

## Once Again 651

### Chapter 651

"Where's Maru?" Sungjae asked as he looked back.

Geunsoo, who said he'd bring Maru, came back holding Bitna's hand. Maru couldn't be seen with him.

"He says he'll be eating over there."

'There' - Sungjae looked at the lunchbox vehicle. People were taking lunchboxes from the lunchbox vehicle that had a large logo plastered on the side. Maru could be seen in the middle of that line. He was talking to the people standing in front and behind him. He shouldn't have had that much time to get along with them, so his ability to get close to strangers was kinda incredible.

"It kinda suits him."

Maru looked so happy that Sungjae would feel sorry if he called him here. He met eyes with Maru from afar, and Maru just took a bow. He seemed to be apologizing for not being able to take him up on the invitation.

"Looks like we'll have to eat together next time."

As unfortunate as that was, he couldn't force Maru to come. Sungjae grabbed Bitna's hand and put some strength into his arm. Bitna, who was standing between the two men, jumped high into the air and laughed. That was the only activity she liked. She was kinda hard to approach at the beginning because she was so polite, but playing 'aeroplane' and lifting her like that would make her chuckle, so he was at ease with her after that. Maybe she remembers her father doing that for her - Bitna's mother told him that. Bitna was raised in a single-parent household.

"Isn't Maru-oppa coming?" Bitna asked.

"You know Maru too, Bitna?"

"Yes, I do. We shot together before."

"Really? Do you want to eat with Maru-oppa?"

"I don't have to, but I do have something to say to him."

"Something to say? What is it?"

Bitna stared at Sungjae when she received that question. Sungjae became awkward and started laughing awkwardly. He even felt that he was being scolded by her. The clear and translucent eyes looked upwards and, at the same time, Bitna's curved lips turned into a straight line.

"It's about my sister, so I can't say it. Sorry."

"No. It's my fault for asking. Maru won't be going home right after eating, so remind me about that later. I'll call him over for you."

"Yes."

Bitna's face became delicately frozen again after loosening up. The frozen princess had returned. Sungjae sent Geunsoo a signal for help.

"Bitna, hand."

Geunsoo grabbed Bitna's hand again. Sungjae also grabbed the other hand again. The two lifted Bitna up at the same time. After swinging back and forth like a swing, the princess' mouth curved again. Sungjae sighed in relief. The appearance of the frozen princess made him nervous every single time even though it wasn't like she was throwing a tantrum or something.

"Our Bitna's not ordinary, isn't she? She's much better than most adults. The boy that will wed her in the future will probably have a hard time. He's going to have to treat her like a queen," said Bitna's mother, who had been talking to the director until now. Sungjae could only smile and nod.

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Fried fish, seasoned burdock, stir-fried kimchi, and miso soup. Maru put a ruptured cherry tomato into his mouth. It was probably there as a dessert, but it had already become a side dish after being mixed with the stir-fried kimchi.

"You looked really natural, though?"

"No. I was so nervous that I don't remember what I did. I couldn't even hear the cut sound," said glasses as she put down her chopsticks.

"You even smiled in leisure yet you're acting embarrassed? Why don't you take an audition? Who knows, you might actually become an actress. Just take a break from college and try it out. If things go well, hire me as your manager. How about it? Isn't that perfect?"

"What a dream. Also, I told you it's not like that. It wasn't that I was at leisure; I only managed to let it pass because of this guy. I didn't understand when we were doing the shoot, but it all makes sense when I think about it now. I'm right, aren't I? You asked me about those fairy tales on purpose, didn't you?"

"I asked because I was curious."

Maru ate a piece of fried fish. The fish was very oily because it had been a long time since it was fried. The rice was all soupy and the side dishes were quite salty, but he didn't have a problem with eating them because he was hungry.

"The man wearing a suit came up to you and talked to you, didn't he? Isn't that person the main character of this movie?"

She seemed to be referring to Geunsoo. Maru chewed on his food as he nodded. When he affirmed that, everyone's attention was gathered on him. Maru smiled awkwardly and picked up the miso soup that he had left to the side. He thought that no one would be listening because they were absorbed in eating, but it seemed that they had been paying attention to them the whole time.

"Why would he talk to you?"

"I just know him personally."

“Really? What did he tell you? Did you just say hello?”

Before he could say yes, freckles interfered.

“I overheard. He said they should eat together. They seemed to be pretty close.”

Freckles raised her voice and asked ‘am I right?’. Maru took another sip of the miso soup to buy some time to think. He had always been quite uncomfortable with being pushed into the center of attention. There was a need to make up an excuse here. He thought that he should say that it was just out of formality. People would talk about something else once they lost interest.

“There you are.”

A shadow covered him. Maru looked behind. Sleeveless was standing there with two drink cans. He wondered what she wanted, so he stared at her. Sleeveless did not speak and just pointed at a bench, which was pretty far away. Leader was standing around the bench. Her intention was pretty clear.

“If you say we’re close, I guess I can call it that,” Maru said, as he looked at freckles.

Freckles and glasses quickly turned away from sleeveless. They started talking non-stop as though they were fish that had just been fished out. All sorts of questions burst out in the span of one breath. The other background actors also showed interest. Having become the center of attention, Maru looked back at sleeveless who was standing behind him.

“I’m sorry. I’m talking to them right now.”

He made an expression that said ‘as much as I want to talk to you, I’m tied up here’. It was a soft way to refuse. Someone who was quick witted would turn around and come back at a later time.

“Save that for later.”

Unfortunately though, sleeveless wasn’t quick witted. Maru wondered if he should tell her to get lost. The other background actors also looked at sleeveless with displeasure. There was no one here who would accept her kindly after she intentionally caused NGs to attract attention. Receiving the attention, sleeveless just crossed her arms and pulled her chin inwards as though she didn’t care. Maru clicked his tongue inwardly. She was way too egoistic. At the same time, she also was someone who enjoyed other people looking at her. No matter how much people glared at her, she probably thought that they were jealous of her. Maru scraped the remaining side dishes and finished them at once.

“I’ll be right back.”

He followed sleeveless to the bench. Leader, who had been watching until now, turned around. If sleeveless was acting like that by herself, Maru would have ignored her and kept on eating, but he decided to follow her obediently after seeing leader standing behind her back. Sleeveless and leader. There was nothing for him to lose even if he earned the ire of these two, but he was rather concerned about the other background actors. Since she was capable of openly causing an NG in the middle of a shoot, it was clear that she would tell everything she didn’t like to the leader. The shoot would probably continue into the night, so if the leader got pissed off, the people remaining here would have a hard time. Sleeveless looked like she was more than capable of asking the leader to do something like that.

Moving for other people's sake, it's really good to see you do that - the man within him said. Maru also replied - is that a compliment or are you mocking me? The man did not reply.

"What is it?"

Maru asked as he received the canned drink. He didn't know what she wanted, but he wanted to get this done quickly. Talking to a woman who considered other people as her foothold was not going to be constructive in any way.

"Are you pissed because of what I said earlier?"

"Of course not. I just want to take a break quickly. Is there something you want to know?"

"There is something I want to know. You looked pretty close to Hong Geunsoo back there. You know the director, you know Ahn Sungjae too. I heard that you were in a drama too?"

"That I do."

"Why are you still standing. Come sit. Why don't you have a talk with this noona? We should stay close to each other since we're both aiming to be actors."

Maru curved his lips upwards as he sat down.

"There, I sat."

"Good boy."

"What do you want to say?"

"Nothing much. I just want to be close to you. And if possible, introduce them to me."

"Introduce who?"

"Who else? I mean the actors of course."

Sleeveless turned around slightly.

"Actually, I have the skill, but I just haven't come across a good opportunity. You should know too that auditions are rigged, don't you?"

She looked around her foot. There were ants underneath the bench. A cicada, which had died after crying its lungs out for all of summer, was being disintegrated by the ants. Sleeveless lifted her foot before cutting the line that the ants were following. Tsk - she shook her foot in displeasure.

"No amount of effort is enough. The one who'll get picked is set in stone after all. Trying hard was only for the fools. The people who used their connections are laughing at the people who are trying their best. I should've realized that earlier...."

"And so?"

Maru looked at the line of ants. The other ants were carrying the ants that were squashed. They acted as though the disaster didn't happen at all. They continued moving their six legs and returned turned the world into its original state.

“Let’s help each other out. I’ll also give you an opportunity. Don’t you think it’s not a bad idea?”

“What kind of opportunity exactly?”

“Meetings with other actors. Or maybe writers and producers. Of course, I won’t be able to set up ones with top-tier ones, but you aren’t exactly top-tier either. First, you start by meeting with the lower people. Then, you make your connections. You just need to grab those and slowly climb up, then you’ll be up there eventually.”

Sleeveless pointed at the sky. The red in the sky was slowly being pushed away. It was turning dark now.

“Doesn’t that sound like a good idea?”

“It’s okay.”

“Right? I thought I could get through to you. Honestly, it’s not anything hard, is it? We should just eat together and get to know each other. Right?”

“It’s not hard.”

Maru looked at sleeveless.

“How old are you this year?”

“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“No particular reason.”

“Twenty-four.”

“Good times.”

He looked into her eyes. He tried to read what was on her mind, but he couldn’t see the speech bubble pop up. It was rather strange. He tried again to no avail.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

Did his ability disappear just like his memories? It didn’t matter that much since it wasn’t an ability that he used frequently. It was a pity that he had lost an advantage, but it was something he could replace with his experience. Though, he might miss that ability when he had to face a real veteran.

Maru straightened out the crease on his knees before standing up. Sleeveless’ story was so bland that her words disappeared into the abyss of his mind the moment he heard them. It should be fine if he hung out with her this much, right? She didn’t look stupid enough to throw a tantrum just because he didn’t comply with her.

“But I’m the tortoise style. I’ll just take things slow.”

“You’ll never get anywhere like that. We’re in a world where you can only climb up using your connections.”

“Rather than trying to climb a rotten rope, it’s much better to walk even if it’s slow.”

“Rotten? That’s a strange way of putting it.”

“I’m just not that good at making analogies. Anyway, you get my point, right?”

“Hey. You just have to tell them that we should hang out. Men fall for it easily.”

“Probably not, I don’t think. Especially for those two. One of them has been haunted by female fans for the recent part of his life, and the other one is being chased by a stalker right now.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, what could it mean?”

Maru shrugged before turning around. Sleeveless called out to him from behind, but he didn’t look back.

“You seem to not know your stuff since you’re still young, but-!”

Those words pierced his ears, but Maru just sighed it off. It’d be great if he was young and didn’t know better. How old was he now? He left behind sleeveless and returned to where the rest of the background actors were.

## **Chapter 652**

Choi Minae’s eye twitched as she watched the cocky kid walking away. They say people act like they look, and the kid who was exuding coldness from his sharp-looking eyes kicked away the laws of this world and decided to walk his own way. He probably thought that it was cool because it made him look rebellious. He was at that age after all. He was still immature and thought that the world revolved around him and that everything was decided based on his efforts. He would take nothing she said seriously since he treated convenience as trickery. He would probably find out what it meant to use connections when he becomes of age and has to take responsibility for himself. I shouldn’t have rejected her offer - that Han Maru kid would regret it later on.

“Did it not go well?”

Leader slowly approached her. Unlike his fat body, his steps were silent. And his hands were likewise silent as well. He was quietly grabbing her buttock and was twisting it from side to side. Minae slapped away the hand that was grabbing her buttock like she was chasing away a mosquito. The leader licked his lips.

“Everyone can see us here. If we get caught, both you and I will get into trouble.”

“Now, that shouldn’t be how you talk to me.”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve been like this.”

“That’s right. This isn’t the first time you’ve acted sassy.”

His hand sneakily touched her body while he was speaking. From the way he got up close to her to grope her, his skills were top rate. If there was a competition that awarded prizes based on perverted hand techniques, this guy would get the grand prize. Minae exerted some strength into her hand and grabbed his wrist. Leader made an awkward smile and took his hand off. He was a persistent man who would only stop his actions after being warned twice.

"I told you to leave it to me."

"So? Did you manage to set up an appointment? You didn't."

"People's matters don't progress that easily. Director Lee has a conservative side to him, and he's also married, so he might not like such a place, but the other two aren't. Ahn Sungjae might be difficult since he knows the taste of fame, but Hong Geunsoo will probably take the bait if I say I would get him more connections, you know? There's no man who would refuse to play around with women."

"Don't take things too far. We should only play in the range we can handle."

"I know, I know."

"But what about the director? Is this method really going to work? If I get stamped as an annoying girl who ruins his work, I'm going to hate you for real."

"I told you, it's going to work. I've known director Lee, I mean, that Lee Jincheol dude for five years now. He has a lenient personality, so he can't refuse a favor from those above him. Moreover, I'm quite close to him, and if I tell him it's a hyung-nim's favor he'll probably refuse at first, but he'll probably listen to me in the end. He's that kind of guy after all."

"Then didn't we choose the wrong strategy to begin with? I think it would have been fine even if I acted obediently."

"Then wouldn't give him an impression, would it? Don't you know the traits of directors in general? They like those that stand out. You might have acted quite rude, but you didn't cross the line. If you listen to him well from now on, you'll be able to get close to the director as well. You get what I'm saying?"

"Okay, then."

Leader, who was giggling, picked up his phone. He looked around before turning his head away.

"Go take it. Isn't that your wife?"

