.”

“You must have been tired. We can watch the important stuff later, so don’t worry about it. Also, Yoo Jiseok, you should visit an ENT doctor.”

After sending Daemyung and Jiseok off, Maru cleaned the living room. It was 11 past 10. The videotape he was watching was on pause. This was the part where Joohyun shouted at Junmin. This could potentially be a sensitive part, so he did not continue the video when the others woke up.

“Did they leave?”

“Yeah. It was noisy, wasn’t it?”

“Not really. Are you going to keep watching?”

“I am.”

Bada nodded before returning to her room.

Maru resumed the video. He met Joongjin when he visited the coffee shop to meet Jincheol. He heard about the past between Joongjin and Junmin and received the videotapes there. Like what Joongjin said, Junmin didn’t have a good relationship with the members of the theater troupe, but it was getting better as time went by. However, Joohyun didn’t seem to like Junmin. Perhaps this was the case since Joohyun cherished Haejoo a lot.

-Ahjussi, you’re thinking that unni doesn’t have any talent, aren’t you? What you said at the beginning is just a lie, isn’t it? That’s why you’re talking like you’ve given up, aren’t you?

The agitated Joohyun stood in front of Junmin. The camera captured her face. Joohyun was angry, and Haejoo was looking at her with surprise. Junmin was also in the frame.

After a moment of silence, Junmin spoke,

-Haejoo can do better. It's such an obvious thing that I don't need to mention it. Confirming her talents, and giving her the conviction that she can do better - how is that any important? The reason the word 'faith' exists is because people do not trust. It's because they do not trust that they keep seeking such a word and then affirm it for themselves. What I am doing is helping Haejoo become a better actress, not giving her faith.

When Junmin said those words, Joohyun made a complex expression. After that, Joohyun ran past the camera.

-Joohyun!

Haejoo called out to her and followed.

The video showed the stage with nothing on it for a while before it was turned off. Hm, Maru played the next video. The first thing he saw was a grey screen. There were people cooking pork belly on a frying pan. He also saw Joohyun, who was smiling awkwardly, as well as Junmin, who was cooking for her.

"Looks like things went well."

Maru looked at the screen with a smile.

Chapter 627

After taking a shower, Maru poured some green plum concentrate in a cup of water before bringing it to the living room. He opened the veranda and went outside.

"It's pretty quiet."

For some reason, the lights were off all the way from the distant apartment complex to the residential area nearby. It was 11:40 p.m, pretty early for everyone to be sleeping, but for some curious reason, other than the street lights, shop signs, and car headlights, there was no other source of light. When he turned his head just a little, he saw the streets, which were bright due to the lights. He observed the boundary between blocks which looked way too distinct. The stage and the audience seats - Maru was reminded of that place, which he had become familiar with now. Eventually, the lights along the streets started turning on. It seemed that there was a temporary blackout. He brushed the droplets of water on the surface of his cup and shook them off the veranda before turning around.

Thinking that he should watch one last video, he sat down on the sofa and played the video. The contents of the video hadn't changed for the past few videotapes. What was different was that the videos, which were taken every two weeks or so, were now taken every three - or even two - days. Most of it was about some chatter between the members of the troupe, practice, as well as Haejoo and Junmin's lecture.

-You need to show yourself a little more.

Maru put down his cup. Junmin's words sounded a little different right now. There was even a hint of anger.

-Show what?

-Yourself. I was mistaken because your character keeps being reflected when you are acting. You aren't hiding anything, so everything about you is being reflected on the character you're playing.

-I'm not hiding anything.

Haejoo said.

-I thought about it. No matter how bright a person's nature is, is it really possible for that nature to protrude out in every single act? It's natural for some traits, or habits to show. Of course, there are other characteristics that show as well. However, if it shows in every single act, even when acting another emotion, don't you think it's not being done subconsciously, but consciously?

-Are you saying that I'm intentionally ruining my own acts?

Haejoo glared this time as well. The two seemed to be the only people in the practice room, as it was silent otherwise. Just as the motor sound from the camera filled the audio, Junmin spoke again.

-You definitely have the skills to do better. It might look awkward because your unique character shows through in every single role, but once you take that away, I can't find any flaws.

-Oppa, you know what you're saying, right?

-If I am wrong, I will kneel and apologize to you. But from what I saw, you aren't someone who would repeat her mistakes. I was convinced when I first saw you during the street performance that you were a gem; a gem undiscovered by any other. The actress that made me fall for her in that instant keeps being awkward on stage? At first, I thought your acting method was wrong. That's why I tried to fix it. After some time, however, I realized that fixing it was no good. Because there was nothing to fix to begin with.

Junmin had no hesitation as he said those words. It wasn't stubbornness. It was conviction. Maru was rather surprised by that conviction. What did president Lee Junmin see from Jung Haejoo back then to be so sure?

'Well, he is someone who could chuck 300 million won to a high schooler, so he must be rather extraordinary.'

Perhaps Junmin had the ability to see something that other people could not. Whether that was intuition based on logic, or something spiritual, Junmin probably had some kind of evidence he could base his conviction on.

Maru was curious about Haejoo's reaction to that. Being the target of other people's expectations wasn't entirely a good thing. To a certain extent, it would increase her motivation and pride. There were many people that overcame their despair and gained courage from a simple 'you can do it'. However, too much expectation would erode away at their hearts. The moment they doubted that expectation, the target of the expectation might fall into a state of self-loathing. They would hate themselves for not being able to live up to those expectations, and would ultimately end up despising those that had high hopes of them. Expectations were like fertilizers. A moderate amount would accelerate the growth of a plant, but too much would make the soil rot. A plant rotten at the roots was bound to die.

-Oppa, you see me too clearly every time. Even though my body isn't made of glass, you see through me too well. I'm angry about that. It makes me realize that you will never change.

