

## Once Again 721

### Chapter 721

The masked man forgot about when he started wearing a mask. Was it the 13th or the 14th? He couldn't remember because it had been such a long time. Perhaps he didn't want to remember.

He did not know what was happening for a while after his consciousness spurred into life. He was earnestly living his life after coming back to life, but he died due to a sudden accident. Was it really over now? Was he finally reaching either heaven or hell? In a space without light nor darkness, in a place where the sense of time was distant, he wandered around. He didn't know whether it was for just an instant or for a whole eternity because his senses had been isolated.

When he realized that a change occurred within him, the masked man was within 'Han Maru'. He wondered what was happening. I am Han Maru. Who is the owner of this body? That was his meeting with the first Han Maru.

The first Han Maru had succeeded the masked man's memories. He rejoiced at his second life and even vowed to live his new life for the sake of his wife. The masked man screamed. He wanted to talk to the living and breathing Han Maru at that time.

His voice did not reach. The dark stage existed within Han Maru but was surrounded by a thick wall. The only thing the masked man could do was to keep watching. He watched Han Maru's first life with a cautious mind. He cheered for the living Han Maru if he made the right choice and groaned whenever he stepped onto something he should not step on. The masked man did not know why he had split off from the entity known as Han Maru, but he cheered on for the Han Maru living in that era regardless. It was all thanks to the baseless belief that the living Maru's happiness would be the same as his own. That belief was his last hope and the last safehouse that prevented him from mentally breaking down.

When the first Han Maru met his wife, became affectionate, confessed, and whispered love, the masked man closed his eyes for the first time. He couldn't bear to watch. The fact that her eyes were looking at another man agonized him. It was a strange dilemma. The man his wife was looking at was indeed Han Maru, but that Han Maru was not him. The masked man thought about the things that he started worrying about when he first found himself within the 'first Han Maru': why did I split off and why am I here?

The first Han Maru had sexual intercourse with his wife. The first Han Maru's emotions splashed into the masked man's space like waves. Her breathing sounds, her smell, and her moans with them.

The masked man only had one thought in his mind: I want to disappear. His wish was not fulfilled.

Time kept ticking. The first Han Maru managed to get himself a great position in his company thanks to the social skills he gained in his previous life. His promotion was set in stone. As though to prove that it wasn't just misfortune that happened in series, the first Han Maru encountered a series of fortunate events. His wife became pregnant.

By that time, the masked man realized that the first Han Maru's state had changed a lot compared to before. The reason was simple. His memories had vaporized. He wasn't that surprised that his memories disappeared as he already knew about it from the 'woman in a white suit', but there was something

different about the disappearing memories. The memories didn't become faint, they were completely changed. Eventually, he wouldn't remember the fact that he had revived at all.

Perhaps that was god's will to make him lead an ordinary life - the masked man thought so at least. He had long since given up on thinking about these things deeply, so he arrived at a conclusion pretty quickly. He found it laughable that he had to watch the success and happiness of someone that was himself yet not himself, while he himself was in a state that was neither human nor ghost. There was only one thing he wanted to know - when was this life going to end?

The day arrived when the first Han Maru forgot about the fact that he had revived at all. That day was a week after Han Maru had managed to win a big contract, and it was also the day his child became one year old.

The masked man's only joy in life was to watch the daughter that looked just like the wife. Even amidst the guilt, despair, and unease, he was able to put down all of his worries when he looked at Gaeul<sup>[1]</sup>, who looked just like his wife. Babies were a product of miracles. He realized every day that those words weren't wrong.

The first Han Maru's life seemed to be sailing smoothly. He was an acknowledged employee at work, a good husband at home, and a splendid father. There were very few things that could break such a perfect life. Who could destroy this family?

The masked man then came across Han Maru, lying on the ground after having been hit by a car. A car rushed into him when he was seeing the teacher out after his daughter's one-year birthday.

The masked man saw the stifling malice. The car accident was too impossible to happen. While he was close to the road, the place Han Maru was standing on was the pavement. It felt as though death had made his way out to get him. While watching his wife cry out in horror, the world became distant. He had returned to that space where he could feel nothing again.

A sense of fear overwhelmed him. The fact that he had to be here by himself in this meaningless space made him afraid, but what made him even more afraid was the life that might begin once again. He prayed that it wasn't like that. He prayed that he would be judged at the end of the world and sent to heaven or hell, where he could settle down.

When his senses returned, the masked man grit his teeth at the vanity of his prayers. His hairs stood on end due to the mercilessness of god. The second Han Maru was preparing his new life after having succeeded the memories of his first one.

The masked man looked at the woman in a white suit standing in between the boundary of life and death. The woman who offered him the chance to come back to life was giving the second Han Maru the same opportunity in the same space. He thought that he was cursed to repeat his time over and over again. He was going to live the life of a hamster in a hamster wheel whose time didn't move forward even by one second.

The second Han Maru did not follow the life of the first Han Maru. He had decided to become an actor, and he became successful with incredible luck and opportunity. He met his wife during that process and shared their love.

40 years. That was the time that the masked man had watched the lives of the first and second Han Marus. The second Han Maru also died due to an accident. It was on his pretty daughter's birthday.

He sent off the third, fourth, and fifth Han Marus.

During that process, the masked man came to a realization. It wasn't that the same time was being repeated over and over again. While time returned to 2003, when Maru was in his 1st year of high school, the time for those existing outside life and death kept flowing.

The masked man's attention fell on the woman in a white suit. He wanted to know why she was committing such terrible things. She should be aware of everything. Unfortunately, he didn't have a way of reaching out to her. It was hard to ask her a question when he couldn't even talk to himself.

The masked man became proactive. He had sent off five Marus while he was a complete observer, but from the sixth onwards, he called out to Han Maru with all of his might.

The voice that didn't seem like it would reach, finally reached. He had finally interacted with someone else after 80 years. Though, that 'someone else' was himself, he rejoiced that he could have a conversation.

The sixth Han Maru was startled upon seeing a man with the same face as him. The masked man wanted to explain everything slowly, but he could not say that the reincarnation was being repeated. Every time he tried to say the truth about coming back to life, an invisible hand blocked his mouth.

As frustrated as he was, the masked man did his best. He told Maru to look around carefully when he thought that he had succeeded. He believed that this unending life would change if he prevented accidental deaths and Maru died in peace.

"Why do you have the same face as me?"

His expectations shattered when the sixth Maru turned thirty-three. His memories had been altered by someone. The years of talking to each other like friends had disappeared overnight.

Not long later, the sixth Maru died. The masked man did not give up. The seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth.

"Who are you? Why do you wear a mask?"

The masked man started wearing a mask and he did not speak anymore. He did not reveal everything. He had come to a realization that the only thing a hamster could do inside a hamster wheel was to walk on the same spot.

A time longer than 200 years forced him to make a decision. He would either collapse mentally or become numb to everything. The masked man chose to become an indifferent observer. A good way to endure the punishment was to otherize himself. The one being whipped there is not me - thinking that was enough to make him feel relieved.

Time kept passing. Han Maru lived and died. The ending was always Han Maru's death. What was strange was that she never got caught in accidents. Whenever a traffic accident occurred, it was always Han Maru who died.

When the twentieth Han Maru's life began, the masked man was able to talk to the woman in a white suit. She talked about a story that was nearly an eternity long, and the masked man realized that the time he spent was a brief instant compared to what she spent. It wasn't him being punished.

The twenty-first. The masked man met himself with a smile that was no different from an indifferent expression. The twenty-first was a little special. He was able to tell Maru the secrets of coming back to life. This was something impossible before. However, he didn't have any expectations or anything. Maru was bound to forget and die soon anyway.

The twenty-first Maru also experienced changes in memory. He had forgotten about the things precious to him like all the Han Marus before him and started changing. He had forgotten about the secrets of revival that he had told him.

The masked man knew what this signified. He had experienced it twenty-one times before. Even a dog would learn tricks in 3 years, and he had lived observing Han Maru from this cramped stage for centuries. He will die soon - that was the conclusion he came to.

Perhaps the ones who had bestowed her that great punishment had decided to deal with this special Han Maru early so that the hamster wheel could keep turning.

"Is forgetting, really according to that flow?"

The masked man smiled bitterly. The twenty-first Maru knew everything, but he now became a man who did not know anything. He wondered how many years of memories would disappear this time around. Perhaps he might forget that he was revived from this moment onwards. The earnest hamster wheel would once again bring a corpse to life again to let the man turn the wheel again.

He did not say anything. He didn't want to. He was thinking about what he should say to the upcoming twenty-second Maru.

Just then....

There was a man who stepped out of that hamster wheel. A man was trying to do something that he wasn't permitted to. The masked man could feel that. He could hear the sound of someone trying to reverse the flow decided by the great one. Tick, tick, tick. The stopped clock hand started moving again. It wasn't the sound of a clock hand from the human realm. It was the sound of the flow of time of the great ones, residing above the six destinies.

"If forgetting is set in stone, I will not forget. To hell with things like that. I will not forget; not this moment, not that humming song."

It was twisted. The masked man could feel the cage that imprisoned her was creaking. He could feel the clock of the world created in order to punish her trying to move again.

The masked man looked at the twenty-first Han Maru.

-Who are you?

There was no reply. Han Maru had stopped as though he was sleeping. The masked man laughed. What did he expect? There was a momentary change, but that was it in the end. Humans could not break out of the world created by the heavens.

“You.”

Han Maru, who had been silent this whole time, had spoken. At the same time, he collapsed sideways.

“What the! Hey, Han Maru!”

“Director Park! Maru collapsed!”

The sounds of this world rushed in. However, only one word was echoing within the masked man’s head,

You.

[1] Here, Gaeul is referring to the daughter.

## **Chapter 722**

When he realized that he was falling, his center of gravity was already outside his body. His body was leaning towards a point in the air. When his body leaned about halfway, he saw Joomin dropping the coffee cup in shock as well as Dongho who was reaching out to him. The falling cup eventually stopped in the air, and Dongho’s actions also stopped like a paused video.

Time passed by slowly. At this speed, he felt like he needed ten years to fall down on the ground. It was a strange experience, but that wasn’t the important part. Maru probed his memories and became an adventurer treading on the wrinkles of his brain. Fragmented memories shot out from around him as though popcorn was popping out of the ground. He felt like his brain was being fried. All the calories that were supposed to be spent in his body was being stolen by his brain. Maybe even his body weight was being consumed by his brain.

Amidst the swirling memories, Maru saw the masked man. He did not say anything. Maru soon realized why he was silent. It wasn’t that he was being silent. He had said everything already.

He could hear eggshells cracking. No, he felt like he heard such a noise. A thin layer of something crumbled apart, allowing a sunken memory to surface.

Maru remembered the masked man’s face. Han Maru. What would the historian who has been watching an individual’s history repeat itself over and over again, feel like?

The fragments of memories that had been scattered and blocked by someone were gathering little by little. In the middle of them was a song. The humming song that tickled his ears was like a lighthouse shining down on the vast sea. The memories curled up beneath the darkness followed that faint light. The memories gathered towards that one guide and mixed among each other in a chaotic manner, but the organization was happening steadily.

Maru saw a drop of coffee that popped out from the cup. He was still falling, and he felt like the distance between him and the ground was as far as the distance from the Earth to the moon.

He went through a process of turning and moving the various memory puzzle pieces before putting them together. It was a hard and excruciating process. It hurt his brain so much that he wanted to give up immediately. What’s the point of regaining those memories? - these sweet words reverberated

inside his ears. His reasonable mind whispered to him that it was right and proper to focus on the present rather than being obsessed with the past.

Yes, that was right. Longing for a bus that had already passed won't make it return. A wise person would wait for the next bus at the bus stop. Perhaps it was a good idea to enjoy some coffee in the meantime. Only people who were able to let go of what had already passed would be able to grab the future.

Bullshit - someone said. It was a familiar voice. It was rough, unlike the voice that told him to let go of the past. Just listening to it made him feel uncomfortable. If you missed that bus, you should chase it down and catch up to it - the voice said. Maru felt stifled when the voice told him not to package the past as good memories and to face them properly.

A voice that made him comfortable, and a voice that made him uncomfortable. It seemed clear who to follow at this crossroad. Maru consciously ignored the voice that scolded him. He felt like a wave of pain would crash into him if he followed that voice. He wanted to choose the side that others suggested he take, which was also the path that he wanted to choose. The words that told him to let go of his past felt warm like his mother's words that he heard when he was young. They felt right like the advice of his wise father. Was there a reason to follow the rough words where a gut-churning, difficult journey was certain?

He felt like time was returning to normal. The falling cup started speeding up. Everything was returning to normal. Everything was returning to the flow, where everything should be.

The sunlight was very strong. He suddenly remembered an old memory. He was driving across Hangang bridge, and next to him was a woman. She was someone who he met for the first time that morning. He was a 'fill-in' manager, while she was a 'fill-in' support actress. The sunlight that seeped through the window emphasized the contours of her face. The car audio was quiet, but the car was filled with her humming.

That hum. Maru knew that song. It was a song that he could sing and listen to right now. It was the song that Gaeul hummed from time to time after all.

Maru felt his pupils widening. His back felt chilly. The puzzle that was his memory fit together at this moment. The voice that whispered to him became smaller and smaller. Instead of the voice that told him to forget about the past and look at the present and the future, the humming song filled his mind.