When she talked to him, leader's eyes widened before he placed his index finger on his lips.

"Hello? Yeah. Of course I remember Minah's birthday. Don't you know me? I know my daughter's birthday the best. She wants to have a party at home? That's fine. You're going to be home at that time, aren't you? Tell her that she can invite her friends home. I know that cooking for them will be hard, so you can just have food delivered. Kids like fried chicken and pizza these days, don't they? A birthday present? She said she wanted a piano a while ago, so should we buy an upright piano? How about an electronic piano? Let's change it to a grand piano once we move to a bigger house. Also, what should I get for you? Don't refuse. I wouldn't be qualified to be your husband if I don't get my wife a present. I'm thankful that you gave birth to our daughter, so you're more than qualified for a gift. Okay. Then should we go traveling over the weekend? You said you wanted to go to Daecheon last time, didn't you? Okay. Why don't you set up a schedule with the things you want to do? I'll take you on a full course. Alright, alright. Love you too, bye."

After making a deep smooch sound, leader hung up.

"You really surprise me every time. Don't you feel ashamed?"

“Why would I? Why should I be ashamed? I’m fulfilling all of my responsibilities as a husband and as a father. Did I make them sad? Did I not bring them money? I hold events for all the anniversaries, I do household chores, and I take my family traveling often during the weekends too. I score full points as a father, so why should I be ashamed?”

“So you don’t remember what you did with me?”

“Miss Choi Minae, are you perhaps jealous?”

“You’re being delusional, Mr. Fatty. I just pity your wife. I wonder what kind of expression she would make if she found out that her husband is rolling around in bed with a young girl.”

“I use my head so that she won’t find out. I am very devoted to my family during the weekend, and I stay the night out during weekdays. If I do that, my wife doesn’t suspect me, and I can enjoy myself. It’s a new world where no one gets hurt and no one gets sad. Since we’re talking about it, how about tonight?”

A hand crawled towards her thighs like a snake. Minae shrugged. Leader was a trashy man. He put a photo of his family in his car, spoke of love to his wife, and yet had her sit on the passenger seat next to him. He took her to motels, to mountains, and to seas. They rolled around both inside and outside of the car. He was a shameless man who still told his family that he loved them at times like that. And Minae liked that shameless side of his. A person with a thick face would lie naturally. It meant that he was safe. Don’t even bother with awkward guys. Only touch those that lie like they’re breathing. That will be better for you - those were her teacher’s words. Those words had never been wrong.

“I want to buy some new clothes.”

“It hasn’t even been that long since I last bought you some.”

“So, you don’t want to?”

“No, I am going to. As long as you keep being to my liking.”

“No matter how I think about it, I pity your wife.”

“She’s a happy woman right now so don’t you worry. I’m a perfect husband.”

“And a perfect cheater too.”

“A lie that isn’t discovered is not a lie. Everyone has it good, so there’s no problem.”

Minae glared at the leader who slapped her butt before walking away and turned around to face where the background actors had gathered. She wanted to naturally set up a meeting with Sungjae, but that seemed to be out of reach. It would be easy for her if that kid knew the workings of the world. This was why she hated kids. Their complacency in not knowing what was important was to the point of being disgusting. Background actors had gathered around Maru and were chatting. They were slaves who didn’t know the importance of every single day. They gave up on trying to climb up and were satisfied with their cheap daily salary. Looking at such losers made her feel like she wanted to vomit. The ones who said that they were just here to make a quick buck were better off. She couldn’t understand the people who proudly said that their dream was to become an actor in that group. Background actors spent most of their time waiting. That was equivalent to wasting time. The people who lightly talked

about dreams were wasting their lives, drunk in their satisfaction of being on the shooting set. They consoled themselves by looking up to stars and thinking that they would one day become like those people. They were no different from shit. Perhaps that was why she felt like there was a foul stench around those people.

Minae made a wise decision. Since she had decided to step into the entertainment industry at a late age, she used her smarts in order to not waste any time. She was running out of time focusing on her acting skills already, so she couldn't waste her valuable time laboring away to earn chump change. She needed a backer, and she took immediate action. However, it wasn't easy for her to find a backer. There were a lot of delinquents who would hand money to a girl with a decent face, but the capitalists who would support her in what she wanted to do were hard to encounter. She didn't need a man who would run away like a rat once they were done relieving their desires with her; she needed a proper backer who would support her consistently. It wasn't like she could go around looking for one openly, so she had to be careful, but there was a limit to that. The information network of someone who didn't possess anything was something as small as a spiderweb in the corner of an old house.

She needed a breakthrough point so that she could spend her time wisely. That was when she came across her teacher. Her teacher was the definition of a wise woman. She understood her situation instantly and consoled her saying that she was also a nobody in the past before immediately providing her with a method. That was how she met leader. Leader was fat, had a foul breath, and was a man who had a strange obsession with doggy style, but he was not foolish, knew how to earn money, and knew what cooperation was. Her teacher's recommendation was perfect.

Her financial situation improved quickly. Leader was a man who easily spent his money. As a successful man, his wallet was thick and chump change didn't exist inside his wallet. She stopped all of her part time jobs and focused on acting. She didn't see immediate improvements, but she wasn't afraid. After all, it was natural that the results would be late since she started late. She kept practicing and broadening her relationships following her teacher's words. She also reminded herself of her teacher's words that she would never become first rate with a backer alone.

"Life is about efficiency, kid."

Minae looked at Maru, who was sitting afar. She only pitied the pathetic kid that could not use his connections.

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"I was originally going to let you go after shooting the first scene, but I changed my mind after looking at the footage. The screen feels much more full now. It looks just the way I want it to."

Maru accepted the coffee that director Lee Jincheol gave him with both hands. He saw the staff members putting away the shooting equipment. The background actors were getting on the bus, following leader. Freckles and glasses waved at him. Maru also waved back.

"You became close in that short time, huh?"

"They're good people after all. I can get through to them."

“It felt like everyone was scattered before you were here, but ever since you became their pivot, the shoot was smooth, and it looks so much better.”

“Don’t put me on a pedestal. I didn’t do anything. Everyone just cheered up since it became cooler after sunset.”

“Do you think my eyes are here for show? I can see it. Films are ultimately shooting people, but they’re shot by people as well. It’s obvious that things have changed ever since you joined.”

“It’s a coincidence.”

“No, there is no coincidence when it comes to people. Everything happens for a reason.”

The director patted his shoulder, thanking him. Maru sipped on the coffee. The only thing he did was join and chat with the background actors, so he felt rather embarrassed when he was complimented for it.

“There are actors who influence the shoot, and there are actors who have no influence at all. I can’t say which one is better. It depends on the situation after all. However, you were really helpful today. Both Sungjae and Bitna looked a lot softer after seeing you. Geunsoo, is well, he was perfect from the beginning, so let’s put him aside.”

“Don’t say all that. It makes me want to hide.”

When he had a look at the smiling director, his phone started vibrating. He excused himself before opening the phone. He got a text from Gaeul.

“So you need to go?”

“Yes. There’s someone I need to meet.”

“I was planning to take you to the next location if you said you didn’t have anything to do. What a pity.”

“I find it a pity too. I’ll come again if there’s an opportunity next time.”

“You’re not telling me to call you huh?”

“It’s the holidays, so I’m going to play around.”

“Yes, you should.”

“I’ll return the videotapes in a while. Can I visit your house?”

“You can take your time. There’s no one who’s going to watch it anyway. Thanks for everything. Watch out on your way home.”

“Yes, I’m leaving now.”

He shook hands with the director before turning around. He met eyes with sleeveless on his way, and she was exuding an aura that read ‘I don’t like you’. It would be great if this was their last meeting, but he would probably continue coming across her as long as he kept doing this job.

“Kid, life is about efficiency,” said sleeveless as he walked past.

Maru nodded.

“Yes, it is about efficiency indeed.”

Just as he was about to go, he saw her staring at him with displeasure, so he added,

“Contraception is really important when you sleep with a married man. Though, I’m sure you must know that already.”

Sleeveless’ eyes became wide. Her mouth did not budge. As she started looking around in unease, he heard leader call out to her.

“Why don’t you get going? To your daddy, that is.”

Sleeveless looked around several times before quickly running towards the bus. She looked very uneasy when she turned around to look back at him.

“Why don’t you ask Kim Suyeon for help? She’d probably tell you a really efficient way.”

Maru said that to himself as he saw her becoming distant. Leader, who was groping her butt, also seemed to have heard from her as he was glaring at him from afar. Maru just nodded. They were a fitting duo for sure.

### **Chapter 653**

“Oppa.”

It was Bitna’s voice that stopped him in his steps. He could see Bitna’s mother smiling from afar. A year ago, during the historical drama, he was called ahjussi, but it seemed that his title was promoted(?) to oppa recently.

“Looks like I almost forgot to say goodbye to you, Bitna.”

“Are you going?”

“I have an appointment. You’re still shooting, right?”

“Yes. I think it will continue into the night.”

“It must be tiring.”

“It’s my work, so I can’t help it.”

Maru couldn’t help but smile whenever she sounded like she was a long time veteran. As she had been working as a child model since before she entered elementary school, perhaps it was natural that she seemed like a pro. The pivot of her life could be seen in her young eyes.

“I think unni wants to see you, oppa.”

“Me?”

Maru thought she was here to say goodbye, so it was rather surprising that he heard something else. He was curious about what happened to Yuna after that, but he didn’t know that he would hear her name from Bitna’s mouth.

“Can you give unni a call? Unni probably won’t be able to call you, probably.”

Bitna took out her phone from her small cross bag. She pressed some buttons with her little fingers before turning the phone around so that Maru could see. Yuna’s phone number was on the display.

“I know her number already.”

He got her number last time.

“Bitna, we should get going now.”

Bitna’s mother called out from behind. Bitna put her phone away and took a bow after grabbing her bag strap. Maru looked at Bitna running away before taking a bow towards Bitna’s mother. Bitna turned around after she reached her mother and waved her hand. Maru waved both of his hands in response.

“Looks like we won’t be able to meet today.”

He got a call from Gaeul as the car the mother and daughter were in disappeared into the distance. Hello? - before he could even say that, he was told that practice was going to end late today. She was panting. It seemed that she had called during practice.

“You don’t have to be sorry. We can just meet next time. It’s the holidays after all. We can just meet up when you don’t have practice. But rather than that, you seem to be quite passionate these days. Are you having fun with practice? Oh, you want me to look forward to it? Alright, I’ll have high hopes. Don’t push yourself though. You know that resting is just as important as practice, right? Yes. Since you’re doing this, don’t leave behind any regrets.”

He hung up. Gaeul was a girl who looked like a rabbit and liked rabbits, but her personality was more similar to a beast that would not let go of its prey than a docile herbivore. She didn’t show it usually, but during the important moments of her life, she would become a huntress. She would not let go of the opportunity she got by signing with an agency. She showed some hesitation until the moment of her decision, but once she decided on something, she would rush straight ahead like a racing horse. It seemed that something changed within her when she came to watch the videos last time. She didn’t explain anything, but Maru could tell from looking at her. All of her actions contained some kind of intention in Maru’s eyes.

He looked up at the skies for a moment. Since he was rejected, he had to change his destination. It wouldn’t be bad to go home like this, but he felt somewhat lacking. The conversations he had with the background actors reverberated in his ears. He needed more stories.

He opened the phone in his hand. He put his thumb on the menu button and thought for a moment. It was 8:10 p.m. It wasn’t that late to make a call, so he wondered if he should try calling. She might be at a loss if he called so suddenly, but he didn’t want to ignore her after he was asked to call her by Bitna. His thumb wavered between the menu button and the cancel button before it decided on a destination. He opened his contact list and called Yuna.

Once, twice, three times - the signal sound was repeated seven times, but she did not pick up the call. Since it was the weekend, it was likely that she was hanging out with her friends. Just as Maru placed his thumb on the end call button,

Hello? - he heard a hurried voice picking up the call. He put his phone against his ear again.

“Is this Miss Kim Yuna’s phone?”

-Yes, it is. Aren’t you Maru-seonbae?

“Yeah, it is me. I just asked just in case. You sounded like a different person.”

-Must be because I picked it up in a hurry. I ran because I heard my phone ringing.

“Ran? Are you outside?”

-No, I’m at home.

“Ah, I see.”

There was a moment of silence. Maru knew what he had to say, but it was hard to say. What happened after that? - asking that question made it seem like he was being too meddlesome. Though, telling her that he called because Bitna asked him to do so was also rather strange. Bitna seemed to want to keep her interference a secret.

-Sorry for leaving after just saying what I wanted last time.

Thankfully, Yuna spoke up first. This was why having a phone call with an unfamiliar person was rather difficult. If they were talking face-to-face, Maru would have had a much easier time talking to her since he would be able to watch her expression and mood. In Maru’s memory, Yuna was a big sister who looked after her little sister a lot; a student who had a passion for acting; and, at the same time, a little child who was fed up with acting. He couldn’t say anything much since he didn’t know much about her, so he was rather relieved that Yuna talked to him first.

“In the first place, you called me out for a consultation, didn’t you? Though, it started off with a lie.”

-I’m sorry about that as well. You were displeased after all, weren’t you?

“No, I said that to sound funny, but it looks like it wasn’t. It’s really hard to talk over the phone, especially when we don’t know each other that well.”

-Then can we see each other right now?