Haejoo spun around on stage before speaking.

-Do you know? There's another me inside me. A me fully immersed in acting. If I borrow her power, I will be able to do better. Just like... the first day you saw me.

There was a gap in her words. It seemed to signify some sort of event, but Maru focused on Haejoo's confession first. A me inside of me.

'She's the same as me.'

Maru turned up the volume.

-Oppa, tell me honestly. You fell for me at first glance, didn't you?

-I didn't look for you for such personal feelings like t....

-Really? Do you really think so?

Junmin made a difficult expression and looked at the camera. It seemed that he remembered that they were shooting.

-Oppa, what did you see in me that made you think I'll become a star?

-I can just tell.

-How?

-It's hard to describe with words. But I can tell. I can see what that person's talents are like, how far they will reach, and things like that.

-That's curious. It's like magic from fairy tales.

-Perhaps that's what it is.

-Haa, alright. I'll try.

Haejoo closed her eyes.

-At first, just feeling the existence of this girl inside me gave me a hard time. As I got used to it, I became able to move together with this girl. When I close my eyes like this, I can feel my consciousness sink into the depths. In those depths, there is a very dark curtain, and once I cross that curtain, there's a stage just for me. That girl is there standing on that stage. She's sleeping there. I can borrow her power in that state, but that shouldn't be enough to satisfy you. So I need to wake her up. I need to talk to her, share my consciousness with her and act together.

Haejoo, who was running around the stage, stood in the center. She slowly kneeled and sat down. The lights were fixed, but for some reason, it seemed to turn bright around her.

Haejoo put on a tragic smile. Her gaze was looking in the distance, but her body was fixed there. Maru frowned. She changed. He could tell that at a glance. On stage, Haejoo was always bright. The pink energy that circulated around her was like a paint that couldn't be removed, but for that moment alone, it dissolved into nothingness as though it came into contact with paint thinner. Conversing with another, inner self. That should be the identity of that thinner.

The person changed. The woman who always had a smile on her face disappeared and Haejoo put on a very thick smile very lightly. Her clear eyes changed and seemed like the faint moon hanging behind the mountain, and it felt like he would get sucked in if he kept staring. Her casual shake of the shoulder showed the extremes of a curvature that only women could show off, and her legs hid the secret between them, yet was still very provocative. Rather than a miserable woman selling her body in the red-light district, she looked like a high-class courtesan working in a luxury restaurant.

In that state, Haejoo said her lines. The words that escaped her round mouth likewise formed a round shape and jumped around the stage. Maru subconsciously gulped when he heard the sweet voice knock on his ears. It was a voice that too easily stimulated the desires he hid deep inside.

Haejoo raised her hand. Just like a butterfly with a ripped wing, the courtesan that tragically longed for her beloved just looked into the distance, calling out his name again and again, her body unable to move. Desperate, yet not desperate, affectionate, yet not affectionate. Haejoo interchanged between a seductive courtesan and a devoted girl before returning to 'Jung Haejoo' again.

Maru clapped. This wasn't something he should watch for free. The only thing he could do was to applaud, and he felt that it was such a pity that he could not reach out to the woman inside the video. What would Junmin have felt after seeing such an act up close? Probably overwhelmed?

-I knew it. You are still, and you always will be, perfect.

Those were Junmin's words.

* * *

"How is it?" I asked as I feigned calmness.

Junmin's request was simple. It was to show myself a little more. Not hiding it, but showing it even more. I shook off my embarrassment and poured out all of the desires boiling inside me. Even though the air conditioning was on in the theater, my clothes were drenched.

"Unni, you looked like a completely different person," Joohyun replied first.

She was such a thankful girl who joined practice all the time. I looked next to her. This person's answer was more important.

"It wasn't perfect, but you broke the frame. It was good, I mean it."

When a compliment, which I had never heard from Junmin's mouth since the start of practice, escaped his mouth, I felt my legs go loose. I tensed my shaking knees and ran to Junmin. Just like that,

I then hugged Junmin, who tried to dodge. My legs gave up at that point.

"Unni, aren't you being too bold?"

Joohyun's tone seemed calm, but her face was red. Joohyun left the theater, saying that she wanted to go to the bathroom.

"Wh-what are you doing all of a sudden?"

"I just wanted to do this. Why, can't I do it?"

“No, it’s not that you can’t...”

“It’s been months. You gave me a compliment for the first time in months. Don’t you think I’d be happy?”

“But even so, there’s a kid watching.”

“Are you shameful of me?”

“Of course not.”

“Then do you like me?”

I said those words because I wanted to see Junmin panicking, but Junmin spoke in a firm voice without any fluctuations in his expression.

“What are you going to do if I say I like you?”

I was waiting for those words. I tip-toed and put my mouth against his. He awkwardly put his hands around my waist, and I had to pull his hands for him.

“That wasn’t your first kiss, was it?”

“Think whatever you want.”

“It’d be great if it was, but it doesn’t seem to be.”

The man who appeared out of nowhere. The man who kept watching wordlessly and ran away when I talked to him. The man who taught me in this strange relationship of teacher and student. When was it that I started liking him?

“Shall we get married?” Those words escaped naturally.

“Sure,” Junmin also said nonchalantly.

We stared at each other’s face for a while before kissing once again.

“Are you serious?”

“If you’re okay with it.”

“You know that we’re twelve years apart, right?”

“Actually, it’s thirteen.”

“People around you will swear at you for it, are you okay with that?”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“I don’t care either. So we’re really getting married, okay? I’m not joking.”

“I don’t like jokes in the first place.”