The memory of his death at 29 started expanding. The memory of his death at 30 returned to him, then 31, then 33, then 35.... The memories that had been swapped out numerous times by someone started returning to their original places.

Maru saw the cup falling in front of him start to rise again. Experiencing a phenomenon where something that should be falling was not falling. Maru felt the tight chains that bound his memories starting to snap apart.

The rough voice became vivid again. I'm sure you remember now - the voice that had become thick due to experiencing all the hardships in life belonged to himself. It was that same voice he used to fight against his superior, console his junior, and quarrel with a customer. It was the voice of his forty-five-year-old self.

The masked man suddenly asked something,

-Who are you?

Maru replied,

'You'.

The moment he replied, the clock that had been ticking everywhere; forward, backward, and nowhere, returned to its original path. Maru immediately crashed into the ground that had come slower to him. He saw people approach him in shock. He wanted to say that he was okay and stand up, but he felt too dizzy.

"Han Maru, Han Maru," producer Park Hoon said as he took out his phone.

He seemed like he was going to call for an ambulance. Maru barely managed to reach out and pushed Park Hoon's phone cover down.

"I'm okay."

"No, you're not. You just collapsed."

"It's because I've been crouching for a while. It's not a big problem."

Maru clenched his teeth and smiled. Thankfully, his sense of balance had returned to normal. Only his head felt heavy and dazed as though he hadn't been sleeping for days. He stood up and jumped lightly.

"See? I'm completely fine."

"Forget it, and go to the hospital. We've got a long time until we do your scene anyway."

Maru looked at Park Hoon's face before nodding. As the person responsible for this place, it should be putting a lot of pressure on him, so he couldn't act so stubborn.

"I'll go to the hospital and get some vitamins. I'll also get a doctor to say that I'm okay."

"Give me a call once you get diagnosed."

"Yes. I'm sorry for making you all worried."

"Just get going already."

Maru smiled at the people that gathered around him and told them that he'd be back soon.

"Are you really okay? You suddenly collapsed."

"Men can get anemic too sometimes. Looks like I ran out of stamina because I haven't been able to get good sleep these days."

Joomin dusted his clothes off with worried eyes.

"I knew you were going to collapse one day. You looked somewhat weak since morning. Do you want me to bring you to the hospital?" Dongho asked.

"You have a shoot to do. You aren't going anywhere. I can go by myself."

“What are you going to do if you fall down again?”

“That won’t happen, so don’t worry about it.”

Maru thought about Byungchul, who would be at the company, but he decided not to call him. After all, he knew that there was nothing wrong with his body. He left the middle school through the school gates and grabbed a taxi. On his way there, he organized his thoughts. When doing a 1,000-piece puzzle, the start would feel incredibly slow and unclear, but once the edges were done, it would become a lot faster. This was also true for his fragmented memories. When some of the pieces fit together, he could see the general picture. The thing he had to do now was to grab the floating memories and stitch them together in the correct order. His brain was doing this job even without him having to be conscious of it, so the memories should soon be restored with a bit of time.

He went to the nearby hospital, got diagnosed, and left. Naturally, there was nothing wrong with him. He sent Park Hoon a text message. He got a call right away.

-Can you do the shoot?

“Of course. There’s a lot of money involved. The doctor said there’s no problem, so if you would allow it, I’d like to shoot.”

-It’ll take some time before we start your scene, so get some fresh air before coming back. You should get some sleep or something. If you feel anemic at your age, you won’t be able to do this job for long.

“I’m okay now. Then I’ll get some fresh air before returning.”

After hanging up, Maru called Dongho.

-Yeah, it’s me. Are you okay?

“I’m okay. I’m going back soon, so can you give me a call when my scene is approaching?”

-Alright. I’ll give you a call, so get some sleep before coming. It looks like you ran out of strength because you’re doing two jobs.

After thanking him, Maru sat on a bench in front of the hospital. He laughed in vain when he looked at the people walking around in patient clothes. His own state was not that different from them.

-Do you remember?

He wondered when he was going to speak. Maru closed his eyes. He was standing on the stage where the masked man lived.

“Somewhat.”

-Really?

Maru nodded.

“I have a lot to ask, but now’s not the time. My head is still in a mess right now.”

-I’m sure it must be like that. Tens of years of memories should have returned all at once.



Maru looked at the masked man.

“Are you going to keep wearing that mask?”

-It's somewhat embarrassing to take it off right now. At this point, I'm more comfortable with it on.

“If you're okay with it, then so be it. But how funny. We're all Han Maru in the end.”

-Yes, it's comedic.

“We have a lot to talk about.”

-Yes, we do.

“But before that, there's something I want to tell you.”

Maru reached out to him.

“You've been working hard until now. And since you're at it, let's do some more.”

-I don't remember the last time I was thanked like this.

“I'm sure you don't. You've lived for centuries after all.”

-I'm not sure if 'lived' is the right word. The concept of life is very vague here.

“Can I ask you something?”

-Yes, to commemorate your return.

“What is it that you want?”

-I'm sure you must know already.

Maru could read the expression hidden behind the mask.

-I don't care if it's a happy ending or a bad ending. An ending - that is all I want. I want to stop getting tired and to stop watching for that matter. If I could have the luxury of choosing, I wish to lie on the same bed as her, with our daughter in the middle. I long for human smell. I long for emotions too. But I'm sure it must be impossible. I don't have a body after all.

“Why did you pop out like that? Why did you get separated and become another me?”

-I'm not sure. Perhaps it was for the sake of you, the twenty-first Maru.

“The twenty-first.”

It was not a big number, yet an extremely large one too. In this place where no one called out to him, a man had to witness his own death more than a dozen times. What would that man be like? It shouldn't be something that a human could imagine. This being was once Han Maru, but now, it was questionable whether he could still be called Han Maru.

-Let's talk once you get your thoughts organized. Right now, you seem to be in need of some rest.

“Yeah, I think I'll do that.”

Maru slowly opened his eyes. The dark stage disappeared, leaving the autumn sky and the tall hospital building in his vision. He took out his phone from his pocket. He pressed some buttons to pull up Gaeul's phone number on his screen. Maru took his finger off when all he needed to do was to press the call button.

"This shouldn't be the right time."

He could not hurry. His fate, as well as his life, was very twisted and tangled right now. If he impatiently touched it, it might break everything. He had to be careful as though he was walking on a tightrope.

Rather than that - Maru smiled at the memories that flashed through his mind. He felt stifled when he had a look at what the warm-hearted Han Maru had done until now. Ever since his memories of being betrayed by a devoted junior at the company disappeared, his entire person became really docile. It was him who said that memories didn't disappear easily, yet he had made a complete fool out of himself.

Maru pinched his fingers and put them between his eyes.

"So I can resist, huh."

Was this a victory for the man that had repeated the déjà vu-like life over and over again? Or was this another one of god's mischiefs? Maru opened the memo application on his phone. There was something he needed to test out.

'I died once and came back to life.'

He could write things about his revival. Of course, this wouldn't help that much. If all of his memories vaporized, he would obviously treat this memo as a joke even if he found it.

"Uhm, excuse me."

Maru stopped a woman who was about to enter the hospital. He then looked into her eyes for a while. A moment later, something familiar popped up above her head.

-What's this child up to?

God didn't seem that picky. He didn't take away the gift that he sent out. The lack of functionality in this gift was still a pity though. It would be great if he could see other people's inner psychology, but he could still only read thoughts related to 'Han Maru' within the target.

"Nothing. I must have been mistaken."

He had to check things like stocks and estate prices, but he didn't feel like that would work. He only had some restrictions on his memory lift, not all of the ones placed on him.

Maru twisted his neck left and right as he entered the convenience store in front of the hospital. He needed something to drink right now

## **Chapter 723**

Mindsets were scary things. Despite the fact that the coffee he drank today was the same brand as the coffee he drank yesterday, it tasted different. It was probably due to the fact that the 'person' drinking it was different. Ever since the internal elements that defined an individual changed and expanded, his

personality, as well as his preferences, had changed. How tragic was an individual by himself? How weak was he? The disappearance of a small amount of memories changed his entire person. The time he spent and the experience and the know-how he gained seemed like it was well-managed by the system known as memories, but he was helpless against a 3rd person's simple prank.

Maru threw the empty coffee can in the trash. He knew that he needed to come up with plans, but he didn't have a suitable method. It was impossible for an ant to fight against an elephant. The only thing an ant could do was to take a detour so that it didn't meet the elephant. There were two types of people who wanted to fight against the irresistible: one, those that wanted an honorable death, and two, those that just wanted death.

As he wasn't suicidal, he had to look for a way to live. What was urgent was to check the integrity of his memories. He would be worrying for naught if his memories disappeared after all.

"Man, it's looking dark," he muttered to himself out of frustration.

If an electronic device broke, he could look for a repairman. The repairman would then look at various parts of the product and either fix it or replace the broken parts. However, there were no experts when it came to memories. As this wasn't a neuro-scientific problem nor a cerebral problem, he had to resolve this by himself. There was one more fundamental problem. It was that the one giving the diagnosis was the patient himself. Maru hadn't yet heard of a story where a brain surgeon had operated on his own brain.

He needed other people's help desperately. There was one suitable person, but that person couldn't help.

-The moment you lose your memories will be the moment I lose my authority to speak again. It's not something I can do something about.

These were the masked man's words. He was a rational observer and was qualified to discern and judge the changes, but his opinion was under the control of a god.

Maru first did the thing he could do. It was to write down everything he knew on a notepad that he bought from the convenience store. It was now possible for him to write down the emotional evaluations of the events that he participated in, in both his previous life and this life. Could he conclude that the restrictions were lifted then?

He wrote down the events as well as his emotional evaluations of those events that happened after his revival. If his memories disappeared, they would turn into meaningless words, but these words might trigger his memories to come back again. He had lost his memories and regained them once. There were plenty of possibilities.

He wrote 'A scenario on revival' on the cover of the notepad so he would have an easier time explaining if other people found out about it. He put the notepad in his back pocket. The things he wrote in the notepad were the record of his life as well as his checklist. He would have to compare his memories to what was written on the notes every single day. If there was a discrepancy between his memories and the contents of the notepad, it would be a sign that his memory loss had started again. He wished that there would come a day he could throw away the notepad in relief.

“Excuse me, but can you take a photo of me?”

A man approached him with a digital camera. Maru nodded. The man thanked him and turned around before going to stand next to a woman in a wheelchair. The two people grabbed each other’s hands.

He pressed the shutter. One more time - he said before taking a few more photos. After taking the camera back, the man and the woman looked at the photo together. Maru sat down on a bench and watched the two. A moment later, the woman entered the hospital, while the man stayed outside. The man who was looking at the people entering and leaving the building sat down on the spot. He was crying.

Maru thought about Gaeul. In the lives that repeated itself as though they were a m?bius strip, she should have watched the death of the human known as Han Maru over and over again. Thankfully, she was outside the ring of reincarnation, so she shouldn’t have continuous memories. Sometimes, forgetting was helpful.

Wait - Maru probed his memories and opened the notepad. He remembered something that happened before. The woman in the white suit said once that an individual going back to the past doesn’t mean that the time of that world would regress along with him. She said that there would be a crossroad when the human known as Han Maru revived. She said that the world that his wife and daughter live in after losing the father is a different world.

Twenty-one times. That was the number of revivals that the masked man had seen. This was not an accurate number either. There should definitely be Han Marus that died before the masked man gained consciousness. Did an innumerable number of Han Marus die, resulting in many different branches in the timeline? Just how many single-parent households did he produce?

He sighed. Even if those timelines were completely separate worlds, it meant that there were perhaps hundreds of wives and daughters that had to live a lacking life because of him.

Was it a tragedy caused by someone who longed to come back to life? Of course, this might also be a mechanism that pushed him to focus on his new life. It was true that he focused on his new life after seeing his wife and daughter faring well. Now that he found out that the woman in white was not his ally, there was a need to go through the things that she showed and told him.

Maru rubbed his eyebrows. That was one more thing to think about.

“Did I wish to come back to life?”

No, he did not. The reason he was revived was thanks to the granny that lived near him. Yoo Bokja, that was a name that he could not forget. When he lost most of his memories, he even forgot about that, but he could remember it clearly now.

Maru decided to approach the more fundamental problem. When he thought about how she was someone who gave him one more chance at life, she was like his savior. After all, she had given up on her one and only chance to live another life.

Yes, once. If it was just once, she was his life’s savior, but if that was a repetitive thing, that would change things. The masked man once said that Han Maru’s life would begin during his high school days and end when he died, but that the cause was different every time. In the dozens of lives that were

repeated, there was a time when he died in his late twenties. The possibility of coming across granny Yoo Bokja when he had a short life? Infinitely near zero. After all, he met the elderly woman when he moved houses when he was forty.

“Was it a story to make me accept it?”

That seemed very plausible. There was no way Han Maru did deeds of kindness every single time. It was likely that the woman in the white suit had used that ‘good deed’ story in order to lessen his rejection towards revival.

Maru then had another question. It was the most important question as well.

Why was his life being repeated?

Was he repeating his life because he could not escape the cycle of Samsara in the Buddhist sense? Or was he repeating his life in paradise until the arrival of heaven in the Catholic/Christian sense? Or was this how life worked in general?

He lacked information. At the same time, he could finally understand why people fell for occultist religions. There was nothing that felt more uneasy than being thrown into the middle of uncertainty.

