

## Once Again 761

### Chapter 761. Sequence 2

“You want me to show you?” Maru replied dryly.

His indifferent voice made him seem like he was asking if there was really a need to do so. This was Maru’s conversation style that Hyungseok had frequently experienced in the military. This person did not like being roundabout. When there was a need to, he would add all sorts of detail so that the person he was talking to wouldn’t realize it.

“Don’t say that. Listen to this junior’s request.”

“It’s been ages since we got discharged. Why are you conveniently making yourself the junior? Also, weren’t you intending for us to be friends?”

“Ah, hyung, please.”

Hyung was a calling style that he automatically blurted out when he asked for something from other people. The sound of the revolver cylinder turning could be heard. This was the scene where the main character in the film resolved to take revenge and rolled the empty cylinder. The depressing music as well as the figure of the main character planning his murder expressionlessly was the epitome of what Hyungseok aimed to do as an actor. The popped veins on his temple and his calm touches of the revolver. Seeing the actor contain two extreme sides of emotion in one body. Hyungseok was able to carve out a specific form of his dream.

Being told that he was similar to the actor he admired was closer to a compliment, but he couldn’t entirely be happy. ‘You were literally Flipped just now’ would have different meanings according to the interpretation. He felt proud when he heard it but after seeing Maru turn his interest elsewhere immediately, he was convinced that his act lacked something.

“I don’t feel that confident though. I’m not talented enough to do something I haven’t practiced.”

“Sarge Han, when I saw you in the military, you were definitely on the talented side. You did the things you were shown in just one try. Do you know how much we were chewed because of you? Everyone always asked us why we can’t be like you.”

“Well, that’s because I did those a few times already.”

“You did them already?”

Maru tilted the cup again. After emptying the coffee in the cup, Maru twisted his neck and stood up.

“There won’t be that many differences. I guess I should do the scene you showed me, yeah?”

“Sounds good.”

Maru started twisting his ankles, then his knees, hips, waist, and neck. After shaking his entire body up and down on the spot, Maru looked down at his body and muttered in a small voice: that should do.

“What did you do?”

“A little warm-up. Acting is something you do with your body, so I should warm myself up. A stiff body would only produce stiff acting.”

Hyungseok looked back on his own acting. He got into the emotions with a stiff body after having just woken up. He did not feel the need to do stretches since it didn't require a lot of movement, and the scene was something that just used his face. In the first place, it wasn't an official stage, and he was just practicing in front of a friend. He did not see the necessity to go through the proper procedures like he was doing business.

Maru stretched his arm slowly, just like how a wolf would groom its fur after waking up. An unknown sense of tension made Hyungseok sit up. He twitched his toes, which still had a tinge of sleep, and straightened his back before shaking off any sensation of the bed. He felt like he had to do so.

“Is there a video on the internet?”

“Wait a minute.”

He hurriedly ran inside the room. He put his hand among the three people who were still rolling on the ground. He found his phone under the blanket. He looked up the video and showed it to Maru once he got back. Maru put the phone in one hand and watched the video indifferently before throwing the phone away saying that he had seen enough.

“Your act will probably be more similar than mine.”

Maru, who was breathing in long, thin intervals slowly sat down on the floor. His act had already begun. His two knees touched the ground. His torso, which swayed as though it was about to fall at any moment, eventually curled up into a circle. There were intermittent breathing noises.

Hyungseok came down from the sofa. In order to see Maru's expression, he had to lower his eyes as Maru was kneeling and curled up.

The hands were clasped like he was praying had turned pale. His head kept lowering until it reached the floor. The two hands, which were above his head now, were shaking. The pale hands had turned red. They clasped onto each other like they were going to break each other.

The cry of a beast escaped the crack between his lips. The depressingly low voice sounded like a requiem. His cry burst out at once as though he was fainting and did not last long. His sadness was faint like charcoal remains after a burn. It felt like a touch would rekindle the spark within and engulf everything around him. The sadness and rage did not get released to the outside and just imploded inwardly.

Hyungseok started worrying that Maru would start to have a hard time breathing. He almost ended up asking if he was okay.

Maru calmed his breathing and stood up. Hyungseok watched his face closely. He looked like a completely different man after his act. You were literally Flippo just now – he remembered those words. It was him who imitated the act of the main character of the film. He had watched that scene several times over and analyzed the characteristics each time after all. Asking professional critics for an opinion wouldn't result in much difference.

Meanwhile, the act that Maru showed had zero similarities to the scene in the film. From his posture, his expression, and even the line, everything was different. Yet, the feeling it gave off was similar. One side exploded, while the other side imploded, but the total quantity of rage felt the same.

“It shouldn’t feel that similar. This is just how I interpreted that scene.”

“Interpreted that scene?”

Maru walked to the kitchen with the empty coffee cup before stopping. Hyungseok wanted an answer. Maru turned around and scratched around his eyebrows.

“A person who does the same act as Flipp’s will never be able to win Flipp’s role. That’s the only advice I can give you. You figure out the rest.”

The moment he heard those words, an exclamation broke through his lips. His contentedness from being satisfied with his current act shattered into smithereens and made that sound. It was natural. It was something he bore in mind when he ran his clothes sales business. There could not be two same brands in the same world.

A sense of urgency poked its head up within him. This was the moment when he realized that the things he did until now weren’t at all useless but not particularly great either. He started feeling like he was running out of time. The sense of tension he felt when he woke up early morning every single day with his eyes red, and the feelings of pity for the time that was being wasted, started filling his body again. The stress that made his heart race, as well as the sense of frustration from having a mountain load of work smashed his consciousness. A sense of excitement overwhelmed him. The moment he felt a sense of pleasant anxiety that heightened his whole body, Hyungseok rushed into the room he slept in. He put on the clothes that were strewn across the ground and walked towards the door.

“You leaving?” Maru asked while washing his hands at the sink.

Hyungseok replied while grabbing the doorknob,

“I don’t have time to be doing this. I realized what I should be doing.”

He stuffed his foot into his shoe. His plans for the future snapped into existence like fireworks inside his head. He felt like when he first went to an amusement park as a toddler. He was afraid of the unfamiliar place, but the parade and various attractions excited him. He felt the same right now. He wanted to do many different things. He decided to cancel all the appointments he scheduled for the weekend.

“You haven’t met them in a year. They’ll be disappointed if you leave like this.”

Hyunseok had opened the door halfway when he heard those words and then closed the door again. Because of his excitement, he had briefly forgotten about his friends fainted inside the room. He took his shoes off and sat on the sofa. The fanfare ringing inside his mind had eventually quietened down, but the heat of passion from wanting to act spread to various corners of his body. He also felt a sense of regret. He realized that this past year, which he originally thought that he had lived sufficiently earnestly, was filled with endless gaps. Those gaps were things he couldn’t see before. The holes he didn’t see before because he had fallen for the misconception that he was preparing earnestly, could now be seen thanks to watching Maru’s act. He felt bitter about the time he wasted until now, but he was not a foolish man who would waste even more time by having regrets. A mistake is an obstacle, but

it is also a foothold – this was the line that his friend put at the top of his computer monitor. Hyungseok liked this line as well.

“You seem serious. A little desperate now too. If you do anything with that kind of attitude, you won’t stay at the bottom at least,” Maru said those words as he walked past.

To Hyungseok, that was the best kind of encouragement he could get.

It took another hour for the rest to wake up. What Maru placed in front of them when they crawled out into the living room was soju.

“Let’s drink slowly, yeah?”

Hyungseok looked at the gamja-tang that was boiling. He never knew that Maru was going to ask to drink again. Gitae, who was wailing and vomiting by the toilet, shook his head in fright and stepped back.

“Hyung, you should stop drinking now.”

“I had to cancel two weekend appointments in order to see you guys. I met you, so I can’t disappoint you when it comes to food. Don’t refuse and just drink. If you don’t like soju, I have some wine over there too. Also, some vodka if you want it. Just tell me.”

Perhaps the reason Maru stopped him from leaving was not because the others would feel disappointed but because Maru wanted some people to drink with. The way he quietly poured soju into glasses reminded them of the evil private first class Han Maru from the old times. Empty this, while I am still telling you in a good way<sup>[1]</sup>.

“I’ve been getting kinda lonely these days, so it’s good to have you over. Since you’re here, stay for around three days. I can provide you with infinite booze and snacks.”

Maru pushed the glasses with his fingers. Hyungseok looked at the waving soju in the glass in front of him. He felt like there was a stranded ship on top of the waving soju. The ship was about to capsize with the four of them on board. If he drank, he would die, but if he left it alone, he would be left between two deadly cliffs. Hyungseok quietly raised his hand.

“Hyung, I think I should go practice after all,” he voiced his opinion with difficulty.

“Leave after you drink.”

His opinion was lightly ignored.

“What’s up with you? Did you get possessed by a ghost that hasn’t had enough booze or something? Why are you drinking so much?”

“I usually don’t drink that much, but you guys were the ones who started it. People around me refrain from drinking with me these days, so I’m getting my wish fulfilled thanks to you guys.”

“Of course they would refrain. You’re a freaking whale when it comes to drinking. Half of your fridge is filled with booze, isn’t it?”

“I’m not an alcoholic. I just drink like this from time to time. What are you doing? You’re not thinking about waiting until it evaporates, right?”

Maru raised his glass. He kept talking about toasting, and they couldn’t just keep ignoring him.

“I’m reminded of the general manager where I was an intern at.”

Youngjin emptied the glass in one go while frowning.

“Console this old man who lives by himself. Here, drink!”

Maru shook the empty glass above his head with a bright smile on his face.

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“We’re leaving.”

Hyungseok trembled while looking at the empty soju bottles that had been lined up like a fence before turning around. Maru, who was holding the door open, waved at them to have a safe trip home. On the elevator down, his colleagues all commented as though they were confessing their sins: I’m never coming here again; Even if we do meet, I’m gonna meet him outside; I’d rather go back to the military than come here again.

When they left the elevator on the first floor, Hyungseok realized that he had left behind his wallet.

“Hey, I only brought my phone. I’ll be right back.”

“Hurry up.”

He took the elevator back up. Just as he was about to press the bell in front of the door, he instead grabbed the doorknob and turned it. It was unlocked, just as he had expected.

Maru was sitting down on the balcony. He was watching something on the laptop on the table. Hyungseok entered the bedroom and picked up his wallet before walking over to the balcony. The thing Maru was watching was the drama titled ‘Flaming Lady’. It was the drama that became hugely popular before he entered the military and also the one that Maru said he decided not to participate in.

Just as he was about to open the balcony and say goodbye, Hyungseok stopped when he heard the faint sound. Maru had the expression of the happiest man alive while looking at the face of the girl on the screen. He did not want to break that mood. Hyungseok wondered as he closed the door: Was he a fan of that actress?

[1] There used to be a ‘tradition’ to make new recruits drunk when they get stationed. Nowadays, it’s mostly considered bullying and is no longer present.

## **Chapter 762. Sequence 2**

When he looked down at the empty coffee cup, Park Hoon realized that it was time to stand up. It wasn’t like staring at the monitor in the café would give him any good ideas. He picked up the laptop bag and left. The moment he left, he missed the café. The air was more than just hot. It stabbed into his skin.

He staggered back to his house. Today was a holiday that was such a pity to waste. He wanted to go hiking, go fishing, or do anything to take a break, but the work given to him seemed to be laughing at him for daring to try to rest on a weekend. It would be less frustrating if it was company work instead.

“How is it?”

His wife urged him to give her the results. Park Hoon despaired at the environment of his household where he couldn't even form a labor union as he sat down on the sofa.

“It's not bad, I think.”

“Not bad, huh. So it's not good either?”

“You always take it that way.”

“Then tell me properly. Was it interesting?”

Interesting, splendid, touching. These three were magical words that would give him freedom on weekends. If he turned a blind eye and praised his wife's writing, everything would be good, but his mouth betrayed his thoughts and talked about useless things.

“Personally, I would have second thoughts if I had to pay money to read it. Maybe it's because I'm personally not fond of the genre, but I wouldn't buy it.”

He instantly regretted saying those words, but the train had left; Pandora's box had been opened. Park Hoon wanted to stitch his mouth shut if possible. Having kicked away a comfortable weekend's rest, Park Hoon ended up lying down on the sofa. He could already expect what he was going to hear next: then how about this?; What if I change it this way?; Did you like this part?

“Looks like I should stop for the day. I need to get some rest too,” said his wife who was sitting at the computer desk in the living room.

Hearing that, he suddenly woke up as though cold water had been poured over his face. Yoo Jayeon, who was number one in the drama department in YBS, had declared defeat first. This was a rare sight. The path that led to traveling on a weekend, which was about to close its gates, had been opened again. His heart had already packed some kimbap and was on its way to the hiking trail. He felt like the refreshing smell of the moist forest on Mount Hwaak was already tickling his nose.

“Well thought. Creating content requires breaks. You can't do it by pushing yourself.”

“You're right, oppa. I should get some rest. I feel burnt out too.”

“How about hiking? I went to Mount Hwaak last time, and it was really good there. A writer I know said that she goes there whenever she hits a wall while writing. I think she said something about how the refreshing air of the mountain clears her head or something.”

He tried conning his wife with facts mixed with lies. If she didn't want to go, that was fine as well. The mountain was something he could only embrace fully when he hiked by himself.