I let go of my hands that I put around Junmin’s waist. It was a curious feeling. It was curious that I came to like a man who was much older than me, but it was even more curious that I wanted to live together

with this man. When people around me got married after dating for a few months, I thought that their courage was incredible, but now that I was in a similar position, I could understand them. This man is enough. An indescribable sense of fulfillment filled me up and became impenetrable by fear and worries. I only thought about the happy days that I would have in the future with this man.

“But we should try dating at least, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I get a refund if I don’t like it?”

“Honestly speaking, I think I’ll be very sad if I get refunded.”

Junmin made a difficult smile. I just found his expression too adorable. I put my hands on his face and spoke,

“Me too.”

At that moment, we exchanged a long conversation with things other than words.

Destiny - I became drunk on that word.

“Uhm, can I go in now?”

Joohyun’s voice could be heard. I chuckled and left the theater while grabbing Junmin’s hands.

“Joohyun, let’s grab something good to eat.”

“Forget about that, what was that just now? Are you two dating?”

“I’ll tell you that as we eat.”

I took Joohyun, who was nagging me to tell her what happened, outside. It was raining outside. It was the rainy season. Joohyun opened an umbrella and walked forward.

“Let’s use one together.”

I had an umbrella but didn’t bring it with me. I went under the umbrella that Junmin put up and walked next to him.

“Ah, there’s one thing I have to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“You have to quit smoking.”

“That’s a bit....”

“Then I’ll start smoking as well.”

“I’ll quit.”

“You have to look after your health. You aren’t young, you know?”

“It’s sad that I can’t retort.”

I boldly hooked my arm around his. It felt like the statue of emotions I'd been secretly carving over the past few months during practice was finally completed today.

"Oh, you know that I don't have any parents, right?"

"It's fine. I don't have any either."

"Looks like our wedding will be a small one."

"Yes."

Joohyun, who was nagging them to come faster, crossed the road. The green light was flashing.

"Oppa, run!"

"You'll get wet."

"This is youth."

I ran while looking at the flashing green light. The splashing beneath my foot was cheerful, and the sound of the rain hitting my head made me smile. Just as I was feeling that everything was going to go well, I saw Joohyun's face, who was on the other side.

Joohyun, who was stiff with her eyes wide open, threw the umbrella and reached out to me.

Why? - before that question even came to mind, someone strongly pushed me from the back. I was pushed forward and ended up on my knees. Just as I grumbled about how my knees were hurting after being scratched on the asphalt,

Thud - a heavy sound could be heard. It was an unpleasant sound I've never heard before. I quietly stared at my scratched knees in a daze before slowly turning my head around. A truck, with an ad for frozen dumplings on one side, had crashed into a commercial building. People were screaming. Screams gathered on one side, and my eyes naturally headed that way as well.

Pitter, patter, the sound of the rain hitting my head vanished. The rain that muddled my vision couldn't be seen either. There was only one thing that entered my eyes.

"No," I said as I looked at the blood being washed away by the rain.

"Gisaeng", for more details.

Chapter 628

I raised my head when I heard the ambulance break the silence. Droplets of rain were bouncing off the ground, people were murmuring, and there was a streak of red that was clearly distinct from the rain.

"Unni."

I turned around. It was Joohyun, who had changed her clothes. Ah, this was the hospital. The sense of realism kept disappearing.

"Is the guardian of Mr. Lee Junmin here?"

Guardian, am I even qualified to be that? The person who pushed my back and saved me was wandering between life and death in that white room, and yet could I dare to call myself his guardian?

“Unni.”

Joohyun grabbed my hand. Yes, get yourself together. Just as I was about to walk up to the doctor with shaky steps,

“Senior Choi!”

A startlingly loud voice could be heard behind me. A woman rushed across the corridor and stood in front of the doctor.

“What happened to him? What happened to Lee Junmin?”

“Kang Seoyeon, do you know the patient inside?”

“I’m asking what happened!”

“Calm down. I was just about to tell the guardian.”

“Guardian?”

The woman named Seoyeon looked at me. The moment I met her gaze, my breath stopped. What am I supposed to say to those eyes that were seeking an explanation? The unpleasant sound I heard during the accident echoed inside my head.

“You’re a doctor, so you should calm down. Also, Miss?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. We tried everything we could, but he didn’t make it.”

The doctor’s words couldn’t continue after that. Another emergency patient came to the unit. The doctor sighed in annoyance when a nurse called out to him before starting to run. My head blanked out for a moment. I think I just heard the news of someone’s passing away, but I couldn’t understand who. In the first place, why would he say something like that to me? He should be telling me about the state of Junmin who was inside. Why is he apologizing?

The woman who shouted earlier collapsed. I looked at her before standing in front of the room that said ‘Operation Room’. There was a no entry sign on the door, but that didn’t matter. I walked up to it with the intention of going inside. When the door opened, there was a long corridor.

“Miss! You can’t go in there!”

A nurse ran up to me and grabbed me.

“No, but he’s inside.”

“We can’t have you act like this here.”

“It’s just for a moment, just a moment is fine. I’ll just have a look at his face. Please?”

“If you keep acting like this I have no choice but to call security.”

I stared at the distant doctors and nurses in green before turning around. Right after that, strength escaped my legs. My vision became dark, and all sound was cut off. Joohyun ran up to me and said something, but I couldn't understand a thing. From afar, a man in a suit was running towards me. Who was it? People called him 'Prosecutor Park'.

"Unni, unni!"

Sorry, Joohyun. I decided to let go of my consciousness. I wanted to take a breather from the reality full of despair. My body complied with my wishes.

* * *

The yukgaejang cooled down. I didn't know who brought it here. There were about twenty tables, but there weren't many people sitting. It was 3 a.m. The procession was tomorrow.

"Haejoo."