-A branch forms in the timeline immediately after reviving. In this case, there are many worlds where my family has lost me. However, the possibility of this is low. It was something that woman showed me after all.

-A repeating life. There are two possibilities: one, whether it’s a reward or a punishment, I’m repeating life by myself, and two, all of the people in this world are experiencing the same thing as me, and it’s just that they don’t remember.

While reading his notepad, Maru decided to exclude the possibility of the second one. If the world was fixed and the people in it were repeating their lives over and over again, nothing he did would help. Perhaps this world would rewind once he reached forty-five. In that case, he would be greeted by the world of nihilism once he escapes the cycle of revival. This would be something beyond his cognitive abilities, so if this was true, losing memories would be a blessing.

Maru focused on the fact that only he was repeatedly coming back to life.

“Why did the repetition begin... well, fine, I don’t care why it did. But why insert a bothersome event like Yoo Bokja?”

He tapped on the notepad with the back of his pen. If the human known as Han Maru started repeating his life due to a certain trigger, why was there a need to procure the plausibility of reviving every single time? When the masked man talked about the dead Han Marus, he also said that he met the woman in white.

If repetition of life was predestined, there was no need to explain the trigger for the revival through the use of the Yoo Bokja episode. It would be fine if the woman in white told him ‘you got another chance at life thanks to god’s blessing’.

His suspicion started storming. Maru thought about what happened after he died. It was the question he had before he opened his eyes. Had he regretted anything in life? Why did that question suddenly come to his mind at that specific time? It felt like a setup to make him possess regret towards his life.

After opening his eyes, he walked on the sandy beach before listening to the circumstances from the woman in the white suit. You have died, but you have gained another chance at life. It was then that Yoo Bokja appeared. The elderly woman who had lived her whole life helping other people despite leading a poor life herself said that it was okay and yielded the chance of revival to him. Wasn't that like a fairy tale? It could even be called a myth.

This put more weight on the fact that Yoo Bokja was an imaginary figure. Then why was there a need to go through such lengths to create a character and set up the mood?

"What if I refused?"

At first, he definitely refused. He told her not to waste such a precious opportunity on a person like him. What was the result? He was persuaded after a long time and received the opportunity himself.

No matter how much he thought about it, repeating one's life meaninglessly could not be called a reward. This meant that ultimately, his life was being repeated as punishment.

There was no need to ask a criminal for his opinion. Telling him to do what he is supposed to do should be fine.

"I could choose."

Maru could feel the heat rising in his head. It was wrong from the beginning. It must be a natural thing for the dead to long for life. The woman in the white suit paved a path for him to choose life. Who would choose death when they were urged to choose life?

What if he did not choose to revive?

"If that's the key to ending this cycle... do I need to die first or what?"

Maru called for the masked man.

-You must feel complicated right now.

"I feel like my head is going to burst. Let me ask you one thing. The woman in the white suit. Is she simply a guide? Or is she the judge?"

-I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that.

"Fine. Then what about this? You said this to me before I lost my memories; that you know why this all started."

-Yes. I know the circumstances behind all this. Including how and why it all began.

"Fine. Back then, you said something as you looked at that white rabbit on your shoulder. You called the rabbit 'her'. Right before that, I asked you this question: what is the identity of the woman who led me to revive? And whether or not she was god," Maru said as he probed his memories.

“Is the woman that guided me the rabbit?”

-I’m sorry.

“Then you told me this: Don’t hate her too much; she has spent a much longer time in despair. That’s when I asked: Who is this ‘she’?”

-The woman you’ll love forever.

“Yes, that’s how you replied. There’s only one woman I can think of that I will love forever. She’s the only woman Han Maru has loved over numerous lives. She must be Gaeul.”

-I’m sorry.

“What did you mean when you told me not to hate her? Is my life repeating because I loved her? Or are you saying that the reason this all began is because of her?”

-You must know the answer to that already, right? I’m sorry. As much as I want to tell you, my mouth won’t open.

“Gosh, this is driving me crazy.”

Maru then asked one last question. He knew that the answer would be yet another ‘I’m sorry’, but he had to ask anyway. It was the question he was the most afraid to ask as well as the question that assumed the worst.

“The woman who guided me, the rabbit that was on your shoulder, and Gaeul. What is the possibility that those three are the same person?”

The masked man once again replied ‘I’m sorry’.

## **Chapter 724**

Maru decided to look at what was clear for now.

-The revival occurred many times, the reason for which is unclear.

-Memories have disappeared. They have returned, but there’s the possibility that they might disappear again.

-The woman in the white suit is deeply related to this cycle.

As for the unclear things, he decided to put them in a corner of his mind for the time being. It was meaningless to hypothesize about a hypothesis. He had to base his assumptions on the facts. It was nearly impossible to take precautions against what would happen in the future, so he would have to act depending on the situation. He could only shirk back in order to survive the gaze of the omnipotent beings.

Maru grabbed a taxi. The fact that his memories had returned would definitely be unexpected. If even this was within the schedule of god, then every action he took after this would be meaningless.

Did the fact that no measures were taken mean that there was a hole in the surveillance? Something that was progressing according to divine providence had gone wrong. In order to set things straight

again, god should send the woman in white or take away his memories or do something, but there were no reactions until now.

Not knowing or letting him go. Regardless of which was true, it did not change the fact that he had gained freedom. If he could meet the woman in white again, he would be able to get some hints through some questions, but she always appeared at the most random moments before disappearing after saying what she needed to. Was there a method to call her out?

Maru called for the masked man, but there was no answer. If god was really omnipotent and omniscient, he should have realized that Han Maru's soul had split into two. Did he leave that alone while knowing it? Or did he not know about it?

He felt like Sun Wukong, the Monkey King. Despite having an immortal body, the monstrous creature could not escape Buddha's palm and eventually became punished after accepting defeat. The punishment even lasted five hundred years until the monk Sanzang freed him. Did a being like Sanzang exist for someone like him as well?

The more he thought about it, the more he felt like he was playing in the playground that god had made for him. To think that god had a blind spot in his view and that there were things he could not see made him feel like that was a too optimistic thought, but to think that god knew everything would make all of his assumptions meaningless.

In order to have a sense of purpose, he assumed that god had weak points, but 'is that really the case?' kept reverberating in his head. Was there such a thing as free will? Is the fact that he was thinking about this at this specific moment predestined from a point way beyond history? Was there really a path that allowed him to escape this cycle?

He slapped his cheeks. The taxi driver looked at him, wondering what was going on.

"Oh, I was getting a little sleepy. There's something important today, and I can't afford to doze off."

"You look like a student. Sleep is very important for people of your age."

"You're right. I need to get some sleep, but I couldn't because I had a nightmare."

"Are you in your 3rd year of high school?"

"Yes."

"I guess it must be hard for you then. Here, have some of this. It will clear your throat and drive away your drowsiness."

It was a throat candy. The strong mint refreshed his nose and throat. It would be great if it could refresh his mind as well - Maru thought in vain. He paid the taxi fare before getting off. When he went through the gates, he saw people gathered by the central door to the main school building.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Sorry for making you worried."



A staff member that he had gotten to know patted him on the shoulders, telling him to be careful. Maru walked over to the stands. He saw Joomin and Dongho, who were getting ready to shoot.

"You came back pretty fast."

"It wasn't anything much after all. What about the shoot?"

"It's going well. You really should've taken some time to rest at the hospital. There's still some time."

"I should come early and prepare beforehand."

After talking to Dongho, he looked at Joomin.

"Noona, I saw that you spilled some coffee because of me. Is your hand okay?"

"It was completely lukewarm so I didn't get hurt. Rather than that, how do you feel? Even if the doctor told you that you were okay, you should still get some rest if you don't feel good."

"If I really felt bad, I was planning to get some rest as well, but I completely woke up by the time I arrived at the hospital. The doctor also told me it was nothing to worry about."

"Are you sure you weren't anemic or something?"

"Yes. I think I was just a little dizzy because blood rushed into my legs. Looks like I need to do some more exercise. I feel like I've gotten weaker after resting for a while."

"You have a good figure, you're not lacking exercise. It must be because of your schedule. No matter how good your body is, you're bound to become ill if you push yourself. You should watch out for your health. I still feel freaky if I remember how you stumbled and collapsed."

"I'll definitely watch out."

Just then, he could hear a 'cut' sound in the distance. Maru greeted everyone he came across and approached Park Hoon.

"Were there no problems?"

"Yes."

"That's good then. You can make the shoot right?"

"Even if I collapse, I will do the shoot."

"If you collapse, you can't do the shoot. Anyway, I feel relieved to see you're doing okay. Let's get ready and start immediately. I pulled your scene ahead, so let's get that done quickly so you can go home."

"You didn't have to do that though."

"If an accident occurs under my watch because I'm working with a patient, it'll be me who'll be in trouble, okay?"

Park Hoon smiled and told him to go. Maru was just feeling complex because of all the thoughts that rushed into his head. He felt thankful for Park Hoon's consideration. He thought that he should finish the shoot early, go home and think about it.

After wracking his brain over things that completely transcended common sense, he felt like he was resting now that he was met with a more realistic problem. While there was no correct answer to acting, there was a correct area. It felt so relieving to think about something with an answer. Maru smiled in vain and flipped through his script.

“Looks like you feel okay now.”

Giwoo had approached and spoken to him. Maru looked at him and nodded. He realized once again how scary losing his memories was as well as how scary the change in his cognition was when he looked at this guy. He acted kindly towards a person he would never want to keep close. He felt like he wanted to slap his own mouth.

How complex - the emotions from how he acted while he had lost his memories still remained within him. While the social Han Maru did not act the way he liked, it wasn't something that should completely be ignored. The young Han Maru's consciousness definitely helped when expanding his relationships. If he could let his forty-five-year-old self control the recklessness of youth, he would gain a social weapon. Take what was necessary and abandon what wasn't needed. Although 'challenge' and 'adventure' were still terrifying words, he wouldn't just exclude them outright from the get-go.

Of course, there were things that simply weren't an option. For example, his relationship with this guy. He said all those things before he regained his memories, so he would follow along, but if he tried to do something, Maru would let him know why the tongue was called the knife within the mouth. There were young people who had to see blood to realize what they'D done wrong.

Maru looked into Giwoo's eyes. The quicker a person's thoughts were, the faster the speech bubble would appear. Giwoo very quickly managed to finish analyzing and judging the person in front of him. This guy, he has the same eyes as grandfather again - that was what was written above him.

Grandfather, huh. That was rather unexpected. Maru thought that he would not rely on others with the personality he had. The 'grandfather' that Giwoo thought of when analyzing him seemed to be a pretty important figure.

“Now that I think about it, we never talked that much, haven't we?” Maru started off the conversation.

Giwoo made a comfortable smile, but Maru could see the minute cracks in it. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that Maru's eyes, which looked similar to Giwoo's grandfather's, have broken his tranquility. This might be a weakness. If he could get a grasp of what this person's grandfather was like, Maru would gain the upper hand. While Kang Giwoo was trash that couldn't be turned into anything good, there should still be a way to use him. For example, fight your enemy with your enemy - or in this case, clean trash using other trash.

“Talk?”

“Maybe the reason I said all that to you before was because I felt envious.”

Maru could see his wariness rising rapidly. While Giwoo's lips were still in the shape of a smile, his eyes that looked at him became a lot sharper. He was the type who would only feel relieved after knowing what the opponent had in mind. In that sense, Maru thought that Giwoo was like him. Because they were similar, it was easy to understand him. Moreover, while it might be superficial, he could read Kang

Giwoo's thoughts as well. If Maru took the time and effort to shake him up and down, things would become really interesting.

"What do you mean, envious of me?"

Giwoo looked really nervous when Maru sounded friendly. Maru did not go out of his way to relieve his nervousness. Reaching a hand out to a wary cat was a foolish thing to do. He had to make the cat stand down by itself.

"Who here do you think is not envious of you?"

"I'm not someone so amazing."

"There you go, being humble again."

Maru took a beat of rest before speaking again,

"But you know? How does it feel to do that play of yours?"

He could see Giwoo's shoulders stiffening as though he was about to attack at any moment. He looked like a soldier that had met an enemy during war. Maru looked into his eyes. Thoughts seemed to be flashing through rapidly inside his head to the point that there was no room to think about Han Maru. He could not see any speech bubbles. Though, he could see Giwoo's lips trembling. It seemed that he was pretty flustered if he couldn't maintain his signature smile.

If Maru wanted to stop him from doing bad things around him in the future by pressuring him, he could just stop speaking here. Giwoo would start worrying about the things he did after imagining all sorts of outcomes, and as a result, become rather docile. If this guy was an idiot, he would start rampaging the moment he realizes that he had been driven into a corner, but Kang Giwoo was cautious to the point that he would control others through phone calls, so he should probably choose to stay still.

"Why do you ask?"

There was a sense of urgency in his voice. The fact that he couldn't stay quiet proved that Giwoo was shaken. Maru smiled as though it was nothing much. His objective was not to end all conversations with him; it was to disarm him.

"Nothing, I was just a little curious. I was also wondering if it was fun."

"I thought you weren't interested. In fact, you looked like you despised that sort of thing. You even warned me not to do it, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did. But I realized recently that what you are doing might not be entirely so bad after all."

"What do you mean by that?"

He still had not let his guard down. Giwoo was so absorbed in the word 'play'. He was probably thinking of thousands of excuses in his mind to argue.

