

Once Again 901

Chapter 901. Crank Up 2

The kal-guksu race that seemed to drag out thanks to Joongjin's stubbornness and the owner's shamelessness seemed like it was going to be ending soon. Maru looked at the two women receiving autographs from Joongjin. They were women who had been staring for quite a while. The women came over when the fourth round of kal-guksu came around. They tilted their heads before asking the director if he was Park Joongjin. Then, the lady who put down the food in front of them looked around before taking the bowl back into the kitchen. Joongjin told her to just put it down, but the lady just smiled awkwardly.

"Please take a photo with us."

A woman who introduced herself as a movie fanatic hooked arms with Joongjin. Her friend, wearing a white t-shirt, also stood next to him. Maru accepted the phone from them before the one in purple told him to. Behind the two women creating Vs with their hands, he saw a man peeking out from the kitchen. He seemed to be the owner or the cook of this place.

"Director, when are you shooting your next movie? I'm waiting."

"I'll start shooting soon."

"Really? Can you tell me who you're shooting with? An internet café I frequently visit said that you're doing it with Kang Giwoo."

"I think I'll do one with Mr. Giwoo later. For this piece, I'm going to do it with this fellow here."

Many pairs of eyes suddenly looked at him. Maru put on an awkward smile. He thought that the director would gloss it over, not introduce him directly. The ladies in purple and white t-shirts quickly scanned him. They seemed to be discerning if he was a famous actor, a new one, or just a joke.

"Chatterbox!"

The one in white clapped in realization and shouted. The one in purple asked her to elaborate.

"You know, that entertainment show. That corny guy."

Corny. That word went straight past his eardrums and shook his very brain. He wanted to leave the director here and leave this place immediately. Back when he was recording the show, he had the sense of duty to get attention on himself and the desperation to not miss that opportunity, so he threw his whole body into the show. He felt proud at the end of the shoot, nay, even when he reached home and reported it proudly to Gaeul. That sense of satisfaction dissolved like cotton candy in water on the day the episode aired. It was a new method of torture to watch himself singing surrounded by loud music and large subtitles. Gaeul played back the clip whenever she was bored. Maru wanted God to have given him the ability to delete clips instead of the ability to read other people's minds.

Even the purple t-shirt woman recognized him. Inside his head, recognition and face – these two words clashed violently. Sometimes, he missed his nearly fifty-year-old self.

"I'm sorry, customer. There seems to have been a mistake with the order."

The man who was watching from the kitchen came around. The man's expression had been changing ever since he had seen Joongjin give out autographs. He was originally planning to drag this fight out, but when it looked like the director was a famous person, he seemed to have admitted his loss. Maru thought that things would go better now.

"The mistake was with the kal-guksu, not the order. I think you're mistaken."

Maru lowered his head and scratched his eyebrows. Did the director not like dramatic stuff like coming to a harmonious ending at the very end? It seemed that even the owner seemed flustered as he was originally intending to lower himself. He probably expected that there would be a harmonious ending with both sides admitting that there had been a mistake.

"Since you're here, please take our order. That person over there took away our kal-guksu. It seems like there was a mistake there."

"Uhm, mister, it's not like that. The thing is..."

"I know it's not like that, so bring us the kal-guksu."

The kal-guksu race, which he thought was over, had begun again. Maru pulled his chair out slightly and looked around inside the restaurant. The customers in this wide space had all put down their spoons and were looking towards them. They seemed like they weren't going to miss this fight. Watching fire burning from across the river was the most fun thing after all. He could see what the owner was thinking without having to bother peeking into his heart.

"You're the one who came out on Chatterbox, aren't you?"

"You're Bigfoot from Doctors."

More and more people started recognizing him. There were even people who looked him up and showed him to other people who didn't know him. People started gathering. The owner was glaring at him. Why are you famous too? – his eyes seemed to say.

"Uhm, sir, it looks like I've made a mistake due to being busy."

The way he called Joongjin turned from mister to Sir. The owner spoke in a begging tone, saying that he would bring proper kal-guksu.

"So ours wasn't even proper kal-guksu, huh."

"He's discriminating."

The people who were docile when apart no longer held back when they gathered. The owner, who had received heavy bashing, waved his hands around in the air while explaining circumstances no one here wanted to even know about before saying that he would make them again. The lady who received the order at first repeatedly apologized while bowing.

"He didn't do that with bad intentions."

"I'm fine as long as I can eat good kal-guksu."

The lady ran off to the kitchen as soon as the director said those words. The kal-guksu incident had died down, but there was a different problem now. It was the people who had gathered around. Maru was smiling back at everyone while saying ‘yes, yes’ like a politician during an election when he heard a snippet of a song that made his entire body flinch.

“Can you do this once?”

It was a girl who looked like she was in high school. She held her phone out, and on the screen was his own face, with the big subtitles that said ‘I’m the crazy guy around here.’

“This?”

“Yes.”

“Here?”

“Yes!”

He couldn’t dare to teach this little girl that people could spit on smiling faces if they were cornered to a wall. The eyes of a robber demanding money would be less scary than this. This student, who was just playing back a video, was asking him to do what was in the video without a shred of malice, however, with the sole purpose of watching something interesting, she became too strong of an opponent. Maru rolled his eyes around. When he did, he saw another student who had the same video playing back on her phone. Was this a new endemic? An endemic where people had to play videos on their phones? One person after another started playing back the video. Maru thought that smartphones had to be a gift from the devil.

“Mr. Maru. You did something like this before? I was just doing the interview back then, so I didn’t know the atmosphere was like this.”

The director, who Maru thought was an ally, was now kindly explaining the situation to the people around: you can look up ‘Han Maru princess song.’ Maru recalled a famous line from a comedian: laughs bring people together. You were right, goddammit.

“Our actor Han over here does not know shame. But why aren’t you doing it? Oh, it must be because there is no applause.”

“Uhm, director.”

Maru tried calling out in a soft voice, but it was to no avail. The applause spread around in an instant. Just moments ago, he could have finished it off with a few words while smiling, but now, it looked like he had to go up on the table and take his top off or something.

“Please watch the movie when it comes out later.”

Maru took off his shoes and climbed up onto his chair. The people around him pointed their phones at him.

“He won’t be able to do this if he becomes more famous,” Joongjin said.

Funnily enough, it sounded persuasive.

“Please don’t spread it on the internet and just keep it to yourselves. I can already feel my lifespan decreasing whenever I watch Chatterbox. If this goes around, I might end up crying.”

He started enjoying it after all these camera lenses were pointed at him. He would regret it dearly afterwards, but for now, he felt rather joyous. Perhaps he had an innate talent to show off if he was given the stage for it. He pushed aside the forty-five-year-old man smiling calmly. This was time to sing ludicrously cutely. He spoke while leaving the shame to the depths of the heart of his future self.