“Hiking?”

She seemed not so into it. For producers, who stayed up night after night like it was nothing, saving energy was a requirement, and it was natural for them to not want to waste energy by doing something like hiking.

“You’re tired, aren’t you? Then have a break at home.”

“What about you, oppa?”

“Me? I’ll go for some fresh air. Just for a little bit.”

“Don’t say that; let’s watch a movie together at home. I just bought a DVD the other day. You’re going to like it too. It’s a romance movie.”

“No, there’s no real need to watch together is th...”

His wife was already connecting the cable to the TV. Park Hoon nervously watched his wife as she ripped open the packaging of the DVD joyfully. What would happen if he said to her ‘honey, I’ll go hiking’ when she looked like a little bird flapping her wings in excitement while imagining watching a romance movie together with her husband? At first, she would probably try to coax him into it. The moment he mentioned it again, the little bird would become an eagle that soars in the skies and attacks with her claws, which she had trimmed for work but were still slightly long nonetheless. The whole time she would be mentioning the duty of the husband in society to spend the weekend with his wife.

Park Hoon looked at the wedding photo in the living room. His wife in the photo, Yoo Jayeon, was beautiful. He himself, who was on one knee next to her giving her a ring, was handsome. When he mentioned that he was dating Jayeon, who was like a fighting rooster, to the producers of the drama department, the entire YBS building flipped upside down. When he handed out wedding invitations, his senior producers asked him if he needed serious advice. They said things like ‘you can’t give up on life so easily’, ‘tell me if there’s anything you need’, or ‘it can’t be helped if she’s pregnant’.

If he looked back in retrospect and asked why he got married, he honestly wouldn’t be able to answer. Was it because he took her around a lot when they worked? Or was it because she found him an easy man? They somehow ended up being comfortable around each other, and when he came to, he was meeting her parents. They got married half a year after dating, so when the people around them said that they were too hasty in getting married, they weren’t entirely wrong.

His marriage life was just as he had expected. The tomboy genes didn’t go anywhere just because she got married. In the beginning, they quarreled quite a lot. As they were both people who could say anything about each other, they never avoided a fight by feigning good smiles. Once, they even fought about which direction to put their toothbrushes in. This person was a woman that didn’t fit him from A to Z.

Two years passed like that. The fact that they didn’t suit each other from A to Z hadn’t changed, but what had changed was that if they fought ten times, he would lose ten out of ten times. Fighting each other fiercely like fighting dogs in an arena became a thing of the old. Park Hoon chose to become a docile puppy who would lie on its back and act cute. He was still the unrelenting producer who did not know compromise at the TV station, but he became a gentle puppy who let his wife take the leash. Why did it become like this? He did not know. He only vaguely predicted that his subconscious judgment to

not continue the cold war with Yoo Jayeon, who had braved the women's taboo zone that was the drama department by herself, created such an environment.

Mount Hwaak became distant. The game console, which had become a DVD player for this moment, gobbled up a disk and started producing motor sounds. Once the movie began, his path to Mount Hwaak would be blocked off completely. Seeing the DVD precursor screen, Park Hoon thought back to two months ago when his wife said that she was going to write a book. To him, he heard that as: she was going to enjoy a gentle hobby, so he urged her to do so and even cheered her on for it. Back then, he didn't know that he would be in charge of the research and even the editing. If he knew, he would have stopped her. He would have told her that not anyone could just write.

He desperately needed an exit. Spending the weekend lying down on a sofa at home wasn't bad, but his consciousness, which was already at the foot of Mount Hwaak, was screaming at him to escape his house. It was when his wife brought some snacks in a wooden bowl that the phone in his hand started ringing.

-I'd like to eat the dinner that you said you'd treat me to tonight.

Park Hoon spoke as calmly as possible while reading the text. It would be troublesome if his wife found out that there was a party going on within him to congratulate his escape.

"Maru says he wants to meet me."

"Maru? You mean Han Maru?"

"Yeah. I told him I'd treat him out some time."

"So you're leaving now?"

His wife looked at the clock from the corner of her eyes. He cut in before she could say 'it's still early'.

"We have a lot to talk about. You know me, honey. You know I want to shoot a drama with him. We couldn't do that four years ago, so I should shoot one with him this time."

"Really?"

He silently stared at his wife rummaging through the snacks. He was inwardly nervous that she would say that she wanted to go with him.

"Don't drink too much. Just because you aren't working, if you come back late because of drinking, well, you'll see what will happen."

"I'll come back early of course. You should get some rest too, honey. You have to go to a shoot tomorrow."

He embraced her shoulders and pulled her in before kissing her on the forehead. He found his wife so lovely for obediently waiting at home.

"Buy some milk on your way home. We ran out."

"I can buy two."



Three wasn't a problem either.

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"The outside air sure is good."

"Did something happen?"

"You'll see once you get married. You should definitely get married. It's something filled with happiness."

Park Hoon parked his car at the barbecue restaurant's parking lot before walking inside the store. They were guided by an employee to a room on the inside.

"Hey, you look like you've grown."

"I've grown a bit in the military, though, I still haven't hit 180."

"You were pitch black when you got discharged, but you've whitened up like an actor now. The dermatologist seems to be doing a good job, eh?"

"Well, I'll have to thank the head manager at the company for forcing me to go to the dermatologist. Money sure is good."

Park Hoon's memory still contained the young Maru that was in high school. He was a child who did not show any of the challenging or daring attitudes that his peers would have. The child that looked 'experienced' had become a young man. Though, he still had those coldly sunken eyes that he couldn't see through.

"I heard you did your last performance."

"Yes. It went well, thanks to you."

"Don't thank me. I didn't do anything."

"Is the thing you're preparing as the director going well?"

"I'm participating in the production crew, so I think I'll only be able to do my own thing at the end of the year. Well, the preparations are going smoothly, so there's no problem with that."

"What's the genre this time?"

"What else? It's a drama that the ladies would like. If I want to raise my value before I quit and become a freelancer, I have to make big hits, so I ended up going down that route. Looks like it became a habit after I gained some popularity."

"At times like those, you come back to yourself if you get smashed hard."

"Gee, why don't you pray for my doom instead? Let's order something for now."

"I have a classy taste now, so I might end up drilling a hole in your credit card if I make the orders. You're gonna get an earful from director Jayeon too. Are you okay with that?"

He wanted to shout 'I'm that woman's husband' in a confident voice, but his voice couldn't help but become lower when he thought about his wife appearing in front of his face with his credit card bills. Hold back a little – she would say.

The pork ribs they ordered came out. Maru picked up the tongs and put the meat on the grill. Only after seeing the sizzling meat did he realize that he had skipped breakfast and lunch today. He realized that the stress given to him by his superior at home was quite serious.

"Are you really not going to have a child?" Maru asked as he ate a spoonful of the doenjang soup.

Park Hoon licked his lips. A child; it was a word that he used to not like, but these days, that word gave him a kick in the heart.

"I'm not sure whether I want one or not."

"You should. Having a child is the entire point of marriage."

"But I can't have a child by myself. I need to think about Jayeon too. It'd be weird to tell her that we should have a child when she still wants to work."

"That's true, director Jayeon is a workaholic."

"She sure is."

He poured some beer into the glass. He didn't dare order soju because of what his wife said.

"What are you going to do? It's been a year."

"I don't know. If anyone calls for me, I do want to go back to dramas. Plays are fun, but it's the TV that makes money. Blue Sky also has a lot of applicants because I became pretty well-known. Though, the problem is that they don't have any money to accept more members. But that's something they need to solve by themselves."

"You should've joined us when we did 'Flaming Lady'. If you did, you would've become a national star rather than the Daehak-ro star."

"Instead, I got my discharge certificate."

"Since we're at it, let me ask. Why didn't you do it back then? I still don't understand. The director wanted you, yet you refused that and went back to doing plays. Didn't I tell you several times that there's a character I based on you?"

"I can only apologize. I really wanted to do it when you gave me the offer. I really did, but the circumstances weren't right."

"Well, I'm asking what those circumstances were."

Maru only smiled to gloss over everything. Park Hoon lost his motivation to ask any further questions. Usually, Maru became firmer than concrete when he smiled like that.

"But still, you got a star from that drama."

"Han Gaeul, the girl you recommended? She did become a star."

Park Hoon thought back to the winter four years ago as he sipped some beer.

### **Chapter 763. Sequence 2**

Park Hoon remembered that day had pretty good weather for winter. December of 2007, they had finished casting the main actors for 'Flaming Lady', had gotten a slot in the TV timeline, and only had the shoot left. The drama was going unhindered without any obstructions like an express train from preparations, to casting, and even time allocation. The reason the train stopped abruptly was due to the refusal of a support actor.

"I will not do it."

It wasn't 'I can't do it'. Maru was clearly expressing his refusal. It wasn't an attempt to raise his own value nor was he showing any signs of doing that. Park Hoon put a cigarette in his mouth before reminding himself that he was inside a café. He had gotten so confused that he forgot where he was. He didn't have a problem casting a main actor who he expected to have a hard time casting. That was the power of Choi Haesoo's script. Park Hoon expected success when all the actors he gave the scenario to gave him a call back. Successfully casting popular actors directly led to more funding from the company. The TV station's president, who said he wasn't sure about the success of this drama, inserted his drama into a good slot with the help of the scheduling producer. The only thing left was to drive smoothly towards the destination, but a speed bump suddenly appeared mid way; a speed bump that was high and sturdy.

"Why?" Park Hoon asked as though he was screaming.

He couldn't think of anything else to say other than 'why'. He was trying to insert this guy into the YBS mini-series with guaranteed views; he was saying that he would let this guy eat out of the same pot as the popular actors, so he wanted to know why he was refusing it.

"Is it because you got another schedule? It is possible since New Semester is over."

"I don't have any dramas to do for the foreseeable future."

"Then what is it? A film?"

"I don't have that either."

"Then why?"

After going round and round, it came back to 'why'. He wasn't cast in another drama or a film. He didn't become a college student, so he wasn't studying either. He was twenty, an age where it was natural to challenge various things and fail. He didn't understand why Maru was refusing this drama, which was like a path to success laid out for him.

"I'm planning to study more about basic acting. On a play stage."

To him, that sounded more absurd than 'I'm going to be hiking the Himalayas tomorrow'. In fact, if Maru said he was going to the Himalayas, he would be less confused right now. Going back to doing plays? And the objective is to study?

“You can study while doing the drama. No, you aren’t at a stage where you should be learning the basics anymore. You’ve already proved yourself in Pojang-macha that aired this time last year. New Semester was the same. Not only that, while you didn’t make yourself known through the dramas you shot before, you always received good evaluations. Both I and my senior producers remember the impressive acting you showed us. The reason I’m offering you this role is because you have that foundation. You’re doing plenty well. What you need right now isn’t the basics, it’s depth. And depth is something you gain from experience.”

Park Hoon thought that the situation was going pretty strangely. For a producer to be persuading the actor, the actor had to be a popular one. He never imagined that he would be playing power games with an actor who had just entered the drama scene. He decided to become calm. He believed that Maru was not genuinely refusing this offer. He had faith that Maru would eventually accept if he kept advising him, and he thought that there was a different reason he was doing this now.

“I’m sorry.”

The moment he saw Maru lower his head and say those words, Park Hoon had to admit that he was clearly wrong. Those eyes weren’t those belonging to a man who could be negotiated with. Those unshaking pupils were proof of his firm decision. Park Hoon intuitively felt that Maru would refuse even if he promised he would be the main actor.

Park Hoon gulped the cooled coffee in one go and went over to the counter to ask for a cup of cold water. He had never considered Maru refusing this offer. He believed that it was as easy as scooping out a fish from a fish tank, but it turned out to be more difficult than catching a yellowtail fish in the vast seas barehanded. He sat down and drank a sip of cold water again before looking at Maru’s eyes. Forget yellowtail, this boy was a shark.

“You really don’t have any intentions of doing this, huh.”

“Yes. I really appreciate you offering this role to me. If you want to use me again in the future, I will set aside everything and participate.”

“You have quite the confidence huh. Do you know how I feel right now? I feel like I proposed to the woman I promised my life to but had my cheek slapped instead. Didn’t I tell you that I want to shoot my next piece with you throughout the whole of New Semester?”

“You did.”

“Then why did you suddenly change your mind? I usually don’t say this because it’s embarrassing, but I have a really good hunch about this piece. The scenario has proved itself already. All the actors who received the script, and I’m talking about those picky ones, gave the okay sign in just one go. Some even said that they were willing to lower their pays. You’re just kicking away the opportunity to appear in such a drama. You know that?”

I know – Maru replied without hesitation. There wasn’t a shred of doubt in his words. Park Hoon found him despicable even. He took out the script for the 1st episode.

“Have a look.”

“It’s okay.”

“I won’t force you to do it. Just have a look.”

Maru politely accepted the script with both hands. He slowly turned over the pages as though he was appreciating a bowl of rice that was just cooked. The more Park Hoon looked at him, the more pity he felt. That script had a role that was based on the human known as Han Maru. If Maru said he didn’t want to do it, he would have no choice but to give it to someone else. A custom suit would become nothing more than a mass-produced one.

“It’s good. I really mean it.”