The conversation strayed off towards a completely unexpected direction. Maru stopped walking. His thought process also stopped as well. It was nearly 9 p.m. Not exactly the greatest time to meet up. Moreover, they weren’t close enough to set up an appointment like this so easily and meet each other. Maru was rather flustered when she told him that they should meet right now so easily.

-Is it not good after all?

“No, well, it’s not like that, but I’m in Seoul right now.”

-It only takes an hour by train.

“An hour is not entirely short.”

-Then what should I do?

It seemed that meeting was set in stone, just not the time. Maru started walking again for now. He thought about what kind of expression she had right now. Did she have an unspeakable worry like the first time they met? If it was like that, he could understand. After all, last time she was under pressure high to the point that she ended up bursting into tears on the spot. Perhaps she was in desperate need of an ear that she could say that the king's ears are donkey ears to. Associating that with what Bitna said, he was probably right. Unni wants to see you - it must be that Yuna has another worry.

"If there's something you want to say, you can tell me about it. I'll listen."

She was a junior that Gaeul cherished. Maru remembered that she was smiling pleasantly when she mentioned Yuna. He wanted to help her out with her worries if possible. Since she was a junior of his important person, it wasn't a waste of time to allocate some time for her.

-Uhm, I did say that I'll treat you to food last time, and I'm really okay with the time right now.

Was it a story that was important enough that they had to meet? She sounded rather urgent.

"Then let's meet in Suwon. I'm going to go down anyway. You shouldn't come all the way here."

-I can be the one to go there.

"I have to go home as well, you know? But by the time I'm there, it'll be 9 p.m. Are you okay with that?"

-Yes. I don't care.

"Don't you think your parents will worry about you?"

-She's not someone who would become worried because of something like that. I'm alone at home right now, and I'll be by myself until tomorrow because of my sister's schedule.

"That's true. I came across your mother by chance, as well as Bitna."

-Really?

"We met on a shooting set in Seoul. Bitna was as composed as ever."

-She can be awkward at times. She's quite stubborn at home, you know? Though, she never acts like that outside.

"She has to relieve her stress like that. She's still young after all. Then see you in Suwon."

-Okay. I'll buy you dinner.

"Nah."

-Don't refuse. I definitely have to do something I said I'll do. I definitely want to buy you dinner.

Yuna sounded rather insistent. Maru felt like there was an unshakable wall right on the other side of the phone. A person like that would never go back on her words. She was the type of person who would do something if she had to. Maru said okay. He avoided being treated without any reason, but he did not refuse free food if there was a reason.

-Where should we meet? I think Suwon station should be good.

“Isn’t that place far from your house?”

-No, it’s close.

“I’m good with that.”

-Then give me a call before you arrive at Suwon station.

“Okay. Send me a text if you change your mind midway. It’s getting late, so don’t bother yourself.”

-Not at all. I’m really okay with it.

Yuna’s voice became higher. It seemed that she had a lot to talk about. Maru pressed the end call button.

\* \* \*

Yuna threw her phone before getting up from her bed. The phone bounced off the mattress and fell on the floor, but she couldn’t care less about that. She had to do her hair first. She puffed up the flattened parts with a hairdryer before using a hair iron to groom her hair. Her hair, which had been scattered everywhere, looked decent now. She put effort into her hair, more than when she took an audition three days ago, before opening her closet.

“Why are there so few clothes?”

She looked at the clothes hanging in the closet before picking a few she liked and putting them on her bed. Black was too stifling, gray was too dusky, pink looked too childish. It’s summer, so a bright one might be better, but it’s the night, so perhaps a darker color would be better? She groaned and barely managed to choose her clothes. An ivory round-neck shirt and a pair of jeans. She wondered if she should wear a skirt, but she wasn’t feeling confident for some reason. She put on her clothes and twirled around in front of the full-body mirror. The combination that the coordinator-uni, that worked with her mother, picked was really to her liking. The clothes themselves looked rather bland, so she accentuated herself with a wristwatch and a bracelet.

She smiled at herself when she looked good before sighing. There was no reason to be so excited. She was just buying dinner for Maru, who gave her consultation. It would be fine as long as she wore something that wouldn’t embarrass her. She should just wear things that she would wear when she hung out with her friends.

However, unlike what she was thinking, her hands were already reaching out to the cosmetics on the cosmetics desk. She usually didn’t put on any make-up unless it was for a special occasion or for an audition because she sweated during practice, yet she was pondering about her facial tone more seriously than ever before. What if it didn’t look good?

She finished off her make-up with a light-colored lipstick as the final touch. The make-up was very light. Yuna looked at the mirror before making an embarrassed smile. She found her actions rather laughable. It wasn’t that she had any special feelings towards him. In fact, she would feel very embarrassed if she saw Maru’s face because of all the things she did last time. She ended up bursting into tears all of a sudden, hugged him even though it was their first time meeting, and even smudged his shirt with make-

up. It would be normal if she felt like she didn't want to meet him, but she said that she wanted to see him while they were on the phone.

"No way, it can't be, right?"

Yuna shook her head. There was no way romantic feelings would arise so easily. The reason she felt rather nervous, despite looking forward to it, was probably because she felt apologetic and thankful to Maru. It was obvious that once she met him today and thanked him after treating him to dinner, these inexplicable feelings would go away. Yuna thought as such and looked at the mirror. The make-up on her cheeks was a little off. She hurriedly took out a make-up sponge. She tapped on her cheeks until she thought that she didn't look too bad.

After doing everything she could, Yuna sat down quietly and stared at the clock. She felt like the second hand was ticking backwards. She wondered if time always passed so slow. She gulped down some cold water before looking at the clock again. Only 20 seconds had passed. Maybe the clock was broken? - she seriously thought about that possibility. She turned on the TV, but nothing entered her mind. Her favorite comedian was making a funny face but her smile only reverberated deep within her. The TV, the clock, her phone. Was time being sucked into the Bermuda Triangle formed by those three? Only 30 minutes had passed, but she felt like 4 hours had passed. Just as she walked around the living room, feeling a strange thirst, her phone rang. Yuna picked up the call, getting surprised at herself for being able to move so fast.

-We're going to return tomorrow night, I think. Don't skip your meals.

"Huh? Oh, okay."

-Why do you sound like you're out of energy?

"Nothing, it's just hot."

-Yeah, it is pretty hot. Turn on the air conditioner. Don't forget to turn it off when you go to sleep.

"Okay."

She sighed before hanging up. Was Maru-seonbae's call not coming? Just as she was thinking about that, her phone rang. She immediately pressed the call button and waited with her breath abated. Hello? - it was Maru's voice.

## **Chapter 654**

Choi Gyeonmi thought about her past. She was an actress who had gained a decent amount of fame in the drama industry after debuting through a play. Although she stayed as a TV actress without being able to cross that wall into the realm of film, she wasn't disappointed. There were people who recognized her, colleagues who she could work with, and above all, a loving family. She wasn't that desperate for success. She had the confidence, but she was afraid of slipping. Rather than tasting failure after poking her head around in the film industry, she thought that it would be for the best if she kept playing supporting characters in dramas. That is, until she got divorced.

Divorce didn't come to her suddenly. Just like how a newborn baby would eventually graduate from their mother's breasts, divorce found its way to her after a suitable amount of time. It wasn't that her

relationship with her husband had gone bad. The relationship she had with her two daughters was just like others as well. There were no problems and life was smooth. It was her husband who showed her the divorce papers. Her husband was a gentle man who had deep thoughts. When he showed her the papers and apologized to her, she nodded without a word. She thought that there must be a reason for him to do that even though he was cautious about his every move. Gyeonmi just had that much faith in her husband. Marriage failures didn't always happen after a dramatic event. The break occurred very slowly. Their two daughters said that they would follow their father. Her husband was a director at a large pharmaceutical company, so he was more than capable of taking responsibility for their two children.

After breaking up, Gyeonmi challenged the film industry. Although the challenge of an actress past her forties did not attract anyone's attention, Gyeonmi did not mind. She wanted to put a burden on her body that had been lightened. She tried to fill that absence of the weight that was her family with work. In 1990, she got her first film script. Since this was her first try, she went about the shoots with the mind of a rookie. The film she tried her hardest for went bust halfway through the production. Everything stopped. The director waited for a few months before he started working on another film, and other actors were also selected for various other commercial films, but Gyeonmi didn't have anywhere to go. A rumor started circulating. An ahjumma with half-assed acting is being a pain.

One of the pillars that supported Choi Gyeonmi collapsed into rubble. She believed that she would be able to stand up again, but that was her being arrogant. Only then did she find out that one of the pillars that supported her had collapsed already. It was the pillar known as family. From then on, the acting skills of her juniors started catching her eyes. Acting techniques were developing rapidly by the day, and likewise, shooting equipment and techniques were also improving rapidly. As the importance of post-sync recording decreased, the very concept of acting changed as well. Dramatic acting became more focused on placing importance on the ordinary. It didn't take that long for the skills she had polished through plays to become outdated. Her colleagues started quitting their acting career one by one. The ones that managed to adapt to the new norm belonged to a minority. Unfortunately, Gyeonmi belonged to that minority.

It wasn't that her livelihood was in danger because she had saved up quite a lot, she now no longer found any reason or fun in life. Humans probably weren't born in order to spend their time doing nothing before their life came to an end. She fought her best in order to become the actress Choi Gyeonmi, and although she tasted failure, she did not want to despair and collapse on the spot. She needed an opportunity to leap. She was already branded as a failure as a mother, so she didn't want her acting career to have the same branding. At least, she wanted to do something related to the entertainment industry.

It was around then that she was given an offer to teach children. Around that time, the debut age for entertainers had gotten lower because of idols, so the trend now was to try and raise child actors professionally. Gyeonmi accepted after thinking about it for a few days. She decided as such because she realized that she would no longer be able to continue as an actress. Teaching others about acting was something she had been doing when she was in the theater troupe, so she thought that there wouldn't be any difficulties, but as with all matters, it didn't entirely go the way she expected it to. Teaching the foundations of acting was easy. After all, those foundations would not change even if the era changed. The problem lay in form. Why did she have to step down from the entertainment industry?

It was because her acting techniques were outdated. She was in a situation where she couldn't let her students inherit her own acting. Gyeonmi started studying. She handed the children who were above a certain level to other teachers with the excuse that she wasn't qualified. She once again realized that there was no end to learning as she chased down the latest trends. It was a duty of sorts for an actor to become sensitive to the trends. At the same time, they had to be not swept by those trends, and if possible, they had to be the ones leading it. She changed her vocal methods and her movements. She tried her best to learn what a 'natural' acting was and then tried to break it down so that she could standardize it and teach it to her students. She lived a much busier life than when she was an actress. Even when she was resting, she continued to think about such things. There were times when she woke up in the middle of the night to think about a natural pose for sleeping. It was tiring yet surprisingly fulfilling and fun.

Once she gained a bit of confidence, she started accepting children. In order to guide the young actors who didn't have as much patience as the adults, their teachers had to have several times the amount of patience. She started teaching the children the acting style that she had discovered and nurtured. She was afraid of not being able to achieve anything with her teachings, but she tried believing in herself. Eventually, the results were out. The four students she had taught had all successfully managed to debut. One in a sitcom, two in a movie, and one in a drama. When her students, who received the spotlight, mentioned her name in passing and thanked her, Gyeonmi became assured that this was her path forward.

After that, she continued to accept a few children and taught them. The number of students she taught at the same time didn't go past three. Getting to know people and teaching them was definitely not an easy thing, so having more than three tired her out physically. Every year, she produced two or three disciples. Among them were some who stopped without becoming big. Becoming perfectly successful was impossible.

Gyeonmi gathered the successful cases and thought about what she could do in order to increase the chances of success. However, the more she analyzed the children that stood out, the quicker she arrived at the conclusion that actors had to have something special. Effort was, yes, very important but even that effort had to be at the level of that 'special something'. She couldn't help but agree that the people who put effort into practice like their life depended on it had bestowed upon them the 'talent to try hard'. The more she taught, the more she realized that talent was not distributed fairly.

Gyeonmi became cold from that moment onwards. She rarely said that trying hard would lead to success. She kept teaching the people who really put in the effort after hearing her words, but she immediately gave up on them the moment they tried to take a detour, even if it was just a small one. You should look into doing something else - Of course, even if she said those words, the children did not give up and looked for other teachers. Among them were people who managed to debut after having their skills acknowledged, but the overwhelming majority of them did not. Gyeonmi trusted her own discerning eyes.

Ever since her teaching ways became concrete, the students she took in were also 'different' from the rest. Innate acting talent, the one chosen by the god of acting, the one that makes everyone surprised - she was now in charge of the so-called 'elites' with fancy titles to their name at a young age. Like that, she had encountered a few incredibly surprising kids. There were times when she even felt jealous as she looked at the gemstone ores who rushed forward without stopping after she set a direction for

them. The children with that much talent lived in a different world from the rest. However, even those geniuses sometimes failed to enter the entertainment industry. That 'special something' wasn't restricted to elements about acting. The children who had developed an increased amount of 'something' that they possessed as humans showed a higher level of acting than even the talented kids with special kinds of acting skills. There was something that surpassed form. Gyeonmi intuitively realized that that something should be her ultimate objective as an educator. Among the people that went past her, there were a few people who possessed that 'something'. The one named Yang Ganghwan was one of them. He was crazy and that was put in a soft way. There was a boy named Hong Geunsoo as well. He was a lunatic. Other than these two, the children who possessed that 'something' were now at the center of the entertainment industry. Gyeonmi could guarantee that those two would one day join their ranks.