“You know.”

* * *

“This is a blunder. I never knew you had such a side to you. Should I do away with all the violence and go with a cute little high school boy story for the movie instead? A high school boy aspiring to become an idol.”

Maru skipped past the speed bump right in front of him without slowing down. The car jerked once. Joongjin grabbed the handle on top of the window and became silent.

“Or how about playing a high school girl who has her body switched with a boy’s?”

The silence broke in just 10 minutes. Even if Jung Haejoo didn’t exist, the relationship between president Lee Junmin and the director must have ended badly. The love fight between two men that Ahn Joohyun told him about was probably just one of the reasons. The director’s teasing skills were at the very top out of all the people in Maru’s life. His title of oddball probably didn’t come from the way he worked.

“Director.”

“Yes?”

“You see that wall over there, right? Don’t you think we can directly go to heaven without pain if I crash into it at 160 kilometers an hour? A liberal paradise where no smartphones exist.”

“You have a great talent for making jokes sound real.”

“Should I experiment with it? I do have something I can count on.”

Even if he crashed and died, he would likely just start over from his first year of high school. If he goes back in time, he would decide not to go to Chatterbox, ever. The director, who was laughing to the point of crying, said that he would stop and let go of the handle.

“It’s been a long time since I had a laugh like that. Thinking about how I’ll be working with you makes me overjoyed already. When I talked to you six years ago at the restaurant, you were fun because you were rather old-fashioned, but I was convinced that you weren’t the type to be funny. I never knew you could make people laugh so much.”

“If you keep talking about it, I’ll mess up my acting.”

“I’m not worried about that part at all. I know that you would never do your work carelessly. You can bet on it. Oh, by the way, even president Lee Junmin doesn’t make bets with me.”

“Then it looks like I shouldn’t either.”

“I don’t usually take bets that I’ll lose.”

The GPS navigation system announced their arrival. They were in a mountainside village in Jinju, South Gyeongsang province. Gu-op-myeon. It was a place he had never heard of before.

“It’s about time.”

“What are we doing here?”

“We’ve emptied our minds in Suncheon Bay, so it’s time to fill it up again. This is the place you must watch. This is where the movie started after all.”

Joongjin got out of the car. Maru followed the man holding a light baton in front of him and parked his car in the parking lot. A long line of cars filled the parking lot. Even though this place was no special tourist attraction, there were quite a lot of people.

As soon as he left the parking lot, he heard dogs barking in the distance. It wasn’t one. The sounds were loud, sharp, thick, and ferocious. The growling got louder as though they were competing. Maru saw a gagged dog being dragged somewhere. He realized the moment he saw it. That dog wasn’t raised to be petted by people.

“Shall we go?”

Joongjin took the lead. It was a steep slope. Behind the wall that looked like it was going to cave in at any moment, there was a house that was more like a shack. This was a neighborhood without many people living in it. Men holding light batons started joining one by one. They walked across the neighborhood in a single line as though it was a military march. The procession stopped in front of a wide clearing that had been shaved down from the mountain. The sounds of barking dogs could be heard like thunder. The gagged dog he saw before was taken right next to him. Someone said that Gwang-chun seemed to be in a good condition.

“Have some rice wine, people.”

A woman with a toilet roll hanging off her neck was walking around with bowls and rice wine. Behind her was a metal net that had been installed as a round fence. It was too narrow to call it a cage. It was just enough to fit two fierce dogs in.

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(Warning: animal abuse)

A bowl of rice wine cost 10,000 won. The woman, who earned 50,000 won with a bottle of rice wine that cost 1,500 won, ran off somewhere before coming back with another bottle and continuing with her sales.

“Do you want to drink some?” Joongjin asked.

“Even if I do, I don’t want to pay that much. Let’s drink together once the match ends.”

“Not a bad idea.”

The sun started setting. When the shadows on the ground started getting longer, the lights installed around the dogfighting arena started scattering light. People even started some fires in metal barrels as well. Despite the crude facilities, there was most of the necessary stuff: a chair where they could sit down, food and drinks, warm fires. A van slowly approached the dogfighting arena. The owner got out and opened the back door. A reddish-black Pit Bull Terrier agilely jumped off. It looked around without shirking away despite the numerous eyes on it and walked towards the arena with the owner.

That's ma boi Thunder – said a man drinking carton soju. The dog seemed to be famous in this dogfighting arena.

“Director, I’m asking just in case, but this place is illegal, right?”

“Dogfighting itself isn’t illegal.”

That was something he didn’t know. Dogfighting was actually not illegal.

“But it’s not legal either. There’s no law that can punish them. If someone files a complaint, the police would arrive and make these people scatter, but they would not be punished. Dogs cannot voice their opinions, and legally, they’re considered possessions.”

While Joongjin explained, another Pit Bull entered the arena. This one had an extremely short ear. The short-ear and the reddish-black one entered the same cage. The two of them scanned each other before starting to growl at the same time. If their owners did not pull them back by the leash, one of them would’ve seen blood already.

A man holding a green light baton stood in front of the metal cage.

“A’ight, everybody. The first match will be a small one. On my right is the blue corner, and on my left is the red corner. The next match will be the same, so remember that folks. Our coinlady will walk around and ask which side you’re betting, and I hope yer use yer intuition well. The winners will get carton soju and some dried squid to enjoy the show. Coinlady?”

The woman selling rice wine started walking around with blue and red colored sticks.

“I’ll go with red.”

Joongjin received a red stick. It turned out to be a red-painted chopstick. Maru just said that he was with Joongjin.

“This is jus’ appetizer, so no pressure.”

“Then I’ll go with blue.”

“Don’t ya lose it.”

‘Miss Coinlady’ walked around the dogfighting arena. Everyone now held a stick in their hands. Maru looked at the blue stick in his hand.

“Dogfighting might not be illegal, but adding gambling to it is definitely illegal, isn’t it?”

“That’s true.”

“So we’re sitting in the middle of something illegal?”

“Pray that we don’t get caught.”

Joongjin waved the red stick in the air. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Maru wondered if he would still be smiling if the police arrived.

The man with the green light baton spoke,

“Everybody got one? For a smooth process, take out yer cash before the next match. And dun yer ferget ter pay our Coinlady some tips. It’ll be boring to drag things out, so we’ll start with a match between these boys. The one missing an ear is Martie. His last match was his first one, and the boy got frightened and the match ended after getting his ear ripped. So he got some education before comin’. Thunder over here used to be king o’er in Gwangju. He’ll start appearing more startin’ next week, so we prepared an event match fer y’all.”