Park Hoon saw that thing known as desire appearing in Maru’s eyes. That was an expression of emotion that would never happen if he did not like the drama. Perhaps it wasn’t all over right now.

“That’s precisely why I think that someone else has to do it. I don’t think I can focus on work right now.”

Maru, who had only expressed his refusal until now, finally mentioned a reason for the first time, as vague as it might be.

“If it’s something I can help with, I can help you as much as I can. Is it money?”

“I’ve earned enough to make a living.”

“I know I shouldn’t be saying this, but is it because a member of your family has become ill and....”

“Both of my parents are healthy. If it was about that, I would have told you about it. The reason I’m not doing the drama is because of personal emotions. It’s not that there’s an inevitable reason for it.”

“Emotions?”

“Yes. You might say that doing work might make things okay, and I agree with that to some extent, but this time, I don’t think that’s plausible. I need time to collect myself. Studying acting is just on the side. It’s not anything grand, so I found it awkward to tell you about it.”

“Yes, now that I heard what you said, I feel like getting angry. You have the audacity to kick away such a good opp....”

Park Hoon stopped midway and drank some water. He had already stuffed the script on the table into his bag.

“I’m no one to direct your life. I’m not sure about anyone else, but if it’s you, you’ll definitely do well by yourself. If you made such a decision, you must have a clear reason for doing so.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“I’m not understanding anything. I’m just letting it be. Honestly, I want to nag you right now. I want to tell you about how good this opportunity is for a whole day. I’m the producer here, so you must know how tragic it is for me to have such thoughts towards a support actor.”

“If you ever need me for later work, then I will definitely participate.”

“You’re deplorable for having the confidence to reject me now yet also telling me that there will be a next time. At the same time, I find myself foolish for thinking that I will definitely use you next time.”

Park Hoon got ready to stand up. As the casting didn't happen, there was no need for him to continue being here.

"Uhm, director," Maru spoke just as he was about to stand up.

Park Hoon looked at Maru expectantly. Maybe he had a change of heart? Was he going to do this after all?

"I know I'm shameless for saying this, but may I recommend an actor?"

"Recommend?"

Park Hoon sat back down again, thinking about how serious he was when he read the script.

"Have you watched the movie 'Building' that was released this fall?"

"That disaster movie?"

"Yes."

"Movies that get more than 10 million views, I have to watch, even if it's for work."

"Do you remember a girl who played the role of a high school girl there? She gets crushed under the debris and dies."

"Oh, you mean the girl that appears with a big dog?"

There was no need to probe his memories. She was an actress who left a deep impression on him after all. When he watched that scene, the first thing he thought was that it must have been hard to shoot a scene with an animal, and the second was about who that girl was to be able to express the reality of being crushed to death so vividly. After watching it, he forgot about it due to being busy with drama work, but when he heard Maru talk about it, that memory became vivid again in an instant.

"Don't you think she suits the obsessive girl that appears at the beginning of the drama? Of course, you don't need to think about it if you have someone for that role already but seeing that you were here to offer me a place in the lineup, I was wondering if some of the supporting and minor roles are open."

"You're right. We've only procured the main roles because of the advertising. The casting is still in progress. Though, it will probably be finished."

"Have you cast someone for that role already?"

Park Hoon leaned back on the backrest. A new actor who rejected his own cast but was recommending someone else, huh.

"No. I did get a list through some connections, but nothing is set in stone yet."

"She will definitely digest this role well."

"Do you know her?"

"I do know her. Of course, I'm not telling you that you have to use her. I'm only telling you that a girl like her exists."

“She’s not bad. It’s true that I’ve taken note of her. Though, I forgot about her due to work.”

“If you’re okay with time, you should have a look at her. You will definitely not feel disappointed. She’s a good one after all.”

If it was an absurd request, he would have refused, but the girl in that movie definitely possessed the skills worth meeting.

“If you do meet her, I hope you don’t talk about me to her.”

“Why that all of a sudden?”

“Please.”

Please, without mentioning the reason huh. Park Hoon accepted his request.

“But you owe me for this, okay? You can’t change your words later. I’m not saying that I will definitely use her, but I will have a look at her for sure. But in turn, you have to work with me later, okay? After you deal with whatever emotions of yours.”

At that time, Maru deeply nodded and thanked him. A sense of satisfaction that couldn’t be seen when he asked him to take up a role could be seen on that face. He was curious about the relationship between the two, but he didn’t ask. He promised after all.

It was a week later when he met the girl, found out the girl’s name was Han Gaeul, and that she was the daughter of the writer Choi Haesoo who wrote the scenario for the drama. During this time, he had not mentioned Maru’s name even once.

“Director, the meat is getting burnt.”

Maru grabbed some pieces of meat and put them on a plate. The expression he had at the café four years ago overlapped with his smiling face right now.

“Since you’re coming back to dramas, I can assume that you have resolved that reason of yours, correct?”

“Yes, to some extent. I think I’m at the point where I don’t have to run away anymore.”

“You’re not going to reply if I ask from what, are you?”

“Director, your glass is empty.”

Maru raised the beer bottle and switched the topic. He looked like he had zero intentions of replying.

“Hey, what was your relationship with Han Gaeul? Why did you recommend her?”

“She’s just a friend. I wanted to see a friend of mine doing well.”

“Did you know that the writer for ‘Flaming Lady’ was Gaeul’s mom?”

“No, at least not back then. I found out later. I’m sure the writer must have been overjoyed when you recommended Gaeul to her.”

“Like hell she was. She instead convinced me to think about it rationally. If she’s someone who would be joyous because she got to use her daughter, she wouldn’t be able to write something like that. She’s a woman who can make jokes, but she’s firm when it comes to certain things.”

“That, I have to agree.”

Park Hoon glanced at Maru while drinking beer. From the way he talked, he looked like he knew her well. That was the attitude of someone who had experienced such a thing to death.

“Let’s toast.”

Park Hoon raised his glass.

“To the arrogant new actor.”

### **Chapter 764. Sequence 3**

He saw light in the distance. He looked down at his feet. On either side of the narrow path was darkness, splashing about. He felt like he would disappear without a trace if he fell into it. He looked back. The path he took was faintly glowing. There were two options ahead of him. He could either walk towards that intense light, or go back the path he came from.

Just as he was about to take a step towards the light, Maru put down his half-lifted left foot again. This was a dream he constantly had before he got enlisted. He always realized that it was a dream at the same point. He always came to himself in the middle of the narrow path where he could only walk forward or go back.

Light was the symbol of happiness. He would be able to endure anything as long as he could jump into that light.

Maru slowly looked down and looked at the path that led to the light. The intense light made him unable to see the end. He had no way of knowing what was there; whether there was a path, darkness, or nothing at all.

He ran towards the light several times. He tried walking, running, and even crawling. He even tried swimming in the darkness, but it always ended with him waking up from the dream. He had never once reached the light. The light turned from something he wanted to possess to a target he could feel satisfied with just looking.

Maru neither returned nor went forward. He just sat down on the spot and watched the warmly-lit light source in the distance. The darkness splashing on either side of the path slowly crept up onto it. The darkness quickly spread towards his neck after it touched his body just like a droplet of ink falling on a piece of paper. This darkness possessed neither warmth nor coldness and was a cleaner that erased everything. Life and death held no meaning there. The darkness crept up his chin, covered his lips, and colored his cheeks. When all of his senses disappeared, Maru tensed his eyes and looked at the light. He captured the light with his eyes that were being erased. I am still here.

He took a deep breath like someone who had been underwater for a while. He saw a chest heaving up and down through his vision. He stroked down his face and stood up. His entire body was sticky from sweat.



Maru got off the bed and went to the bathroom. He took a shower and brewed some coffee in the kitchen. He checked his social network on his phone while sitting on the sofa with a cup of coffee in hand. There were new posts cheering for his last performance. He emptied the coffee and changed his clothes. He put on a t-shirt and a pair of pants, both of which his fans gave to him as a gift. He got in his car and headed towards Mapo.

“You done yet?” he asked as he opened the door to the convenience store.

Daemyung, who was organizing the triangular rice balls, shook his head.

“I have to organize all of this.”

Maru took out some milk and fizzy drinks from the box by his foot.

“I have to display them over there, right?”

“I’ll do it.”

“You take care of that.”

He pulled forward the milk which had a shorter expiration date and inserted the new milk at the back. Just as he started cleaning up the other products in a similar fashion, the door to the convenience store opened. Daemyung said ‘welcome’ and returned to the counter. A tired-looking woman asked for a pack of cigarettes. Following that, another customer came in. It was 8 a.m. The convenience store was crowded like a full train. Maru finished organizing stuff before sitting on the chair outside the convenience store. The influx of people disappeared soon like the rain. Daemyung came out of the convenience store with empty boxes in each hand.

“It’s a war every morning.”

“It’s a good thing if the business is going well.”

“The problem is that your wages don’t increase just because the business goes well.”

“The owner still looks out for me quite a lot.”

As soon as he put out the empty cardboard boxes, an elderly lady appeared with a hand wagon. The elderly man who was pushing a bike on the other side of the road clicked his tongue and turned around. Maru saw a girl yawning as she walked past the elderly lady. The girl looked at the convenience store sign, took a deep breath, and started running. After running about 20 meters, the girl opened the door in a hurry and shouted: Oppa, I’m sorry for being late.

“It’s okay.”

Daemyung’s voice could be heard through the creaking glass door. Maru looked up at the sky and sighed. Why did his gentle nature not change a bit? Daemyung left after taking off his convenience store jacket, having passed over the work to her.

“She’ll be late every time if you don’t say anything to her.”

“I’m sure she must have her reasons. Also, it’s hard waking up every morning.”

The person in question was okay, so there was no need to nag him about it. Instead, Maru stared at the woman standing at the counter. She seemed surprised to see him together with Daemyung. She must inwardly be wondering if they knew each other? A girl who tried to deceive people by pretending right in front of her workplace should also know how to use her head. She would probably not be late starting next time.

“Let’s go, we should go eat.”

He took Daemyung to the nearby gukbap restaurant. Daemyung seemed to have adjusted to the late-night convenience store shift that he began doing as soon as the college holidays started. He almost looked like he was going to die when Maru met him on the third day after he started work.

“It takes quite a lot of money to live by yourself, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, a lot more than I thought I would. I never knew that shampoo, toothpaste, and toothbrushes are so expensive. Everything, from drinking to eating, needs money.”

“You should’ve stayed at home. Why did you dive into pain nose first?”

“True. I regret leaving the house. Though, I can only live by myself because the president is paying tuition. If not for that, I would have had to stay at home. The tuition is quite a lot after all.”

“Why don’t you ask for living expenses too then?”

“Nah. I have to start earning my own money once I graduate.”

“Or just borrow from me. You would never take it for free though.”

“I’ll leave that as a last resort.”

Daemyung poured the rice into the soup and started scooping it up.

“You look pretty okay now. At first, you couldn’t even eat anything properly after your shift.”

“Looks like I adapted. I don’t feel that tired now either. Though, I still fall asleep the moment I go back home and get washed.”

Daemyung opened the bag next to him with his spoon still in his mouth. He took out a notebook.

“Here.”

Maru grabbed the notebook. The reason Daemyung took up a night shift at the convenience store when he usually did day shifts at places like factories and restaurants was this notebook. When he opened the notebook, Daemyung’s gaze headed to it after having been glued to the gukbap all this time.

“You just keep eating.”

Maru held the notebook with one hand and flipped the page. Daemyung was gobbling down the gukbap in a hurry from what he glimpsed over the notebook. He looked like he was nervous and couldn’t find the leisure to eat.

“How is it?” he carefully asked when Maru closed the notebook.

His eyes, red from staying up all night, contained expectation and nervousness.

“It’s good as long as the shoot goes properly.”

Maru returned the note to him. Daemyung made a sound that sounded like a sigh mixed with a groan.

“I passed the first test, so that leaves the 2nd.”

“Right, there was a picky one. I wonder if she is at work right now.”

“Probably? I should text her for now. I was so concerned about this during work. Looks like I’ll be able to sleep easy now.”

“Are you going to start if she says she wants to shoot?”

“If you’re okay with the schedule.”

“I just did my last performance, so I have plenty of time. I’ll be busy if I get work though.”

“I’ll try to schedule it as soon as possible.”

“Alright.”

He let Daemyung in his car. During the 10 minute trip to his house, Daemyung dozed off in the passenger seat.

“Yo, dude, go sleep inside.”

Daemyung got off while staggering and waved goodbye at him. Maru told him to go inside before turning his car around. Today, there was one more place he had to go.

“Can you wrap it for me? It’s for a gift.”

“What kind of gift wrap would you like?”

“I’d like something a two-year-old girl would like.”

He had bought a dollhouse from the toys section at the mall. He put the gift-wrapped toy on the passenger seat.

“I’m on my way there. You’re at home, right?”

He made a call when he arrived at Suwon station. There was a girl who was wailing and a mother who was consoling her. The doting voice of the father was mixed in as well.

He parked his car in the parking lot of the apartment. He picked up the gift in one hand and got on the elevator. He really hoped that she would like it. He would probably feel hurt if the little lady with a picky sense of aesthetics ended up disliking it.

“I’m here.”

As soon as he pressed the bell, the door opened. Taesik was standing behind the fence that was installed to prevent dogs from getting out.