And, the two in front of her right now also clearly possessed that 'something'.

"Teacher. Can we seriously stop for today?"

Heewon fell on the ground like melted ice cream. Gyeonmi snorted. Heewon sounded like he was lacking energy every single time, but he had never collapsed during practice. He was a guy who made other people shiver with his eyes despite looking like he was a fool. Gyeonmi had set an objective this year, and it was to see Heewon truly exhausted. Whether physically or mentally, she wanted to see his rock bottom.

Heewon was very special even among the students that she had taught until now. His emotional processing procedure was different from other people's. Gyeonmi understood to a certain extent the concept of seeing color from emotions from his words, but she had no confidence in formalizing it. It was a cognitive ability only allowed to the human known as Lee Heewon. Gyeonmi focused on setting a direction for him to follow. It was hard to teach him since he strangely lacked any motivation, but as he was a kind kid at heart, he did listen if she asked him to. If he was stubborn, Gyeonmi would have given up on him as well. Even now, she would be having a hard time if not for Haewon. Gyeonmi believed in the existence of God whenever she looked at Haewon. Otherwise, there was no way such a bad kid would have a gentle brother like him. Haewon was both the carrot and the stick for Heewon.

"Let's continue while we have time. Also, isn't practice fun?"

Gaeul said that before she took a deep breath. Gaeul was also a special child to Gyeonmi. Until not too long ago, she was just one of the many children who had a refined form without that 'special something'. She was taking care of her because of a request from the president of an agency she was close to, but she was rather skeptical about Gaeul. It was more likely that she would fail than succeed. How disappointed would she be when she realizes that what waited for her at the end of her path was the lack of qualities as an actress? Gyeonmi was worried about that. Not only that, she was taking the same class as someone who had a talent that couldn't be explained with human words. She thought that Gaeul would become dejected soon and leave, but recently, Gaeul had become a completely different person.

Honestly speaking, she wanted to focus on Gaeul rather than Heewon right now. Heewon was a semi-perfect actor who only needed time, as his thought processing system was already perfect. In contrast,

she still had a lot to teach Gaeul. They had a lot in common as ‘ordinary folk’ after all. Rather than Heewon, who was no different from an alien, it was natural that she had an easier time talking to Gaeul.

“We’re going to start again after taking a 10 minute break. Get ready,” Gyeonmi said to the two children.

She was fifty-six, the perfect age to teach two children.

\* \* \*

Maru looked at Yuna, who was standing in front of him. He could smell something good from her. Did she put on perfume? He felt rather sorry because he thought that he made her concerned about looking good. It would have been fine even if she was in casual attire. Well, she was a girl after all, and since she was at an age where she cared about her looks, he could understand what was on her mind.

“You have something to say, right?”

“Eh?”

“I just thought so because you said you had to see me no matter what.”

“No, I was planning to just treat you to dinner because I promised last time.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

He decided to think of her as someone who could not live while being indebted to others. They walked side by side until he pointed at a kimbap restaurant in front of Suwon station. It was cheap and they could eat it quickly. It was the perfect choice. However, it seemed that Yuna didn’t like it.

“Can we go over there instead?”

The place Yuna pointed at was a fancy-looking family restaurant.

“That place looks expensive though.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’m not fine. I know how deep the pockets of a high school student are. I don’t want to get treated to something like that for listening to a couple of words. Also, I like kimbap.”

Just as he was about to open the door to the kimbap restaurant, someone pulled on his clothes. It was Yuna. She kept staring at the floor without saying anything, but he could understand her intentions.

“You’re quite stubborn.”

“It’s not like that.”

“You should save up and use that money when you go on a date.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend though.”

“I’m sure you’ll get one soon.”

“How do you know?”

“Just a feeling.”

Maru tried to go back into the kimbap restaurant, but Yuna didn't budge as though she had taken root. It wasn't like he could force her either. He was in a fix.

“Fine, let's go then.”

He turned around, intending to give his credit card to the cashier before she could.

## **Chapter 655**

“Would you like to sit by the window?”

Yuna nodded at the waitress who smiled at her. She scraped the soles of her shoes on the mat before walking inside. Was this place always this wide? - Yuna thought as she followed the waitress. Family restaurants were familiar to Yuna since her mother had taken her to such places a lot. When Bitna had a tight schedule she would always drive the two of them to a nearby restaurant to get their meals, and this place was one of them. Both the interior as well as the employees were familiar to her, but for some reason, they felt rather unfamiliar today. Perhaps it was because she was the one leading someone in to eat rather than following her mother inside?

They sat by the window from which they could see Suwon station. Buses that left Suwon station were lined up in a long trail, and there were people moving next to that line of buses. This was a busy time when employees going home intermixed with people seeking out entertainment.

“I'm going to eat something expensive, okay?” Maru said as he sat down.

He was tensing his eyes. Yuna opened the menu and pushed it towards Maru.

“Sure.”

“I'm not holding back, okay?”

“Yes.”

“Then I'll go with this one.”

Maru pointed at the corner of the menu with his index finger. The word 'special discount' could be seen. Chicken steak, the price was 9,900 won. It also said in red that the price did not include drinks.

“Seonbae, you can eat something more expensive, you know?”

“In that case, I'll get something expensive and pay for it myself.”

“No, I said I'll treat you.”

“I'm sorry, but I don't like being treated without reason. I think 9,900 won is enough for listening to your story last time.”

Although he was saying that softly, persistence could be felt from his words. Yuna looked at the menu again. The words 'special discount' and 'does not include drinks' couldn't be more bothersome right

now. Maru was being polite, and she knew that it was for her sake, but she didn't like that for some reason. Yuna fell into thought as she looked at the menu. Why did she feel upset about it?

"Are you uncomfortable with me, seonbae-nim?"

"I'm not exactly uncomfortable with you, but nor am I comfortable. This is only the second time we've met."

"That's true. Looks like I was thinking too much even though this is our second meeting. Seonbae, I know it's late, but do you think we should go over there now?"

Yuna pointed at the kimbap restaurant across the street. She felt a sense of distance from Maru ever since they entered this restaurant. All she wanted was to have an enjoyable meal and have a talk with him. She wasn't planning on thinking deeply about the menu, nor did she want to look at him awkwardly like this. Yuna felt like she had become a fool. Why did she get so excited, get dressed up, and put on make-up like it was a special occasion? Why did she bring seonbae to a restaurant like this?

All she wanted to do was have a talk...

"Something's wrong after all, isn't it?"

"Eh?"

"I was rather confused when you said you wanted to meet me at this hour. Bitna mentioned when we met that you seem to want to see me."

"Then the reason you called me was..."

"I didn't plan on saying that if possible, but I think that's the least of your problems right now. You still have some worries left, don't you? I'm not sure if I can be of help, but I can listen. They say just spilling out what you have pent up inside you will make you calm down. So there's no need to force yourself to buy me something expensive. In fact, it might be better if we have a quiet talk in a café or something. Don't feel too much pressure. I have plenty of time to listen to you."

The moment she heard his words, Yuna realized the identity of the sense of distance and unfamiliarity she was feeling since a while ago. Maru wasn't here to get a meal from her. He was here to listen to her worries. She was here to have an enjoyable talk, while Maru came here with the mind of a consultant. Naturally, there would be differences in their attitude towards this meeting. She now understood how she was portrayed when she suggested to Maru that they eat something more expensive. The way she talked about meaningless trivial talk while picking the menu might have been portrayed to Maru as her being hesitant to talk about her worries. Perhaps that was why Maru was being direct - don't beat around the bush and say what you really want.

"Seonbae."

"Yeah?"

"I don't have any worries at all."

Her voice didn't contain any energy. She could see Maru's expression coloring with confusion in front of her. Then why did you call me out at this hour? - his eyes seemed to be asking.

"I just, wanted to treat you to dinner..." she spoke slowly.

This meal had no meaning to Maru. Perhaps the reason he said they should eat light while pointing at the kimbap restaurant was also his way of indicating that they should finish the side event that was having a meal quickly and start talking about her worries as soon as possible. Thinking back, perhaps it was natural that he misunderstood. When he said that he was in Seoul, she reflexively said that she would go there. She even said that it only took an hour by train and that she definitely wanted to go. 'Just having a meal' was definitely something strange to do for a meeting at 10 in the evening and without any prior appointments made beforehand. Like what he said, this was only their second time meeting after all.

"Did nothing happen at all?"

Yuna nodded with difficulty. If possible, she wanted to break the window and escape from this place or turn back time. She only continued sitting still because both of those were impossible to do.

"You really called me out just to treat me to dinner?"

"Yes, that was my intention...."

Yuna felt dizzy. She felt like she would have a hard time enduring if they became silent here. She kept turning her head in order to find something to talk about.

"And there's something I want to boast about."

That was the answer she came to in the end. Maru spoke after drinking a sip of water.

"Boast?"

"Yes. I actually passed an audition."

"Really? Congratulations. Looks like you had no problems with acting after that."

"I felt really refreshed after talking it all out back then. I stopped acting like it was my duty and thought about it deeply. Do I really want to do acting? When I asked, I came to an answer quickly. I felt itchy. I was itching to do more acting even though I thought I was fed up with it."

Yuna collapsed her hands.

"Like you said, acting wasn't entirely fun. When I looked back, there were more times when I had a hard time. But I just thought of it as 'not hard'. I fooled myself into believing that it wasn't hard. Acting is something really precious to me, so I thought that feeling tired or painful because of it was something that doesn't make sense. This isn't hard, this isn't painful - like that. Then, before I realized it, I became insensitive. There were definitely times when I was tired and when I didn't want to do it, but I ignored those feelings. I can only say it now, but I was really stupid. It's not like ignoring them would make them disappear. After I talked to you, I talked a lot with my mother. Mom said that it was natural. That it was obvious for the painful feelings to be just as intense as the fun feelings; that not everything would be just good. She also said that knowing the exact reason why you hate something is also an important process to becoming a pro. When I heard that, my thoughts all just cleared up. It was then I found out that I like acting more than I want to avoid it. After I realized that, I started liking acting even more."

Yuna spoke without stopping as though she was uttering out what she had pent up inside. She was afraid that things would get awkward if she stopped talking. Once silence arrived, she would start thinking - that Maru-seonbae was only here to give her a consultation; that he wouldn't be here if not for that. She kept talking in order to not think of the conclusion that followed after that. However, unlike her mouth, her mind produced the conclusion and brought it to the center of her mind. Maru-seonbae was not someone who would come and meet her for private reasons.

She thought that she didn't have any special feelings. It was just one meeting. Although he ended up embracing her and wiping her tears, she thought that it was just an accident. She thought that she wanted to treat him to a meal purely to pay back her gratitude, not because she had fallen in love at first sight like in dramas. She realized that she was wrong while they had their conversation. The fact that Maru-seonbae was here for a consultation and out of a sense of duty made her feel cold. The fact that he wasn't here just to get dinner from her - the fact that he wasn't here because of a trivial reason like that made her disappointed.

She now felt embarrassed by the perfume she put on. She felt more embarrassed by her clothes now than when she was naked. She felt ashamed due to all the hopes she had while looking at the clock while waiting. She found herself pathetic for denying the fact that she was dreaming of being Cinderella. It was just like her acting. She avoided it without looking at it straight on. She had plenty of time to look at herself, but she did not do so. She suddenly felt her face go hot. She felt like a child who had just lied.

"That's good."

"Yes, it's good."

"Then I'll treat you for today, as a celebration of sorts. Also, don't feel too much pressure. All I did was just listen to you, you don't need to think about paying me back or anything like that."

Maru spoke with a smile. For some reason, she found that side of him rather hateful. She thought that he acted like that while knowing everything. Her head knew that it wasn't like that, but her emotions started going rampant. So I'm really a child - she thought. At the same time, she spoke,

"You can treat me, but I can't treat you? Why? You said you didn't like being treated because we aren't close, didn't you? Why didn't you think that I would be the same?"

"It's okay when it's an adult buying it for you."

"We're only a year apart. Seonbae, you're young too."

Unlike what she thought - I should be more polite - her words were quite thorny. She could feel the blood vessels in her head thumping. Her neck became hot. She didn't even know what she was doing, yet her mouth kept blabbing on. It had escaped the control of her mind.

"I am young, I guess. Well, yeah, I'm young. I was too short-sighted. Sorry about that."

Maru scratched his eyebrows and immediately apologized. That nonchalance stopped Yuna. It was clearer than ever now. Maru didn't have any personal feelings towards her. It was obvious. It was normal that he wouldn't. It was her who was strange.

Let's calm down and act like it's nothing for today - Yuna decided to act wisely. It would be foolish of her to reveal her heart so suddenly. She just had to admit that she had favorable feelings towards him and keep proceeding when they met next time. After all, she decided not to fool herself from her feelings from now on.

Her head felt a lot clearer now. She just had to 'coolly' eat the food and return home. She just had to retract her grumbling attitude, thank Maru-seonbae for coming, and finish up for the day. Maru-seonbae would probably just laugh it off thinking that it was a child being coquettish. He looked like someone who would do that after all. Everything was perfect.

"Seonbae, I think I like you."

Then, the words she said completely betrayed her perfect plan. The gap was as wide as the price tags on the dishes from this family restaurant and the kimbap restaurant across the street.