The man with the green light baton waved his hand in the air and stepped back, and then the owners of the dogs let go of their leash at the same time. The fight began without any signs. The dog that used to be king in Gwangju immediately proved how he had become champion. Thunder bit his teeth into Martie’s snout and started shaking his head violently. The dog missing an ear now became a dog that was also missing half its nose. At the sight of blood, the dog owners immediately grabbed the leashes. Thunder’s loud shouts spread across the area, as though to declare that he was the new king in this place. Martie leaned against the wall and started breathing heavily, tail pointing towards Thunder.

The man with the green baton curtly declared the results. Coinlady started moving again. Joongjin waved the carton soju and smiled. It seemed that he wasn’t joking when he said he was good at taking bets.

There was a little commotion in the originally quiet dogfighting arena. People started talking after drinking some soju from their cartons. Maru could see why they were so passionate about it. The violence that unfurled in front of his eyes contained indiscriminate brutality that couldn’t be seen in MMA. There was also the addition of the secrecy of illegal business as well as the excitement of gambling, so it wasn’t surprising that they were crazy. Animal lovers would faint at the very sight of this, but clearly, there were no animal lovers here. Even if some of them raised dogs at home, they would differentiate the dogs they have at home and the dogs here in their minds.

While Thunder proudly returned to his van, Martie’s owner struggled to pull on the leash. He had to pull out the dog that had no intention of leaving the cage. The dog, which clearly seemed like it had something wrong somewhere, was dragged against the ground as it left the cage. There were dotted lines of blood in its wake.

“Have a good look at the ecology of this area. The positions of each person, the jobs they do, as well as what happens to the dogs.”

Maru looked at the dog being dragged away. He could see the dog’s face as the light fixture above it swayed up and down. The dog licked its own dangling flesh before jumping around. The owner pulled hard on the leash. The dog fell snout first and seemed to have difficulty walking as it lay on its side panting. The pitifully inflated stomach shrank like a deflated balloon before returning to normal again.

“This is definitely not a place I can take a liking to.”

“People have their differences. Do you raise a dog?”

“Yes. I do have one at home, who just won’t listen to me.”

Joongjin nodded. Maru looked at the dog disappearing into the darkness. As much as he pitied it, he did not think that he should step up to help. It would be a different story if that dog was his Woofie at home, but that was ‘Martie.’

“Since we’re done with the event, let’s start the real deal. Let’s start off light with 200^[1]. The money you bet will go ‘round to those who win except for a small operation fee, so those of yer who pride in looking at dogs might be able to win big.”

Cries could be heard from a distance. It seemed to be a dog that was preparing for the next match. Joongjin, who was chewing on a straw, looked around before standing up.

“Shall we get moving then?”

“Where are we going?”

“We had a look at the general atmosphere, so it’s about time we go to the place you need to go to.”

Joongjin approached the man with the green baton. He spoke with the man for a little before returning.

“Come with me.”

A man holding a yellow baton pointed away from the arena and started walking. They walked about 300 meters away from the arena, where there was a vinyl greenhouse. It was riddled with holes, and dogs barking could be heard from the inside. They approached the greenhouse. The moist smell from the mountain became faint. What replaced it was a foul stench. Maru covered his nose and mouth with his hand. The smell became many times worse when the door to the greenhouse was opened.

“Look around. Little boy. Show these people ‘round.”

The man with the yellow baton left the greenhouse. The man called ‘little boy’ stood in front of them. He was wearing a black jumper, a white mask, and a black beanie. As for his age, he seemed to be in his early to mid-twenties.

“Don’t get too close. They’ll start going crazy if they get stimulated,” the man grumbled as he turned around.

What is there to look at in a dog cage? – Maru looked at the dogs as he heard those words. They were all Pit Bulls. Were they all the same dogs because of the fun of gambling? The dog to his left was growling while baring its teeth. The one on his right was just staring at him calmly. There were about twenty such dogs here.

“God, you shitty dog. Shut up.”

The man poked the cage inside the greenhouse with a long rod. The tip was quite sharp. It had turned black as well, seemingly from blood. The dog moved around, trying to dodge the sharp rod. It did not stop barking even as it moved.

“Damn son of a bitch doesn’t know who he’s dealing with.”

The man went to the oil heater in the middle of the greenhouse. He picked up the kettle on top of it before returning to the cage. Maru cringed one eye. The boiling hot water fell on top of the dog. The dog who had its skin cooked couldn’t even scream as it got stuck in a corner and started trembling.

“Am I supposed to be looking at that person? Or the dogs?”

“You’re a person, so you should look at one. That person shouldn’t have been like that from the beginning. I’m sure he must have been afraid of and pitied the dogs. But then, he got numb to it. I’m sure you must know how frightening numbness can make a human. But there’s a difference between knowing it and seeing it for yourself, and that’s the reason we’re here. There’s a calm lunacy that cannot be pictured with imagination alone.”

Calm lunacy. Maru observed the man’s actions. He did not care about the onlookers when he was dealing with the dogs. He would shout at them and would kick them if that didn’t work, then when that didn’t work either, he picked up his rod, and the ultimate method was pouring boiling water. Looking closely, he never touched the face and the legs. Whether it was the rod or the hot water, he aimed for the back and the rear.

Maru approached the man. From up close, the man looked even younger than he originally thought. Perhaps he was even younger than Maru.

“You look like you’re in charge of all the dogs here, am I right?”

“Well, yeah. Hey, shit dog. Stay still.”

Even as they spoke, the man kicked a dog that was sticking too close to the cage. Maru took out his wallet from his pocket. He could feel the man’s eyes quickly scanning his wallet. He took out a few ten thousand won notes.

“What are you? You don’t seem to be detectives.”

“I just wanted to ask a few questions. And not compensating you for it didn’t seem right.”

“I can’t answer anything strange.”

Even as he replied, he snatched the money away.

“Why do you do this job? Do you enjoy it?”

“Does this look fun to you? This place stinks like hell, and those shitty dogs keep barking all day. Do you think sitting here for hours is any fun?”

“Then why are you doing this job?”

“Of course because I get fucking paid. You ask some damn obvious questions. What do you do for a living?”

“I recall it was me who gave you the money. Am I obliged to reply to you?”

“No, you aren’t, fuck. But hey, Stop glaring. You’re damn scary. If you have a problem with the way I talk, then tell me about it beforehand. I don’t want to cause problems. But are you perhaps one of the seniors from another area? Are you here to scout out the area?”

“No, it’s not that. How did you feel when you first did this job? On the day you first met these dogs.”

The man scanned him from top to bottom, seemingly trying to grasp the intention behind his question. But soon, he replied as though he couldn’t be bothered.

“It was shit at first. These shitty dogs are those that can kill humans if let loose. You don’t know how well untrained wild dogs can kill humans, do you? God damn, they’re fucking brutal. I’m supposedly training and overseeing them, so of course it’s fucking scary. I couldn’t do anything at first. But when I kept going, I realized that these shits freak out if I scare them. Since then, well, it became what you see now. If they don’t listen, I kick’em. I still need to watch out though, cuz I can’t kick them anywhere I want. If something goes wrong with them, my money will go with them. Fucking dogs, and yet they’re fricking expensive.”