It was someone from the theater troupe. I mechanically smiled and tried to rise from my knees, but my body didn't listen to me. It wasn't that my legs had become numb. My body just didn't feel like mine and didn't heed to my intentions. The intense powerlessness made me into an incompetent human.

"Stay seated. I know this isn't the time for this, but I thought I'd let you know. The plays are on hold for now."

"No, oppa. I can do it."

"You aren't in the right state. Joongjin-hyung decided to help us. He's willing to loan us the monthly rent. He was adamant on paying it himself, but we barely managed to talk him out of it and settled with a loan. We can't keep relying on him after all."

"Sorry, it's all because of me."

"I'm not here to listen to you say that. I just want you to not worry about anything and get some rest. Okay? You really don't look good right now. As cruel as my words might sound... dead people are dead. The living cannot chase after them. So... nah, I hope you get better. I'll be leaving now."

I wanted to stand up and see him out, but my legs really did not listen to me. I barely managed to lower my head before leaning against the wall. The jeolpyeon had dried into stiff blocks, the yukgaejang had turned cold, and the watermelons were crumbling apart. What was I doing here?

"Miss Jung Haejoo?"

I was staring at a fly that was on top of a slice of a watermelon when I heard my name and raised my head. There was a man with a worried face, and behind him was the clock. It was 4 a.m. An hour had passed already. It felt like my sense of time had disappeared completely.

"Ah, yes."

"You'll ruin yourself if you keep acting like that for two days in a row. You should get some rest."

"No, I can't rest."

"I understand how you feel. No, I can't truly understand how you feel, because I'm not you, Miss Jung Haejoo. However, what I can be sure of is that Junmin, that fellow, doesn't want you to get in trouble."

The man with a heavy expression asked if he could sit next to me. I nodded. I felt this when I came here, but there were only three things I could do. One was to say sorry, one was to carry food around, and the other was to nod.

"Did I tell you my name?"

"Prosecutor Park Sunggoo, was it?"

"So you remember. Junmin was a friend of mine."

Sunggoo poured some soju in a glass before drinking it without a word. I couldn't say anything. I was a sinner. A horrific sinner who took away his friend.

"Junmin, that fellow, he's been all smiles recently. I thought he was sick. He isn't someone who would act like that. That's why I asked. Were you cast somewhere? He told me no. Then I asked again. Then why do you look so happy?"

Sunggoo refilled his glass. He didn't drink it this time.

"He told me he finally found the one. You know? There was something he always mentioned. He said that there lies a true actor somewhere in this world. He wasn't someone who liked idealism, but for some reason, he kept saying that. I think that you are the actor he's been looking for this whole time, Miss Haejoo."

"I'm nothing like...."

"I don't know you that well, Miss Haejoo. However, I do know the man known as Lee Junmin. He tried to protect you and based on the fact that he did that without hesitation, I believe that you're worth trusting, Miss Haejoo."

Sunggoo gave me a business card. The prosecutor mark and the word Seoul entered my eyes.

"If something happens because of this incident, call that number. I will help you as much as I can. Also, keep in mind that this isn't your fault."

I stared at the business card and the filled glass. Just then, my head felt cold. Water flowed down and dripped off my hair onto the table.

"Kang Seoyeon!"

"It's all your fault. Because of you, Junmin is!"

"Hey, Kang Seoyeon!"

The smell of soju was ringing in the air. It entered my eyes, making my eyes hurt. I lifted my head up in a daze. I saw Seoyeon, venting her anger with a haggard face, as well as Sunggoo, who was trying to stop her.

"Seoyeon!"

"It's because of her. It's because of HER! You saw it, didn't you? You saw the CCTV footage! Junmin died trying to save this girl. That foolish guy died! Just to save this girl!"

"Seoyeon, stop!"

"How can I stop? How could I possibly stop! Junmin was my... I... Junmin...."

Seoyeon fell down and curled up. She cried loudly as though she was trying to fill the funeral hall. I couldn't say a word to her. I knew that anything that escaped my mouth - even my breath - would hurt her. I'm not someone who should be here. I'm like that piece of dried out rice cake....

"I'm sorry."

I kneeled and lowered my head. Would my guilty conscience become better if she swears at me more? There was no reaction even after a few seconds. When I raised my head, what I saw was Seoyeon's face, which had given up on scorning me. She was half-dead. She looked even more hurt than I was. That... that was what made me feel even worse.

"Miss Jung Haejoo."

I left the funeral venue as I heard Sunggoo call out to me. Only after I left did I realize that I hadn't brought an umbrella, forgot to wear shoes, and that my feet were bleeding. But who cares? What good was that? That didn't kill people. A truck was required at least to kill a person.

I saw a 6-lane road in the distance. People that started up the morning were busily driving. If I throw my body there, will the busily working people clean me up? The moment I was about to let death take my body, the thought that it would inconvenience them woke me up. I wasn't afraid of death; I was afraid of inconveniencing others with my death. The bitch that drove a man to death is now haunting people by committing suicide - I honestly didn't want to hear something like that.

Is this why people went to one of the bridges over the Han river? There was no need for cleanup, and did not pain anyone either. It's such a neat cleaner of death. I kept walking. I kept walking and walking without knowing where the bridge was. I could hear people murmuring around me. Look at that, it's blood.

I kept walking down the road and eventually came across a bridge. I didn't know what bridge it was, but I felt like I could jump off it. For this moment, I found it fortunate that I lived in Seoul. There was a quick and easy method to commit suicide so nearby.

I walked up to the bridge. I could see the river below. The river, which I never looked at closely before, was murky. Would this memory sink with my body so that it would never come up again?

"How charming is that."

Not having any family members was convenient at a time like this. Perhaps it was a happy thing that there weren't many people to grieve for me. I grabbed the banisters and lifted my legs.

"How about you live another life?"