"Mommy."

Today, Yuna found out why people called out to their mothers when they were surprised.

## **Chapter 656**

She said those words without thinking. Even Maru, who was listening, almost replied 'okay' without thinking. Those words contained her purest emotions, so Maru reached out to his cup of water in order to buy some time to organize his thoughts. When the cold sensation of his cup climbed up his fingers, Yuna, who was sitting in front of him, abruptly stood up. She sprang up and leaned sideways so that she could escape at any time, but she did not move her legs. Whether it was her reason that held her back or it was her body that just froze up, he did not know, but he did know that he had to talk to her right now.

"You'll fall over. Sit down for now."

Yuna's gaze was on the exit. A suitable excuse, no, just a touch of his finger might make her sprint towards the exit. Maru did not want to embrace the silence, the confusion, and the lump of emotions that would replace Yuna by himself. That would be mentally exhausting. It was obvious that doing that would be even more tiring than listening to her worries.

"Sit down. You know that you'll put me in a tight spot if you just go like that, right? And you'll probably regret it a lot afterwards. Sit down so that both of us won't get embarrassed. Please."

The distance between Yuna's nose and upper lip shrunk in an instant. Her expression was hard to describe, and it seemed that she was trying to show a hard-to-describe emotion as well. Her body slowly moved down to the seat. It seemed that she realized that things would go awry if she left just like that.

"I spoke wrong," Yuna said as soon as she sat down.

Her urgent-looking face made it seem like she had hundreds of excuses ready. Her lips twitched in nervousness.

"Alright, I get it. Calm down for now. No one's going to fault you for it. Do you want some water?"

"Yes."

Yuna quickly brought her cup to Maru's side with both of her hands. Maru filled the cup to the brim. It was a lot to drink in one go, but Yuna gulped down everything as though she had just trekked through the desert.

"Do you feel a little calmer now?"

"Can I have another cup?"

"Sure."

He poured some more for her. After emptying her cup, she took a deep breath before breathing out. It was a warm breath that Maru could feel from that distance. He felt like he understood just how much she was boiling on the inside. She must be flustered. After all, he was quite flustered as well, and he was the listener.

From the way she denied those words immediately, it seemed that she didn't think deeply when she said those words. They were impulsive. Maru could understand her. After all, not everyone spoke the words they had logically thought of inside their head. To change the atmosphere, he opened the menu for now.

"We should eat now, don't you think?"

Yuna nodded after a bit of hesitation. Maru chose a suitably-priced dinner set.

"I'll go with that as well," Yuna said.

After ordering, Maru sighed in relief.

"Uhm, seonbae. I startled you, didn't I?"

"You sure did. But you did say that you said wrong, so it's fine. I also make mistakes like that from time to time."

He tried to change the topic naturally after burying her mistake like that. He didn't want to pry deeply into that and find out what she really meant by those words.

"Did you also make mistakes like this?"

"When I was young. I am young right now, but it was when I was even younger."

"What kind of mistakes do you mean?"

"Trivial things. Like saying a different word or forgetting an honorific towards a senior. Sometimes, I would be on a completely different line of speech because I can't follow what others are saying. Everyone has those moments, you know? So don't worry about it. I won't tell anyone about this even as a joke. Just forget about it, it's not even funny, right?"

"Yes, it's not a joke."

A corner of her lips twitched as she said those words. Maru wanted to smoothly pass this situation. He did not want to waste any energy trying to understand what was really on her mind, what made her commit that mistake, nor what her wavering eyes meant. He had a vague awareness that her actions,

packaged as a mistake, contained feelings that might put them both in an awkward situation, but he intentionally ignored it. Unless she wanted to talk about it, Maru was not planning to mention it either.

They got some bread as an appetizer and then the main meal. Maru kept bringing up topics so that they didn't spend any time in awkward silence. The shoot he had during the day became a splendid topic of conversation. Just talking about Bitna allowed them to chit-chat until they finished about half of the steak.

"Bitna is really obedient when she's outside. People are surprised by her. Sometimes, even I think that the way she's acting is like a pro. Though, sometimes, the disparity between her actions at home and her actions outside does make me feel rather weird."

"I think Bitna knows exactly what she's doing."

"Yes, that's exactly it. I probably won't be able to do that."

"Yuna, I'm sure you can do it as well. You've splendidly overcome your trauma and you're still doing your favorite thing - acting. That's something really hard to do. There are many people who turn away after not being able to overcome that. Since we're at it, what kind of audition was it for? A film? A drama?"

"A drama. It was a rather weird audition. When I first met the director, I was quite confused, but after I had a realization, everything had an intention behind it. I was rather uneasy because I couldn't follow the audition for the first half, and I didn't know what the director wanted from me, but the director told me midway: show me drama. When I heard those words, I suddenly had something I wanted to do. When I finished my acting, the director told me that we should work together. Those words really made me happy."

"That's good. Maybe you'll get famous immediately and become busy?"

"No way."

"You never know what will happen."

"Geez, everyone's teasing me about it, whether it's you or the seonbaes from the acting club."

"I'm not teasing you. I'm just saying that it's a possibility. The people from your acting club cheered for you when you said you were doing an audition, right?"

"Yes. Gaeul-seonbae also encouraged me a lot. The other seonbaes did too. I feel like I passed the audition thanks to them. If I kept going to acting schools to do my acting, I would never have known what the director meant by 'drama'. I really think I did well by choosing to do acting. I like acting."

"I like acting too."

Maru drank the rest of the drink. Their stiff atmosphere became a lot softer once they started eating, and now they were at a point where they could talk with smiles. Things were probably going well. He put down his fork. The only thing in front of him now was an empty plate. He had a decent talk with a junior he wanted to look after over a meal. This was a clean ending.

"Thanks for the meal. I'll have you buy it this time and I'll buy you one next time."

If he tried to pay this time, she might try to do something, so he gave Yuna the bill just as she wanted. The emotions squirming within Yuna would probably die down in due time. Once she realized that it was a momentary mistake and a temporary excitement, Yuna would probably come to the next meal with an ease of mind. Yuna's clothing entered his eyes. The faint make-up also caught his eyes. Yuna was smiling awkwardly. She had returned to the expression she had before they started eating. Her lips were still trembling. Her expression was confessing that the words she said before were not just a mistake. Maru wiped his mouth with some napkins. It was about time to go.

"Uhm, seonbae," Yuna said as she grabbed the bill before continuing,

"You said that you have to look at what you like with truthful eyes, right? That you should not try to fool yourself into thinking that you have different feelings from what you actually feel."

"I think I said something similar."

"Seonbae, I think I like you after all."

"I think you're making a mistake this time as well."

"No, it's not a mistake. I don't think it is."

"Then you might be misunderstanding your feelings. I also once felt rather attracted to a seonbae-noonaa who listened to my worries before. However, she said this to me - being grateful and liking someone has similar characteristics that can easily be mistaken; that I'm feeling reliant on her; and that what I feel is actually far from the feelings of love. After some time, I understood what she meant. That's why psychologists consider falling in love with their patients a taboo...."

Maru stopped after saying up to that point. Yuna's eyes, which had been wavering everywhere throughout the entire meal, were now fixed on one point. Maru closed his eyes. This was why he tried to ignore her. He had a lot of resistance to emotions close to malice and could easily come up with countermeasures, but a pure confession of emotions that put down the person herself and hurled everything she had at him irresponsibly was still something that made him smile in bitterness. It seemed that this child still had not learned the ways of an underhanded adult who avoided other people's emotions by talking about something else. He felt rather iffy.

"You know that I have a girlfriend, don't you? Don't you think it's rather disrespectful for you to do that when you know that?"

He finally took out the last words he wanted to say because he didn't want to have an awkward relationship with her. They say love between students was something that burned easily and cooled just as easily, but Maru did not want to treat Gaeul like that. Of course, they might end up breaking up, but for now, he still liked Gaeul.

"What?"

"Hm?"

Yuna blinked in confusion. Maru did the same. She looked like she didn't know at all.

"You had a girlfriend, seonbae?"

“You didn’t know?”

“You didn’t tell me, so there’s no way I would know, right?”

Her words slowed down. There were question marks between every single one of her words. Maru scratched his eyebrows. Yuna tilted her head.

“Didn’t Gaeul tell you?”

“What would Gaeul-seonbae tell me?”

“That she’s going out with me.”

Yuna’s expression changed by the second. Maru felt like he was watching a timelapse of a flower blooming before wilting. Yuna became blue in an instant and sealed her mouth shut before taking her bag and walking over to the counter. Maru followed her. While she paid for the bill, Yuna kept staring at the ground.

Thank you for your visit - the employee’s goodbye seeped out through the open glass door. Maru waited for Yuna in front of the stairs. Yuna returned from the bathroom. Her face was all wet. Only after drops of water dripped off her chin did she run back to the bathroom. When she came back, Yuna had a lot of toilet paper on her face. It seemed that pieces had gotten stuck on her face when she was wiping her face, and it seemed that Yuna didn’t notice.

“Uhm, on your face, there’s....”

Maru said those words with much difficulty. It was harder to say than asking someone to guarantee for him. Yuna abruptly turned around and started dusting off her head starting from her hair. Maru was reminded of a dog shaking off water from its body. When she turned around, Yuna couldn’t be said to be looking good at all. Her hair now looked like a lion’s mane, and the remaining make-up on her face made her look like she was playing around with make-up tools.

“Seonbae.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll call Gaeul-seonbae and apologize.”

“No, you don’t really need to do that.”

“No, I have to.”

Yuna, who smiled at him, started to make a crying expression. The ‘crying’ was complex, but the element that made up most of it was probably ‘embarrassment’.

“Uhm, Yuna?”

“Seonbae, I’m really sorry. I mean it.”

Yuna kept bowing to apologize before running down the stairs. The sound of hiccups and crying was mixed with the loud sound of footsteps. Maru stood still for three minutes. Just then, he got a text on

his phone. Seonbae, I'm really sorry for today. If we ever meet again next time, please just smile at me, or you can tease me about it.

He chuckled. The way she acted was pretty cute. He didn't feel that good when Yuna confessed to him, but when he found out that she didn't know that he and Gaeul were dating, he ended up smiling instead.

"Han Maru, you're still pretty useful."

He didn't know when the next time would be, but if he did meet her again, he thought that it might be good to try and tease her just like she said. Since she was a pretty decent girl who knew how to be polite, had a good personality, and was rather conservative in nature, he didn't want to have an awkward relationship with her. She was also a precious junior to Gaeul, so it would be better if their relationship was one where they could shake hands when they met rather than an awkward one.

And three days later.

"This is Han Maru, and this is Kim Yuna. You can introduce yourselves to each other."

Maru came across Yuna again, and she looked like she was seriously considering running away.

## **Chapter 657**

Yoo Jayeon regretted being born as a woman several times throughout her life. I wish I could take off that thing between a man's legs and stick it on me - she said this every time she got semi-drunk during drinking occasions. When she was in school, she didn't have any deep worries about her gender. The problem occurred when she graduated college and entered the TV station. During the period where new recruits were sent around to various departments to gain experience, Jayeon saw the limitations of a female producer. Entertainment, culture, radio - there were female producers in these departments. Some of them were even treated with respect. While there was a disdainful gaze from around, at least there was the opportunity to prove oneself.

However, it was a different story for dramas. The drama department was a taboo zone for women. It was a sanctuary of men. There wasn't a single female producer. The department simply didn't pick any in the first place. When Jayeon said that she was going to apply for the drama department when she was new, she heard these words hit her ears - 'how dare you, even though you're a woman'.

How dare you. The moment Jayeon heard those words, she decided to bury her bones in the drama department. There were many reasons the drama department avoided women. The biggest reason was health. Unlike entertainment or culture, the producers of the drama department would often have to work outside of the company. On top of that, there was a saying that extra working hours were a necessity and that staying up the night was a must in the drama department. It was also a place where showing signs of fatigue or having a nosebleed was a sign for other people to ridicule them for causing a ruckus. It was no different from a warzone, so the general consensus was that they could not tolerate women in such a place. Who's going to cover for her when she takes a leave because of her period? - these were the words of a mocking senior, who also said that female producers were never allowed in the drama department.

Jayeon nurtured her stamina. As she had a strong body and had never caught a cold since young, she was quite confident in herself. She reduced her sleep and tried doing more work. She also planned her schedule so that it matched the schedule of a member of the drama department. When her colleagues told her to stop being foolish, she clenched her teeth and endured. She had absolutely no plans to change her objective because of a childish reason such as her having a woman's body.

An opportunity came. Rumors spread that there is a 'lunatic woman' among the new recruits in the drama department. Go on, try - the one to put his hand out to her was producer Park Hoon. He was an acknowledged producer in the drama department, who, while never having done any works that were huge hits, had constantly produced works that had steady viewership. Jayeon was rather confused. She wondered why he gave her this opportunity. That was why she asked Park Hoon before they started working - why did you give me this opportunity?

Park Hoon's answer was quite simple. He said that people with tenacity are worth believing. Jayeon fully prepared herself. She learned everything she needed to do as the assistant director and pulled herself together so that nobody would be able to say to her that a woman is no good 'after all'. She always acted with the mindset that she would move 10 minutes earlier than most people and resolved to herself that she would never fall down, even if it meant dying under all the workload.