The man wiped under his nose with his work gloves covered in soot. There was no sense of disparity between his smile and the same figure pouring boiling water on a dog. This man didn’t have a serious ethical problem, despise dogs, or was threatened to do his work. He was just doing it because it was work.

Maru knew this, but he had gotten confirmation of it, so it was worth interviewing him. Maru scanned the dogs barking. He captured the eyes of the dogs that would soon be thrown into the craze of men.

“I think we can leave now,” Maru said to Joongjin, who was waiting behind him.

[1] As in, 200,000 won. Think 200 USD

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Maru took a few photos on the way out. The man in charge of managing the dog cages looked at him with weird eyes.

“You really aren’t a detective, right? You can’t surprise me later by telling me that you’re the cops. People these days are so evil and many people would smile in the front but stab through the back. Of course, I’m not saying that you’re one of those people.”

“That won’t happen, so don’t worry,” Joongjin said in his stead.

The foul stench didn’t end even after they left the greenhouse. The smell felt like it wouldn’t go away even after a shower. That man would probably continue to kick, stab, and pour hot water on those dogs amidst that stench, as a faithful laborer working to earn money.

“Don’t you sometimes think that the world might have been a healthier place than it is now if violence was legal and was something that can be traded for money?”

Joongjin seemed to be talking about people’s secret imaginations. Perhaps something like wishing bad luck to fall on other people without actually saying it: from wishing that someone would fall over, to terrible curses that wished for other people’s death by car crashes. Maru just replied that he didn’t know.

“It is already a tough world we live in, so getting hit just because you don’t have money sounds even more depressing.”

“That’s nothing new though. There are people who beat their subordinates with bats as punishment. If they’re going to hit and be hit, you might as well cleanly make the trade with money. The price will differ according to the wound. It will give a new meaning to the phrase ‘using your body to pay.’”

“Is there a person you want to do that to, director?”

“You mean a person I want to beat up or kill legally?”

“Yes.”

“There were a few, but there is only one person I want to beat up to death with my own hands.”

“It’s not the president by any chance, is it?”

“My relationship with him has never reached such a terrible state before. We’ve cleared up our grudges a little too recently. Thinking about it, it’s thanks to you that I had an opportunity to talk to that person. Thank you.”

“It’s rather strange to be thanked when I haven’t done anything.”

They walked down a road filled with gravel. Cheers broke through the barking from the greenhouse. It seemed that a match had ended. Maru could vaguely see a dog being dragged out of the cage in the distance. Like the first match, it was dragged on the ground like it was dead. The owner with the leash walked towards the greenhouse. The dog that was being dragged like luggage stood up again while trembling like a newborn calf. It was doing its best to hold on with its exhausted body, desperately expressing that it did not want to go back to the greenhouse.

“If dogs ever gain intelligence, I’m sure humans will be the first ones to be hunted.”

“True.”

The dog owner walked past them. The dog, which had the courage of a fighting dog stripped away along with its flesh, fell down in front of the greenhouse. The dog stood with its four legs planted on the ground and had to be forcefully dragged by the dog owner. Maru stood on the spot and watched the dog. The dog was also looking at him with sparkly eyes. It was also foaming at its panting mouth.

“That’s quite a desperate struggle.”

The dog owner shouted at the greenhouse. The door opened and the man from before walked out. In his hand was the sharp rod as though he was already aware of what he was going to be dealing with. The dog barked loudly after seeing the man. It was not a bark of wariness. It was a cry of desperation.

“Director.”

“Can I get paid a bit of my guarantee in advance? Or just lend me some money for one hour.”

“What are you going to use it for?”

“I watched a TV show that dogs can get lonely and need friends.”

Joongjin opened his wallet without hesitation. He took out a stash of 50,000 won bills and handed it to him. Maru lowered his head as he received the money. There was probably more than 2 million won. He folded the stack of cash in half and walked towards the dog owner and the young man.

“You haven’t left yet,” said the young man as he raised the rod above his head.

The dog owner asked who the two were.

“How much is that dog?”

“Why do you want it?”

“Because I met his eyes. How much?”

The dog owner and the young man exchanged looks.

“Pitbulls are an expensive breed. You’ll be surprised if you hear the price.”

Maru took out his phone to look up the price of dogs and showed it to the dog owner.

“It has become quite convenient these days.”

The dog owner sniffed before calling someone.

“Yeah, it’s me. There’s someone who wants to buy a dog here. The one I just dragged here. From the looks of it, he doesn’t seem like he belongs to that side. Well, even if he is, it doesn’t matter that much, does it?”

As they were running an illegal gambling den, it seemed that they didn’t deal with the dogs so easily. The call lasted for a few minutes. Maru looked at the dog rolling its eyes around the dog owner’s feet. It looked at the sharp rod anxiously before looking for a road that didn’t have a human presence.

“Just take it. Grab the leash tightly. It’ll run if you’re too loose.”

The dog owner gave him the leash. Just as he said, the taut tension could be felt from the leash. A moment of distraction, and the dog would run off to the mountains.

“Do you really not need any money?”

“Mr. Choi told me to just give it to you when I told him that you’re with Sir Park. I was worried that you might be part of some animal rights activist group which got me scared. But why did you want this one? It ain’t fit for dogfighting since the first thing it looks for is a way to run. Also, hey, I think I’ve seen you somewhere.”

“I do have a rather common face.”

“That’s true.”

The dog owner talked all on his own before eventually walking towards the cages with a ‘not my business’ attitude. Maru saw him nodding towards Joongjin on the way. Maru tried pulling on the leash. The dog, which had its stomach on the ground, did not budge at all.

“You knew the president? I didn’t know that and acted rude. I’m so sorry.”

The young man hid the rod behind him and started smiling. His eyes were fixed on the stack of cash in Maru's left hand. Maru handed the cash to the young man.

"You're giving it to me?"

"I will, but let me ask you to do one thing. I'm not sure if you'll keep it, but don't pour hot water on those dogs while you don't run out. If possible, don't poke them either."

"You, big brother, liked dogs, huh? You should've told me earlier. I'll look after them well in the future."

The man bowed towards him before walking back into the greenhouse. Maru could hear him kick the dog cages the moment he went in. He didn't mind since he didn't have a shred of expectation. Instead, he looked at the dog crouching down in front of him. This fellow was within his reach. He reached his hand out slightly. The dog growled at him before trying to bite him. Maru opened his hand and pressed its nose before grabbing it by the snout. He could feel a sticky, warm mass. It was a bloody piece of flesh. He reached his hand under the struggling dog's stomach before lifting it up. At first, the dog struggled desperately, but when Maru turned its snout around and stared into its eyes, it soon became docile.