The human brain was actually very simplistic and could not do multiple things at once. In the case of a lie that required a high level of mental power, it would weaken the defenses of other elements once a person became absorbed in defending that lie. Maru was planning to make use of that.

“There’s someone I really don’t like. But I’m not in a situation where I can blatantly point him out. Just then, I thought about the play you were doing. It dawned on me that teasing some idiotic adults isn’t such a bad thing after all.”

“Really?”

While Giwoo was showing a positive reaction, his wariness increased by a level. Even if Maru asked him to let him in on these plays, Giwoo would never allow it. Maru could obviously tell that Giwoo was trying to cut himself off from everything related to the play. It also meant that there was a gap in his defenses now.

“He’s an old dude, and I really can’t like him. Do you have a grandfather at home? You should know how annoying elderly people can be.”

“I do have a grandfather, but I never thought of him that way. My grandfather is on a whole different level.”

Giwoo, who was preparing to defend the wordplay, ended up advocating his grandfather in a very strong tone. It sounded like it was beyond respect and more like admiration. If Maru asked him about his family history on a normal occasion, he would never leak any information due to suspicion, but he was so absorbed in defending the word ‘play’ that he ended up blurting it out so easily.

“Is your grandfather that amazing?”

“He’s the perfect man.”

Usually, the word ‘perfect’ wasn’t usually used to describe a person, not to mention ‘the’ perfect man. The fact that Kang Giwoo described him as such would mean that this grandfather of his was not an ordinary man.

“There’s a limit to how perfect old people could be.”

“Watch your words. Grandfather is in a whole different league from normal people.”

“Is he that amazing? I don’t think so. Are you sure you aren’t mistaken?”

The wariness and tension disappeared, replaced by the hostility that rose. Maru felt like the ‘grandfather’ keyword could be used against Giwoo pretty well.

“He’s the chairman of YM, yet you call that not amazing?”

After speaking with a proud face, Giwoo soon shut his mouth. Maru nodded. The man this little devil treats like a god, huh.

“He is an amazing person, huh. Okay, I get it.”

“Don’t go telling people. I don’t want things to become noisy.”

“Okay, okay.”

The people who should know about it probably know him already. The manager-level personnel probably got notified from those above them. Maru also remembered the distributor of the film that

Kang Giwoo was going to play the role of the main character in was a subsidiary of YM. He sighed. This was a fruit that he could not pick and eat. He had a god to deal with, so he had no energy to deal with a chaebol's grandson.

"Anyway, talk to you later," Maru said with a smile.

## **Chapter 725**

Going through the door, Hong Janghae took off his shoes and arranged them tidily. He had a glance at the darkroom before turning on the lights. He undid his tie and stood in front of the refrigerator. He saw three yellow sticky notes on it.

I won't be here until the weekend, I've prepared side dishes so eat them as you wish, contact me via text message if possible.

Those were the messages left behind by his wife. He took off the sticky notes and put them in the trash. He opened the refrigerator. He saw containers of side dishes with labels on them. His wife had prepared the side dishes according to each day. He took out the braised tofu, stir-fried nuts, and the chicken breast salad. While he warmed up the braised tofu in the microwave, he took off his shirt. The noise from the microwave filled the room, putting him at ease.

"A meeting accompanied by my wife? I'll call you back after I look into it."

He hung up the call he got from his friend and got ready to eat. He first drank the stamina drink that his wife prepared for him before eating the heated food. When eating, Janghae always focused on the food. He didn't turn the TV on or fiddle with his phone while eating. After he finished eating, he washed the dishes. He then shook off the water from his hands and sent his wife a text: Can you make some time next week?

He got a reply soon: Wednesday and Saturday. Janghae called his friend and told him that he could do Saturday. His wife was a woman of few words. Instead of words, she was a woman of action. Janghae liked that part of her. While they did not trust each other, they provided each other with what they needed. She wished to use the system of marriage to her benefit, and the same went for Janghae.

For the image of a family that society wanted, they also promised to have two children before they got married. Two regardless of gender. His wife splendidly fulfilled her role as a mother, but she did not stop working either. Janghae thought that there wasn't a problem with it as long as she didn't make a mistake while doing both of them, and his wife did everything perfectly. Janghae also did all the things that he had to do as a husband and as the breadwinner of the household; he trained himself to stay fit and satisfy his wife sexually, and he did not forget to buy gifts on commemorative days and anniversaries. She also did her best to stay slim. After all, maintaining an appearance that wouldn't make them look shameful as a couple in public was important. After marriage, both Janghae and his wife still had other lovers in their respective workplaces, but they never fought over something like that. In fact, they even introduced each other to young lovers. His wife always brought him women that suited his tastes. Janghae also gifted her with young men in order to pay her back. It was a much healthier and more desirable relationship than those that relied on uncertain things like love. Their views on education also matched, and there was no discord there either. Though, they were surprised when Geunseok left the house.

In any case, his wife was a good woman and still proved herself to be useful. As long as she continued to be earnest, Janghae would continue to like her. The opposite was true as well.

He sat on the sofa and had a look at the reports that the team leaders submitted. The schedules of the various actors and musicians under Soul Entertainment were written in detail in them. The documents on his left were about the music streaming service 'Music Soul', that just finished the open beta and had been fully commercialized. The high number of users showed a drastic decrease ever since the platform became a paid subscription. It seemed that they didn't like paying for music. It was a natural reaction since the internet was filled with illegal tracks.

There was no problem since this was all expected. Janghae stroked his chin. The only thing that could win against something that was free of charge was convenience. The advantage of being able to listen to the latest songs without much effort for just a few thousand won should be a very welcome thing for the people in their 20s and 30s, who consumed a lot of culture.

The slogan that Music Soul put forward was 'trend leader'. That term started appearing on internet banners already. Music Soul, a step ahead. Rather than appealing to people's sense of justice to use legal, paid services, telling them that using the platform would make them trendy would stimulate purchases more. Once he managed to open their wallets once, the hurdle would become a lot lower when renewing the subscriptions. A fee that was less than 5,000 won was stronger than any form of advertisement.

If it successfully takes root in the market, Music Soul would become a bigshot in the music market. Now that the CD market was on the decline, he had to make use of the advantages of the forerunner as much as possible.

After organizing the documents related to Music Soul, he looked at the reports for other departments. Currently, Soul's signature actor could be called Lee Hyuk, while their signature singer was The Five. In Lee Hyuk's case, he had to admit that he got lucky. He tried to go over to join JA Production after his contract expired with his previous agency, but that didn't work out. Although he definitely once was a popular actor, he rarely had any activities for the past few years and other unfortunate events like how the premature ending of the drama he participated in was leading to his decline in value as an actor. Janghae managed to bring him in for a cheap contract deposit thanks to all those elements. Immediately after that, Lee Hyuk was cast in a movie directed by director Park Joongjin, and that ended up doing extremely well. He was in his mid-thirties, his prime as an actor, and his success at this time made him an actor called by many places.

However, Janghae did not have Lee Hyuk do any work. In his opinion, the success of a film was unrelated to the actor. It was purely up to the director. If he rowed the boat just because there was water, he might end up in the middle of nowhere, so he had to be careful. Sometimes, opportunity was like a storm that would capsize the ship when it got caught up in it. As he had suppressed Lee Hyuk's rebellious personality, he did not resist that much. In fact, he looked even a little relieved. Janghae liked how he knew his own position. He was someone who gave rewards to docile sheep after all.

The Five wasn't doing bad either. Perhaps thanks to appealing to the public's sympathy with the problem of the slave contract, the fans stayed loyal. Although he only had three of the five members, as the remaining two still belonged to the previous agency, they were still allowed to use the team name

'The Five', which meant that there were no big problems. He was also working below the waters to get the other two to join his company, so they should be able to go back to their five-man team soon.

"I should slowly start pulling out from this one now."

The reason The Five was able to rise so rapidly was thanks to the help of many rich ladies. Daughters of big chaebols, as well as female presidents, were The Five's patrons. It wasn't just women who sold their bodies. In fact, while there was less demand, the money involved with men doing the same work was much larger. On the day members of The Five satisfied a rich lady, public TV stations broadcasted The Five's signature song by playing them during entertainment programs. They would appear in the golden slots for music programs, and they even had a program named after them. Janghae found out through managing the agency that stars were creatures that grew on money. The entertainment industry wasn't that different from the logistics business that he was originally handling. The forerunner monopolized it all.

The problem was that The Five had become relatively big now.

Janghae came to know Lee Miyoon before he became the president of Soul. He went to meet her after hearing that she had a vast connection in the industry. He knew with one glance that she was the same type of person as him. Perhaps because she too was someone who desperately tried everything to climb higher, their business talks went smoothly. It was then that he found out about The Five. Back then, Janghae made a proposal. There were many people who would be in trouble if the sexual service matter became controversial, so they should cover it up with another incident. That was how they made an issue out of the unfair contract, sowing disharmony between The Five and their agency. That was just before the male idol sexual service controversy burst out. After that, some newbie journalists tried to stick their nose into that matter again, but society soon became calm because there were no follow-up articles. There was no reason to dig into it, and The Five's sexual service matter disappeared back into the memories of people, and Janghae managed to bring them in. He also managed to bring them in cheaply to the point that it was no different from a slave contract.

The problem was that the rich ladies were starting to look for The Five again. Now that they were beginning to lose attention from the public again, they seemed to want to play around with those young men again. Janghae did not think negatively about those services. He was of the mind that it was a good thing to make use of their puny bodies if it meant that he could win a big contract. If The Five was doing badly, he would have sent them to do those services without hesitation, but right now, the value of idols was through the roof since they were becoming huge hits in Japan. Since they had become expensive, there was a need to adjust their price, but thanks to a middleman, it became a lot harder to calculate the benefits and losses. Lee Miyoon, that old hag, was up to shady business in the middle.

She was indebted to him too. Janghae found Lee Miyoon incredibly annoying when she reached out to him for help while not knowing what she was doing. She tried to manipulate The Five as she wished while hinting to him that she had a lot of connections in the political and financial world. Janghae disliked that. He was supposed to be the owner of The Five, yet it was her who tried to use that right as she wished to.

If he could, he wished to stuff her in a bag and beat her up. A beating was the only way to tame a foolish woman who thought that the power she gained by opening her legs was hers. He thought about hiring

some mercenaries to bring her here quietly, but he left that for another day since she was hard to deal with.

His hands felt itchy. At times like this, he thought about Geunseok. He remembered how the boy looked at him with eyes stricken with fear. It felt good to beat him up, but unfortunately, Geunsoo took him away.

Janghae despised the incompetent but cherished the capable. When he saw Geunsoo escape the castle he built and become successful independently, he felt really proud as a father. It was to the point that he could stand the boy's hostile gaze.

Just as he was reminiscing about that sensation he got from his hand, he got a call. Not from his business phone, but from his personal one. He reached out and opened his phone.

"Junior director Kim, it's been a while. But what's up today? Calling at this hour."

-Junior director Hong. No wait, I guess you're president Hong, now, eh?

He could hear a laugh over the phone. Junior director Kim wasn't someone who would call without reason, so he decided to wait.

-There's someone who wishes to meet you.

"Me? At this hour?"

Janghae looked at the clock on the wall. It was past 9 in the evening. Junior director Kim was not a rude person. He wasn't incompetent either. If he wanted to see him at this hour without any prior notifications, it meant that it was that important. Above all, there weren't many people who he would use polite speech like 'who wishes to see you' to refer to.

-Come to Sanggye-dong.

"Is it the chairman's call?"

-Yes. You have to come to the chairman's mansion.

"Junior director Kim, I'm asking just in case, but am I losing my position?"

-If it was like that, I wouldn't have called you beforehand. Come as soon as possible.

"I will."

Janghae put his shirt back on and put on his tie. He put his shoes on and brushed them off with a shoe brush. He stood in front of the mirror, checked his clothes, and went to his car and turned it on. On his way to Sanggye-dong, he thought about whether he did anything wrong, but fortunately, there was none.

He arrived at the chairman's mansion, which was located on a hill that looked down on Sanggye-dong. He was guided by a driver waiting for him to park his car underground before going round to the front door. He checked his clothes again before stepping forward.



He passed the wide living room and arrived in front of the study. Junior director Kim was waiting for him there. After exchanging gazes, junior director Kim knocked on the door.

He was just getting ready to go in when the door suddenly opened. The chairman, who had a build that was better than most people despite the fact that he was in his seventies, came out holding his hands behind his back. Janghae bowed towards the chairman. This man was the legend who succeeded a small trading company that was YM and raised it to the super conglomerate of today.

"You've come."

"Yes, chairman."

"How about food?"

"I haven't eaten yet."

"What did you do until now? Geez. Junior director Kim, let's eat together after a long time."

Junior director Kim replied 'yes' before standing next to the chairman.

"Little Hong."

"Yes."

"Did you like bossam?"

"I do."

"Then let's go with that," said the chairman.

## **Chapter 726**

The chairman was a man of power. It was hard to find a man with as much power as him in the country. After all, the reality was that those who had quite an influence in the political field were completely docile in front of him. There was a rumor about how he was the mental support of the current Korean president, but the truth was only known to the two of them.

"Little Hong."

"Yes, chairman."

"How is it going these days?"

"I'm doing everything without a problem. I will definitely make the most out of this opportunity you gave me."