“I’m not inconveniencing you by coming on a weekend, am I?”

"I thought you were never going to come because you didn't come no matter how many times we told you. Honey, Maru's here."

Taesik shouted inside. The first to show a reaction were two chihuahuas. Maru patted the head of the chihuahua that propped himself up using the fence.

"This is a gift for Sol. I'm not sure if she would like it though."

"Why did you bring such a thing? You shouldn't have."

"Aren't your hands a little too quick to receive it when you're saying those words?"

Maru went over the fence and walked into the living room. The floor was covered with soft mattresses for kids, and the wallpaper next to the main door was full of crayon marks. Clearly, a tomboy was living in this house.

"You're here?"

Miso walked into the living room, holding Sol in her hands. Maru put his hands out the moment he saw her.

"Can I have a hug?"

"You mean me?"

"That sounds terrifying. I mean Sol."

Miso handed Sol over, telling him to be careful. The child's eyes had tear marks as though she fell asleep after crying.

"She's grown a lot in the past half a year."

"She surprises me a lot too. When I wake up from sleep and see her, I always find myself surprised to see that she grew so much. Anyway, what's that?" Miso asked as she pointed at the gift.

"A gift for Sol. It's a dollhouse, and I was told that a two-year-old is fine to play with it. If she was awake, I would have loved to emphasize that it was uncle who bought it for her."

"She should wake up soon. Then, she'll probably start throwing a tantrum since she is hungry. Anyway, thanks for the gift. I did tell you that you can come empty-handed, but I was going to chase you out if you really did."

"I had a hunch that would be the case. How do you feel these days? You said you weren't feeling good during the last performance."

"Apparently, it's stress-induced gastritis. Looks like standing on stage after a long time took a toll on me."

"Not as much as me though, right? I had to suffer under you. I never thought I would be acting under you after I graduated high school, so imagine what I felt when I met you in Blue Sky. What a life, eh?"

"Hey, would you like to put Sol down for a moment?"

“Hell no. I will only be safe if I take Sol hostage. Teacher Taesik, I’ll take care of Sol until I leave.”

“That’s outside my jurisdiction unfortunately.”

Taesik looked at Miso through the corner of his eyes. He seemed to be indicating that she was the decision-maker in this household. Miso sat down on the sofa and spoke,

“How about breakfast?”

“I just had one with Daemyung.”

“Has Daemyung lost some weight these days?”

“Nope, he’s the same as ever.”

“I told him to lose some weight, but he just won’t listen. I wonder if he would listen if I go and beat him up a little.”

Miso frowned in dissatisfaction. Maru whispered to Sol in a small voice.

“Sol, you can’t take after your mother, okay? You have to take after the gentle nature of teacher Taesik.”

“I can hear you.”

“I want you to listen. If you haven’t eaten, let’s go out. I’ll treat you.”

Maru felt Sol twitch halfway through his words. Sol then slowly opened her eyes. Maru smiled so that the child wasn’t surprised, however, Sol immediately burst into tears. He tried making all sorts of funny faces, but it was to no avail. Only after getting into her mother’s embrace did she stop crying and look around.

“I’m pretty popular with the girls too.”

“Dear Sol looks at the heart of people.”

“Then I can understand why she’s crying.”

Maru opened the packaging of the toy he brought in front of Sol. She immediately showed a reaction and took out the dollhouse. She soon hid behind her mother as she was quite shy, but when he pretended to play with the dolls, she approached him again.

“You should find a partner quickly and get married. You’re a total sucker for playing with children.”

“I’d love to if I have a partner.”

“How about Yoonjoo from the troupe? I think she was interested in you.”

“Yoonjoo is a little sister.”

“How about Jiwon? It’s been a while since she hasn’t had a boyfriend.”

“She’s a big sister.”

“Forget it, what am I even saying. You’re the guy who rejects everyone who likes you. You know? You’re going to live alone for the rest of your life if you keep acting like that.”

“That doesn’t sound half bad either.”

Maru grabbed Sol’s hand and shook it from side to side.

“Sol, would you like to marry uncle after you grow up?”

As soon as he said those words, he got a loud smash on his back. Along with a low thud, pain spread from his back. Sol, who was watching him in a daze, started giggling.

“Honey, let’s leave for now,” Miso said.

### **Chapter 765. Sequence 3**

Sol ate the bossam<sup>[1]</sup> with her small mouth. Despite her mother repeatedly telling her to chew before eating more, she reached out for more meat before she even swallowed what was in her mouth. She kept saying ‘more, more’ intermittently. Her pronunciation of other words often became smudged, but ‘more’ was very clear. There didn’t seem to be a parent who could win against that.

“She eats way too much. She was born quite hefty too.”

“It’s a blessing for a child her age to eat well. But is it fine to feed her kimchi?”

“Just the washed ones. I heard that feeding kids sweet or salty stuff can get them bad habits. Sol, grab your spoon.”

Even Miso, who was always fiercely scolding the members of the play on stage with a script, was an endlessly kind mother in front of her daughter Sol. Maru wondered what the new guy would say after seeing this when he ended up crying after being scolded by Miso. He might tell her not to put on an act and act unjustified.

“I’ll pay.”

“You’re semi-unemployed; you don’t have any money. The toy was more than enough.”

Maru was putting out his card, but he had to put it back in his wallet when he saw the fierce glare. Now that Sol was in her father’s arms, Miso was not a mother; she was the vicious director of Blue Sky.

“Since we’re out, we should take a stroll with Sol.”

Taesik grabbed Sol’s hand and started walking. Maru and Miso walked behind him at a distance.

“She doesn’t cry that much.”

“Sure she doesn’t. She’s not crying now because she cried enough in the morning. Also, she just ate. She’ll cry again when she gets hungry.”

“She eats well and cries well. She must be healthy.”

Sol, who was walking by herself, suddenly leaned towards the side. Taesik had let go of her for a moment. Maru only noticed that Miso had moved when she took about two steps ahead. She was that

fast. Taesik grabbed the falling Sol with both of his hands and lifted her into the air. Sol, who was raised to her father's chest level, waved her hands and feet around in the air and smiled pleasantly. Daddy will give you an airplane - Taesik nonchalantly said. Miso slapped him on the back, and Taesik looked back at Miso, completely clueless about what he had just done.

"Be careful. You made her fall over like that last time."

"It's fine for a child to fall over."

"Are you going to take responsibility if it leaves a scar?"

"Okay, okay. I was in the wrong. Sol, daddy's sorry, okay?"

Taesik raised the white flag before there was even a fight. Sol, who had almost inadvertently become the cause of marital problems, just cluelessly raised her arms into the air, wanting to go higher. That bold personality of hers was just like her mother. The grumbling mother, the gentle father, and the child that walked between the two of them.

The figure of the three people made Maru take out an old photo from a cabinet in the depths of his memories. The daughter was giggling while smelling her father's socks, and the husband was waving around the socks in the air. There was also the wife who took out her phone saying she had to take a photo. His daughter was a grateful child who grew up without many problems, and his wife was a reassuring person who told her husband to get some rest after he quit his company. Was Gaeul around that age too? He wondered about that.

"This is why I can't let that guy take care of her."

Miso did a sermon about scars for Taesik before returning.

"What a harmonious family, other than the fact that the mother is a little scary."

"Why don't I become scary for real today?" Miso said while pulling up her sleeves.

The faces of the members of Blue Sky, who had been beaten by those thin arms of hers, flashed in front of his face. Maru waved his hand in the air in a flurry. He didn't want to get hit, even as a joke.

"You're quitting the troupe?" Miso asked when Taesik became a little more distant.

"Yes. It's too tiring, I can't keep up."

"Are you going to continue if I make it less tiring?"

"No. It's about time I go back to the screen and the TV. My dream is to earn tons of money with commercials and play around for the rest of my life. You know, like senior Joohyun."

"If that was the case, you shouldn't have kicked away the opportunities given to you before you went to the military."

"I must have not known what was right because I was young back then."

"Like hell you didn't. It was because of your escapist life."

Maru felt like a small needle had been poked between his ribs. Miso snorted as though she wasn't gonna be fooled.

"It's our 8th year, isn't it? I first saw you when you were in your first year of high school. I was wondering what was going on back then. I first thought you were intentionally moving to the side of being bullied because you couldn't adapt to school, but you ended up acting fine after taking the blame from everyone. I thought you were amazing. I mean, it's not easy for a young boy to endure being falsely blamed, is it? I got to find out more about you and found out that you are much more peculiar than I thought. While you were peculiar though, you were still acting within common sense. But your actions after graduation were completely outside both my common sense as well as what I knew about Han Maru's action patterns. Why did you abandon such a great opportunity and laugh your life out in the play scene where no one recognizes you instead? It didn't seem like you were waiting for the right time, and it didn't look like you were preparing something either. An exiled aristocrat might look like that. You know, they pretend to care about everything in the world but don't do anything about it. Or maybe, you weren't able to do that."

"You should've told me if it was obvious so that I could put up a better pretense."

"You're the type of guy who does things well by yourself, so I thought that you were doing something I didn't know about. It was when you announced that you were going to the military that I realized that you weren't doing anything like that. Other people are going so far to delay their military service as much as possible, but you enlisted as soon as you got the notification. That convinced me that you were running away."

"There's no better place of exile than the military after all. There's no one who knows me, and I don't know anyone there either. Two years, honestly, it was good. I almost ended up staying there<sup>[2]</sup>."

"Why didn't you? You wasted another year after leaving. That's so unlike you."

"There are times when people just want to stray off. Still, it's a good thing since I cleared myself up."

"For someone who cleared himself up, you didn't look that good, you know? Rather than looking like you cleared yourself up, you look like you just pushed it into a corner."

Maru smiled; It was an escapist smile. Miso wasn't someone he could fool or win against since she was comparing clues and facts about him like a lawyer. It would be much wiser to stay silent. Maybe her time bearing a child, giving birth, and raising her might have broadened her horizons. When he avoided the sharp question, Miso also switched the topic as though she had no intentions of pursuing this matter.

"Did you get any offers? I didn't hear anything from senior."

The senior that Miso talked about was probably president Lee Junmin.

"Not yet. As you said, I'm splendidly semi-unemployed."

"For a person like that, you look pretty confident. You look like you know that you'll get work soon."

"I have confidence in my skills after all. I have blind faith that advertisers would notice me and give me offers."



“Does senior count as one of those advertisers?”

“I’m not entirely sure about that. From how he hasn’t abandoned me yet, I think he intends to make use of me, but I can’t be sure if he likes me when I escaped to the military instead of listening to his words. I should try begging, I guess.”

“You don’t need to be worried about that since he would have cut you off a long time ago if you weren’t needed. He didn’t tell you to pull out of the apartment, did he?”

“Fortunately, not yet.”

“Then I guess he must be watching. Just like you said, he might give you some work in due time.”

“I should go find my own prey before he does. I should reassure him that I’m still intact. Only then will I be able to sleep easy in that apartment.”

“That place is pretty expensive. There’s the Han river view, and the redevelopment just finished. If I wanted to buy a place there with my own money....”

After writing some numbers with her index finger on her palm, Miso frowned, saying that it was absurdly high. There was no better word than ‘absurd’ to describe the price of that place. He was living in such a place. He was practically bringing the company losses by just living.

“You should definitely find work soon if you want to keep living there.”

“That’s the plan. Since we’re at it, are there any auditions I can take?”

“There are a few at the academy, but they’ve been assigned already. We have to give them things like that since they’re paying expensive tuition, or they will quit soon.”

“I was planning to get some free info, but that didn’t go well.”

“Hey, why are you even asking when you know it already?”

“I’m just that desperate.”

“Geez, I’ve never seen someone desperate make a face like you. Tell me honestly. Do you really not have anything? If you really don’t have anything to do, then just help out at Blue Sky. I can list you as a member and give you living expenses.”

“If you have money to give me, you should increase the wage for the new guys. At this rate, they might earn a million and a half per year.”

“You get paid as much as you work around here. How many do you think would want a fixed pay when they’re working as an actor? They’re getting paid a million and a half right now, but they’re doing it with the resolve to earn 150 million per performance in the future.”

“Man, the passion pay<sup>[3]</sup> hasn’t changed at all since before.”

“If you don’t like that, then you can pay their wage. I’m also in charge of distributing, so I feel gosh darn sorry every single time.”

"It's better than nothing. From what I hear, there seems to be quite a lot of people who didn't get their pay after the theater troupe went bust."

"It's not just one or two for sure. If you include the overwhelming majority who chose to stay silent because they knew there was no point arguing, the number is going to be enormous. It's not just the theaters. The situation with the RBS drama that ended a while ago seemed to be pretty serious too. The main actors all received their money, but the minor actors and staff didn't get any pay starting March."

"What a dirty place."

"Yet you and I are making a living in such a place. Get yourself together. You're twenty-five now. It's good to wander around a little, but I'd like to remind you that the opportunity to gain experience is decreasing."

"I'll keep that in mind."