"I'll pay you back the money once we return to the city. Or if you tell me your bank account number, I'll send it to you directly."

"No need at all. Let's just consider it a fun trip with Mr. Maru. I may look like this, but I've earned quite a lot of money. The president of the production company gave me a strong guarantee because he didn't know the movie would hit 10 million views."

"Even so...."

"If you don't like that, then just consider it an investment. An investment in an actor that I have high hopes for. From what I saw today, that couple million won doesn't seem like a waste at all, and it makes me happy. But why did you decide to bring that dog specifically? There are a lot of dogs inside."

"Because I locked eyes with it. It was asking me to save it, and I ended up looking directly, so I had no choice. The ones inside are pitiful as well, but I don't have the leisure to look after all of them. Also, I'm not a charity worker."

"Perhaps you didn't need to come and see this place. You're closer to the character I'm thinking of than I thought."

"That doesn't sound like a good meaning to me."

"I'm telling you that you're extremely humane."

They walked to the parking lot with the dog. On their way down, Maru found a man with his eyes glued to the main road. He seemed to be watching out for any police that might show up. Maru let the dog loose on the back seat. He also loosened the leash which was tightly wrapped around the neck. The dog also seemed to have understood that it wasn't being locked up or beaten up, and it stayed docile below the seat. It was quite quick-witted since it was raised in an environment where it was constantly kicked around.

"Is it because of minimum conscience that you gave him the money?"

“You can call it that.”

“How about you report to the police then?”

“From the looks of it, you seem to be acquainted with the person up there.”

“I guess we know each other. I know all sorts of people after all.”

“Then it’s fine.”

Before Maru started the car, he looked at the dogfighting arena colored in orange. He had not yet heard about the theme of the film from Joongjin, but he could already picture how it would turn out in his head. A plain lunacy – Joongjin’s mise-en-scène would probably charge straight to that phrase.

“I haven’t gotten an answer before, so can you elaborate?” Maru asked when the car got on the main road.

Joongjin turned and asked what he was talking about.

“The one you wanted to beat up with your own hands. I’m curious about who it is.”

“Oh, that? She’s an ordinary housewife. She’s a woman with a son, a great single mother who has divorced her husband and has raised her son by herself until now.”

“Then why would you....”

“Because she made a single mistake. She grabbed the driving wheel after drinking. It was a rainy day, too. The roads must have been unclear due to the weather, and she even drunk-drove, so how good could her judgments possibly be? The car she drove ignored the speed limit and ended up crashing into a person that appeared in front of it. So strongly that there was no time to help the victim. She was the one who did it. I’m sure you know what story this is.”

After that, Joongjin no longer spoke. His ever-cheerful mouth had finally quit working for the first time.

“That woman should not have drank. At least on that day.”

Joongjin said those words after about an hour. He started talking cheerfully again as though he had shaken off all the gloomy feelings. Maru laughed from time to time to go along with him. The sound of the wind hitting the car, the sound of the engine, the sound of Joongjin’s laugh, the sound of the dog whimpering. The car was more noisy and bustling than ever, but for some reason, it even felt quieter than dead silence.

“Should we donate some of the profits to animal protection groups?”

“Doesn’t sound bad.”

“Then let’s do that. I’m sure the better you do your acting, the better the lives of dogs will get. Then do your best.”

“Me doing my best won’t be enough for that, will it?”

“It probably will, I think.”

Joongjin's words contained a hint of conviction that his way of production would not fail.

"Then let me explain the outline, shall I?"

Maru pressed the gas pedal as he listened in.

Chapter 904. Crank Up 2

(Warning: more animal abuse.)

The breathing of dogs could be heard from the man's residence. The high and low panting noise, the sound of legs dragging, the sound of scraping the cage. The man had to stand up whenever he heard a thudding noise of bone and metal hitting each other. There was only one thing he had to do with the long rod. It was to push back the dogs that were bashing their heads against the cage after having gone crazy. It would be big trouble if they ended up breaking their heads open and going limp or something. Whenever he raised the rod, the dogs gnashed their teeth and fell back. There were no exceptions. The stronger ones would glare their pitch-black eyes at him for days and get ready for a fight, but after tasting a few stabs from the rod, they would loosen their legs and roll up their tail. Whether it was men or dogs, there was no winning against violence. After preventing suicide, he had to feed them. They would only not go into a frenzy if they were given a path to escape. The rod would be useless against those that had given up on their lives, so he had to prevent that before it reached such a state.

There were those that were bashing into the cage again today. The man grumbled and stood up before looking for his rod. He had sharpened the rod with a planing tool a few days ago. A stab should shut them up and make them more docile. He opened the door and the dog cage door right next to it. A foul stench of rotting dung and piss wafted about. There was a woman with a dragon tattoo who got into the dog cage wanting to see the dogs up close, but she ended up leaving the cage while vomiting.

The struggling dogs became docile. Even these dogs had heads and could differentiate when they could act up and when they couldn't. The only ones that couldn't, were those that rampaged around like they had rabies. He stood in front of the cage to the left. He knew it would be this one. It was a new one that came in two days ago. It was the last pup birthed by the breeding dog. Apparently, it almost died the moment it was born from being bitten to death by its mother. Perhaps because the first sensation it felt since its birth was its mother's teeth, it bit everything in its sight. He heard that the trainer who managed breeding dogs and fighting dogs alike had given up training this one, which was the first time in his life. As dogfighting was a form of business, there would be great losses if a product was damaged. The dogs should moderately bite each other and stop once the opponent dog lowers their tail, but this one apparently ripped apart its opponent with its canine teeth without caring whether the opposing dog admitted defeat or not. Supposedly, in the last fight, this one had before coming to this place, it had bitten the opposing dog's mouth, resulting in that dog's guts spilling out. The president, who loved people with a screw loose in their head, bought this guy over with a surplus sum of money.

The man spoke softly: shut up and stay still. That one didn't even care. It kept crashing into the cage. It seemed to want to know whether its skull would break first, or if the metal would dent.

It was time for the rod. The dog was the president's favorite, but that didn't matter. Even a dog that the president was head over heels for had to be docile in front of the rod. Of course, he didn't plan on killing

it or heavily injuring it. If he did, the president himself would pick up a rod of his own. The man did not want to live the rest of his life limping.

He pushed the rod against the dog's head. Even without teaching them anything, dogs knew how foolish it was to crash their heads into a sharp object. Even dogs who had never tasted the rod would yelp and turn around if he did this.

But this one was different.