When she went to her first shoot, Jayeon encountered the second reason why 'women were no good as producers'. It was authority. In other words, charisma. The overwhelming majority of people ignored her words because she was a woman. They did what she told them to, but they either were very lax about it or did it very unwillingly. Otherwise, they did things by themselves and did not give her any room to interfere. Jayeon realized that she was going to be eliminated in this kind of atmosphere and that she would become a precedent that supported the unwritten rule of 'female producers are no good'.

A woman appeared in an ecosystem without women. It was natural for the rest to try to exclude her in confusion. Logical persuasion was only possible when they could talk. In an environment where she couldn't even get a conversation going, her words were shouts in the void. Jayeon had to choose. Either she would have become 'Miss Yoo' and struggle to survive by sucking up to others or become an eel that muddied the waters by jumping into the center of the ecosystem. Her hesitation did not last long. Jayeon chose to become a very vigorous eel that would muddy the waters.

The first thing she had to do was to make them forget that she was biologically different from them. For efficiency, she constantly uttered swear words. Her mouth became violent. The men who smiled at her until just yesterday no longer smiled. She did several times the work that other people did so that no one could nitpick her for not doing enough work. She did everything meticulously in order to not give them any room for doubt.

It was only a matter of time before displeasure replaced the absence left behind by the smiles. Complaints continued to arise. Word arose that she was being cocky for being a woman. Producer Park Hoon asked her - do you want mediation? Jayeon slowly shook her head. This is only the start - she told him.

If a resentful woman could make it snow during the summer months, she had to show that a bitchy woman could turn the drama shoot upside down. However, it wouldn't be good to act crazy without restraint. She had to discern her allies and enemies clearly, and then reach out to the people she had to

keep on her side. If she tried to fight against an organization of men by herself, she would most definitely lose. She had to be strategic, and Jayeon moved in order to pull the people related to the production to her side. They were none other than the directors of each area.

It was very difficult to attract the directors of each part since they were the epitome of being conservative and condescending, but fortunately, they were people who could discern passion from bitching. Ever since she got close to the directors, the friction between her and the staff was definitely reduced. Her plan to conquer their chiefs was a success.

Next were the actors. Actors, who could say that they couldn't trust a woman without holding back, were in one way, even harder enemies to deal with than the people at the TV station. The staff members at least had a common point with her in that they worked for the same company, but the actors had none of that. But raising her voice at the actors was too risky. Jayeon knew her own position, and she knew that she wasn't important enough to challenge the actors yet.

If a frontal breakthrough wasn't possible, she had to go at them from the back. There was one person, who, while not showing up to the shoots, had the ultimate key to the production of the drama itself. It was none other than the writer. And that was the first time being a female producer was to her advantage. Other than historical dramas, the overwhelming majority of writers for dramas were women. Jayeon looked for the writer of the drama. Jayeon, who was the sole female in the sea of men that was the drama department, was a topic of interest to the writer as well, so they could get close very easily. The way she called the writer also changed from simply 'writer' to 'unni'. They would also often drink out with other actors at night. Jayeon's first ally was writer Lee Hanmi, and she was a very strong one.

There came the day where the actors, writer, and production staff all gathered to have a read-through. In that place, writer Lee Hanmi said: there's no one here who's stupid enough to look down on women just because they're women, right? It was a single arrow that penetrated the enemy general's heart.

Jayeon managed to successfully finish her job as the assistant director for her first drama. She was even tossed into the air during the afterparty. Her enemies had become her allies. Of course, even after that, she received biased gazes of contempt and even a bit of jealousy, but that disappeared soon. After all, a 'bitchy woman' did not let go of what she bit. The moment the vice-president declared that 'she is a woman, but not a woman', Jayeon became the first female producer to put her flag in the drama department.

This was her 4th year, and she got to produce her debut work. She got to shoot her first piece in her 4th year when the norm was 5 to 8 years. When Jayeon was told by the president to prepare a one-act play, she almost screamed in joy. She rushed out of the president's office and walked around between the producers and cheered out loud. She could now make her own work as a producer, instead of as an assistant. This was her true starting point, and it was also a result she gained from fighting for it. The drama department was still a taboo area for women. She had survived as a mutant. Jayeon wanted to change this stiff environment from the ground up. The first step to doing that was to prove her skills. She had removed the bias of 'women are no good' to a certain extent. The only thing left was to make other people say 'women are okay too', followed by 'only women can do it'. Since she was doing it, she had a ton of ambition. In order to grow up into a powerhouse in this area, she first needed a good piece to work with. A work that no one could 'dare' retort to.

The late-night one-act play theater at YBS was a great stage both for experimentation and to prove her skills. Although the budget was tight, the producer had full control over the direction of the drama. The production budget was completely provided by the TV station, which meant that it was a haven where she didn't have to worry about advertisers. It was a great opportunity to let her presence be known from the planning phase to the final piece.

Traditionally, the late-night one-act play theater at YBS was used as a stage to excavate new stars. Not just one or two people who went on this stage became splendid actors within the country. This was why, before the start of every season, which there were four of every half a year, one call would come in once from agencies that had a close relationship with the TV station, while two or more calls would come from agencies that didn't. They were all calls to recommended actors.

Jayeon refused all the recommendations she got and carried out an audition herself. In order to prove herself in both potential and usefulness through this debut work, she needed a set of people who could work with her perfectly like fitting cogwheels.

As a result of that, she managed to get actors to her liking. There were some who had a decent reputation, and there were some who were close to being nameless. It was the two child actors that she delayed her decision for until the very end. No matter how good the adult actors were, if the child actors looked awkward, the whole play would look incomplete, so she picked actors who had not only great acting skills but also fit well with her.

She had the two child actors she found through that method meet each other today. The reason she had the two of them meet before they met the other actors during the get-together, was to form a sense of kinship between the two. Even the actors who had a lot of experience would sometimes change their acting style according to who they were working with. These tendencies would be more pronounced with child actors, who were just stepping into the industry. Rather than meeting each other for the first time on set, she calculated that having the two of them get close beforehand would make the shoot a lot smoother.

Jayeon looked at the two people in front of her alternately. It seemed pretty clear that they knew each other. However, their reactions were quite contrasting. One side greeted in kind while the other looked like she was about to leave at a moment's notice.

"You two know each other?"

"Yes."

The answer only came from the boy named Han Maru. The girl, Kim Yuna, sat there without saying anything and looked like she was sitting on thorns. Jayeon frowned. While Yuna had a shy side to her, she was someone who knew what Jayeon wanted and did just the things she wanted her to. Yet now, she was unable to meet the eyes of the other person.

"Did you do something wrong? Did you borrow money from him or something?"

Jayeon questioned Yuna. This wasn't good. There was a girl that she thought was pretty decent among the people that took the audition with Maru, but she gave up on her because she had picked Yuna beforehand. She was naturally thinking about changing her plans if Yuna did not live up to her expectations. If she called the other person right now and told her that she passed, then a change of

child actors would occur immediately. It wasn't like they wrote a contract, so there were no problems either.

"Yuna, you're at work. I thought you wanted to become a pro," Maru said.

His words seemed to contain some magical power as Yuna, who had been avoiding his gaze this whole time, shook her head before looking at Maru. The expression that Jayeon liked returned.

"I won't ask what happened between you two, but tell me clearly if it will influence what I'm doing - that you can't do it. Han Maru, are you okay with it?"

"Yes. Yuna shouldn't have a problem either."

"I should hear that from the person herself. Kim Yuna, what about you?"

"I can do it! Please allow me to do it."

Yuna spoke firmly. While Jayeon had her doubts, she decided to watch for now.

"When you said you found two decent people last time, I thought the other girl passed as well but looks like I was wrong."

"When did I ever say that both of you passed? I just said that I found two decent people. I'm going with you and Yuna. I was planning to tell you to get close beforehand, but it looks like that was unnecessary. You two know each other already."

"Yes."

"You're going to have to get close to each other in the future. After all, you're going to be portrayed as a couple. It won't be funny if you act awkward during the shoot. This is the first piece I'm producing so my life is on the line. That's why I'll ask again. There are no problems between you two, right?" Jayeon asked as she looked at the two people alternately.

After exchanging gazes, the two nodded at the same time.

## **Chapter 658**

"Did you get back home safely back then?"

"Yes."

"I was slightly worried because you were so rushed. I'm glad you're okay."

"Sorry, I was so out of it back then. I tried to call you... I typed in your number several times, but I couldn't bear to press the call button."

"I understand how you feel. I wouldn't have been able to do that either."

"But I did call Gaeul-uni. Unni laughed a lot. She did say that it was okay, but I still felt sorry."

"It's okay since she said it's okay. Liking someone isn't a crime, you know? You met Gaeul during practice, right?"

"Yes."

“Did she say something to you? Or did she glare at you?”

“No, there was nothing like that. In fact, she told me not to worry about it.”

“Then you must know that there’s nothing to worry about, right? Just think of it as an accident.”

Yuna nodded. Maru saw a doubtful smile briefly appearing on her face before disappearing.

“Rather than that, I never imagined that the audition you passed was for this.”

“I was really surprised too when you first came here.”

“That’s why you grabbed your bag the moment you saw me? So that you could run?”

“That’s... no. Probably....”

“Yuna.”

“Yes?”

Maru reached his hand out to Yuna.

“Since it’s like this, let’s try our best. I know that the awkward feelings won’t disappear immediately, but both you and I need to do this drama.”

“Are you okay with it?”

“Me? I’m okay. I told you, didn’t I? Liking someone isn’t a crime. In fact, I’m grateful. When else would I get to hear such an honest confession like that?”

“Don’t keep mentioning it. It’s making me embarrassed.”

“We’re going to have to see each other for a long time anyway. I’ll keep bringing it up until you get fed up with it. Maybe that way you’ll no longer feel awkward with me. Don’t you think so?”

“That’s true, but it also sounds wrong....”

Yuna hesitantly looked down. She met him again even though she didn’t have any time to take care of her feelings after the messed up confession, so Maru understood that she felt rather complicated, but he couldn’t afford to have her avoid it all the time. Maru shook his hand which he reached out.

“I’m asking you to take care of me in the future, are you not going to accept this handshake?”

Yuna became startled and grabbed his hand with both of her hands. Maru looked at the small hands that were grabbing onto his. She had her hands clasped as though she was praying.

“That’s a weird handshake, but anyway, take care of me in the future.”

He shook her hands up and down slightly. Yuna, who was smiling awkwardly, also loosened up a little. A sigh escaped her mouth. It seemed that she was very nervous. He took Yuna back to the café. He saw Jayeon waiting by the window.

“4 minutes and 48 seconds. You didn’t go past 5 minutes. From the way you look, it looks like things are okay now?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Jayeon nodded and stood up.

“I hate starting things off awkwardly. If you’ve decided to do it, let’s do it properly like a pro. I don’t plan on interfering with your history, but like I said, there’s no privacy if it affects work. I will ask about everything. Take care of your matters so that something like that doesn’t happen. If I feel a strange sense of distance between you two before the shoot starts, I’m going to switch both of you out. I mean it so keep that in mind.”

Maru had seen that Jayeon wasn’t all bark and no bite during the audition. She was someone who would really switch them out if she said so. They left the building and got in Jayeon’s car. Inside the black SUV was a change of clothes, various scenarios, sketches of the stage, as well as some energy drinks.

“Push them aside and grab a seat,” Jayeon said.

Maru cleaned the items inside the car as he thought of Miso’s car. There was a pair of underwear on one of the seats, and Yuna stiffened up when she saw that. Maru wrapped the underwear with a t-shirt and put it on the passenger seat next to Jayeon. Jayeon gave them a glance before starting the car without saying anything.

“Have you ever been to a pojang-macha before?”

Maru said yes, while Yuna shook her head while saying no.

“Looks like Yuna will have to watch in detail today. You’ll only be able to reflect the feelings you get from the scene if you remember the scenery of the place you’re going to now. I’ll say this beforehand, but to be honest with you, I’m worried about you two the most. Not to mention acting experience, you have little experience with the world itself. This drama requires you to dissolve your livelihood into it. Of course, I’m not expecting anything amazing from you. I’m just asking you to hold back from doing awkward imitations. See and feel for yourself as much as possible and instill it into your acting. Don’t try to drag other people’s stuff into your own.”

After saying those words, Jayeon started driving.

“We’re now going to a pojang-macha. It’s the place that is the closest to what I’m thinking of. No, in some sense, it’s more than what I imagined. If it’s possible, we’re going to do the shoot here, and if that doesn’t happen, we’re going to recreate everything there as a set, so engrave the images into your mind.”

The radio announced that it was 9 p.m. Soon after that, shoulder-jerking rock music vibrated the air. Jayeon raised the volume. The whole car became a giant echo chamber, amplifying the sound. As Maru didn’t have any preferences for music, he just listened without feeling anything. The drums and bass didn’t sound too bad, resonating inside his body. He listened to the music without thinking much before he turned his head sideways. He saw Yuna scrunched up like a turtle with her hands clenched into fists. When an ear-screeching electric guitar flowed out from the speaker right next to Yuna, she twitched before closing her eyes.

“Uhm, producer.”

“What is it?”

“Can you lower the volume a little?”

“Was it too loud? I don’t really drive with other people in the car, so sorry about that.”

Unlike what she seemed like on the surface, it didn’t seem like she was extremely self-centered. Jayeon turned down the volume and changed the channel as well. A calm voice from an announcer calmed down the air inside the car.