He stopped wandering around after he enlisted. He just needed some time to check how much he could endure, and by endure, he was referring to meeting her, who could be the start of this cycle of reincarnation, and to loving her. It was impossible to deny her, hate her, and treat her like she was completely meaningless, but it became possible for him to package himself with lies and show it to others. Maru was planning to meet Gaeul in a while. As an old friend; as a colleague who cheered for each other. There would be no love there. She probably wouldn't feel that either. Her affection might have cooled off when he declared his break up a long time ago. There was no guarantee that doing so would break the cycle of reincarnation, but he had to be open to possibilities and experiment. He had to do anything in order to sever this curse of living the same time over and over again.

"Thanks for the food today."

"You're leaving?"

"Yes. Since I was treated, I might as well take the rest of the day off."

"Enjoy your unemployed life while you can. Once you start getting busy, you won't be able to."

"That's why I was planning to find the people I haven't seen for a while when I have the time. I have a full schedule tomorrow too."

"Don't just have others treat you. You should learn more about the market."

"Yes."

"The door to Blue Sky is always open, so you can come back any time. Or you can come to Film. The director might hire you if I ask."

"I'll think about it if I don't have any work at all. Of course, I'm never going back to Blue Sky. I don't think I can ever work under you again."

"Only I will use someone like you."

While they were conversing, Maru heard his phone ringing. He took out his phone from his pocket.

"It's Sooil."

“A popular actor wants to find an unemployed guy, huh.”

“True. Looks like I should latch onto him. I’ll leave now after saying goodbye to teacher. I’ll come back next time with another gift for Sol.”

“Alright, watch out on your way back.”

“Don’t forget to tell her that it was uncle Maru who bought her that dollhouse. I don’t want to get the cold shoulder from her later.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Maru approached Taesik and Sol and said goodbye.

“Let’s have a drink with just the two of us next time.”

“Yes, teacher.”

“I don’t know what kind of problems you had, but I believe that you’ll do well. You’ve been doing well until now after all.”

“I have to if I don’t want to go bankrupt. Sol, uncle’s leaving, okay? Say hi when we meet next time.”

He grabbed the tiny hand and shook it before returning to his car.

[1] Boiled pork, usually pork belly.

[2] As in, applying for staff personnel. Both NCOs and Officers are possible.

[3] You get paid with ‘passion’ instead of real money.

### **Chapter 766. Sequence 3**

It was 2 p.m. by the time he returned home. He took out the maesil-cheong<sup>[1]</sup> extract that he put in the corner of his dressing room and stripped the black vinyl cover and opened the lid. After blowing away the sour smell from the fermentation, he dipped a wooden chopstick into the contents and put it in his mouth. There was a strong sense of sweetness followed by a faint sourness. That was the taste he wanted. He took the bottle of muesli-cheong and honey-dipped ginger.

The car that moved around busily headed into Seoul. He turned his car into the familiar alley. As he was driving up the hill slowly with the window open, Maru heard a familiar sound. Woof woof, it was Dalgu, who had become old, barking. He took the maesil-cheong and the ginger and got out of the car. Behind Dalgu’s children, who were wagging their tails at the entrance, was Dalgu, who looked docile now.

“I see, you’re old huh.”

He opened the front gate. When the rusty iron door creaked open, the pups returned to their mother. Maru patted Dalgu, who yawned with her belly on the ground, on the head before standing in front of the main door.

“Elder, it’s me, Maru.”

He shouted while knocking on the door. A moment later, he heard a voice telling him to come in. He opened the door and went in. The smell of doenjang across the whole house as well as the furniture that was getting on in age along with the elder; the laundry that was in the middle of the living room as well as the books placed around here and there. It was just as he remembered from when he visited right after getting discharged. If there was a difference, it was that there were dog houses in red, yellow, and green on the way to the bedroom.

“They got houses.”

There were even nameplates on them. Dal-il, Dal-i, Dal-sam<sup>[2]</sup>. They were the names of Dalgu’s pups whose names didn’t have a shred of thought put into them. Were they really called that?

“Ganghwan brought them as a gift. Though, they aren’t much use since they rarely use them.”

He understood when he heard that they were Ganghwan’s work. The elder came out to the living room with a pot. Maru placed the food he brought on the table.

“What’s that?”

“Some maesil-cheong and some honey-dipped ginger. For the maesil, you can mix it with hot water whenever you have a bad stomach, and as for the ginger, you can just have them as a snack. I made them myself instead of buying them from the store. They’re precious.”

Maru took out one of the pieces of ginger with chopsticks.

“Here, have a taste. It tastes awesome.”

“You’re overreacting.”

The elder put the piece in his mouth with a smile. After chewing on it, his eyebrows twitched.

“Are you sure you were the one who did it?”

“I actually did. I received the knowledge from my mother, but I did everything from picking the ingredients to making the whole thing. How is it? Not bad, eh?”

“It suits my tastes perfectly.”

“Don’t give it to the drunkards that visit your house and eat them by yourself.”

“Those drunkards must be disappointed, but I guess I can’t help it. The one who gifted it to me doesn’t want them to go to other people.”

Maru took the pot that the elder was holding. It was boiling braised black beans. He picked up the long pair of wooden chopsticks right next to the stove and stirred them so that nothing stuck together.

“The one who will wed you will have an easy time. You can do everything by yourself.”

“My plan is to do the household chores. In this era, the man doesn’t really have to be the breadwinner. I will look after the house, do the laundry, look after the kids, and make the meals. I’d love to meet a competent wife and have an easy life.”

“Then first, you must meet someone to be your wife.”

“As much as I’d love to, there’s no one around me who likes me. Looks like I don’t have any charm.”

He put the braised black beans to one side and left the kitchen. The elder was sitting on the sofa with the three pups that came in from outside.

“I did hear that she give birth, but I never imagined it was to three of them.”

“It’s so hectic around here thanks to these ones. They’re so familiar around people like their mother. Every night, they would come to me and lick me. These little ones have such good stamina. They never run out of energy after running around all day.”

“As expected of Dalgu’s pups. But isn’t it good to have some bustle around here?”

The elder replied by tickling the puppies on the necks.

“How was the trip to Europe?”

“I realized how much of a pain it is to leave the house. But there were a lot of things to see.”

“There are people willing to take you on trips lined up, so you should take their offer.”

“I’m wondering if I have enough energy for that. It’s hard for an old man to move around.”

“I know you’re still energetic. Since we’re at it, what do you think about going on a trip with me? I will do my best. Though, you’ll have to walk quite a lot because I don’t have a lot of money.”

“You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you? Usually, people grow up when they go to the military, but you’ve gotten more sly.”

“Maybe it’s because I left a lot of things there. I feel so light that I might fly off somewhere.”

Maru started folding the laundry neatly and piled it in front of the sofa. He felt at ease as though he had made a visit to his own grandfather. He visited around the time it would become awkward to visit again, so he felt like this place was his own house. He even felt like he should place his set of cutlery and toothbrush here. Everyone who visits this place might feel like that though.

“It’s as you say. It seems you have left a lot of things there. Is it just me who thinks that you’ve left behind some things you shouldn’t have as well?”

Maru smiled and stood up with the folded laundry. The elder shouldn’t have miraculous powers that looked into the minds of others. After all, God was petty and did not scatter his powers anywhere. Was it the power of experience that allowed him to see through other people’s hearts despite not having magical powers? Or did he show it on his face without knowing?

He thought about it while putting the laundry in the drawers. About the things he shouldn’t have left behind. A dark corner in the drawer seemed to be whispering to him: you didn’t leave them behind, you are pretending that you have left them behind. You’re pretending to have left behind Han Gaeul.

“Sure.”

He pushed the drawers shut. He still missed and longed for her, but he had already entered a path of no return. In her memories, the one known as Han Maru might have become a ‘wretch’ after ending their

relationship with a simple 'let's break up'. In fact, that was too good of a treatment for someone who had fallen silent after a one-sided announcement.

"Am I even a wretch in her heart?"

If he was a wretch, it would mean that he still remained in a corner of her memories. If she had ripped out Han Maru from her memories like ripping out a page from a note, he would become nothing more than a 'passerby A' in her life. A wretch was better than a passerby, wasn't it? He was planning to meet her in a while. He looked forward to, and at the same time, worried about the expression she would show. He would feel hurt if she greeted him nicely, but he would also be hurt if she looked at him with contempt as well. The consequences of meeting her were that he was bound to end up with depression and self-loathing, no matter how it turned out.

"Should I bring some drinks?"

"I was wondering when you were going to say that."

The drunkards that visited this place, aka, Junmin, Ganghwan, Geunsoo, and Sooil, all left behind traces under the sink, in the cupboard, and in the fridge. The drink that one had to wait 2 years after ordering in order to get was tragically contained under the sink. The bottles of drinks that were lined up next to it were all quite valuable as well, but they were nothing more than deadweights in this house. The elder's preference was always soju.

In the cupboard were dry drinking snacks from all over the globe. A cursory glance would be equivalent to a trip around the world. He took out two of them at random. As these were all snacks that passed the quality test of the picky drunkards that visited this place, there was no real need to hesitate. He took out some budaе-jjigae<sup>[3]</sup> that could be made easily from the fridge and boiled them before putting them on the table.

"Here, have a drink."

He accepted a glass from the elder and took the bottle from him. After toasting with the elder lightly, he emptied the drink in one go.

"If you're going to cry, tell me beforehand. Don't just go crying without warning like you did last time. I may look like I'm experienced with most things in the world, but I'm bound to panic if a young man past twenty suddenly starts wailing on the spot."

"Elder, that was already three years ago."

"I'm saying it because you look exactly like how you looked back then. Don't you think you should give me some time to prepare? I'd have to give you some tissues if you start crying again."

"Please forget that time. I was not right in my mind because it was right before enlisting."

"Oh please, something other than the military was the problem. Try fooling someone else. It's not like I've only seen you for a day or two."

"This is why I can't even lie in front of you, elder. I had the confidence that no one else would find out, but you keep seeing right through me."

“Weren’t you practically flaunting your sadness in front of me?”

Maru smiled and said that that might be the case. The drunken sensation spread through his blood vessels. Outside, he didn’t get drunk no matter how many bottles he drank, but he got drunk after just a few glasses in front of the elder. The fact that he didn’t have to put on an intricate mask, and that he could act spoiled in front of the elder disarmed all of his defenses. This place was the reed forest; the only place where he could shout that the King’s ears were donkey ears.

“Elder. Do you remember a story I told you about before? That I was forty-five in a dream?”

“I do.”

“You told me this back then: I should try hitting the world as a reality and not look at it as scenery. You were entirely right. When I tried it, things went easier than I was worried about. I no longer have any fears about not being able to act. It doesn’t matter if I become poor as well. I can be satisfied as long as I can continue acting in my life. However, I realized that there were things in this world that you just simply can’t clash against.”

“If you can’t clash against it, you can only avoid it.”

“That must be how it is, right?”

“From the looks of you, you don’t seem to like that decision. You said you had a girl you liked, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you break up?”

“I told her that we should break up when I was a complete idiot without anything good about myself. That was three years ago. That’s how I ended up acting spoiled in front of you. That’s the reason this fully grown-up man wailed in front of you.”

“What is the reason that this girl became something you could not clash against?”

“Would you believe me if I said that the heavens have decreed so?”

The elder sighed before drinking. He neither mocked nor nagged him for being so vague.

“If there’s a clear reason you can’t, then you should forget about it.”

“I think so too.”

“But thinking that and carrying it out is different. I don’t know what your circumstances are, but I hope you don’t make decisions that you would regret. Usually, choosing something you know you would regret because you had no other choice doesn’t end up that well.”

“What if both choices end up with regret?” Maru asked as he put down the glass.

“For problems you can’t do anything about, there are only decisions that you can’t do anything about. If everything went the way you expected it to, you can’t call that life.”

The elder raised the bottle.

“I’m sorry I can’t give you a useful answer.”

“You were much more helpful than those plausible-sounding lies. I guess the only answer to a problem you don’t have a choice for is a decision you don’t have a choice about. I’m sure I’ll end up regretting it, but if that one regret is enough to end it, I will be satisfied with it. It’s better than tasting regret repeatedly.”

Maru propped up the glass. He already had the answer: to not enter a deep relationship with her. He just wanted conviction. He wanted to know if this was the right choice or not. He would only find out the result of this choice on the day he dies. If his life ends, he would have been right. If it was repeated....

“If you made the wrong choice and regret it to the point you feel like crying again, you can come over and cry again. You can do that as much as you want while I’m alive.”

“Oh, please, elder. That was my last cry. There will only be happy things in the future.”

He had lost something he couldn’t afford to lose. A person who no longer had anything to lose should not possess any sadness. Maru smiled and grabbed the glass. From how he found smiling not so difficult, it seemed humans were bound to adapt after all; to a life with her; to *him* without her.

“The pain won’t last forever.”

Those were the elder’s words.

[1] Green plum juice concentrate.

[2] Respectively, Dal-one, Dal-two, Dal-three. Dalgoo also happens to be Dal-nine.

[3] Korean army soup.

### **Chapter 767. Sequence 3**

Sooil came around when they had emptied a bottle of soju. Dalgoo, who had been docile until now, wagged her tail and welcomed Sooil. Perhaps even dogs recognized a handsome man. Dalgoo strolled around Sooil, biting his leg sleeves in a playful manner.

“Sir, I’m here.”

“Alright, come on in. Thanks for coming all the way here in this hot weather.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Maru waved his hand to greet him. He got a call when he was about to part with Miso, and when Sooil told him that they should meet up, they scheduled a meeting in the elder’s home. Sooil’s head touched the bug net that went across above the door.