The man cursed and pulled the rod back. Had he been a moment too late, the dog would have become one-eyed. This one lacked too much fear. It seemed as though it had forgotten what being hurt meant and what pain was. It was time for a more effective method than the rod. He brought boiling water. Even the most vicious dogs who bite their owners would turn into the most docile dogs in the world in front of water that could literally cook their flesh. When he lifted up the kettle that had a burnt bottom, the dogs inside waited with bated breaths. The man enjoyed the silence brought by the boiling water before clicking his tongue at the thudding sound that he could still hear. That one was probably rampaging around because it didn't know to fear the boiling water.

He stood in front of the cage and tilted the kettle slightly. Steam rose from the beak first, followed by boiling hot water. It flowed down in one constant streak and touched the dog's waist. The dog jumped up and fell back. Even pouring water required quite a bit of technique. At first, he was unable to control it properly, and a portion of fur ended up falling off of the dog. Even some puss came out from the cooked flesh later too. Now, he no longer made such mistakes. The man boasted that he could pour water more delicately than anyone in the country.

The dog that snapped back even in the face of the rod finally put its chin on the ground. It lowered its butt and placed its two front paws in front. The unrelenting dog had finally accepted the rules of this place. The man predicted that this one would function properly as a dogfighting dog from the next match. A dog that would bite moderately and gain victory.

The man returned to his residence. He lay down on his bed with the stench of dogs still on him. He could no longer hear the dogs' breaths. He could finally get some quiet sleep.

* * *

It had been thirty minutes. Maru didn't budge from the sofa. He sat still with his eyes closed as though he was meditating. Without the occasional twitch of his eyebrows, the roughening of his breath, and his upper lip rolling upwards to the point that his canine teeth could be seen, she might have mistaken him for sleeping.

She wanted to go to the bathroom, wanted to open the fridge, and wanted to boil some water in the coffee pot, but she just watched Maru quietly because she didn't want to disturb his focus.

"Shh."

Woofie hopped over. She would walk over to Maru with her bowl every morning, but she seemed to have felt that something was serious today and came over to her instead. She wanted to lift her up and place her on her lap, but there was a prior visitor today.

Gaeul grabbed the paw of the Pit Bull trying to scratch its cone. When Maru returned home in the middle of the night a week ago, he was holding this dog. Gaeul covered her mouth and groaned the moment she saw him. There was blood all over Maru's clothes. She subconsciously reached out to her phone to call 119, but Maru stopped her. The blood didn't belong to Maru, it belonged to the dog. The dog had a serious wound on its face. There was another one on its left leg. Its flesh had been pushed to one side as though a saw blade had ripped its leg. Maru said that the dog belonged to a dogfighting arena. Thinking that getting the dog treated was more important than finding out what happened, they took it to a nearby veterinary hospital. The vet there asked if the dog got hit by a motorbike. The skin on its stomach was mangled as though it had been dragged across concrete. Fortunately, the vet also said that there would be no problems with some suturing and good treatment.

"He's Woofie's friend. I'm not sure if he'll adapt though," Maru said as he brought the dog home after treatment.

Only then did she hear what had transpired. Apparently, he went to a dog fighting arena because of matters related to director Park Joongjin's film and met this dog there. After listening to everything, Gaeul rubbed the Pit Bull's chin, saying that he did the right thing. She also added that Woofie would be glad to have a friend. It was Woofie who soothed the Pit Bull's wanderlust. The two of them approached each other, smelled each other, and licked each other's wounds the moment they saw each other. The Pit Bull licked Woofie's limping leg, while Woofie licked the Pit Bull's wound. Gaeul was glad to see that, but one thing came to her mind. Maru mentioned a dogfighting arena. Fighting wasn't something that can be done with just one. From what she vaguely remembered from watching the news, dozens of such dogs would be raised in one such area. She asked Maru, who was watching the dogs stuck to each other affectionately. What happened to the other dogs? Maru did not answer. Gaeul knew that, as they shared a lot of things, they needed to be even more careful around each other. She hadn't heard the details, but she could understand vaguely. That was why she decided not to ask anymore.

The Pit Bull kept trying to scratch its cone as though its wound was itchy. Gaeul tapped on its nose and frowned. It may look menacing at first, but it was quite docile and acted quite cute. It broke her heart to think that such a dog was growling and fighting other dogs in a dogfighting arena.

"You were up?"

Maru opened his eyes. It had been forty minutes since she started watching. Gaeul looked at the clock. It was going past 8:10 in the morning.

"I thought I shouldn't disturb you."

"I didn't mind. Wasn't it boring?"

"It was good because it was rather interesting to watch you. You were cute when you were frowning too. So what was that about?"

"I tried refining the character in my head, so I can get a grasp on what his feelings are."

"I thought it would be something like that. Your head has been filled with the film you're shooting ever since you brought this one home, hasn't it?"

"It's a film I'm making with a good director."

“And it’s your first lead role too. Are you excited?”

“How can I not be?”

Maru approached her and kissed her lightly on the forehead. Gaeul placed the Pit Bull on her lap on the floor. Woofie and the Pit Bull walked under the table side by side.

“We should get eating, and feed these ones too.”

He opened the fridge, while Gaeul headed straight to the bathroom. When she came back out, Maru asked,

“Were you holding back?”

“No.”

“I think you were.”

“Just ignore things like this. You just had to ask.”

“Okay.”

“Rather than that, did you think about that one’s name? I’m worried since it’ll be like Woofie all over again, and he won’t have a name for a while.”

“You make one for him. I think my naming sense is terrible.”

“He’s supposed to be a parent, but he’s such a terrible one, isn’t that right?” she said to the Pit Bull staring at her from under the table.

“You’re not going to name your child in the future either, are you?”

Maru, who was holding a pot, said something. Due to the running water, she couldn’t hear him properly. She approached him and asked what he said.

“I’ve already made the prettiest name in the world for someone. You won’t know how glad that person was about it.”

“You said you never had pets before. Who did you name?”

Maru smiled and just replied, “a small child.” Gaeul frowned. Her woman’s intuition was ringing alarms. This was not about an animal. It was about a person, a woman at that.

“What the heck? So you gave a splendid nickname to another woman?”

“My first love is you though?” Maru put his face close to hers and said.

His eyes did not contain a shred of lies. At the same time, the eyes felt somewhat sorrowful.

“Sit down. I’ll bring the food soon.”

Gaeul no longer pried. This felt like something she shouldn’t ask.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No.”

Gaeul nodded. She did not want to talk about something that he did not want to talk about. If it was something necessary to talk about in their relationship, he would have talked about it. Gaeul rested her chin on her hands and watched Maru’s back. Actually, it didn’t matter even if he was lying to her in some way. What was important was that she had trust in him.

“So, did you think of a name for this one?”

“Should I go with doenjang-jjigae?”

“Let’s... not talk about it,” Gaeul replied with a smile.