Someone spoke from a distance away. I looked at that person for a while before putting strength into my arms. I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to hear anything. What I want to do now is to throw my body into that body of water.

"Will dying change anything?"

Those words stopped me. What did that mean? Was this person a civil worker? The kind that is affected by people committing suicide? Is that why there was a patrol here?

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't intend for you to apologize. It's just, I want to give you an opportunity."

"An opportunity?"

"Yes, an opportunity. Well, to introduce myself briefly, I'm an entertainer of sorts."

"Entertainer?"

"Yes. I provide gods with entertainment or something like that."

What did that even mean? For some reason, though, my mind kept being attracted to that person. That person's appearance was rather peculiar. I couldn't discern whether it was a man or a woman. The person looked like a man, and yet a woman.

"I will bring Mr. Lee Junmin back to life."

"What?"

"It's just as you heard. I will bring Mr. Lee Junmin back to life. Not only that, I will hand him some things that might help him in his life. Furthermore, you will also return. Return to the time before that terrible traffic accident happened."

Did this person even understand what was being said? Was this person some kind of lunatic? Or was this person just like me, someone that came to commit suicide? If this person was trying to play a prank just before committing suicide, well, the target was wrong.

"I'm not a lunatic, and this is not a prank either. I'm just offering you an opportunity. What do you think?"

"Bring that person back to life?"

"Yes."

"Ha, haha. Go ahead, try all you want. If you can, I'd be willing to give you my soul or anything."

"You're rather straight to the point. But since this is for entertainment, there are a few things I must warn you about."

That person came up to me and continued speaking,

"First up, you will lose your memories."

Spicy beef soup. Often served in Korean funerals. for more info

Ricecakes. Also often served in funerals.

Chapter 629

When he opened his eyes, he subconsciously touched his head. He expected that his head would be covered in blood, but unexpectedly, his hands were clean. He saw a messy desk and clothes strewn everywhere. Junmin stood up from the floor. The small kitchen had a foul stench, and his friends were sleeping on the floor.

"It wasn't a dream?"

He hurriedly looked at the monitor. 1988. Those four numbers entered his eyes clearly. He walked past his snoring friends and went into the bathroom. He checked his face in the mirror that had a corner broken. His eyes looked exhausted, but he was not injured. It was the him from a year ago. The loud bang that muffled his ears, the shock that followed after that, his body that flew through the air, as well as the people that looked at him with shock. That was then followed by the memory of Haejoo screaming in the rain as she looked his way.

"I've really returned."

It was a shocking matter. Unless he was in a dream, he really came back from the dead.

"It's just as that woman said."

The woman he saw at the boundary of life and death - just like what that woman with an indescribable beauty said, he really came back to life.

"They say animals have souls..."

There was a time in his early twenties when he picked up three stray dogs by the road and raised them. The dogs had ugly features all over their faces. That woman told him that he was given another opportunity because he looked after those dogs dearly. He never knew that such a trivial good deed would allow him to go back in time. As unbelievable as it was, though, he really came back to life.

He couldn't hold back his glee and came out of the bathroom, waking up his friends. His friends, who earned money by playing minor characters in various theatrical pieces, woke up in vexation.

"You guys should treat dogs well in the future."

"Dogs? What dogs?"

"You don't know dogs? I mean dogs, the ones that bark."

"You hated them though. What changed your mind?"

"What do you mean, I hated dogs? Where can you find a bigger dog lover than me?"

"What the hell man, did alcohol get to your brain after drinking too much? Hey, everyone you know knows that you hate dogs. What nonsense are you saying? If you are still drunk, then get some more sleep. Leader told us that we'll have our schedules full tomorrow with a historical drama. I think I'll rot in the countryside for about two weeks. He got us historical dramas from all the three major companies, RBS, KBS, and YBS. With those, we won't have to worry about money for the time being."

Another friend, in the corner, spoke,

“Hey, how long do you think we can keep doing this? We’ll be forty in a couple of years.”

“What can we do? We just have to keep trying ourselves out at the TV station. Let’s get some sleep first.”

His friends giggled before going to sleep again. Junmin couldn’t understand. He hated dogs? He was given another chance at life because he saved some dogs. Just as he was thinking about that, he saw faint colors emanating out of his friends. The area around their ears had turned cloudy as though it was painted with pastel. He rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was hallucinating, but the cloudy colors still remained. One of them had a red color, and another one had a blue color. The one sleeping in front of the fridge had a green color, and the one next to that had a yellow color.

After staring at the colors for a while, he came to a realization. The colors varied according to what he thought of his friends’ acting skills. The one that had a hard time memorizing lines was black, and the one that could memorize but had terrible acting was grey. The ones that were decent looked red, blue, and yellow. Junmin went back into the bathroom and looked at the mirror. Unfortunately, his ears reflected in the mirror did not have any color.

“I’ll be leaving for a bit.”

“Can you buy some ramyun on the way back? We’re out.”

Just as he was about to rush out wearing shorts and a baggy t-shirt, something came to mind. He opened the closet and took out his suit. He changed into his only suit and put his shoes on.

“What the heck? Why did you change your clothes?”

“Reasons.”

He even put his necktie on before going towards the streets. He grabbed a bus and headed towards Daehak-ro immediately. Everything was the same as though his death was just a figment of his imagination. Junmin immediately headed to the streets with the small theaters. He saw the building, that Yecheon resided in, that he had been to many times. He bought a ticket and went inside. There were 10 minutes until the play started. He sat down on one of the narrow chairs. Before he embraced this new life of his, he had to check something first. After more people came in, and one of the members of the troupe made an announcement, the play started. The lights turned dim, and an actor appeared on the stage right in front of him. All of them were familiar faces. Eventually, Haejoo came up. Her good, yet awkward acting hadn’t changed. So I’ve really returned to life. Joy overwhelmed him.