Maru rested his chin on his hand and looked outside. The car was entering a main street. The car crawled its way in between the various signs put out on the street. The distinction between the sidewalk and the road was quite vague here. The loud music from the speakers of various stores mixed with the loud shouts of drunk youths seeped into the car. The radio channel had changed back to the rock music channel from before. Fortunately, the volume wasn’t that loud.

“It’s a blessing to play around to your heart’s content, don’t you think?” Jayeon said while driving.

Her eyelids were moving like the shutter of a camera in burst mode. It seemed like a process of taking in the scenery of the street into her eyes. Perhaps she was gathering materials to use later.

The street that was divided into the heat of youth and the beauty of debauchery became distant and they entered a quiet, dark alley. To their left were many stores with their lights off. It seemed to be the traditional market. The car, which drove around the old-looking stores, eventually stopped in front of a store named ‘Miyong Firm’. That store looked like it hadn’t been in use for a long time.

“You can get off now.”

Yuna got off first through the door on the right, and Maru followed her out. The door to the left was blocked by the wall. The first thing Maru noticed was a fishy smell. The ground was wet with a mixture of water and oil that was flowing between the cracks of the asphalt. They were only five minutes away from the street filled with youths, yet the atmosphere had changed completely. Jayeon then started walking towards an alley where no human presence could be felt. Maru glanced at Yuna before starting to follow her. The signs of the various stores around here were barely hanging and had lost their colors. It wouldn’t be strange if this area was going to be under redevelopment starting tomorrow. Was there a pojang-macha in such a place?

Just as Maru got used to the smell of sewers, he saw a faint orange light that was different from the street lights. Jayeon smiled and raised her head. It seemed that they had arrived at their destination. They turned around at the store with a sign that said ‘Shinil Grocery’. There was a pojang-macha enveloped in an orange curtain, shining in the middle of the darkness just like a traffic light protecting a crossroad in the dark countryside.

“This is where my drama is going to be made,” Jayeon said.

She seemed excited like a little kid who had just gotten some pocket money. They pushed aside the plastic curtain and went inside. This wasn’t like the pojang-macha seen in crowded places, where there were many tables laid out. Instead, there was only a long, fold-out shelf-like stainless steel table with

the cooking area right behind it. There were a total of 8 chairs. A couple seemingly in their 30s as well as two men in their forties were eating on each end.

“Sir, I’m here.”

“You never get fed up with this place, do ya?”

“You shouldn’t say that to someone who’s here to give you sales. At least today, there are some seats.”

“Do you think people will come all the way here in this weather? Everyone would go indoors to drink. Anyway, who are the two kids behind you? Your illegitimate children?”

“You know that I’m a celibate. They’re my actors. The actors who will act here.”

“I never said I’m letting you borrow my store.”

“There’s still some time until the shoot, so think about it slowly. Well then, you two. Have a seat.”

Jayeon said that as she sat in the center.

Maru pulled out a round plastic chair and looked around. There were boiled eggs inside a basket made of bamboo. The price was 100 won each. Behind that was a steaming bucket. Inside were fish cake skewers. The owner put his hand inside the container that seemed like a steamer before taking it back out again. In his hands were pig lungs. He then chopped them before putting them out in front of the two men in their forties. If there was tteokbokki and fried food, it would be a similar menu composition to the bunsik restaurants near schools, but those two couldn’t be seen. Next to the steamer for the soondae was another steamer, and what came out of that were some dumplings. Their shapes were inconsistent as though they were made by hand. Soondae, fish cakes, and dumplings. As side dishes for drinking, they seemed kinda lacking, and it was a rather vague combination for a meal as well.

“For now, give us three bowls of udon.”

Jayeon ordered. She looked like she couldn’t care less about the opinions of boy 1 and girl 1 sitting on either side of her. Maru just shrugged. It was the perfect time for some night snacks, so he didn’t have any complaints. The owner took out some broth from the fish cakes and put some noodles he took out from god knows where before putting it out. The only other thing in that bowl of udon was some dried fish cakes.

“It might look like that, but the taste is quite decent,” Jayeon said as she picked up her chopsticks.

Maru drank the broth first. It definitely didn’t taste coarse. It lacked something that would draw him into it but considering that it was something he could eat on the spot, it was quite luxurious. Above all, the price tag hung on the side multiplied the taste. 1,000 won per bowl and 1 free refill. Just as he was about to eat the noodles, a white plate containing soondae and some steamed organs was placed in front of him.

“Don’t bring kids and feed them flour. They look like they’re in their growth period.”

They seemed to be freebies. The men in their forties and the couple in their thirties smiled pleasantly. They seemed to be used to that kind of scenery. Maru swirled the noodles once with his chopsticks

before putting them in his mouth. The noodles were elastic and retained their shape until they went through his throat. The quantity wasn't that small either. This was just 1,000 won?

"Do you have any margin if you sell these at 1,000 won?" he asked the owner.

The man, who seemed to be in his forties, made a faint smile and replied.

"There's nothing more foolish than being worried about a merchant. Just eat it. Tell me if it's not enough."

When he finished his words, more customers came in. They seemed to be a student. They seemed to find the lack of seats natural and ordered some udon while saying that they would eat outside.

"You should eat more rice and fewer noodles if you're going to study."

"Your udon is much better than any rice out there. Call us once they're ready. We'll be outside."

"It'd be boring if you wait while doing nothing, so take a skewer each. And an egg."

The owner put the skewer and an egg into each of the two students' hands even though they tried to refuse before starting to make the udon.

"This is one of the few resting places that remain in this busy city," Jayeon said as she lifted her bowl.

## **Chapter 659**

The couple in their thirties left. They put the money inside a blue plastic basket. They put the money in there before the owner said to put it there. It seemed that there were a few unwritten rules in this small pojang-macha. It was something cozy and not uncomfortable. It was one of those 'oh, there's something like that' elements that people could smile at.

Maru downed his udon and gave back the bowl. Can I have another bowl? - The owner said yes before putting some broth and noodles in the bowl. The quantity didn't decrease from before. In fact, Maru felt like there was more. There was a lot of topping as well. Although it was only some fish cakes, the amount provoked Maru's gratitude in his heart.

The owner told the students eating outside to come in, but the two students refused, saying that they liked eating standing up better. It seemed that right below the street light, where the light from the pojang-macha could barely reach, was their secret hideout of sorts. Maru could hear the conversation the two had through the opening of the plastic curtain. They were talking about how it was the summer holidays and yet they had to go to school or something, about teachers, and about cram schools.

"Thanks for the food."

The two salarymen in their forties paid before leaving. They each had a bottle of soju, some soondae, and a bowl of udon. There were warm smiles on their faces as they left. The smiles seemed to be due to a combination of the warmth of the udon and the alcohol.

As though it was a relay race, the next set of customers entered the pojang-macha as soon as they left. A woman, who was carrying a drunk man on her shoulders, took seats on the left. The man, who was

balding, kept heaving out heavy breaths as though he was a humidifier, and the woman next to him kept stroking his back in worry. Were they married? The man loudly ordered a bottle of soju.

“You drank enough already. Don’t get yourself into trouble tomorrow. Drink some of this.”

What the owner gave him was some fish cake broth. The woman, who seemed to be the wife, accepted the bowl instead of the man, who seemed like he couldn’t move properly.

“Sorry, this man just has to visit this place whenever he’s drunk. Yoonji’s dad, drink some of this.”

The man, who had his face against the table, abruptly opened his eyes and snapped out, but when his wife narrowed her eyes and glared at him, he accepted the bowl without saying anything. It seemed that a wife’s glare is something undefiable even when one was drunk.

“Oh, you’re open today.”

The right seat was soon filled as well. It was a man in his mid twenties with a neat haircut. He was also wearing a suit.

“I took a break yesterday. You said you were going to an interview?”

“Yeah. Today, I think it really went well. I got the feels. The interviewers asked me my name one more time when I left, so I’m sure of it this time.”

“Didn’t you say that last time as well?”

“It’s for real this time. Oh, one udon and a portion of soondae.”

“What about dumplings?”

“No thanks.”

“They’re good though.”

It seemed that the dumplings here were an unpopular menu item. The owner made a disappointed expression before putting down a bowl of udon and soondae in front of him. The man placed his phone next to the bowls before he started eating. He ate a mouthful of the noodles then the soondae. While he was eating, his gaze did not move away from his phone. The phone must have been a symbol of faith for him.

“Interesting, isn’t it?” Jayeon said.

She said that this pojang-macha was a theme park. She smiled in satisfaction, saying that it was possible to see many different types of people here as long as they bought the ticket known as a bowl of udon. Maru had a look at the drunk man, his wife, the students eating while chatting outside, and the man who said that he did a good interview before nodding. It was indeed a theme park. Instead of rides though, it was filled with people.

“Uhm.”

Yuna, who had been sitting quietly for a while, quietly called out to the owner. In her hands was a bowl. The owner wordlessly gave her another bowl. When everyone looked at her, she smiled and picked up her chopsticks again.

“Owner, please let me shoot here. I don’t think I’ll ever get this feeling even if I make this into a set.”

“Just recreate it to make it look similar. I’m sure you have a lot of money since you’re working for the TV station.”

“This kind of scenery isn’t something you can make. Look here, this oil stain. Then there’s this dented iron griddle as well as the steamer that makes you doubt the hygiene of this place. All of this is what makes this atmosphere.”

“Why don’t you swear at my face instead?”

Despite Jayeon’s wooing, the owner did not budge. The students eating outside returned the bowls before leaving. The owner took off the vinyl wrap around the bowl and put it in the trash before starting to clean up. The way he exchanged words with the customers looked very affectionate. Usually, pojang-machas were filled with loud noises, but this place looked rather calm like an ordinary house. Maru felt like anyone would be energized even if they were tired due to all the work and life things they had to do as long as they had a bowl of this warm udon. It was a safe haven located in the corner of the traditional market. It was a place where life dramas happened.

Maru looked at Jayeon. She was looking at the owner as well as the other customers with a smile on her face. Her eyes looked like she was wondering how to bring all this into the world of the screen.

The wife left the pojang-macha, carrying her drunk husband with her. The man, who came from an interview, also left after saying thanks. This place didn’t look like a place where one could make themselves at home; it looked more like a temporary shelter. A place where people with shallow pockets could come and eat lightly before leaving pleasantly. If they were lucky, they would be able to get a free boiled egg as well.

“This place is good.”

Maru remembered the jeyuk-bokkeum restaurant in the shanty towns of Seoul. Like that place, this pojang-macha was also a refuge where people could console their tired bodies.

“It’s only a pojang-macha no matter how good it is,” said the owner.

Unlike his cold-sounding words, he was smiling.

“I’m also going to clean up and go home. You should go home as well, miss producer.”

“Are you not going to give me an answer today?”

“I said I’m not doing it. Look for somewhere else.”

“I said this has to be the place. Why do you think I, the producer, came all the way here to beg you? I really don’t act like this usually, but I really want to use this place even if it means begging you for it. Please? Please allow me to. It’ll be good promotion for the store.”

“Like I said, I don’t need any promotion.”

“I know you don’t. It’s just, the only thing I can give you is some compensatory money and promotion, so I can only keep mentioning it.”

“Use that money to make that set or whatever it is. Don’t waste it on me.”

“Are you really not letting me borrow this place?”

“I’m really not letting you borrow this place.”

“Even if I beg you like this?”

“No.”

“How about if I cry? Can I?”

“I’m going to report you to the police.”

The owner reached his hand out. Maru cleaned up his bowls and gave it back to him. Yuna was still eating.

“Take your time,” the owner said to Yuna.

It seemed that he noticed her starting to eat quickly after he said ‘clean up’. The owner was watching the customers even while talking.

“Yuna, eat as slowly as possible. We’ll stay the night up here.”

“What a great thing you’re teaching to a kid even though you’re supposed to be a TV producer.”

The owner clicked his tongue. Jayeon did not feel dejected due to the cold reaction and stared back at the owner. Her face seemed to be saying ‘I won’t give up until you give me permission’.

Maru smiled faintly as he looked between the stubborn Jayeon and the uncaring owner. A firm-willed owner and a producer who’s trying to persuade him no matter what the cost. Since there was a conflict between two extreme characters, it was enough foundation for a drama. The only thing left was to see if it had a happy ending or a bad ending like the current trends. From the look of things, there seemed to be almost no chance of the owner giving permission. He looked far from a person who wanted money and he didn’t look like he wanted any fame. Maru didn’t think that someone who could give students boiled eggs without boasting would be persuaded by the producer’s words when the only thing she could offer was money.

“Thanks for the food,” Yuna said as she gave back the bowl.

She seemed full and looked very satisfied. Her smile was really good to look at. People who had their fill would often smile defenselessly.

“Thanks,” said the owner.

Maru felt curious now. 100 won for a boiled egg, 1,000 won for a bowl of udon. Plus a bowl of soondae was 1,500 won, and it was filled to the brim. Moreover, he often gave the customers some extra. While he said that worrying about merchants like him was useless, if it was like this, it seemed like he would

hardly be able to recoup any labor costs. Why was the owner running a pojang-macha in this place? If it was for his livelihood, the prices were questionable. If he lived alone, it might not be entirely impossible but....

“Hello? Oh, yeah. I’ll go back soon. Where’s Jooyoung and Joojin? They went to watch a movie? They have good stamina. Well done driving them to places like that. Go get washed and have a rest. You must be tired. Okay, see you later.”