Chapter 905. Crank Up 2

“Still, it’s good that he’s adapting,” Gaeul said as she looked at the two dogs stuck to each other like glue.

There had been no accidents for the past week. The Pit Bull had to fight because of people’s selfish desires. She wouldn’t be able to blame it even if he bared its fangs according to his instincts, but thankfully, it didn’t cause any trouble. In fact, it even felt like the Pit Bull was losing against Woofie. Even now, it didn’t shirk away from Woofie’s slight bite on its front paw, wanting to play with it. Perhaps it might have discerned the hierarchy here in that short time for the sake of survival; that it should not cause harm to the pitifully weak dog in front of it. From how it was taking glances at Maru and her from time to time, the prediction didn’t seem too far off the mark.

“Woofie, don’t bully him. He’s sick.”

She scolded Woofie, as she kept bothering the Pit Bull’s cone. As Woofie was extremely quick-witted, she soon stopped.

“I feel like she listens to you more than she does to me.”

“Didn’t you know? Her owner had changed a long time ago.”

“So even the dog knows that I’m servile to you, huh? What a pitiful life.”

“You aren’t that servile to me.”

She handed the empty bowl of snacks to Maru who was standing up with the empty mug.

“So, when does your shoot begin?”

Maru replied after reaching the kitchen sink,

“Originally, it was early November.”

“But the thirtieth is right around the corner?”

“It seems like the camera team and acoustics team that the director wants have been delayed. That’s why we’re starting late too. This will change depending on the situation, but I think it’ll be mid-December at the earliest?”

“That’s right around the time I receive my paid vacation.”

This week was the last week of shooting Doctor’s Office, next week would be the final episode and the after party, and the week after that would be when she leaves the country. Gaeul thought about her schedule in her head.

“Philippines was it?”

“Yeah. I already have a headache because of that. I wish I had two bodies.”

Although Doctors had once caught up and even reversed the viewing rate, it had been flipped again after the recent episodes. The refreshing reversal episode of Kang Giwoo after the revelation of the true villain behind the curtain must have enraptured the viewers. Thanks to this, she was in the middle of a literal flood of commercials, photo shoots, and interview requests. This was compounded with the fact that the final episode was coming. She couldn’t just do whatever she wanted either, as all these requests came through someone she knew, and there were also some of them which had been agreed upon beforehand. Having no choice, she was digesting her recent schedule while having to reduce her sleep. It was also the reason she was staying at home without doing anything on days like today when she had a full break after nearly two weeks. She had to save up any energy to go around in order to digest the near triathlon level of schedules starting early tomorrow.

“You should earn a lot while you still can.”

Maru returned from the kitchen and massaged her back. He was really good at massaging the sore parts without her having to tell him.

“I would have some leisure if I didn’t go on that vacation. Oh, press a bit harder on that part.”

Her shoulders felt refreshed as though cold water was poured on them. Maru would probably be successful even if his occupation was a massager.

“I saw on the news before that some actors don’t go on those paid vacations because they’re too busy. Why don’t you pull out as well? It’s somewhat funny to exhaust yourself just to go on a vacation.”

“I want to do that too, but I can’t really do that. Paid vacation is ultimately an extension of business after all. Not only that, the production company and the TV station are both paying for the trip, so it is rather unsettling to pull out.”

“Would you be hated if you pull out?”

“If that was it, then I would have pulled out. But they told me that the budget might be shaved off if the main actors are not going and maybe even canceled outright if many of them don’t go. The senior actors all have busy schedules but have decided to go for the sake of the staff who worked hard.”

“I can feel the great will of those higher-ups at the TV station wishing to squeeze every last drop from you. Journalists will write articles about the paid vacation, and that will naturally lead to more publicity.”

“Exactly. Also, we managed to gain this much after being vocal. At first, they told us that the supporting actors, managers, and stylists won’t get their plane tickets paid for, so we, the main actors, and the writer said that we wouldn’t go either if that were the case, and then they changed their minds. The

director discreetly took our side as well. From what I heard, they already sold out all the ad spots, sold overseas licensing rights, and earned a lot of money. They're so petty."

Before, Gaeul couldn't understand why some celebrities were embarrassed to go on holiday, but now she could sympathize. It was supposed to be a paid vacation thanking everyone for their work, but things would be really awry if some had their plane tickets paid for while others didn't. She could understand that overseas travel was expensive, but she didn't like grading people until the end and differentiating them. There was a senior actor who did not participate in afterparties after hearing about the paid vacation. He was barely persuaded in the end, but if things didn't go well, only the staff might be there at the afterparty.

"Aren't you hearing anything about vacation on your side? Usually, people start talking about it 3 to 4 weeks before the last episode airs."

"Nothing yet. From what you said though, it might be better off not going. How is it? Feel refreshed yet?"

Gaeul waved her arm and said that she was refreshed, thanking him.

"Since you're going, have a good rest."

"I will. I think I will be able to if I could push Kang Giwoo to one side."

"Looks like you'll have many things to watch out for during this vacation."

"Still, it's a good thing that he has been staying quiet ever since I came out strong last time. Rather, it's the old woman that I'm more concerned about these days."

"The old woman? Lee Miyeon?"

Gaeul nodded.

"Is she picking a fight with you again?"

"No, I'd rather she did. It's even more suspicious because she's not saying anything to me."

"Maybe she finally realized that the girl known as Han Gaeul will not fall down no matter how much she tries?"

"If that was the case, then I would be celebrating. But it doesn't feel like that. I met her yesterday during the shoot, but she just glared at me once before walking past. Normally, when we make eye contact like that, she would nag me about the way I open my eyes, how I don't greet her properly, followed by how terrible my acting is, but she just went on her way as though she was chased by something. I even had to follow where that woman was going with my eyes, to see if she wasn't possessed by a ghost or something."

"So the one who always picks a fight with you has started to ignore you recently, right?"

"Unpleasantly so. At this point, it's making me worried. She might be preparing a big one after leaving me alone for a while."

“Or maybe she became so busy that she doesn’t have time to dawdle with you. Anyway, it’s a good thing that she’s not picking a fight with you. Or what, did you get affectionate after all those interactions? You feel bitter because the one who bullied you has suddenly stopped?”

“You really need a beating.”

She raised her index finger and poked Maru’s flank relentlessly. There was no hate-turned-affection at all, but there was her intuition that she had developed for years. She could tell what was on Lee Miyoon’s mind better than most people. Recently, Lee Miyoon was very strange. It should have been her joy to trot around everywhere on the shooting set with her head held proud, but for the past few days, she looked frantic as though she had left her stove on back at home. Leaving aside everything, her acting was something that even Gaeul had to acknowledge, but yesterday, Lee Miyoon made 10 NGs in a row. That was the first time such a thing happened. Even the director paused the shoot.