"You know, I have always hated those clowns. They show up on television to sing and dance. They're practically no different from circus troupes, but the people like them too much. If we were in the Joseon era, people would treat them as nothing more than street fools, so I despised seeing them act like the world was theirs just because they gained a little popularity."

"You're entirely right, sir."

“Until a few years ago, I never changed my mind. I felt like my blood was rushing to my head when they introduced themselves as ‘public figures’. Who are they to call themselves that? They would lose their jobs if businessmen didn’t give them ads. No matter how much the public sucks up to them, who is it that feeds them? It’s us, businessmen.”

“You’re entirely correct.”

Junior director Kim commented every time the chairman finished his thought. The chairman laughed every single time. Janghae just nodded without saying anything.

“But recently, I changed my mind. Before, we were in an era where a business could sell products based on their brand value alone, but it’s not like that these days. I don’t know what these idols are, but I felt really absurd when I received a quarterly report. The public moved when we used those minstrels in our adverts. It was flabbergasting. Little Hong, what is the main product of YM Living?”

“Based on market monopoly, it’s toothpaste. I heard that we were past 70%.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable even though you have taken your hands off logistics.”

“Whether it’s the child company or the parent company, I’m trying my best to know everything related to YM.”

“Yes, Little Hong. That’s how people should be. The lazy ones will get abandoned.”

The chairman lifted his glass and put it against his mouth. Janghae and junior director Kim also drank along with him. This soju, which was created by a master brewer of Andong soju specifically for the sake of the chairman, was on a completely different level from the factory-made distilled soju that was sold in markets. Of course, the alcohol content was completely different as well. Even Janghae, who had a strong tolerance for alcohol, felt heat rushing up from his throat on his second glass.

“It’s a market worth 170 billion won, and it’s YM who controls most of it. Toothpaste was the main item when I succeeded the company. It’s something that has a lot of memories for me.”

The chairman chuckled after remembering the old times.

“The distance my friend and I traveled in order to sell toothpaste back then should be enough to travel around the Earth at least once. It’s nearly impossible for latecomers to increase their market share. But when I did it to the death, I did manage to do it. I had to suck up to bank-men to increase clients and then find out the logistics by sucking up to those clients. I had a hard time raising it. I can say that toothpaste is the core of YM.”

“Of course, of course,” junior director Kim said.

“Toothpaste is my pride. That’s why I’m usually lenient when it comes to anything else, but when our market share of toothpaste fell, I flipped over the household item marketing department. Little Hong, maybe you managed to maintain your position because you’re in logistics.”

“I was lucky,” Janghae said as he lowered his head.

“While it is a petty dream, it was my dream to go past 70% market share in toothpaste. I thought that it was a monumental event to completely get a hold of the market that YM has sprung up on. I even

danced in joy when it first went past 60%. No matter what I did though, I could never reach that 70%. No matter how good the ingredients we use to make them, it takes time for people to spread the word. When we first made the toothpaste for toddlers, I thought that we would go past that 70%, but even back then, we weren't able to do so."

Janghae was reminded of the toothpaste ad where a popular animation character appeared and sang a song.

"I wanted to use an actor too. However, I was told they can't do it even if I give them the money because it doesn't fit their image. It was absurd. Those clowns dare to refuse money? I thought that the world was being crazy."

"Everyone's too full of themselves. We must return to a time where they come and go at the beck and call of businessmen."

Junior director Kim spoke like an automatic answering machine. Janghae thought that it was an ability of his. Flattering wasn't something that anyone could do.

"But it happened. We're past 70% just because we used an idol actor. We did a survey about it as well. Why do you buy YM products? Do you know what the answer was?"

"I have no clue, sir," said junior director Kim.

"I guess a lot of them must have bought it thanks to the actor."

Should he say he knew or act ignorant? Janghae had debated between the two options before replying. Junior director Kim was in charge of the flattering character, so there didn't seem to be a need for him to do the same.

"Yes, that's it. The majority of them said that they bought it after seeing the face of the actor holding that toothpaste rather than considering things like effectiveness or ingredients used. It was totally absurd. A product was not being evaluated as a product. I found it absurd that the trivial reason of 'a celebrity using that thing' raised its value more than its improvement in function. But what can I do about it? It's the solid hard truth. It means that the world has changed."

The chairman wiped his mouth with some napkins.

"Back in my day, we were treated like adults the moment we entered high school. Even if we smoked with the adults, we might get slapped on the back of the head, but we didn't get our cigarettes taken away. In fact, the adults even told us that we're at the age where we should learn to drink. There were many people who started taking care of their families, and there are also those that started working. But these days, the young ones can never leave their parents until they're twenty or even twenty-five. So what does that make them in their middle and high school days? Practically toddlers. They act like crybabies telling their parents they want this or that. They have no sense of responsibility but are a lot more greedy."

When the chairman spoke with a hint of anger, junior director Kim respectfully lifted up the soju bottle.

"Chairman, there's no way the young ones these days understand the harsh reality of the world, is there?"

“Of course they don’t.”

“It’s all because of the efforts and the generosity of people like you that made the world a better place, and as a result, they can live the life they are living now, but they don’t know that.”

“You’re right, junior director Kim. Kids these days are all whiny. They don’t even know what we went through in the past. They don’t know that the things they take for granted are my achievements and the results of my business. They don’t know, so they don’t know how to be grateful either. They call us chaebols and poke the hell out of us on a whim, but what would happen if we disappeared from this country?”

“It’ll be doomed in a blink of an eye. If the YM Group falls, Korea will become a developing, no, poor country in an instant. But chairman, it’s not like everyone on this land is an ignorant fool. I’ve had a look at the public opinion, but there are many youths who think that businesses are the future and the lifeline of this country. So do not worry too much.”

Junior director Kim would very much succeed with his flattery alone. He was a complete smooth-talker. Of course, if that was all he had, he would have lost his position a long time ago. The chairman does not have incompetent people by his side after all.

“Anyway, ever since then, I have had to accept that those clowns have some abilities. Little Hong, I knew that you longed to go to logistics, but I couldn’t let just anyone take over the helm of a new business. The times have changed, so I should step in line as well.”

“I will raise it well and meet your expectations, chairman.”

“I don’t think there will be a problem if it’s you. I don’t put the people I trust in vague positions. I either have them right next to me or send them really far away. Junior director Kim, this guy, he’s very good at flattery. He knows how to make me feel pleased. Meanwhile, Little Hong, you don’t know how to fawn over people.”

“If you so wish, I will do that.”

“That’s no fun. What I want to say is that the two of you have different uses. Junior director Kim, this fella, he’s quite good when it comes to consolidating the internal atmosphere, but he’s not charismatic enough to lead a new business.”

“You’re right, sir.”

Junior director Kim never stopped his honey-coated tongue no matter what the chairman said. The chairman faintly smiled.

“Little Hong, honestly speaking, you don’t have that much luck with relations. You’re very good at coming up with new things, but you lack when it comes to consoling those around you.”

“I think so too.”

“Soul, try raising it well. I’ve given the word, so if you ever get stuck while trying to handle money, you can contact my line. Try reaching out to everyone that’s doing well these days. I’ve been told that SC and DK are also making plans below the waters, so watch out and do not fall behind.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Also, there’s someone I’d like you to look out for.”

“What?”

Janghae put down his chopsticks and looked at the chairman. This was the first time the chairman was asking him to do something. The monarch that ruled a kingdom always gave orders instead of asking for requests or expressing things in an indirect fashion.

“I’m talking about my grandson. He’s doing his activities in the entertainment world without revealing his background, but the world isn’t that easy, is it?”

“You must be talking about Mr. Kang Giwoo, sir?”

“Yes, yes. He’s a smart kid. He doesn’t take after his mother; he takes after me. He’s a boy worth raising.”

“Weren’t you going to call him into the company soon?”

“That was the plan. It’s a pity for a man to waste his life doing clown stuff. But he has big ambitions. Apparently, in America, the words of a celebrity may decide the senator of a state or whatnot. The new generation, was it? Anyway, the things that that little one does are quite cute. As a grandfather, I can’t just sit by doing nothing.”

“Should I bring him over to Soul?”

“Take him in and watch him well. Also, teach him how the world works. Your style should fit him better than junior director Kim’s.”

“I will do so.”

“Of course, don’t tell him that I was involved in it. Although he hasn’t matured, he’s a man. so it should hurt his pride.”

“If that’s the case, I might be a little rough on him.”

“I will let it slide to a certain extent. It’s a good thing to grow up strong, but don’t be too hard.”

The chairman smiled pleasantly. As this was the first thing that the chairman ‘asked’ him to do, he couldn’t make a mistake. Janghae pushed all the reports to the back of his mind and engraved the name ‘Kang Giwoo’.

“And also, while you’re here.”

The chairman stood up. Junior director Kim quickly pushed back his chair and tried to stand up, but the chairman gestured to him to stay seated. The chairman left for a while before returning with two boxes. Janghae could tell with one look that those boxes contained watches.

“Here, take one.”

Janghae lowered his head as he accepted the box. He saw a brand-name logo in the corner.

“Open it and put it on so I can see if it fits you or not. I’d be rather embarrassed if I bought you something weird.”

Janghae felt uneasy the moment he looked at the logo. He barely held back from groaning when he opened the box. Inside was a watch that cost hundreds of millions of won. That wasn’t the bad part. The problem was that Janghae had put dibs on this watch to buy it at the end of the year.

He looked at junior director Kim. He was also a little stiff but soon regained his smile. It seemed that he got the watch he wanted as well.

The watches they wanted - Janghae never told the chairman that he wanted this watch. He didn’t tell anyone about it, yet, the chairman found out and prepared one for him.

“I shall do my best,” Janghae said as he put on the watch.

“Yes, try your best.”

The chairman put on a faint smile and told them to leave. Janghae stood up from his seat and took a deep bow before leaving through the door. Junior director Kim followed him out.

“He’s a scary man,” said junior director Kim.

“I’ll be leaving now.”

“Yeah, see you later. Let’s have a drink just by ourselves next time.”

“Yes.”

Janghae gave the driver that junior director Kim called over his car keys. On his way home, he rubbed the watch several times. He felt like it was a handcuff instead of a watch.

“I guess it’s better than nothing.”

There was only a paper-thin difference between trust and suspicion. For now, this was proof that he had the trust of the chairman, so now it was time for him to prove his worth. He would have to move busily if he didn’t want this watch to be his retirement gift.

## **Chapter 727**

“Sora, let’s go to the noraebang together after school.”

“Can’t. I have an interview after school today.”

“An interview?”

Sora waved at her clueless friends before leaving the classroom. Two days ago, she received a call. A movie magazine named ‘Movie Sound’ wanted to do an interview. She was drowsy when she got the call, so she was in a daze for a while. When she got herself together, she thought that it was a prank call. If the journalist did not explain clearly, she would have pressed the end call button and gone to the land of dreams.

“Maru-seonbae.”

She opened the door to 3rd-year electrical engineering class 2. The seniors sitting at their desks all turned their heads around and looked at her. Sora smiled awkwardly at the teacher who was standing at the front before closing the door. They hadn't finished their homeroom yet. She was waiting outside while looking at the time when the front door opened along with the last greeting. The teacher in charge of the acting club told her to be careful. Sora apologized.

"Why were you in such a hurry?"

"Because there's an interview!"

"There are 20 minutes left."

"We should go there early."

"You're way too excited."

"I can't help it. It's an interview, you know? An interview with a famous magazine too. When else would I get a chance like this in my life? Well, you might not feel much because you show up on TV every weekend, but that's not the same for me."

"Yes, yes."

Sora dragged the grumbling Maru by the arm. 'Movie Sound' was a long-time movie magazine that filled up one wall of the film production club. She couldn't help but be excited since she got an interview from such a major magazine.

"Quickly."

She urged Maru, who was changing his shoes leisurely, and then left the school gates and crossed the road. They crossed the city park and a pedestrian overpass, before reaching a commercial district. After seeing the coffee shop, the place they were appointed to meet, Sora told Maru to come quickly before opening the door.

"There are 10 minutes left."

"You shouldn't have too high hopes, you know?"

"Why?"

"It's just a student interview, there's nothing amazing about it."

"I heard it'll fill up 3 whole pages."

"3 pages?"

Maru made a confused expression. Sora also maintained her calm before she heard the length, but when the journalist told her that she'd take up 3 whole pages including a photo, she couldn't stay still due to excitement. She had seen the magazines in the clubroom, so she knew how much 3 pages were worth.

"Should we order something?"

"Do it when the journalist comes."

“Seonbae, what time is it now?”

“Check over there,” Maru replied back before taking out his notepad from his pocket.

Sora was curious about what was in it but did not ask. His eyes were really scary when he looked at that notepad. She felt like she would get cut if she touched him.

Sora grew up hearing that she was quick-witted. Just like what others said about her, she was talented at reading other people’s moods. She was complimented a lot by adults for knowing when to approach and when to leave them alone. Her intuition told her that this was the time to leave him alone.

Maru kept flipping over the pages before returning to the first page. He wrote something with a pen before flipping again. He kept going through that process. Although she was sitting at the same table as him, she felt like he was really distant.

His notepad returned to his pocket when the journalist came. The female journalist, who had on a pair of catchy white glasses, asked them what they wanted to drink before she sat down.

“Kiwi juice for me.”

“Cappuccino.”

The woman ordered the drinks before returning. She smiled and said that she enjoyed the film.

“You watched our film?”

“Yes. It was really well-made.”