At the same time, Junmin discovered it. There was a beautiful light circling around Haejoo’s ears. Unlike his friends at home and the other members of the troupe, her color was composed of multiple different colors. Sometimes it was yellow, sometimes it was blue. It felt as though a rainbow was hanging on her ears.

He smiled.

He could begin again.

He would finally make that woman into an actress that was sought out and loved by all people.

After the play ended, Junmin approached Haejoo. He wasn't embarrassed like in his previous life. He was planning to say it boldly this time.

"Do you have any thoughts on doing acting properly?"

* * *

"Time of death: 20:28."

Those words reverberated in my ears. Hearing that, I could neither become angry nor deny it. I didn't cry either. Crying would be shameful here.

"Because of you!"

She called herself a friend of Junmin's, huh. The woman wearing a doctor's gown shouted. When she struggled, the nametag on her gown fell off.

Kang Seoyeon, neurosurgeon. That seemed to be her name.

I picked up the nametag and gave it back to her. The nametag was smacked away into the air, and my cheeks felt like they were burning.

"Because of you!"

She kept repeating those words. I felt my insides churning. Even though I hadn't eaten anything, I got the urge to empty things out. I quickly went to the bathroom and grabbed the toilet. What came out after an intestine-churning vomiting was just some murky stomach fluid.

Why am I alive? Why did that person die? I could feel the sensation of the kiss we exchanged just a few short hours ago, yet that person left for a place I could not reach.

I left the bathroom and walked through the corridor. The people I came across looked at me strangely, but I didn't care. The moment I left the hospital, an intense headache assaulted my head. I felt like I had experienced this scene somewhere before.

When I came to, I was standing on a bridge. I couldn't remember how I came here. I looked around, the moment I saw the black river water flowing beneath, I sighed in relief. If I was at home when I came to, I would have felt even more horrible. It was obvious that I would be disgusted at myself for trying to live on by myself by going home.

It didn't take that much hesitation as I grabbed the banisters. My body was smoothly heading forwards as though I'd done this before. Now, I just needed to put strength into my arms and stand over the guardrails. It would all be over.

One step. All that was left to put everything down was just one step.

Just then,

"Don't you want to start over?"

I turned my head slowly to the left, along the guardrails. There was a woman standing about five meters away from me. I hadn't seen her before, yet she looked familiar.

“Start over?”

“Yes, start over.”

“Start what over?”

“Do you really not know?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t even have the energy to speak right now. I’m going to put everything into jumping off.”

“Will jumping off change things?”

The woman’s words clearly touched my nerves. I let go of the banisters and looked at the woman.

“What are you saying?”

“Lee Junmin.”

That person’s name came from the foreign woman. I looked around as though I’d sinned. Was she a relative? Was she here to pick a fight with me? Or to console me?

My legs started shaking. Just seeing someone who knew Junmin made me feel like the floor beneath me had disappeared.

“What would you do if you could live your life again?”

“Live my life again?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not possible.”

“In this world, sometimes, the things that aren’t possible do happen from time to time. I mean, really absurd things.”

“Forget about getting me to do something just because I’m a woman who’s about to commit suicide.”

“I know it too well.”

“Know what?”

“Know what ‘you’ know.”

“What ‘I’ know?”

The woman raised her head. There was nothing in the sky, but the woman’s lips moved as though she was talking to something.

“It’s about time. Now, you must make your decision. You just need to answer with a yes or a no. Simple, isn’t it?”

“This will change if I just say yes?”

“Yes. It will. It will change somehow.”

I laughed in vain.

"I don't need anything like that. Even if I live my life again, there's no meaning in..."

"Living your life again means turning the clock to the past."

"Turning the clock to the past?"

"You know what that means, right?"

"...Will that person come back to life as well?"

The woman wordlessly nodded. At that moment, there was a smile on the woman's face. For some reason, the smile looked tragic.

"Time will go back to the past as long as I say yes?"

"Yes."

"The dead will come back to life?"

"Yes."

"That sounds way too good to be true. What does that leave you?"

"Let me just say entertainment. I don't know the details either. What I can be sure of is that the moment you say yes, time will rewind and everything will start over."

This was absurd. It was 1989, where cutting-edge science was blossoming in all areas. Who would believe in something like that? However, unlike what I was thinking, my heart had already decided on an answer.

"I'll do it. What do I need to do?"

"You just need to say 'yes'."

"Yes, I will do it."

"Wait. Before that, there are a few things I must explain to you. First up..."

The woman paused before staring at me.

"Do you really want to live again?"

"You said you know me as much as I do, right? What would you do?"

"If it was me, I would have chosen to live again."

"Me too."

"I see. That must be the case. Good. I will start explaining now. The moment you say 'yes', the clock will turn back one year. Of course, Mr. Lee Junmin will come back to life too. Everything will be just as it was in the past. That accident would not have happened, and no one will be sad. However, there will be a few restrictions on you."

“Restrictions?”

“Yes.”

The woman took away her smile.

“First, you will lose your memories.”

* * *

Pss, he opened his eyes because of the noise from the TV. Maru scratched his head and yawned. What time was it now? The sky he saw outside the veranda was purple. It was 6:23. It seemed that he just fainted while watching the video. It was Sunday today, but there was no shoot today. Today, he got to rest, which didn't happen a lot.

“Man, they ate a lot,” he said as he looked at the traces - empty bags of snacks - that Jiseok and Daemyung left behind.

He collected them and put them in a trash bag, but the trash bag looked like it was about to burst. He stuffed them all inside a 10L trash bag before putting the bag outside his house. An old lady holding a bible walked past him. He didn't know whether she was going to the church or coming from the church. God, huh. Maru smiled at the granny he met eyes with before nodding. The granny glanced at him as though she had seen something strange before walking off.