“Man, tall guys are definitely different. Your head can reach that thing?”

“There you go again, even though we just met.”

“I’m just envious. My growth spurt fizzled out in high school and I haven’t grown a single centimeter, but someone has reached a whopping 187cm. Elder, I look better than someone who’s huge like him, don’t I?”



“Sooil looks much better to the eyes. You’re asking the obvious.”

“Elder, my maesil and honey-dipped ginger are crying. Please side with me here.”

Sooil entered the kitchen with paper bags in both of his hands and started putting away the things he brought under the sink, in the cupboard, and in the fridge. Maru also stood up and went over to him.

“You brought a lot.”

“I can’t come empty-handed when I’m coming to the elder’s house. Oh, put that in the fridge for me.”

Maru put the ginseng extract in the vegetable cabin in the fridge. Ginseng extract was added to the never ending list of healthy foods.

“Elder, you’re gonna have to skip your meals and eat these only if you want to finish them.”

“Take some when you leave. Also, Sooil, you didn’t bring more, did you?”

Oh, of course not - said Sooil before taking out the ginseng extract from the fridge. After organizing the things, he picked up a soju glass from the kitchen and returned to the table.

“You should have some as well.”

The elder poured some soju for Sooil. The talk with the elder, which was interrupted halfway through the story about his trip to Europe, resumed again. A glass during the plains that he saw on the train, another glass while talking about the focaccia he ate in a restaurant he didn’t know the name of, a glass over talking about some wine he drank at a famous chateau. When the elder started talking about coming back to the lodging and lying down, empty soju bottles had filled the table.

“We should stop drinking. The doctor said I should restrain myself.”

“I’ll go lay out the futon.”

Maru went into the bedroom and laid out the futon. After entering the room, the elder slowly kneeled down before sitting down on the floor.

“You’re visiting the hospital right? I heard that looking after arthritis early is the best way to recover.”

“I’m going to the hospital lest you nag me. Still, it’s rather fortunate. I didn’t get injured anywhere big, and it’s just a slight pain in the knees. At my age, it’s not strange to find a body part that’s broken beyond healing.”

“There you go saying things like that again. You should shoot another piece once you have had enough rest.”

“I wonder if I even have the energy to do one.”

“I’ll carry you to the shooting set on my back if I have to, so don’t worry about your energy. Then I’ll turn off the lights.”

Maru turned off the lights after hearing the elder say to him that he should stay longer. He quietly closed the door so that it didn’t make a sound. He also closed the metallic fence so that Dalgoo’s pups couldn’t scratch the door. Dalgoo’s pups lingered around as though they were bothered by the absence

of their owner, but Dalgoo came by and took them to their house. The old dog seemed to know how important their old owner's rest was.

"I heard that you've finished your last performance. We should toast, right?"

"It's been ages. Also, if you wanted to congratulate me, you should've come yourself. If you came by, we would have sold several times the tickets that were actually sold."

Maru grumbled as he extended his empty glass out.

"I'll definitely make the time to visit."

"You're all talk. This is why handsome guys are no good. You only make lies with your handsome faces."

"Why does it come to that again? Also, you know that I have an earnest and good image in public."

Sooil's signature dimple smile appeared. Maru saw that smile numerous times on TV. Starting with the movie that he shot with Geunsoo, he became known as the blue chip of Chungmuro and soon became well known through films and various TV programs. A new person was added to maestro Junmin's list of new recruit excavations. He made his presence known through frequent appearances, and thanks to his discreet good deeds, acting skills, and even his handsome and tall figure, it didn't take long for him to turn from a blue chip to a star. He was popular but lacked presence before, but that was solved in one go as well.

"If I keep lying without getting found out, that's no different from the truth. I saw the photo that was shot at the charity bazaar. Anyone would think that you're a good guy."

"That's my specialty after all. There's probably no one better than me who can act the part of a good civilian, you know?"

"There is one more in my head."

"Who?"

"Kang Giwoo."

Sooil, who was bringing his glass closer to his mouth, suddenly smiled faintly. He looked as though he was saying 'he's as good as me'.

"How long are you going to be an actor?"

"Until I die."

"Why don't you just stop and inherit your chaebol grandfather's wealth. There's you and there's Kang Giwoo too. You guys have super rich grandfathers. I don't get why you're trying to take over the acting industry as well. Ordinary citizens like me have it frustrating, you know?"

"It's been a long time since I met anyone from the side. At most, I just say hi to my parents over the phone from time to time."

"Oh my god. I can't believe you chose to become an actor and ditch being super rich. Not only that, you were even successful! Is there even a god? If it's so unfair, what is the point of living?"

"I'm just that well-off, what can you do about it?"

"This is the kind of stuff I should shoot and post on youtube. Title: Pure-man Yoo Sooil actually turns out to be a total cocky bastard."

"I'm sorry, but I don't do this anywhere. No one would believe it even if you do."

Sooil chuckled and waved the bottle of soju. During high school, he loathed himself for doing good deeds and being polite without actually meaning it, but now, he became able to just joke about it. It felt like the things he did out of a sense of duty became a habit and one with him and had settled as an element of him. Sooil would probably continue to do good deeds even if other people wanted him to stop, whether or not it was out of his own will or not. He probably realized that life was too long to give meaning to every one of his actions. This was how adults usually came to be.

"I wonder how long we can sit here and chat like this," Sooil said with a flushed face.

"Why are you already talking about something you should be talking about in your later years in life? Did something happen?"

"Nah, I was just thinking that the elder has gotten quite old, and that just felt rather sad to me."

"He's still healthy. Stop talking about unlucky things."

"He should be. I would be really disappointed if I could no longer come here."

"That's why you should come here often and say hello. He smiles a lot if a handsome guy acts cute in front of him."

"Rather than me, I think you should be the one to visit more often, you know? He likes you more than me."

"Are you a kid? You already have everything. You'll be punished if you even want to take the love other people get from their elders. You should make do with what you already have. Leave being doted on by the elder to me."

"Yeah, you can have that."

Sooil clutched his forehead and leaned back on the sofa. Maru poured some cold water into a glass and gave it to him. The way he undid a few top buttons and gulped down the water was like it was a scene straight out of a fashion magazine. No wonder women were all over him.

Sooil, who had been sighing, raised his phone up high and took photos. He seemed like he was going to post it on his social media.

"Han Maru, come over for a sec."

"Why?"

"You should make your face known."

"If it's like that, then gladly."

The moment Sooil posted a photo on the social network, people on the internet started taking an interest. The number of likes and comments increased by the second. Sooil said that he wanted to show something interesting to him and turned on the alarm function for the social media app. His phone started vibrating like it was going to explode along with endless alarm noises. Sooil turned off the alarm quickly. He looked at the door to the bedroom where the elder was and sighed in relief.

“You're full of bullshit.”

Maru took Sooil's phone away and checked the social media post. A hundred comments appeared in that short moment. He could indirectly experience the popularity of a young star who was active on social media.

“I put a hashtag Han Maru on there, so people should be looking you up.”

“I hope they search me a lot and get to know me. I'd love to do that commercial thing.”

“Why did you have to go to the military back then? Even the president, who doesn't usually interfere, kicked himself out of his office when he heard you were going to the military. I saw his expression back then, and he looked like he would be less surprised to see an alien suddenly appearing in front of him.”

“I should slave away and repay my gratitude. I finished the play I was doing, so I should aim for the TV again.”

The girl he only thought of as someone he should be responsible for was doing extremely well, so there was no need to worry about her. As long as he took care of himself, this life would go on without any problems.

“You're leaving Daehak-ro?”

“If anyone's looking for me, I should run over in a heartbeat and if not, I should look for one. I should get something if I work away as a cheap minor role for a while.”

“I guess there's no need to worry about you then.”

Sooil turned his hand around while looking at the phone. Maru looked at the phone screen that was facing him.

“The president wants to see you. Looks like he wants you to prepare yourself since you've been resting for a long time.”

“When did he find out?”

“I think Miso-noona reported that you were leaving Blue Sky.”

“Gee, that noo-nim had to blurt everything out without holding back. She can't keep secrets. What would I be able to talk about in front of her in the future?”

“Sorry to tell you this, but I also texted him as well. I found you despicable for trying to act like someone unemployed when you have the skill.”

Maru found it scary that a guy who could make such a smirk was the symbol of kindness in the media. This was why the image-making business was not something anyone did. Maru grabbed his phone which

he placed on the ground. He got a text from Junmin: If you're drunk, sober up, I'm going over. The heavyweight was coming.

"He wants us to sober up."

"Then I guess I should."

Sooil staggered up before going over to the fridge and opening it. Maru also crawled over and looked inside. There were various hangover drinks filling the place. The preferences of the drunkards that visited this place also took a corner. He took out some deeply brewed oriental raisin water. This was something that Junmin had placed here.

"He won't say something because we drank some of this, right?"

"Then we should just put some water in it after drinking it."

Maru opened the bottle.

### **Chapter 768. Sequence 3**

"Looks like I should go."

Junmin stood up while putting on his top hat. Park Sunggoo, who sat opposite him, put down his fork.

"What is it?"

"The prodigal son has gotten himself together, so I should make a visit."

"Who is it to make Lee Junmin skip a meal when he places so much importance on having meals on time?"

"Han Maru. Do you remember him?"

"I do. He's a smart kid after all. I get calls from him from time to time, and recently, I got a call from him after he got discharged."

"So he might act dumb, but he still contacts everyone he should."

"According to his words, he can't lose a connection to someone in the legal field. He told that to me straight."

"He knows your personality. You've taken a liking to him, haven't you?"

"Do you think I'm someone who would pick up unnecessary calls?"

After wiping his mouth with a napkin, Sunggoo also stood up.

"You're standing up too?"

"I don't have a hobby of eating by myself in a place like this. Rather than that, it's fortunate that you didn't call Kang Seoyeon. If you said you're leaving in the middle of a meal when she was here, I wouldn't have been able to bear the consequences."

“That makes me feel chilly just by thinking about it. She would have lectured me about my lack of sociability using all sorts of incomprehensible psychology jargon.”

“Seoyeon loves to bully you after all.”

They paid for their meals before leaving. Junmin went out to the streets and was about to reach his hand out to grab a taxi when a black sedan honked its horn and stopped in front of him. It was Sunggoo’s car.

“Let me see that guy’s face after all this while too. I’m curious as to how that smartypants grew up.”

“I’m going to senior Yoon’s house right now.”

“That’s even better. I should say hello to him as well. Hop in.”

He got in the car and closed the door. A photo of his friend and his daughter swayed under the rearview mirror.

“Did Minjeong return to Korea from Europe?”

“She did, but I’m not so sure she will stay. She’s one mischievous lady who loves going outside, so she might leave soon.”

“You have it difficult, supporting your daughter’s lifestyle while working hard.”

“At least I’m still a father. I’m much better than a certain man in his fifties who has parties with some dogs at home. Don’t you think it’s about time you finish playing house with your dogs?”

“Maybe it’s because I’ve been living for so long with them, but I find it awkward to find people at home now. Maybe I’m destined to grow old and die like this.”

“I’m kinda scared because you might have named one of those numerous dogs Jung Haejoo.”

“I think there was one.”

Sunggoo clicked his tongue and shook his head. For the past 20 years, this fellow had praised marriage endlessly and still put blind faith in the greatness of marriage. It was an open secret that Kang Seoyeon was behind his actions by lecturing about how marriage is the salvation of this world.

“Poor Seoyeon. At her age, it wouldn’t have been strange for her to have married five times, but she’s getting old by herself because she fell for a certain twisted person.”

“If you’re pitying Seoyeon so much, you can have her as your second.”

“Excuse me, president Lee Junmin. You shouldn’t say something like that in front of a lawyer. I think you’re forgetting who’s the attorney of the JA business.”

“It’s because you know that I’m only saying it as a joke.”

Junmin opened the window. A heat that could not be cooled off by the AC alone kept circling around in his head. It must be some sort of disorder for him to become emotional from just hearing the name Jung Haejoo. Junmin wished for that disorder to be with him until his death. It was proof that he still remembered her after all.

“The YM family is becoming noisy these days,” Sunggoo said as he turned the wheel to the right.

“What happened?”

“The chairman, who looked like a man of steel, has fallen from the mainline of work, and there has been a lot of noise ever since his son took over his role. The power structure is quite solid, but they do have a lot of subsidiaries after all. The people who would become falling leaves if people with shares shake the tree will probably play it safe, but the ones who already earned enough aren't afraid of that. A problem was also raised with circular investment when it's supposed to be glossed over.”

“Whether it's SC, DK, or YM, I don't think I've made any of them my enemies, so I don't think I would care as long as they maintain their familial power.”

“For JA Production, sure. But the shift in shares in YM is a little bit interesting. Though, that only applies to me.”

“Shift in shares?”

“The YM Living shares that the chairman held are going over to something interesting. They're shifting the shares in order to reform the ruling structure, and it's Logistics that's buying all the shares in Living at a cheap price.”

“Logistics you say....”

“The shares held by Logistics, which the first son has a tight rule over, have increased while changing the investment structure, and now, YM's circular investment will be centered around Logistics. What I want to say is that it's not a simple shift in axis. Apparently, there will be a big investment in one of the thick branches of Logistics.”