The female journalist took out a notepad and a device that looked like a voice recorder.

“Can I have a look at this?”

“The voice recorder? Sure.”

Sora turned on the voice recorder and tried recording. When she played it back, she heard a clear voice from the device. It finally felt real to her that she was doing an interview. While the woman got ready to do the interview, Maru brought over the drinks.

“Shall we have some drinks for now?”

“Yes.”

She drank a sip of the juice as she observed the woman. She was a fashionable person with catchy accessories. She was wearing a white bracelet to match her white glasses and was wearing a trench coat for the autumn season.

“Shall we have a light talk first? Don’t be too conscious of the fact that you’re doing an interview and just think of it as chatting with a girl older than you. It tends to make things a lot easier.”

“Yes.”

“First up, are you two a couple?” the woman asked while locking her hands.

Sora smiled as soon as she heard that question.



“Do we look like one?”

“You two do suit each other.”

“No, he’s just a seonbae.”

“How unfortunate. If you two were dating, there would be a lot more to write for the interview. When did you start taking interest in film?”

“If it’s watching, I liked it since I was young, but I only thought about creating one for the first time when I was in my 3rd year of middle school.”

“Was there a trigger of some sorts?”

“I watched a movie on TV and it was terribly boring. That’s when I thought that I could make something better than that. Now, I’ve come to understand how hard it was to create even that. Shooting is a really hard process, huh.”

“You realized a lot in just one year. Oh, you are in your first year, right?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of genre interested you the most? Documentary-style that touches on controversial topics like ‘Classroom’ which you did?”

“No, I originally liked action movies. I mean, hot action has that taste.”

“Really? Then I guess you must have been rather disappointed when you were creating your piece this time. There was a genre you wanted to do after all.”

“Not necessarily. When I made synopses, I did make some of them with action in mind, but when I actually thought about enacting them in reality, I hit a limit pretty fast. Action movies aren’t something you can shoot in a day or two either. It was then that I came across a piece of news.”

“So you got your motif from there huh? A bullying accident?”

“Yes. I thought about doing a refreshing revenge story, but that usually doesn’t happen in real life. That’s when I thought about showing bullying for what it is.”

The journalist nodded. She was drinking coffee with one hand when she suddenly made an expression that looked like she had remembered something she had forgotten.

“Oh right, I haven’t told you my name yet, have I?”

She took out a business card from her wallet and pushed it forward. Sora accepted the business card. ‘Movie Sound, Koo Yura’ was written on it.

“A movie critic, who was one of the judges for the festival, praised it for the structure of the plot. A drama writer did the same.”

“Really?”

“Apparently, they liked how it showed everything for what it is so indifferently. They said that you’re bound to use different techniques if you were greedy to show off, but you focused on the story instead.”

“Actually, the scenario I first came up with is really different from the one we used for the movie.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Sora looked at Maru, who was just quietly drinking coffee next to her, before speaking,

“I think I need to clear this up first. Maru-seonbae originally didn’t have any intentions of shooting with us. Meanwhile, I was of the opinion that nobody else would do except him.”

“Was there a problem?”

“He was of the opinion that the scenario is too incomplete and thus will not participate. Honestly speaking, I was a little angry back then. He just disrespected my scenario after all.”

Journalist Koo Yura looked at Maru. Maru just shrugged.

“But that turned out to be a good thing. If he didn’t point out the problems back then, the final product would look a lot different from how it is now. I thought about it again after getting an earful from him. What am I trying to show through this film; where am I going to put my focus? That’s how the edited version of ‘Classroom’ came to be.”

“Sounds like there were a lot of ups and downs.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think there’s a film in this world that goes smoothly from beginning to end. There are many big titles that start crashing midway. The crux of the issue is how to get up from that crash and how to clean it up.”

“I think so too.”

Sora spoke with excitement. The journalist induced her to say everything she wanted. She kept asking questions so that she didn’t stop talking, and Sora was impressed by how she induced her to keep speaking. She felt that not just anyone could become a journalist for a major magazine.

“Our boy here is a little quiet,” journalist Koo Yura talked to Maru this time.

“I don’t think it’s my turn yet. Also, I believe that it’s only proper for the director to do the talking.”

“From what Sora said, it sounds like you participated in the production instead of just the acting. Am I wrong?”

“I just said what anyone else could say from the side. There will always be busybodies in whatever you do. There are things that you can see from the sidelines that you can’t see it while doing it yourself.”

“How humble of you.”

Journalist Koo fiddled with the pen between her fingers.

“Since we’re at it, I do want to hear something from you too, Maru.”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Maru, you are an actor who has shown your face on public TV programs, right?”

“Well, I’d be rather embarrassed to call myself an actor with the things I have done.”

“If you’re earning money at your age, you can be considered an actor. There aren’t many people who can win a fixed role in a series while they’re still in high school. Moreover, I heard that you were starting another mini-series soon, right? No wait, have you begun shooting already?”

So she dug into him already. Sora thought that they came across a good journalist. She was worried that they might end up talking about just trivial stuff without getting into the important details but seeing that journalist Koo had done her research put her at ease.

“The shoot began, yes.”

“How’s the atmosphere there?”

“There are times when it’s good, and there are times when it’s bad.”

“How about the people that shoot with you? Do they treat you well?”

“There are times when they treat me well, and there are times when they don’t.”

Sora looked at Maru. All he gave were vague answers. Even journalist Koo tilted her head since he looked like he was dodging the questions. He looked like he was in a bad mood before, so was this related to that?

“In your shoot for ‘New Semester’ ....”

“Miss.”

Before journalist Koo could finish her words, Maru interrupted. Sora felt nervous. The smile on Maru-seonbae’s face looked frosty.

“As far as I know, this interview is supposed to be about the youth film festival. Am I wrong?”

“That’s right.”

“Then I see no relation to my dramas.”

“But the people who read the magazine want to know more about the interviewees, so it’s fine to say what you’re up to right now.”

“If it’s like that, then just go with ‘I’m shooting a drama and preparing for one as well’. This girl is supposed to be the main character, so I don’t think there’s a need to talk about me in so much detail. Don’t you think so too?”

“That’s true, but I still think this much is fine.”

“Yes, this much is fine. If it’s just this much.”

Sora looked at Maru and journalist Koo alternately. There seemed to be a mental war between the two. But why?

“Fine. Shall we go back to talking about the film then? Based on what Sora said, it sounds like you didn’t have any intentions of proactively participating in the film.”

“I did try to proactively participate in the film.”

“That’s not what I heard from her.”

“I’m not sure from what perspective you’re asking, but from mine, ‘proactively’ doing something is doing something properly. The scenario that Sora showed me back then was unpolished. That’s why I said I will participate if the scenario becomes better.”

“Really? Then can I ask you one more thing? Leaving aside Sora, why did you participate in the film festival?”

“Someone I know told me that there was something called the youth film festival that began this year, and they told me that some people at my school are preparing for it. That’s how I met her.”

“So you didn’t participate in it on your own accord, but because of someone else’s advice? So another person’s advice played a bigger role in making you participate?”

Sora felt like journalist Koo’s question was loaded. Just then, Maru audibly laughed before replying,

“Of course not. Are you going to quit your company if I ‘advised’ you to quit? Advice is just advice. It’s me who makes the decision. I did it because I wanted to. I’m rather confused because you’re being roundabout for such an obvious thing.”

Maru had spoken as he wiped the lip of his cup with a finger.

## **Chapter 728**

“Journalist, I didn’t say anything wrong, did I?”

“Well, you didn’t, I was just a little curious. You should be busy with drama shoots and all sorts of other things, but you’re investing your time into a school club, not to mention a club that you aren’t even in.”

“So you even know that I belong to the acting club, huh.”

“It’s natural to find that out as an interviewer. You could also say that it’s minimum courtesy.”

“I’m surprised that you found out so much about me when I’m not worth anything much.”

Sora wanted to interrupt midway, but she couldn’t say anything as there was a thick wall around the two of them. She wondered why such a wall was made. Why did Maru look like he was hostile, and why did the journalist keep asking roundabout questions? Everything was a question to her.

“In any case, you found out that the youth film festival was taking place through another person and was advised to participate, right?”

“Yes, I guess that’s true.”

“Who was it that advised you to do so?”

“Well, I want to know why you are so curious about who that person is, journalist.”

Journalist Koo wiped her lower lip with her pinky. The red lipstick got smudged onto her finger. To Sora, it looked like blood.

“Maru, is it me or does it sound like you hate me?”

“Of course I don’t. I want to answer your questions as earnestly as possible. It’s just that I want to talk about me, Sora and the film festival, but you keep asking about my private life which made me feel uneasy. You know that it’s rare for students like us to appear in a magazine. I just wanted to make as much out of this opportunity as I can.”

“You make it sound like I’m asking strange questions.”

“They aren’t strange, but if it sounded like that, then I don’t really have anything to tell you.”

Sora laughed and drank her cold kiwi juice. While it was the other two holding a conversation, she felt like it was her who was being burned out. She felt like she was placed in between two growling fighting dogs.

She lowered her phone beneath the table and moved her fingers. Sending texts without looking was something that any high school girl in South Korea was capable of doing.

Maru’s phone started ringing.

“Oh, please excuse me.”

While Maru opened his phone to check his text, Sora looked at the journalist and made a faint smile. The journalist smiled back at her. The needle-sharp atmosphere became loose in an instant which made it look like the mind war between the two hadn’t occurred at all.

“Let’s continue,” Maru said.

You aren’t angry, right? - that was the text she sent him and Maru used his actions to answer her. He was smiling, but his eyes had turned frosty. Sora thought about the expression Maru showed when he first read her scenario. It was extremely similar to his face right now. He was clearly displeased with this situation.

“If I happened to hurt your feelings, I apologize. It’s entirely my responsibility if the interview does not go smoothly, so tell me if you are dissatisfied with anything.”

“There’s nothing like that. Like I said before, I just want you to talk more about Sora and the film festival rather than me. Since it’s a movie magazine, you should focus the interview on future film people.”

Sora looked at Maru, who lightly patted her on the shoulder. She felt two things simultaneously. The reliability of a senior who was looking out for a junior, as well as the sneakiness of a senior that dodged a difficult topic.

Journalist Koo nodded once before switching the topic. Everything that occurred after that was about the film festival. For example, they would talk about what happened at the award ceremony. When she heard that the mayor had left halfway through the ceremony, journalist Koo truly became angry. At least, that’s how it looked to Sora’s eyes.

“Before we get to the most important question about your feelings about receiving the grand prize, did you expect to get it?”

The atmosphere of the interview became warm. Sora forgot about the warfare between Maru and journalist Koo and spoke joyfully,

“No, I didn’t. Of course, I did think that we’d get one prize at least, but I didn’t think it would be the grand prize.”

“So you were confident in winning a prize anyway?”

“Yes. We had a hard time shooting it, and the result was good too. The camera I got from a graduate really helped out a lot. The quality was really good.”

“For me personally, I think that camera work was great. Quality is something that you can solve with a better camera but focusing and angling isn’t something that a good camera can improve. It only improves through trial and error.”

“You’re right. The seonbae that was in charge of the camera really worked hard. I nagged him to reshoot many times over. Oh, Maru-seonbae over here also worked hard. I just had to give instructions and watch the video later, but the two seonbaes had to move constantly.”

“A director’s job is to bring out the best of each part. Being too labor-intensive is also a problem.”

Journalist Koo stopped the voice recorder once and turned it on again. She also wrote something down on her notepad. It seemed like she was organizing the main points so that she would have an easier time summarizing later.

“In the eyes of a director, how is Han Maru as an actor?”

Sora replied without hesitation,

“He’s the best you can get. Honestly, the acting for the main character in Classroom is pretty hard. It’s static, and the details in the emotional expression are important, so anyone else wouldn’t have been the same.”

“So only Maru could do it?”

“Of course. I didn’t ask him to do it for no reason.”

“That’s a lot of trust you have there. Maru said he found out about you through someone else, so then how did you find out about him? Did you know him before that?”

Sora shook her head.

“We didn’t know each other. I just knew him one-sidedly. I found out that he is acting through TV first. After that, I went to the acting club to check the real deal. I would have been disappointed if reality was different from looking through a screen, but he wasn’t like that. I chose him as the main character the moment I saw him.”

“What were you going to do if he refused?”

“Well, I’m not sure. I don’t assume that something’s not going to work when I do things. If I’m going to do it, make it work. That’s how I roll.”

“That sounds passionate. It’s a kind of power that is hard to see in kids these days. Are you going to place more interest in film in the future and go down that route?”

“I’m not sure yet. I really want to do it, but I have to think about realistic problems. I don’t want to be starving.”

“Your words now should make many nameless directors sad. I hope you can challenge it though. With your senses, you should be able to keep producing good results.”

“Thank you. I’ll try hard whenever I have it hard.”

“That would be an honor for me. Don’t forget about me if you become successful.”

“Yes. If I ever become successful it will be thanks to you, journalist Koo Yura. I’ll tell everyone about it.”

The interview progressed smoothly. They talked about a lot of things, so there should be plenty of content. She was slightly nervous since this was her first interview, but she didn’t freeze up, perhaps thanks to journalist Koo’s smooth progressing skills.

“Then shall I ask a few things to Maru to wrap things up? I think I heard enough about the director.”

“Yes! Talk a lot about seonbae in the interview as well. It’s just my prediction, but he’ll become big in the future.”