The owner put down his phone, which he had placed between his shoulder and his ear. From the call, it was clear that he was a father of two. Would he be able to feed his family with this pojang-macha which was no different from charity? Simply speaking, he was probably continuing this job because he wasn’t short on money, but no matter how hard Maru thought about it, he couldn’t calculate things properly.

“It’d be great if you bought your kids some presents with the compensation.”

“Even without something like that, I’m capable of giving my kids some gifts. Rather than that, why do you sound like you’re drunk even though you didn’t drink anything?”

“It’s my strategy for the day.”

“What a good thing you’re doing next to some kids. You two must be having a hard time since the one that calls herself producer is like this.”

Maru laughed before hurriedly sealing his mouth when he noticed Jayeon glaring at him. She was a scary woman.

“Ahjussi, you have a family, right?” Yuna suddenly said.

“I do. They’ll be going to college next year, and my words are the last thing they will ever listen to.”

“Then wouldn’t it be good to get the money from the producer?”

After saying that, Yuna looked at the steamer before continuing to speak.

“I had a look at the household account book that my mom wrote when I was young. I was really surprised. I didn’t know that so much money went into me. Don’t you need a lot of money when your kids go to college? I hope you can earn a lot of money, ahjussi. The udon here is delicious and it’s calming. It must all be thanks to you. I believe that good things should happen to the people who do good deeds. Whether it’s money or anything else.”

Yuna’s eyes looked resolute as she uttered her dogma. However, that expression did not last long. She soon scrunched up and made an awkward smile. It seemed that she thought she was overstepping her bounds.

“I wish my kids could grow to be a resolute person like you, lady,” the owner said.

His eyes were drawing a curve. Perhaps he felt that Yuna’s words weren’t just out of formality, but that they stemmed from her heart.

“But you don’t need to worry about me. The reason this ahjussi is running this pojang-macha is simple. I like kids coming over and having a laugh, and it’s also fun to see drunk people doing drunk things here. If

I act generous to people who are short on money, that's also somewhat fulfilling. In the end, I do this for my own self-satisfaction. I'm not doing this to feed my kids."

Just then, a car approached from the left of the pojang-macha with its headlights on. The car approached slowly and was turned off right in front of it. It was a high-class foreign car. The door opened and a woman wearing light clothing got out. She entered the pojang-macha and stood next to the owner.

"Honey, you still haven't finished yet?"

"I was just about to. Get inside the car. It'll take a bit of time to clean things up."

"Then I'll come back after parking. Let's do it together."

The woman, who brought a foreign-made car, bowed towards Jayeon before driving off. Maru looked at the car becoming distant before turning his head around to the owner.

"Generosity stems from possession. If I was short on money, I wouldn't be doing this in the first place."

Aha - Maru nodded in acceptance. At the same time, he understood why Jayeon was acting like that. She was asking for his generosity since he wasn't a man who could be shaken with money.

"Owner, please give me permission. Think of it as earning some pocket money."

Suddenly, the word 'owner' sounded a lot heavier now. Who knew what he 'owned'?

"I said no."

The owner didn't seem like he would give in. Maru gave a glance at Yuna while peeling a boiled egg. Yuna looked at the owner with a shocked expression before laughing. So you weren't worried - she seemed purely happy for him.

## **Chapter 660**

"I'm going to clean up now, so you can get going."

"I'm going to come back until I get permission from you."

"Sheesh, I said that won't happen. What a stubborn lady."

The owner started cleaning things up with laughter. The owner's wife, who disappeared with the foreign car, returned with two buckets of iced water and started helping out with the cleaning.

"Let's go now. We should stop here for today."

Jayeon looked at the pojang-macha before turning around. Yuna said goodbye to the owner before following Jayeon. The pojang-macha's lights turned dark. Darkness crept closer to the street light next to the pojang-macha. The husband and wife cleaned the pojang-macha while relying on the light from the street light. They put food ingredients into a cooler and put the cooking tools inside a plastic container. The owner's wife's movements were agile and meticulous as though this wasn't the first time she was doing this.

"Han Maru," Jayeon called out to him from in front.

Maru looked at her before speaking,

“If we create a set, it won’t have the same vibes, right?”

“Yeah. An atmosphere that can only be created with the flow of time isn’t something that can be imitated so easily after all.”

She was right. The reason why directors were so intent on scouting good locations was because the place the characters step on would be a representation of the world inside the screen. Most of the time, even the scenery behind the characters would be decided by the director as well. The pojang-macha was a pivotal point in Jayeon’s work. The reason she used her own private time to scout this place out was because she wanted it that much, and probably because she thought that this place had to be the one. Maru looked forward to the drama that would occur within the orange curtains. What would it feel like to do acting here? Just imagining such a thing made him joyous.

“You can go first.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Throw a little tantrum, I guess.”

“Tantrum?”

He smiled back at Jayeon, who creased her eyebrows, before walking over to the pojang-macha.

“You didn’t leave yet?” asked the owner as he lifted up the cooler.

“I was planning to help.”

“You don’t need to help. Just get going.”

“It looks like there’s a lot to do here though. Shall I fold this?” Maru said as he pointed at the orange plastic curtain.

The owner shook his hand, saying that he should get going, but his wife walked over to him with a smile.

“Grab the end over there.”

“Yes.”

He folded the plastic curtain so that the metal rings in the corners met another when it was folded. He was reminded of when he put a vinyl film over a military tent during guerilla training.

“Give that part to me.”

Maru moved according to the owner’s wife’s gestures. He ironed the curtain with his hand so that it wouldn’t become all creased before he folded it. Once, twice, three times - after folding it until it couldn’t be folded anymore, he placed it next to the cooler.

“You’re good. I’ll ask you to help me with this one as well. Grab the end like just before.”

The owner told her not to make the kid do it, but his wife just smiled back at him, telling him not to be so picky. The owner pouted before sighing. The king of the pojang-macha had kneeled to the king of the household.

“Are you a student?”

“Yes. I’m in my 3rd year of high school now.”

“From how you came here with that person, you don’t seem like an ordinary high school student. Are you preparing to become an actor?”

The owner’s wife’s eyes were directed at Jayeon.

“I’m doing my best.”

“That must be hard. My son is also going around to various places, saying that he wants to become a singer, but gosh, he’s a pain.”

“Becoming a singer is hard too. You have to do a lot of practice, and you have to have the talent as well.”

“That’s right. You must have the talent. But the problem is, I don’t think my son is that good. He’s trying his best, saying that he wants to join an agency, but the results aren’t that good. He doesn’t show it, but he probably feels really bad every time he doesn’t get a good answer from auditions.”

“That can’t be helped. Despite that though, I don’t think it’s a bad thing to taste failure early on. There’s nothing more disappointing and regretful than not being able to challenge something properly after growing up. It would be for the best if things are smooth sailing from the get go, but realizing your limits early is also quite helpful in life. If he sees the limit, he’ll be able to decide for himself clearly. He can decide whether he’s going to continue challenging that route or look for another path.”

He folded the last curtain and stacked it on top of the rest. Meanwhile, the owner had finished cleaning up the interior of the pojang-macha and was closing off the kitchen area. He took out the support pillar and folded the stainless steel plate upwards. The kitchen turned into a rectangular shape.

“Honey, this boy says he’s preparing to become an actor.”

“I know.”

“He’s just like our son, isn’t he? It’s just the difference between an actor and a singer.”

Maru received a bitter gaze from the owner. The owner was telling him with his eyes to get going. Maru wouldn’t have come if he was planning to back off here. The owner was like an iron castle and did not budge to Jayeon’s persuasion, but what about his wife?

“I’m also doing my best like your son.”

“Really? I hope it goes well.”

“I’m not sure if you know this already, but the drama producer standing over there wants to shoot a drama with this pojang-macha as the stage.”

“If it’s that, I have heard about it from him.”

The owner’s wife smiled at the owner. The owner clearly seemed like he wanted to get going, but his wife shook her head. Maru saw an opportunity there. The owner’s wife in front of him was a drawbridge. In order to conquer the castle that was the owner, he had to do so through his wife. A mother who has a son who’s striving towards the uncertain future of being a singer. The household was financially stable, but she must be quite uneasy. After all, there were no parents in the world who wanted their child to fail. If he showed sympathy towards her son and put his own story into it, perhaps he would sound persuasive? Maru finished calculating and started speaking.

“I want to become successful as an actor. Just like how your son must encounter good composers and lyricists in order to become a good singer, I also have to come across good directors and scenarios. Right now, I don’t know exactly what the director over there is planning to produce. However, when I see the pojang-macha the owner has made, I can picture what she wants to make. It also makes me realize that it’s something I don’t want to miss out on. I only came here for the first time today, but I really like this pojang-macha. The people sitting next to me are strangers, yet I felt a sense of familiarity when they ate next to me. When the customers talk about good or bad things that happened to them, and the owner replies to them without ignoring them every single time, I really think it was a pleasant scene to look at.”

“My husband is a good listener of other people’s words. At first, I was opposed to him running this. He said he wanted to run a pojang-macha all of a sudden. But when I see him working hard at this hour, I feel like allowing him to do it was the right decision. My husband, he really doesn’t smile at all in other places, but he smiles all the time when he’s here.”

“I didn’t do that.”

The owner, who was listening by the kitchen, said that he didn’t do so even while shaking his hand, but when his wife asked him ‘really?’ with a grin on her face, the owner did not say anything. Maru thought that the two were a really fitting couple. The husband felt like he purposely lost to his wife instead of being dominated, and his wife understood that and played pranks without crossing the line. Perhaps this was what a happy couple should be like.

“So the point is you want us to allow you to shoot here, right?”

She immediately got to the point. Maru was unable to answer. He was robbed of any time to answer because of the sudden question. Maru changed his trail of thought when he looked at her face. Perhaps it was harder to gain this woman’s heart than it was to persuade the owner.

Should he be upfront with the persuasion? Maru had no ace up his sleeves. It would be possible to drag the conversation on with roundabout words, but he didn’t feel like it would work against her. Numerous thoughts flashed in his head in an instant. He even came up with a hypothesis that the owner’s wife might be the one who has the financial rights in the family. Perhaps when she said she ‘allowed’ her husband to run the pojang-macha, she might have meant it literally. Not just in the sense of a wife permitting the actions of her husband, but in the sense that she would support him financially.

That was unexpected, but the conclusion did not change. In the end, the person he had to settle the deal with was the owner’s wife.

“Have you ever heard what kind of drama they want to shoot in this place from that director over there?”

“No, today’s the first time I’ve seen her.”

“Then if it’s okay with you, can you listen to her about what the drama is about?”

“Is there a reason I should do such a thing?”

That question made him feel the chills. At the same time, he was sure that they would be able to shoot here as long as he got permission from the woman in front of him.

“Unfortunately, I cannot guarantee you anything in this situation. I’m a mere actor after all. However, there’s one thing I can say with confidence. It’s that the eyes of the director that found this place are pretty amazing.”

“Honey, did you hear that? The pojang-macha you’ve been taking care of all this time is a great place.”

Although he said it in a roundabout way, she saw through him immediately and told that to the owner. When you want to flatter someone, you have to do it subtly like a gentle blow of wind - he couldn’t remember their face, but his superior at work used to tell him that. They weren’t words he liked, but he couldn’t deny the fact that it was useful. Thanks for that, mister.

“I think it will be pretty interesting to hear what she has to say. About what kind of drama she wants to shoot here and how she wants to use this place as a set.”

Other than ‘interest’, he had nothing to persuade her. While it might be old fashioned, it was still enough to stimulate a person. It wasn’t that shooting here would be decided just based on the owner’s wife’s decision, but as long as he could get the director and her to sit at the negotiation table, it would definitely increase the chances for the shoot.

“You look pretty desperate for a young person.”

“They say tasting failure early is better, but I already tasted mine. I want to try succeeding from now on rather than failing. Of course, take it as something said by a brat who doesn’t know the reality of the world yet.”

She nodded before looking at the owner.

“Honey, did you hear her out properly?”

“No. I’m satisfied with running my business here after all.”

“That’s not good. A boy who can ask so politely wants you to listen to her just once. Why don’t you hear her out at least? Of course, if you still don’t want to do it, then you can clearly refuse her here. Decide so that both of us won’t have to drag things out, and that she can drop her hopes.”

As soon as she said those words, the owner wiped the sweat off his forehead with the towel around his neck. He then looked up at the street light before speaking,

“Go call her over. If it’s just listening, I can do that. Like what someone said, a boy wants to challenge his dreams, so I should at least give him a chance.”

Maru bowed to the two people before running over to Jayeon. Having detected that something was up, Jayeon immediately called out to him.

“What is it?”

“They want to listen to how you are going to use this place, and what kind of drama it is.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’ll ask just in case, but you do have a scenario, right?”

“Everything on it, down to the last dot is in my head.”

“I guess that’s fine then. That’s all I can help you with. The rest is up to you, director.”

“I’m not sure what’s happening, but well done.”

Maru looked at Jayeon, who gave him a slap on the back before going over to the two people. He hoped for them to give permission. Not long later, Jayeon returned. The couple was leaving the alley with their stuff.

“What happened?”

As soon as he asked those words, Jayeon grabbed Maru by the collar. She cheered loudly to the point that her voice echoed in the alley as she spoke,

“We got the place!”

Maru sighed in relief as he was being shaken back and forth. It was 10 p.m. when the dramatic negotiation came to a success.