He returned to the house and tidied up the videotapes. He got a clue at least. Conversing with the ego inside him. That should become a foothold to improve his acting skills more.

‘But is this also a form of mental illness?’

He was rather happy to have found a colleague in the same situation as him, but there being another ego inside himself was definitely not normal, no matter how hard he thought about it. When he received mental consultation at the psychiatrist's before, he was told that he was normal, but an ‘inner self’ was definitely not normal.

“Jung Haejoo, it would've been great if I could have met her in person.”

As unfortunate as it was, there was no way to meet a dead person in this world. Well, it might be possible for the fellows up there. Maru stretched his arms out and went to the kitchen. For now, he decided to make breakfast.

Chapter 630

It was a rabbit with a pocket watch. The rabbit, which twitched its nose as it looked at the pocket watch, put the pocket watch away in a calm manner as though the time was nigh before hopping away. Gaeul hurriedly followed after it. She wondered why she was chasing it, but she couldn't care less when she saw the rabbit waving its round tail before disappearing into the narrow alleyway. She decided to follow for now.

The alleyway was curvy and only wide enough for one person to pass through. She used the rabbit's white fur as a guide as she kept following it. The rabbit always waited for her in this maze-like place. Perhaps she would go to the world that Alice went to if she kept going down this path.

The guiding rabbit suddenly stopped. Gaeul looked at the wall that blocked her path. The large stone wall, which even covered the sun, looked like no human could overcome it. The rabbit looked at the pocket watch. After twitching its nose, it slowly approached her. Gaeul slowly reached out. She was helpless against rabbits from a young age. Just as she was about to touch the soft-looking fur, the rabbit spoke.

“It’s a dead end again.”

The rabbit’s words didn’t contain any emotions. Gaeul quickly pulled her hands away as she felt the hair behind her neck stand on its end. Scary - a clear feeling rose up inside her.

“It can’t be helped. It just can’t be helped.”

The rabbit opened the pocket watch. Gaeul looked inside. It was an ordinary watch with indications for 12, 3, 6, and 9. However, when she had a closer look, there were different numbers between those numbers. 12, 3, 6, 9. The same numbers appeared in each of the four quadrants divided by the original four numbers. More numbers existed between those, and that was being repeated infinitely. The two hands - the hour hand and the minute hand - were split into four along with a screeching metal sound. The hand that pointed at the hour fell on the floor and cracked like a crumbling cookie. Just as she was becoming unable to tell what numbers the hour hand and the minute hand were pointing at, the rabbit spoke.

“Time is a thing that can be rewinded after all.”

She felt a hint of emotion in the colorless voice that belonged to the rabbit.

That emotion was deep resignation.

* * *

7 a.m. She tried to sleep in since it was Sunday, but her eyes opened by themselves. The rabbit she had seen in the dream. What was up with those sad-looking eyes she saw at the end? Gaeul sat on her bed in a daze before standing up. The clear scenery from her dream started to blur. She didn’t mind it that much since that was how dreams worked, but for some reason, the figure of the rabbit engraved in her mind became clearer and clearer. She came out to the living room and stood in front of the fridge. She saw a sticky note left behind by her mother.

-My girl, had a good sleep? Mom’s going out for work.

“She’s busy.”

She took off the sticky note and took out some water. It wasn’t a nightmare, but it gave her an iffy feeling. After drinking about two sips, she sat down on the sofa with her phone in hand. When the cool leather touched her skin, her drowsiness left her.

She thought about turning the TV on but decided not to. She wanted to enjoy the silence of the morning for a little longer. When she looked at the ticking clock, she was reminded of Maru for some reason. It was still early, so she thought that he wouldn’t pick up.

Just in case though, she tried calling him. He said that he didn't have any shoots this weekend, so he should be sleeping in. After the signal sound rang out once, she thought that she shouldn't interrupt his sleep and was about to press the end call button when,

-Hello?

"Oh, Maru."

-What's up? You're calling at this hour.

"Sorry, did I wake you up?"

-No, I've been up for quite a long time now. I woke up at around six, so it's been an hour.

"You woke up early. Didn't you say you didn't have a shoot today?"

-I'm on break, which I haven't had in a long time.

"You should've gotten some more sleep. You must be tired."

-I just happened to wake up. Also, I could say the same thing to you. What woke you up at this hour? You said you didn't have classes today and told me that you were going to sleep in.

"I also happened to wake up," she said as she poked the cushion.

She thought that he would be sleeping, but he was awake just like her. It had to be a coincidence, but she was rather happy that they matched like this. They say those in love will become similar to each other, and perhaps this was a facet of that?

"Have you had breakfast?"

-I was planning to eat with Bada when she wakes up. What about you?

"I have to eat by myself."

-What about your mother?

"She left early in the morning. She's really busy these days. I rarely see her during the weekend, and even on weekdays she leaves quite frequently with her laptop."

-She's being chased by deadlines?

"Probably not. She always shows me her drafts when she's done with them, but with the novel she's writing this time, she hasn't even finished her draft yet. When I ask her, she just smiles and won't answer me. She's my mom, but she really is ill-natured."

-That's her charm. If you don't want to eat by yourself, would you like to come over to our house?

"Nah, it's way too early. Also, you said Bada's there too, didn't you? She would be uncomfortable."

-Wait a sec.

She heard some noise over the phone. A while later, she heard Maru talking to someone. He was probably talking to Bada.

“Han Maru, don’t do it. Let Bada sleep. She must be tired.”

She waited for Maru’s answer, but what she heard was Bada’s drowsy voice.

-Is that you, unni?

“Yeah, Bada. Sorry to wake you up from sleep.”