She sighed in relief before finishing off the juice. That war from before won’t happen again, right? She watched journalist Koo’s mouth in relief.

“What did you find the hardest throughout shooting this movie?”

“I have to say the heat. I was sweaty, and there was a scene where I had to keep walking under the sun, so it was a little hard.”

“Did you make a lot of NGs?”

“Well, I don’t know. I’m not sure what our director thinks about this, but I usually don’t make NGs.”

Sora quickly added that there weren’t many NGs.

“You are very talented to put out such a good act with few NGs. Even I could see that there were lots of acts that required difficult emotional expressions. I think you have what people call talent, seeing as how you can digest all that without much of a problem.”

Journalist Koo Yura put the cup against her mouth and said in passing,

“Then should I call JA Production amazing for seeing through to that talent? Anyway, they’re amazing.”

Sora looked at Maru. He didn’t say anything.

“Since we’re at it, how’s JA Production these days? There are a lot of hot actors there, right? So will you become one of the future superstars too after all?”

Journalist Koo asked Maru with a gentle smile. Sora agreed with her. It seemed like she was going to write good things about him in the interview.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"Why? JA is an amazing place, isn't it? You can have more confidence."

"I'm just a bottom-of-the-rung. I don't even get that much help. Though, I'll probably receive help if I become a little more useful."

She couldn't understand his actions at all. Sora wanted to scold him and tell him to be more gentle. The reason she did not say it out loud was because she was afraid of what would happen if she actually said those words out loud. Today, this seonbae made a lot of scary expressions.

Journalist Koo, who was fidgeting with her pen, suddenly made a 'hmm' sound. She seemed angry in a different sense to Maru-seonbae.

"There was a journalist related to JA among the judges. Did you know that?"

Sora stared at journalist Koo when she heard this rather sudden topic. The gentle face she had until now had disappeared, and now she had the eyes of a predator. Sora tensed her toes. The atmosphere didn't seem good. She realized that she should refrain from talking for the time being. On top of that, her instincts screamed at her to watch out for her future actions.

"No."

Unlike journalist Koo who hurled blocks of ice at him, Maru looked indifferent. In fact, he even yawned. He looked completely different from the stiff log from five minutes ago and that made him look like a completely different person. Journalist Koo tapped the table with her pen in a nervous manner.

"I didn't ask with any intentions. I was just mentioning."

"Yes, I know that. I was just thinking that it was a really useless question as well."

"A useless question, you say. That makes me feel hurt."

"If I hurt you, allow me to apologize. We were talking about something completely unrelated to the interview that I thought I was talking to someone who wasn't from a movie magazine. You didn't create this place to do something as lowly as trying to dig up some gossip, right?"

Gossip - that easy-to-understand word made Sora glare at journalist Koo.

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"If an interviewer doesn't know what kind of stance she should take and doesn't understand what the interviewee is saying, then I can say these about such an interview - a waste of time and a powerless interview from an incompetent interviewer."

Journalist Koo smiled brightly. She put down her pen and picked up the camera.

"Should we take a photo?"

\* \* \*



"This fucker really a kid?"

Koo Yura pushed her cigarette to the corner of her lips. Anger rushed to the top of her head. She was driving back to her company, but she couldn't hold back, so she parked on the side of the road and cursed.

-Journalist Koo.

"Yes."

-I think you forgot who's on the other side of the phone.

Koo Yura threw away her cigarette and bit her lower lip. She was very angry, but it wasn't to the point that even her sense of crisis had been paralyzed.

"Sorry. I was so angry that he slipped out like an eel that I ended up being rude to you, president."

-I like you, journalist Koo. You're a woman, but you have the coverage power, connections, and writing skills. That's why I left it to you to do it, but you just had me reevaluate you. I didn't know you couldn't even deal with a rat like him and had to do a boring interview.

"I'm sorry. But you should understand if you listened to it. He's not an ordinary guy. Usually, boys around his age would say everything if they get praised a little, but he cut off my route from the very beginning as though he knew the plan from the start. He's very skilled too. He didn't do it just once or twice. Someone had to have given him a pre-interview and even censored the questions beforehand. That's not something a kid like him can do."

-I get that too. He's careful to not say anything that has a double meaning. He's like a skilled politician in that area.

"There should have been a consultant. Are you sure he didn't find out about our info beforehand, president Hong?"

-I'll look into that. For now, write the interview as you took it. We were done in this time, so don't try anything dirty.

"Yes, I have my pride as a journalist too. The interview will be a proper one."

-Okay, thanks for your work. See you in a hotel next time.

"Okay. Oh, president Hong. Thanks for the tea."

-Nah. I treat my people well.

Koo Yura quietly hung up.

## **Chapter 729**

Sora looked in front of her. Maru was cutting up a hamburger steak with his fork. He was using the side of the fork so it was being crushed. There was a knife right next to the hot stone plate, but he didn't even look at it.

“Don’t you feel uncomfortable doing that?” Sora asked as she pointed at the knife with a fork in her hand.

“This is easier for me.”

He used his fork to cut it until the end. He strangely seemed like her father when it came to being stubborn in the weirdest ways. Even though her mother gave her father a specialized knife to cut raw chestnuts, he was always adamant on using a fruit knife to do it. He looked like a child when he smiled while boasting the smooth-looking chestnut.

“A knife should be much easier to use though.”

“Don’t you ever nag Ando like that. Ando might run away from you.”

“Ando-seonbae probably uses a knife though.”

She used her fork to pick up a piece of cut meat and put it in her mouth. The hot meat juice flowed down between her teeth. Eating delicious food was a joyous thing.

“Anyway, why did you act like that during the interview?” she asked after emptying her plate.

“What do you mean?”

“Of course I’m talking about your attitude. I also noticed that she had other intentions at the end. But I didn’t notice anything before that, yet you acted cold to her from the moment the interview started. Did you hear bad rumors about her beforehand or something?”

“No, that was the first time I came into contact with her today.”

Maru sipped some water.

“Then why did you act like that?”

“A man’s intuition?”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m half serious though.”

“Then what’s the other half? I’m asking because I’m really curious. That journalist looked really angry, but she smiled in the end. It was probably because of that last question. Just what was that?”

Maru acted uncooperative from the start of the interview. She would understand if Maru was some psychopath, but he wasn’t, which made it stranger that he was avoiding the point of the questions and giving vague answers the whole time. If journalist Koo Yura didn’t mention the relationship between JA Production and the journalist that participated as a judge, Sora would have scolded Maru for giving nonsensical answers.

Maru pulled out a napkin and wiped his mouth.

“I wouldn’t say this if it was anyone else, but you’re related to this, so I guess you should know about it. There’s one person among the judges related to my agency. Well, from another perspective, there might be more than one?”

Sora was about to ask 'what about it?' but then realized the severity of the situation. She realized what journalist Koo Yura's intentions were by asking that question, and why Maru was acting on edge the whole time.

"So we got the grand prize because you were...."

"The journalist's intention was to make us think that way. Even you, who's directly involved in it, thinks that way. What would other people think when they saw it?"

"They would think that there is some form of cheating going on."

Maru nodded.

"Seonbae, tell me the truth. Is it just like she is suspecting, and this grand prize we got is related to you?"

"What are you going to do if I say yes?"

Sora tensed her eyes.

"I'm going to call the city hall right now and tell them that there was something wrong with the results."

Sora didn't plan to stay still when she found out. She wasn't doing it for the sake of justice; it was for the sake of her pride. She couldn't care less about a prize that she got through someone else's name value.

Maru smiled.

"It's that journalist's intention to make us act like that. Don't get excited. You did win that prize with your skill."

"Really?"

"I mean, think about it. There are six total judges. There's only one journalist related to JA. Do you think he would have the authority to choose who gets the grand prize as he wished?"

"That's true. Then why did that journalist ask something like that?"

"I'm not sure about the details, but it must have been at the request of someone who does not like JA."

Maru stood up. Sora also got her wallet and walked over to the counter. She paid with her card before leaving the store.

"Thanks. It was even more delicious because the food was free."

"But are you sure this is enough for casting you?"

"I am."

Sora took Maru to the fruit juice store right next door. While they waited for their order, they continued talking about what they were talking about earlier.

"There's something I haven't heard from you yet. How did you immediately notice that the journalist approached us with bad intentions?"

"I was actually bothered by the fact that a famous movie magazine wanted to interview us in the first place."

"Why? We got the grand prize, so an interview doesn't sound that far-fetched."

A store employee handed them their fruit juice in plastic cups. Sora gave the strawberry juice to Maru.

"I'll have to answer your questions if I drink this, right?"

"I'm going to ask even if you don't drink it. You know I can't hold back my curiosities."

She looked at Maru, who clearly seemed bothered. Maru took a sip of the strawberry juice before speaking,

"This is the first time the film festival took place. And it was on a city level too. Do you remember how the mayor acted that day?"

"Do you mean how he visited midway and disappeared after a few words?"

"Yes. If it was an important event, there's no way the mayor would act like that. Although it is called the first film festival, it's uncertain whether there'll be a second one. It might be a one-shot event."

"So?"

"I'm saying that it's not a competition that's weighty enough for a famous magazine to talk about it. It has no power, and the money invested in it was minimal too. You can see just how half-assed it was from seeing how there was a whole two months of delay because they were lacking manpower."

"Yes."

"Is it really an incredible feat to win a grand prize for an event that was obviously held in a hurry? To the point that it's worth a three-page long interview? The youth acting festival is much bigger in scale compared to the film festival this time, but there wasn't a single time when a major magazine interviewed their winners. Only someone from the local newspaper will take a photo and write a few lines. That would then go on the internet, and no actual news would be released on paper."

"That's true, but didn't you go too far by suspecting her just based on that?"

"Her questions were obviously suspicious. When she was addressing you, she earnestly asked you about the film festival, but when she talked to me, she suddenly talked about dramas. That much is understandable. It's not weird to ask me for a status update. However, don't you think it's strange for her to keep digging into that? The way she flattered me also made me suspicious."

"That's true. She did ask you some questions that were far from the point."

"I would understand if the interviewer was unskilled, but it doesn't make sense for someone who is meticulous enough to do some background digging to keep asking strange questions. I can only conclude that she intended to do that from the start. If she wasn't there to play around with the interview, it meant that she had ulterior motives, so I naturally chose to dodge her questions."

Sora nodded. Looking back, journalist Koo had sharp eyes whenever she asked something to Maru. She had a different presence about her when she was asking questions related to JA, and when she was

asking questions about the film festival. She didn't notice it back then, but she realized the difference after hearing Maru's words.

"Then what was that? She came to us for an interview because you're in JA? Not because of the grand prize?"

Maru shook his head.

"That's not entirely it. What I'm saying is only an assumption and a prediction on my part. Their editing team might have taken interest in future film people and asked journalist Koo to get coverage. If someone asked her to do a personal favor midway, it would lead to our current situation. Since they aren't a magazine that can write just anything, the head editor should have given permission beforehand. I can say with confidence that the magazine agency took interest in this matter."

"If you say it like that, I don't know which is the truth. It feels iffy."

"The truth is this: you splendidly managed to finish the film, and the grand prize certificate is hanging on the wall of the film production club."

"And I have the prize money."

"And that too."

Sora puffed up one cheek. She understood it vaguely, but she still had one more question.

"But if journalist Koo is suspecting of shady, behind-the-back deals, isn't it better for her to go ask that journalist directly? I mean that journalist who is supposedly related to JA."

Maru replied while scratching his eyebrows,

"It must have been difficult to face another journalist just like her. Also, shady dealings are things that journalists belonging to the social department should handle, right? It's not something a journalist who only interviews related personnel can investigate easily. If Journalist Koo was requested by someone to do something that would eventually tarnish JA's reputation, she probably thought that she should deal with immature students rather than a quick-witted journalist."

"That sounds like a drama or something."

"Not really. You know in classrooms, people separate into factions and talk to each other cheerfully but also talk bad behind their backs."

"There are girls who do that, but I'm not one of them! I would talk bad in front of them!"

Maru laughed.

"Yeah, if you're going to talk bad about people, you might as well do it right in front of them. Anyway, they gossip about unproven facts and giggle about it, don't they? This is the same thing but on an adult level. If there's a difference, it's that verbal rumors gain ground through text and that emotional fights become a fight of money. There are a lot of similarities in student societies and adult societies. It's just a matter of how you package it. The kids do it openly but adults hide it well. That's why kids have an

easier time reconciling - they know what each other is thinking. With adults, we don't know what each other is thinking, so we become even more suspicious."

"You're still a kid too, so why are you using 'we' when talking about adults?"

"I've lived two more years than you, so treat me like an adult."

Sora drank the juice and chewed on chunks of ice. She thought that this was the last drink of its kind for the year. The wind was getting chilly. It was about time to say goodbye to cold drinks.

"But you know?"

"Hm?"

"We did get the grand prize with our skill right?"

She accepted it, but it still nagged her like when she turned off the lights just before leaving the house.

"Just think about it normally. Do you think an agency would try rigging a film festival that doesn't even go on TV? I wouldn't do that. I would promote another actor if I have the time to do that."

Don't you think so too? - Maru asked her.

Sora smiled, responding 'that's true'.

"Now that I look at you, you're quite pitiful. It sounds like your agency doesn't care for you that much."

"They'll probably give me help if I become bigger."

Sora looked at Maru who was smiling bitterly and shook off her doubt completely.

\* \* \*

"So it was like that after all."