“Now I get why you're talking about YM. It's Soul Entertainment, isn't it?”

“It's the place where the grandson of the chairman is. They also possess the biggest music streaming site in the country. I heard that there's not a single place that is not submissive to them in the music industry. An unknown singer can be made into a shooting star just by giving them a small promotion and putting them on the front page.”

“They approached a few of us too. Their condition was 11:0<sup>[1]</sup>, on top of contract cancellation fees as well as taxes to take one of my own.”

“He's on the offense, alright.”

Junmin closed the window. His head cooled down due to talking about work.

“I did meet him once a long time ago. He was a white-collar man back then, but somehow, he ended up working in this field.”

“You met Hong Janghae? And way before too?”

“Geunsoo. You've met him a few times too, haven't you?”

“Geunsoo... Hong Geunsoo. Don't tell me he's the father?”

“He is. And he’s no ordinary man. I haven’t seen him since he switched jobs, but just his business skills make me impressed. The fact that he monopolized the music market first was really big. If I was raising idols, I would have gone to see him several times.”

“I just thought he was a gentle-looking man when I met him before.”

“From what Geunsoo told me, his nice-looking impression isn’t all there is to him. I can’t tell you the details, but he’s definitely not someone I would share a drink with.”

“If you are saying such a thing, I guess his character must be rock-bottom. You’re someone who would accept a drink from your archenemies after all.”

Junmin thought about the figure of Hong Janghae which had been completed with the help of what Geunsoo told him. When they first met, he thought that he was a typical father who was opposed to his son going down a rocky path. It was when he talked to Geunsoo that he found out that he wasn’t. While Geunsoo just described him as a ‘strict father’, he intuitively realized that there was more to him than just that after seeing him mention his father’s name with viciousness in his eyes. From how Geunsoo hid everything about his father when he was usually open about anything, Junmin was sure that the father was far from being decent.

“Whether it’s the previous chairman of YM or the new succeeding one, I think their faith in Hong Janghae is very immense. You can just see that from how he’s the one taking care of the chairman’s grandson.”

“I don’t care what they’re up to. I just have to take care of my own people. I will have to meet him if they keep bothering my people, but he’s not that stupid, so I’m sure he’ll stop soon.”

The car arrived at Moonjoong’s house. He saw Maru’s car right in front of the front gate. Behind that was Sooil’s car.

“It’s been a while since I came here. I wonder if the senior still remembers me.”

“I’m sure he remembers you as ‘Junmin’s friend little Park who can drink a little’ or something along those lines. Let’s go in for now.”

He opened the door. The two people watching TV on the sofa both stood up, welcoming them in. In front of them was a table set up for drinking.

“Did you already have a drink?”

“Yes, the first round is over already. But what brings you here, lawyer Park?”

Maru stood in front of Sunggoo.

“Well, things just happened. You’ve become quite manly.”

“It’s been four years. I should have gone to find you way before.”

“A call is more than enough. I was in Europe too after all. Rather than that, I never imagined the actor my daughter really likes would be here.”

Sunggoo reached his hand out to Sooil.



“Should I call you Yoo Sooil or Lee Jaeho?”

“I’m not sure if the Lee family still considers me as a member anymore. I didn’t know I would see you here.”

“You should show up at my house once in a while. And meet my daughter while you’re at it. When you were young, you were always following me, calling me ahjussi, but now that you’re grown up, you don’t even show any interest in me, huh. Is that how it is now that you are successful?”

“No way.”

Sooil led them to the drinking table in front of the sofa. Maru, who was standing afar, asked in a small voice,

“So lawyer Park and Sooil turned out to know each other.”

Junmin said that they were pretty close.

“Is senior asleep?”

“Yes. He was drinking until just a while ago, and he went to his room to sleep after feeling tired.”

“Looks like I should say hello tomorrow morning.”

Junmin took off his top hat and put it on the ground. As soon as he put it down, Dalgoo’s pups ran over and bit on the hat’s shade. This was the fourth time already, so Junmin gave up on it. He just threw the hat so that they could play with it.

“Allow me to pour you a drink. First, lawyer Park.”

“Are you okay with pouring one for me before your president?”

Sunggoo reached his glass out with a smile.

“I know the president has a wide heart.”

“That’s right, rather than the owner of a company who’s half out of business, you should look good to lawyer Park who still visits the Supreme Court and the high court like his own house.”

“My words exactly.”

Maru joked around before pouring the drink into Sunggoo’s glass. Maru had become a lot cheesier ever since he came back from the military. His calculative and rational analytic skills were the same as ever, but his expressions and speech had become a lot more flexible as though he had some leisure now. He looked like someone who was happy to have put down his burdens.

Junmin also grabbed his glass.

“Let’s have a light drink first.”

He quenched his thirst with some soju. The liquor that brushed the back of his tongue while he swallowed was very sweet. The guy who said he would go to the military looking like a totally defeated soldier was making jokes with a leisurely attitude, so he felt energetic to see that. Maru was someone

who always caught his nerves. Considering his value alone, he was way below Sooil in terms of worth since a long time ago, but the strange sense of expectation that he would do something big one day made Junmin keep him by his side. It was probably when he accepted the 300 million won deal that his expectations started growing.

He was neither dragged by nor suppressed by money. He was free from the gravity of money but was hung up on something else. Junmin saw that as a shackle. Though, it might have been something important to Maru.

Ever since he got discharged, Maru had become a balloon. At first, he was rather weirded out since the man who looked like an anchor at the bottom of the ocean had turned into someone that would fly away in a breeze, but he soon found out that his nature hadn't changed. The thing that dragged him down must have disappeared. Or, Maru had decided to leave that behind.

"We should talk about work," Junmin said as soon as he put down the glass.

"President, this is just the first glass."

"There's no better time to talk about work than the first glass."

He saw Sooil slowly backing away, but he decided not to mind for today. His objective was the ever-grinning Maru in front of him.

"You had enough rest, haven't you?" Junmin said.

[1] Meaning the ones who will go to Soul will get paid 10% more than when they were in JA.

#### **Chapter 769. Sequence 4**

"I'm sorry, but you can't come too far forward. Please maintain a distance."

"Hey, back off!"

A burly staff member said those words as he blocked the fans.

Kwon Jeonga looked at the obsessive fan who reached her arms out under the armpits of the staff to ask for a handshake before sighing. Considering the reputation of the actor she was going to interview today, there would be an uproar if she made a mistake during the interview. She recalled how she mispronounced the name of an idol due to a mistake, and that ended up going on TV without being edited out. She received murder threats from a group of unidentified people.

"It must be hard doing an interview in a place like this all the time."

Jeonga ended up smiling at the person who spoke to her in a low voice with his head lowered. She fixed her eyes on the gentle-looking eyes under the thick eyebrows. She wondered if it was really okay for a man's eyes to look so gentle.

"Mr. Giwoo, we're on standby. We're going to walk slowly, and as for your eyes, you can look anywhere you're comfortable with."

"Okay. Please take care of me, everyone."

The fans around all started screeching when they heard Kang Giwoo's deep baritone voice. Jeonga also almost screamed out 'oppa' while raising the cue sheet up high. This man was two years younger than her, but heck, a handsome guy was always an oppa.

"Ready, cue!"

At the producer's cue sign, she looked at the camera. She had seven years of experience in doing street interviews. She was planning to use all her know-how today.

"Hello, everyone! This is Kwon Jeonga from Roadview. I'm sure you all must be annoyed because it's hot both outdoors and indoors, right? Allow me to introduce to you an actor who will blow away all those annoyances. The man who makes people refreshed just by being looked at; the man stepping the boundaries of film and drama like it's his own house! Please welcome, Mr. Kang Giwoo!"

Along with the applause from the audience, Giwoo's greeting began.

"Hello. This is Kang Giwoo, who wants to become a good actor. Nice to meet you, everyone."

Giwoo greeted the camera before turning around to kowtow before the fans behind him. This wasn't agreed upon beforehand, so Jeonga looked at the producer for further signs. The producer in question gestured at her to continue with satisfaction.

"Mr. Giwoo. Do you know how much we wanted to see you? We've asked you to come to Roadview several times until now. Why did you come just now?"

"I also wanted to come because I enjoy watching Roadview, but I was too busy. And I mean it."

"Well, I guess it's true that you've been busy. You were in two films and two drama series just last year, weren't you?"

"That was a really busy year. I don't think I've ever been so busy in my life. While it was a great opportunity for me to grow as an actor, I also wanted to rest."

Giwoo smoothly answered her. As expected of the number 1 actor who reporters found it easy to interview. Compared to the actors who always answered in short phrases, Giwoo was a master of interviews as well as a saving grace for reporters. Asking him one thing would get ten answered back, so there was a lot of fun in asking questions.

They walked towards the restaurant they had predetermined. On the way there, they also had a talk with the fans. Jeonga wanted to bring an obsessive girl in front of Giwoo, but she ended up doing the talk with a docile-looking girl due to the producer's signal. Giwoo gave the girl a light hug as a goodbye gift. Jeonga felt a little envious as she looked at the girl who was drowning in happiness, wondering what it felt like.

They walked inside the restaurant. While proceeding with the interview, asking him about recent events, the program writer wrote a new question on a sketchbook and lifted it up. It was a simple question that they didn't need to ask for approval beforehand.

"In your opinion, what is the piece that made the current actor Kang Giwoo?"

“Well, all the pieces I’ve done until now possess important meaning to me, so I can’t exactly choose one.”

“But people are bound to have things that are called their turning points in life, right? I think you should have something like that too.”

Giwoo stroked his chin. His fingers slid across the slightly grown beard, and Jeonga now knew how a man could look sexy. Giwoo, who groaned in a cute manner, opened his eyes and spoke,

“Have you ever seen the works I’ve appeared in?”

“Of course. I haven’t said it yet, but I’m a fan of yours too.”

“Then why don’t you choose one for me, Miss Jeonga?”

“Me?”

As she was thinking about how to answer that, the producer paused the shoot. Giwoo’s face had become sweaty. Makeup artists soon came around. She saw the new writer rush over to the store employee. It was probably due to the air conditioner. It was quite cool when they just entered the restaurant, but it had become hot while they didn’t know it. Only then did Jeonga realize that the air conditioner on the ceiling was silent. It seemed to have stopped.

“It’s quite hot, isn’t it?” Giwoo said. He held out a bottle of water while his makeup was being fixed.

Jeonga accepted the water bottle.

“This is more than enough. It’s not like we’re shooting outside after all.”

“That’s true, it’s better than the festival you ran before. I think it was two years ago? In Seoul plaza.”

Jeonga went through her memories. She remembered how she was left with proceeding a festival under the blazing sun. It only showed up for a brief moment on TV, but she had worked there for a whole four hours. The vicious heat suddenly became vivid, and at the same time, she felt thankful to Giwoo who talked about an event that even she had forgotten about.

“I do remember that. But how do you know about it?”

“I saw a glimpse of you before. Also, I looked it up again because I have an interview with Roadview today. We can only talk to each other if we have some basic knowledge of each other.”

The producer said that they would resume the shoot. Jeonga inwardly exclaimed as she watched Giwoo sit up with a clear smile on his face. While it was a natural thing for the reporter to investigate the actor they were interviewing as preparatory work, the opposite wasn’t true. Even if Giwoo’s considerations were just out of formality, she was surprised that he had prepared something at all.

She collected herself after being in awe, before continuing with the interview.

“If I could be so bold as to choose a piece that made you mature as an actor, I would like to pick ‘Building’. You’ve made yourself known through ‘New Semester’ before that, but I think Building was the movie that left the deepest impression on the audience.”

“Building is also a very meaningful work for me. But when I first heard that I would be in it, I was very worried. Not only was it a disaster movie, but the scale was also quite big as well. On top of that, it pressured me when I found out that senior Lee Hyuk and senior Ahn Joohyun were going to be acting with me. They are splendid actors after all. I couldn’t sleep at night back then because I thought I would get in trouble if I didn’t do well.”

“The first time is hard for anyone. Despite those worries though, you managed to splendidly decorate the cinemas. There were no acting skill controversies, and in fact, you were highly praised as it was the birth of a new worthy actor.”

Giwoo scratched the back of his head and smiled in embarrassment. This was an image of a boy that was discovered in the midst of a grown man. Jeonga saw the eyes of the writers sitting next to the producer sparkle. It was absolute allegiance. Jeonga thought that she probably had the same eyes as them.

“It’s quite embarrassing. It’s only thanks to the scenario and the acting of the seniors that my lack of skill wasn’t pronounced. I was lucky.”

“You’re being way too humble. Tell me honestly. Don’t you think you did well?”

Giwoo hesitated for a while before replying ‘I just said heck it but then did well’. This guy possessed a sense of humor as well. He knew when to dive and went to surface. The producer looked satisfied as well.

“How did you feel when you found out that you were an actor of 10 million tickets?”

“You might think that it’s an obvious answer, but it felt like a dream. Of course, I’m sure that the senior actors and the skills of the directors were the main driving forces of those 10 million tickets, but I dare say I greased the train that was rushing towards the 10 million mark. I was happy. Actually, after the movie got released, I watched it three times in secret. Among those 10 million, three of them were from me.”