-Nah. I was planning to get up early anyway. I’m a high school student too now. I should study.

“That’s amazing, Bada.”

-Nah. Rather than that, you’re alone in your house? Then come over. Let’s eat breakfast together. I can’t say that all of my brother’s cooking is good, but his egg bibimbap is definitely good.

“But...”

-So unni hates me?

“It’s not like that. It’s just that it’s still early and....”

-It’s fine, it’s fine. I’d be bored by myself at home anyways. I might as well play with you. Also, I want to hear from you about how it went with the agency stuff. Han Maru, that guy never mentions stuff like that. Unni, have you seen celebrities?

“I did, I guess.”

-Do you have photos?

“A couple.”

-Come over right now. Oh, and Han Gaeul, I think that name is really good.

“Thanks.”

She felt like she had a phone call with a family member. She felt grateful towards Bada who told her to come over without hesitation. Gaeul threw her phone on the sofa before running to the bathroom. Since she was going, she had to fully prepare herself.

* * *

“Unni?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Wow, you put your mind to it. I was wondering why you weren’t coming even though it only takes 40 minutes by bus.”

Bada grinned and poked her side. Gaeul smiled awkwardly and went inside. She heard the sound of frying while she was taking her shoes off. The savory smell was a bonus.

“Where are your parents?”

“My dad is working in the countryside, so my mom goes there every weekend. Thanks to that, I’m enjoying my freedom!”

Bada lifted her arms in joy and threw herself on the sofa.

“You’re here.”

Maru peeked out from the kitchen. In his hand was a frying pan. Gaeul put the eco bag she brought on the table.

“Should I help?”

“You should just sit since you’re a guest. But what did you bring?”

“Some fruits.”

“You shouldn’t have done that, you should’ve just come empty handed.”

“That wouldn’t be too polite of me.”

“Where did you learn things like that? I guess our little Gaeul is all grown up now, eh?”

“Wanna get hit by a grown up?”

“Uh, I’d like to refuse. If you’re so bored, can you take out the side dishes and put them on plates? There are big containers in the fridge.”

She took out the side dish containers from the fridge. She put some delicious-looking cucumber kimchi onto a plate and looked at Maru’s figure from the back. He was stirring eggs with chopsticks in front of the stove, looking completely natural as he made food. He even cracked some eggs with one hand.

“Do you cook a lot?”

“I do. The food I brought you when you were sick last time was also made by me. Wasn’t it good?”

“It was, but just thinking about it startles me. I opened my eyes and there was a boy in front of me. I hadn’t gotten washed too.”

“That’s just how people live.”

“No, it isn’t. Most people don’t make sudden visits.”

“That’s most people, not everyone. So tell me, were you happy that I visited or not?”

“Are you going to be mad if I say I wasn’t?”

“No, I’ll make even more visits. I’ll bring food every weekend. I’ll do that until you say you’re happy.”

“What a guy. Fine, I was happy, you satisfied?”

“Acting embarrassed, huh. Come here for a sec.”

“Why?”

“Have a taste test.”

He gave her a spoonful of the fried rice. Didn’t Bada say bibimbap? Anyway, she leaned forward and ate off of the spoon.

“It’s okay.”

“Our household doesn’t put a lot of salt in food.”

“It’s good enough though.”

“That’s good, then. Han Bada, clean up the table. We’ll eat there.”

Bada yawned and cleaned up the table in the living room. After all she said about her brother, it seemed that she listened to his words.

Maru put the fried rice into three bowls.

“Usually, we put chilli paste and some vegetables before mixing it together.”

“You mix it after frying the rice?”

“It’s better this way. The calorie count is higher too.”

“You just had to add that at the end.”

“You’re going to eat anyway, aren’t you?”

She was going to have to eat. Gaeul headed to the living room with the bowls. She put them on the table Bada had cleaned. As she was looking at the golden-colored fried rice, something caught her eyes.

“Are these the videos you were talking about before?” she asked as she picked up one of the videotapes that were piled into a tower.

Maru nodded as he brought the chilli paste.

“Thanks to the VCR you lent me, I could watch them.”

“There’s a lot.”

“There’s even more in my room.”

“How many did you say you have?”

“About sixty.”

Gaeul looked at the videotapes in each hand. If there were sixty of these, then the sheer volume would be quite considerable. She could see a box in Maru’s open room as well. It was a blue plastic box, and the videotapes seemed to be from there.

“Unni, they’re no fun at all. I thought they were movies, but they aren’t. The resolution is terrible too. It makes my eyes hurt.”

“I told you many times that they were for studying. Here, take your spoon.”

Bada shook her head and started mixing her rice.

“You said they were videos about an actor, right?”

“Yeah, but it isn’t just one person; it’s the practice of an entire theater troupe, so it’s taking quite a lot of time to go through them. But they are helpful, so I’m not finding it a waste of time.”

“They were helpful?”

“To me, quite a lot.”

Gaeul put down her spoon and looked at the videotapes. It kept tugging at her mind when she heard that they were helpful.

“Let’s watch them together after we eat.”

“Can I?”

“It’s no big secret after all. For now, eat before the food gets cold.”

Gaeul put down the videotapes. Her desire to do better in acting formed a more specific goal after she entered the agency. She wanted her laugh acting to be more detailed; for her sad acting to exude sadness; and for her to be able to transmit anger without expressively being angry.

Those kinds of thoughts came up all the time when she looked at Heewon’s acting. When she looked at him, and his acting, which looked very liberal like a bird flying without restraint, she wanted to become like him. However, she was aware that Heewon’s method was not something an ordinary person could understand and imitate just like her teacher said. She had to look for Han Gaeul’s unique color. Gaeul stuffed her mouth with food as she looked at the videotapes.