-I thought that it wouldn't leak out, but I seemed to have been mistaken.

"From the way she mentioned JA directly, she sounded like she had a source that she could confide in. I'm not sure if it was her individual action or whether the editing office gave her that instruction, but it seems pretty clear that someone who doesn't like you had a hand in this."

-You can't say that for sure.

Maru kicked off the ground to push the swing he was on more.

"Then they wanted to put the blame on me? I'm just a kid who's not worth that much."

-You never know what will happen. If there's something I learned while working in this area, it's that humans are very incredibly petty. I said this before, right? You're too clear when drawing the line. Though, from what I hear these days, you seemed to have gotten softer. Still, it's not strange to say that there are people who find you an eyesore.

"If you say it like that, there are quite a lot of people that come to mind."

-You're still young, so why are you creating enemies already?

“We can’t be sure of anything yet. Honestly speaking, you have a hundred times more enemies than I do, don’t you?”

He could hear a laugh over the phone.

“For now, I didn’t mention anything about that. I also explained it to the girl that came with me, so there shouldn’t be a problem.”

-Tell her that she won it through skill. She’s at the age where dreams should drive her to grow up. There’s no need to show her the reality.

“Yes, that’s what I told her. But I didn’t know you were so considerate of me.”

-Why? Do you not like it because I’m meddling with you?

“No, there’s no one who would refuse help. I’m just thankful that you are taking interest in an ordinary actor like me.”

-I can’t have you be ordinary. I have a reputation to keep up. For now, catch up to Sooil in name value. I’ll be able to give you proper support then.

“Understood.”

-As for the journalist, I’ll look into it myself, so don’t mind yourself with her.

After staying silent for a while, Junmin laughed.

-I thought this the first time I met you, but you’re way too mature for your age. You sound completely natural talking like this. Why don’t you live a younger life? Think more about hopes and dreams.

“I’m only in my 3rd year of high school. If I become any younger, I might as well be babbling like a baby.”

After listening to the president telling him to get some rest, Maru hung up after waiting for a while. Maru pressed some buttons on his phone and brought up a photo. It was a photo of the film production club holding the grand prize.

“The truth isn’t important.”

Rather than the harsh truth, the convenient truth was much better.

Maru got off the swing and walked towards the bus stop.

## **Chapter 730**

If there was a rock-paper-scissors match where winning would win 1,000 won and losing meant nothing, everyone would want to do it. If winning meant 10,000 won and losing meant losing 1,000 won, most people would still probably do it. The risks were low and the chances of winning were high. Then, increasing the scale a little, what if winning meant 100,000 won and losing meant losing 10,000 won? People would start hesitating. What if it was 1 million for a win and losing 500,000 for a loss? Those who had deep pockets might try, but the number of participants would decrease significantly.

Maru took his finger off the call button. This was a gamble that staked the very purpose of his life, no, something even more fundamental than that. If he succeeded, he would gain mental stability and the

willpower to forge ahead, but if he failed, he would lose all motivation to move forward and would collapse on the spot. Stopping would be fortunate. He might end up regressing. Everything might come to an end.

Maru wished for her success and stared at the name 'Han Gaeul', which he saved on his phone, before closing the phone. The masked man referred to 'her' several times. He even gave a hint as to who 'she' was: the woman you'll love forever. Only one person came to mind when Maru thought of that. If Gaeul was the reason his life was being repeated, things would get complicated. It meant that the life of Han Maru was centered around Han Gaeul.

The Han Marus that died until now all married Gaeul without fail. The probability of marrying the same woman in numerous different lives with infinitely many variables was probably around the same as tossing coins and making a tower by lining them up vertically. No matter how much the memory-reset Han Maru tried, it would be impossible to always win over the heart of an individual. Although his life was being repeated as though he was on a hamster wheel, he heard through the masked man that the quality and the structure of the hamster wheel had changed every single time.

Was it a cruel coincidence? Or was something like fate at play? Perhaps the condition for him to revive was to meet Han Gaeul.

"Fine, let's say that I revive like that."

Maru looked at the luminescent stickers on the ceiling. If she was the cause of these revivals, then why did her memories not carry over? Why did the requester have her memories turn into a blank sheet, while the benefitter got one lifetime's worth of memories?

What puzzled him above all was the identity of the woman in the white suit. The masked man referred to three 'people' as 'her' or 'she'. The woman in a white suit, the rabbit, and the 'woman you'll love forever'. If these three were the same individual, the woman in the white suit would equal Han Gaeul based on circumstantial evidence.

Everything would be solved if he could meet the woman in a white suit. Maru laughed in vain. The masked man did not say a word about the things that were important. The woman in the white suit might also shut her mouth if he tried to approach the truth.

Whenever he looked at the woman in a suit, he felt that her beauty transcended humanity, but he was also given a familiar feeling if he looked closer. If that woman's identity was Han Gaeul, that would also explain why he had a sense of déjà vu.

Maru went out to the kitchen and took out some coffee milk and chocolate from the fridge. It was time to supply his hardworking brain with some nutrition. Perhaps he would get some creative ideas if he greased the folds of his brain with some sugar.

"I want some too."

Bada had come out of her room and spoken. Maru was sure that she had sensors that could detect snacks.

"Why are you at home?"



“Today is the school’s founding day. Why? You feel jealous because your sister is on break?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You’re taking a rest by using the excuse of work too.”

“I’m going to be leaving soon.”

“Really? So you are busy.”

“Would you like to go in my stead?”

“What celebrities are there?”

“None that you know of. Probably.”

“Then forget it. I’ll just watch TV at home. Rather than that, why don’t you give me some of that thing in your hands?”

Maru snapped the chocolate in half and gave it to his sister. Bada put the chocolate in her mouth.

“You don’t like chocolate that much. What’s up with you today?”

“It’s not my mouth that wants it. It’s my head.”

“Your head? Are you sick?”

“I wish I was sick instead. That’s a much simpler problem.”

Bada tilted her head before turning around and telling him to get some sleep if he was feeling tired. Maru turned on the TV and sat down on the sofa. It would be great if he could narrow down his hypothesis, but he didn’t have a single piece of concrete information and the number of variables kept increasing.

“If you’re inside, why don’t you answer me?” Maru questioned inwardly.

The masked man, his sole helper, had started a silent protest a while ago. It wasn’t that he disappeared. He still existed inside him and kept giving him help when it came to acting-related things. If there was a change, it was that personal conversations came to a stop. At this time, Maru was unaware whether the masked man was willingly shutting his mouth or whether he was forced to do so.

The reporter on the TV screen was making a happy expression as she ate a piece of freshly-made rice cake. The trivial happiness of eating delicious food seemed so far away from him. He was walking on top of a thin sheet of ice that might break at any moment. No matter how careful he was, if one wrong step broke that sheet of ice, all that would await him was the freezing cold water. He could neither return nor stop right now. The only thing he could do was to keep walking ahead while putting all his senses on their edge with the mindset of gambling.

After continuously changing the channel with the remote in his hand, Maru checked the time and turned the TV off. He put some clothes on and picked up the bag he put the script in before leaving the house.

“I told you to come out when I call you.”

"I came out ahead of time to cool my head a little."

Byungchan unlocked the doors, telling him to get in quickly. Having gotten in the car, Maru uttered a short sigh. The season was now one where the heated air from the car felt welcome.

"You look tired. I heard you almost collapsed on set a while ago."

"How did you know?"

"I have my ways."

"I didn't tell you about it because I thought you'd worry. The doctor said it wasn't anything much either."

Byungchan nodded.

"Yes, it's you we're talking about, so I'm sure you can take care of yourself, but please tell me about it. There are things that we should take care of at the company level."

"Okay. I was too short-minded there. I will call you next time."

It was true that he didn't report properly because he felt chaotic organizing the thoughts that flooded his mind.

"Take this and drink it."

When the car stopped in front of a traffic light, Byungchan gave him a pouch. From how there was a picture of a deer on the front, it seemed to be some sort of medicinal tonic.

"You see that in the back? It's a gift from the president. There's yours as well as some for your family. You said you had a sister right? Apparently, he also gave you Clarity Tonic or something that apparently helps when studying."

"Looks like I must give him a call to thank him."

"He looks after his own people."

"Yes, that's true."

He tore open the vinyl pouch and drank it in one gulp. It tasted similar to oriental flu medicine that was sold on the streets. It seemed that the taste would be similar if the medicines used were for general purpose use.

"You should have one too."

"Shall I?"

Byungchan didn't refuse. It was probably him who needed medicine the most. As he had experience working as a manager, Maru knew the hardships that came along with it.

"I think I feel energetic now."

"You should look after yourself too. I feel like you've become thinner even though you got a promotion."

"It's true that I just have to look after you and Sooil now, but it doesn't mean I have less work. We just got a new member, so I'm teaching him, but he's shy around strangers. I'm realizing how hard it is to teach other people."

"A shy manager huh. He must have a hard time."

"Yeah. Although he said he's going to do his best, he'll probably change his mind once he gets shouted at by a producer or an assistant director. Heck, I'm nervous even now that he might quit. We're lacking manpower here, you know?"

"You must be having a hard time, but what can you do? You got promoted to a position with more responsibilities, so you should accept the risks associated with it."

"I like how I got a pay raise, but I don't know if I'm really benefitting or not because the stress was increased as well."

Byungchan twitched his nose and smiled.

"But I'm glad to see you and Sooil doing well. These days, I barely scrape by seeing you two."

"I'll do my best so that you can earn a lot of incentives. If I do even better, I'll buy you a car."

"Thanks for your words. But you know, I have a good memory when it comes to things like that."

"Sure. If I do become successful, you should look into what car you want to buy. I'll make sure you sign the deal."

They arrived near the shooting location. Maru told him to stop the car.

"Today, Sooil has a shoot in the countryside, so I don't think I can pick you up afterwards."

"Alright. Take care. Watch out at night."

"Yeah, you too. Also, I'll deliver the medicine to your house. I was originally planning to call you and have you carry it back to your house before departing, but I completely forgot about it."

"I'll call my sister about it."

Maru closed the car door. Today was Saturday morning. He couldn't make any time no matter how much he adjusted his schedule, so he took the day off school. He judged that his work was more important than his studies, so he had no hesitation. His attendance record also wouldn't have a gap if the agency sent an official document to the school.

The streets were still calm. Things would only start to heat up with music and street performances after sunset. He walked down the streets that didn't have a distinction between pavement and the road before entering the alleyway that led to the shooting location. The commercial street gave him a different sensation during the day than at night. The worn-out and rusty buildings added to the deserted feeling of the street. The streets looked spooky at night and had traces of humans, but with everything revealed under the sunlight, the street looked more like a shantytown. Maru wouldn't find it strange even if a bulldozer razed everything down tomorrow.

People were gathered a vague distance away from both the residential area and the old commercial buildings. They were at the orange pojang-macha that had flapped its wings under the sun.

“You’re here.”

Producer Jayeon waved at him.

“I saw that the streets looked haunted during the day.”

“That’s why I like it even more. If I get the camera to shoot it from this angle, it gives off the feeling that it’s the endpoint of life.”

Maru looked at the buildings that looked like they were about to collapse from where Jayeon was standing. He could understand what she meant by ‘end point’. The buildings that had their steel beams exposed looked like the mound of a grave made from concrete.

“Maru, I heard you collapsed?” Ganghwan said after suddenly appearing behind him and putting his arm around Maru’s shoulders.

“Is someone going around spreading the word? I’m pretty sure I’m not that famous.”

“I was drinking with the president and you came up. Hey, kid, you can’t afford to run out of stamina so early on. Even I don’t have a history of collapsing and I’m reaching my mid-thirties.”

“Looks like I collapsed in your stead so that you don’t.”

“That sounds commendable. Did you get the tonic?”

“Yes, I got it through Byungchan-hyung.”

“I told the president to give you some. Be grateful.”

“Who paid for it?”

“Of course, big brother president did. I’m in no position to buy other people tonics. I’m already low on money because I used up all my savings to visit Russia.”

“But you should be able to save up again quickly, can’t you?”

“Hey, it’s people like Geunsoo who can save up quickly. No wait, maybe it’s Miss Suyeon.”

“You still call her Miss Suyeon? You dropped the polite speech with her, didn’t you?”

“For some reason, I wanted to call her with an honorific. You know how I feel right?”

“Haha, I do. I really do.”

“But there really isn’t anything wrong with you, right?”

“If there was, I would have gotten the doctor to diagnose it and then give the company the diagnosis, so they pay for the medical fees. Unfortunately, I’m so healthy that I can’t even get vitamins.”

“Yeah, yeah. I thought it shouldn’t be anything much when I heard you collapsed.”

“Why?”

“Because people who have less humane beauty live the longest.”

Ganghwan walked over to the pojang-macha after slapping him on the shoulders. Maru laughed in vain before he took out his script.

“Seonbae.”

He raised his head when he saw the shadow cover his script. He saw Yuna smiling.

“You’re here early.”

“The traffic was good.”

“Same for me. I came here in my mom’s car, and we didn’t get caught at a traffic light even once. It was so congested at night too.”

Yuna brought a chair and sat next to him. Maru quietly stared at her.

“Seonbae, what is it?”

“Yuna.”

“Yes?”

“We’ll be great friends, right?”

“Friends? We’re friends right now.”

“Yes, just like now.”

Yuna faintly smiled as she blinked. Maru took his eyes off her and looked at his script.