“Did you watch it by yourself?”

“Yes. When I did, I really regretted it. I thought I could do better. I think it was back then that I resolved that I should try harder so that I would regret less while watching my own work. Though, I still find many things lacking if I have a look at the footage that gets shot.”

“I’m sure no one can find fault in your acting skills, Mr. Giwoo. Actor Choi Jaewoo once mentioned that you were a promising youth actor. Do you know that?”

“I did. I’m not gonna lie. I jumped on the spot when I found out that a senior I respect said something like that about me.”

“Uhhh, I’m sorry for asking, but can you think of what happened back then and reenact it for us?”

Giwoo smiled awkwardly before standing up and jumping on the spot. He was quite tall, so he looked like his head was about to bump into the ceiling. This man was not hypocritical, he definitely had a pure side to him- Jeonga thought such as she told him that he had done enough when he covered his face in embarrassment. She then continued the interview.

“Oh, here comes a question filled with the writers’ ulterior motives. Are you perhaps dating anyone right now?”

“I really wish I was.”

“Are you sure you aren’t meeting someone in secret while saying those words?”

“In fact, I would love it if that was the case. It’s another wish of mine to meet someone good and live a happy life, but maybe because the acting side went so well, I don’t have any talent on the romantic side.”

“Then here comes a sudden question! I, Kang Giwoo, have received a confession from an actress, yes or no!”

Giwoo waved his hand and looked around.

“I wish that was the case, but it never happened. It looks like I’m not that charming as a man.”

“Now, that’s an answer I can’t believe. Mr. Giwoo, are you sure we won’t find you through a dating scandal later?”

“If I ever find someone I like, I would love to reveal it on Roadview first. I can promise you that.”

“You know that what you said was caught by the camera, right? If you are ever in a good relationship later, you must tell us about it, okay?”

“Of course.”

The interview progressed smoothly. There weren’t many questions left.

“Since we talked about your past works, we can’t not talk about your upcoming drama. ‘Doctor’, what is this drama about?”

“I can’t tell you a lot of things because we haven’t started the shoot yet, but I can assure you that it’s a passionate story regarding passionate actors.”

“From the rumors, I heard that you were going to be showing a good chemistry with Miss Han Gaeul.”

“I met Gaeul when we were doing ‘Building’. We are friends with acting skills that are on par with each other. But ‘chemistry’ doesn’t really fit the context here. She doesn’t see me as a man.”

“Oh, did Miss Han Gaeul appear in Building as well?”

“Yes, she showed really good acting. I heard that even the director back then stood up to applause. She had a short role, but her role left a deep impression, so I learned a lot as well.”

“I see. So the meeting from 5 years ago is continuing through this drama.”

“That’s how it is.”

“Do you know that YBS has also scheduled a medical drama, just like ‘Doctor’?”

“Yes. I have heard. From how their shooting schedule is similar, it seems likely that we’ll be aired at around the same time.”

“Are you confident?”

“I’m not sure. The only thing I can do is do my best in my position. The results are for the viewers to judge. Well, I do hope that our drama does better. I don’t like losing that much.”

“You have a competitive spirit after all?”

“People who know me call me obsessive. Actually, there aren’t that many people who want to lose in this world, are there?”

“That’s true. Since you’re doing it, it’s natural to want good results.”

As the designated drama promotion time was done, it was time to wrap things up. Jeonga asked the last official question on the questions sheet,

“What is acting to you, actor Kang Giwoo?”

“Half of my life.”

“Thank you for watching, that was actor Kang Giwoo.”

Jeonga applauded and said her finishing commentary.

#### **Chapter 770. Sequence 4**

“Thank you for your work.”

“It must have been hot. Thank you for your work. It’s about time it gets a little cooler too.”

“You don’t say.”

The manager came over to Giwoo, who was waiting outside the store while looking after his fans. Jeonga looked at her watch and watched them. This man showed her what manners were until the moment the interview ended. Although many people thought that young actors would act polite, in Jeonga’s experience, that wasn’t necessarily the case. If they were just young, then maybe, but people like Giwoo, who had achieved success at such a young age, would show a hint of arrogance. Hitting on her after the camera turned off was on the cute side. There was an actor who pointed at a fan standing behind him and asked the staff to remove the ugly girl. That actor usually had the ‘young master’ image, but Jeonga was still flabbergasted by that image. Although the interview with that person ended on a smiling note, she would sign into that actor’s anti-fan café. Regarding this area, Giwoo was exceptional in both skill and attitude among his peers. Not only that, his background as well. She wondered who the modern version of a prince on a white horse would choose as his woman. Jeonga briefly imagined what it would be like if it was her.

“I’ll say goodbye to the producer.”

“Ah, okay.”

He even went to the producer, who was outsourced for this single program, and did a handshake. Producers would sometimes be treated like invisible people, but Giwoo even said goodbye to the staff he met along the way. It felt like a polite attitude was engraved into his body rather than him being hypocritical. This man was perfect from his toes to his soul.

"I have an appointment I must attend, so allow me to take my leave. Thank you for the interview. I had it easy thanks to your help."

"It puts me at ease to hear those words. See you next time, whether it's an interview or a get-together."

Jeonga lightly shook hands with Giwoo. He got in a car with the manager and opened the window to wave at the fans. A flock of high school girls followed the car that drove away.

"Miss Jeonga, good job."

"You too, producer. Are you going to the next shoot?"

"Don't even mention it. I'm going to have to go to Haenam<sup>[1]</sup>. Apparently, someone peculiar lives there, and morning TV programs love those kinds of people. I have to do things like that to feed my kids. Miss Jeonga, you're going home, aren't you?"

"Yeah, since I'm done with work here. It's been a while since work ended early."

"It's thanks to that fellow Kang Giwoo. I couldn't find anything worth scrapping while the camera was rolling. The editing is going to be easy."

"Looks like Mr. Kang put in some effort so that you can have it easy, producer. He's a good man, isn't he?"

"Miss Jeonga, you interested in him? You rarely show any interest after an interview."

"He's charming. He looks after people and he smiles at people. Who would say no to him?"

"He's a good guy alright. It must not be easy to maintain an upright attitude as a new actor for so long."

"That must be his nature. Someone who was born gentle."

"Maybe."

The producer turned around to his crew, who were putting away the equipment.

"Miss Jeonga, you should go. I need to wrap things up here."

"Yes, producer. Thank you for your work today."

Jeonga undid her watch and stretched her arms out.

\* \* \*

"Hyung, turn the volume down a little."

"Okay."

Manager Kim reached for the volume dial but had to turn the wheel abruptly due to a tow truck that cut into the lane. The tow truck honked its horn repeatedly as it switched from the first lane to the fourth lane. Fucking bastard - he cursed. He calmed his heart down and took his foot off the brakes.

"Giwoo, are you okay?"

"Yes."



“Sorry about that, some lunatic just cut in front of me.”

Ever since he saw a tow truck that drove in the opposite lane during the middle of the night, he couldn't consider the drivers of tow trucks human. They must either have two lives or have a screw or two loose in their heads. Even though a crash would mean they would die as well, those tow truck drivers didn't seem to know such a simple fact. He suppressed his disgust towards tow trucks as he kept driving. If this was his personal car, he would have caught up to the tow truck and shouted at the guy but not only was this his company car, Giwoo was riding on it as well. If there was trouble in the drama schedule because of a traffic accident, who would take responsibility for that? Manager Kim tried to calculate how much he would have to compensate for Giwoo's loss of time before giving up.

He heard a sound behind him. It was Giwoo, who had snapped his book close. The heavy sound from the hard-cover book snapping shut got on his nerves. Manager Kim looked at Giwoo's expression. He was smiling, yet not smiling.

“The volume.”

Manager Kim felt stifled as though he just got stung by a bee in the middle of his throat. He quickly turned the volume down. He had forgotten about it due to the tow truck cutting in. It should have been around 10 minutes since Giwoo mentioned it. He had not listened to Giwoo's words for ten whole minutes.

“Hyung.”

“...Yes.”

“Mind your own business, okay? You're not usually like this.”

“Sorry. That tow truck suddenly cut in....”

“I know, you reacted well to that. Even I thought that the truck was moving around dangerously. But you know? I told you to turn down the volume, and that was about ten minutes ago. Avoiding the tow truck is good. I saw it as well. It'll become a very big accident if you crashed into it while trying to turn down the volume. But you are done with that. The tow truck left, and your hands became free again. Was it so hard to reach out to the volume dial again?”

“I was so out of it. I'm really sorry.”

“Don't keep apologizing. You make me look like the bad guy here. I'm just saying that we should each do what we should. I never treated you badly over the past six months, have I? I really want to continue riding the car that you're driving. You are good with work, and you don't get on my nerves. I would love to have someone who works well by my side. I hope you understand how I feel.”

“I will watch out from now on.”

“You should. Or else, I would have no choice but to look for another manager.”

Manager Kim nodded heavily. Six times. That was the number of times Giwoo had switched out his manager over the six months before him. Among the managers, it was called the two-out system. Watch out - the moment a manager hears these words for the second time, they would be relieved of their exclusive manager duties.

Giwoo was known for not bothering his managers. He would frequently do the things that managers had to do as well. All the managers before him shared the opinion that Giwoo was respecting them for their work. Their treatment was good, and his attitude was good as well. Yet such a person did not hesitate for a single moment when switching out a person in a job.

What manager Kim felt after being put in charge of Giwoo was that Giwoo was a good man. The rumors were true. He did not treat people strictly, and he watched out for the managers, even for trivial things. However, the chill in his eyes as well as the lack of emotions in his words that he showed from time to time made him couldn't help but wonder if Giwoo really was a good person when he considered those two things.

Manager Kim looked at the rearview mirror and smiled. He made eye contact with Giwoo. It didn't matter if he was a good man or not. What was important was for him to do his best to not get fired from his position. The position of Giwoo's manager was worth it.

"But hyung."

"Yeah?"

"Didn't I tell you on your first day? That you should look forward when you drive. Especially when I'm on my phone."

The next day, manager Kim had to hand his job over to the next manager. He was notified that he was to take care of another idol. Giwoo hadn't contacted him at all.

\* \* \*

There were sounds of classical music. Giwoo woke up from bed. He could hear the door closing. The cleaning lady this time had good comprehension. She turned on the music at just the right time and left his house without making so much as a single footstep sound.

He came out to the living room and had a look at his stuff. The cleaning lady hadn't even gone near the things that he told her not to touch. The slight layer of dust was proof of her loyalty. An obedient dog had to be rewarded. He took out two bills from his wallet and put them under the clay doll next to the TV. She had cleaned both what could be seen and what could not be seen. This cleaning lady seemed good enough that he didn't have to concern himself with her for a while. A dog that realized that it could eat delicious food after working would not become lazy after all.

He sat on the sofa and picked up a script. As it was the script for a medical drama, it was filled with medical jargon. He muttered the medical terms that he couldn't get used to pronouncing as he walked around the living room. The fact that he chose a medical drama as his comeback work was a challenge for him. He had already proven himself with romantic historical dramas, so he had to show people that he could digest modern dramas as well. The producer in charge of this drama was skilled, and the writer, while she was just an old-ass woman, was also a frequent hitter. He was sure that this piece would consolidate his brand value as Kang Giwoo.

"Don't treat interns like tools! You might see us as little chicks, but I came here after doing all my studies. I may not have cut up as many people, but..."

After saying the line in a passionate manner, Giwoo looked up at the clock. It was 1 p.m. He quenched his thirst with some water before going to the gym in front of his house. He did warm-ups with the trainer before going on the treadmill. He was planning to run until his lungs felt like bursting at multiple intervals. As he was thinking of doing an action film for his next piece, there was a need to raise his stamina right now.

“Set your posture straight and manage your breathing. Your torso is leaning forward too much. Watch out.”

The trainer, who could be called one of the best in the country, was also a long-time partner of Giwoo’s. Giwoo thought that the best needed to be treated with the best things. The car he presented to the trainer should be in the parking lot of the gym right now. A treatment that fits one’s skill. That was the motivation that made the gears of society turn the right way.

“Okay, that’s enough. But hey, are you planning to do a marathon or something?”

“If necessary. Do you think I should? I think it’ll be a good experience.”

“You’re quite hardworking alright. Other actors don’t even visit the gym on their break periods.”

“I should come frequently if I want to manage myself. I hate my body falling out of shape. It feels rather despairing if things don’t go the way I expect them to.”

His clothes were drenched in sweat. He felt like his lungs were going to burst before they felt like they shrank up. Fatigue overwhelmed his entire body, but the sense of achievement was even bigger. He had to achieve what he needed to. Giwoo lived the past 25 years like that and would continue to do so. Everything within his eyes moved according to his will and according to order. His body and his mind were not exempt from those rules either. He was always perfect and always clean. The pleasure that a delicately-structured life gave him was higher than any drug.

He spat out a long breath and was planning to switch to doing weights. Just then, a man wearing a hood walked on top of the treadmill while rotating his wrists. Giwoo wiped the sweat on his forehead and walked towards the man. He spoke to the man, who was speeding up the treadmill,

“It’s been a while since I saw you at this hour.”

“You were here?”

“I was.”

The man took off his hood. Han Maru, with a scruffy beard, was smiling.

[1] The South-western corner of South Korea.