“Don’t think too deeply about it. Just think that a wicked woman has finally gotten her retribution.”

Gaeul spoke as she recalled Lee Miyoon shaking her legs while holding her phone anxiously,

“I’d be so glad if that was the case.”

* * *

“What do you mean by that?”

Lee Miyoon barely held back from throwing her phone in anger.

-Old woman, it’s over so stop calling me. You’re way too naggy.

“Hey, you little son of a...”

-Did I come out of your stomach or what? Don’t call me a son. You know, I have a really patient personality to have endured all your curses for over a decade. Had it been anyone else, you’d have a few sashimi knives stuck through your stomach.

“Where the fuck are you?! WHERE?!”

-If I tell you, then what? You’ll come here? This is Japan. Come if you want. But old woman, keep this in mind. Five to six tourists go missing in Japan every year. You’d better bring your will when you come here. Once you’re deemed missing, I’ll personally deliver that letter to your family in about five years. No wait, maybe your family will be the most delighted after hearing your demise? I mean, you have a lot of money saved up, don’t you?

“Who do you think you’re talking to, you fucking bastard of....”

Lee Miyoon clenched her teeth and looked at the staff member who appeared in front of her. He was a clumsy-looking man. When she glared at him, he bowed before immediately going away.

“Head manager Park, calm down and listen to me.”

-It is you who needs calming down, not me.

“Haven’t you heard from the chairman? To put everything back into place?”

-You silly woman. Are you asking because you really don't know?

"What do you mean?"

-How do you think I came to Japan to work in the first place? The setup here is all done thanks to our new president Hong.

"As I said, the chairman himself told Hong Janghae that prick to stop."

-You really can't get this through your thick head, huh? Well, I guess that's not surprising considering you've lost everything. I was also out of my mind when my business rights were ripped off from me by a guy I trusted. I could see why people would daze out like an idiot. You're exactly like that right now, old woman. Think about it. Do you think president Hong really has the guts to do this by himself? No, absolutely not. Listen to me carefully. You were abandoned. You were a lost cause the moment you went against your owner for more feed when you're just a hunting dog. You should've held back a little. Or maybe have a smarter head.

"HEY!"

The call ended. Lee Miyoon collapsed on the spot. She could not contact any of her business partners or any of her customers. The people who had called her saying that they got a call from the chairman and that she should feel at ease had all broken contact in an instant. During the ten days she waited smugly like a military officer who was given commanding rights, Hong Janghae had finished off everything. What she received from the chairman was not some commanding rights. It was poison.

"Lee Miyoon won't go down that easily, you know? I am not going down like this."

She pushed herself off the ground. Drink the poison and die? Not happening. That would just fulfill the desire of someone else. Lee Miyoon calmed down her breathing and returned to the set.

Chapter 906. Crank Up 2

Lee Miyoon walked past like a pedestrian crossing the road on blinking green lights. She was walking so fast that there was a small gust of wind when she passed by. Gaeul turned around to look at Miyoon walking in the distance. Why would she come here? She had no appearances today. The staff made way for her as she was exuding chilliness from all over her body. Everyone was wary of her. Today, Lee Miyoon looked like she shouldn't be touched. Gaeul also stayed quiet after seeing Miyoon's blizzard eyes. She looked like she would stab someone without hesitation if there was a knife in her hands.

"What the heck is up with that woman? Is she angry because her makeup didn't turn out well? For that to be true though, she looks way too vicious," Mijoo came around and said.

"If possible, don't go anywhere near her. She looks really dangerous today."

"It's scary, so I think I might run. Unni, you have two types of clothing today. But hey, I saw that your flank was getting a little bigger. Maybe you gained weight because you ate love?"

"I'll exercise and lose weight. I'm already concerned about it without needing you to tell me, so don't tell me off too much."

"I'm not telling you off. I'm envious."

Mijoo walked away, saying that she would come back with a necklace. Gaeul picked up the script and stood in front of the hospital's counter.

"Miss Gaeul, are you feeling okay today? Madam Lee has come to the shoot."

"Today, she just walked by without doing anything. From the look on her face, it seems like something happened to her."

"Her eyes were totally cold, weren't they?"

"She's someone who puts many people in difficult positions just by being here, and she's even worse today. Did the director go looking for her?"

"I think he met her already. He looked really bad. Madam Lee didn't say anything to the director before, but it seems like that wasn't the case today."

A supporting actress that she chatted with flicked her eyelids once and closed her mouth. Lee Miyoon, who had been away from the set, suddenly appeared. She was attached right next to Kang Giwoo.

"Mr. Giwoo must have it hard, having to get along with her."

"I'm sure he'll do fine by himself. He's everyone's Giwoo."

This scene was something that Gaeul had already witnessed before. Kang Giwoo would step aside with a difficult expression, but Lee Miyoon would block his way. Gaeul closely observed the two. The two were talking like that last time as well, so she thought that perhaps the matter back then hadn't been resolved yet.

"I only heard about this too, and apparently, madam Lee has run into something bad. There are many people who saw her shout into her phone in the bathroom."

"You don't know what it's about, do you?"

The supporting actress nodded, saying that she also didn't know because she heard it from someone else as well.

"Regardless of what it is, I just wish she didn't bring it to work. Many people have a difficult time when she's around. I'd rather have her just nag me like she always does. Doing the shoot in a mood like this is going to be terrible."

"Looks like you don't fear her, Miss Gaeul. Honestly, I thought something big might happen when I first saw the two of you fight. I was surprised again when I heard that your relationship was like that from way before."

"I got used to hearing curses from her."

"I hope I can be as bold as you are, Miss Gaeul."

"Don't be. Sometimes, I hate myself for it. I can just laugh it off, but I keep making a big deal out of it. I'm lacking sociability."

“Don’t say that. You’re someone I really want as a friend. You’re bold, snappy and you even care about the people around y....”

The supporting actress stopped speaking. Her eyes were filled with fright as she looked over her shoulder. Gaeul could tell who was behind her without even looking.

“Hey, you. Did you just talk behind my back?” Lee Miyoon inquired as she placed her hand on the counter.

Gaeul could see the supporting actress’ lips trembling. Lee Miyoon was the type to send people out on a whim. Gaeul cut in before she could utter any nonsense.

“She was talking with me about interesting recent movies. We absolutely weren’t talking about you.”

She refined those words to make them sound as nice as possible. She didn’t want to fight Miyoon. She learned not to fight people whose eyes were loose. She expected her to step back since she was acting servile, but today, it seemed that Miyoon couldn’t care less about any consequences.

“Was I asking you?”

Miyoon snorted in disdain and pointed her finger at the supporting actress. The supporting actress came out from behind the counter and stood in front of Miyoon, her hands neatly folded together in front of her.

“Young ones these days are so rude. They dare to openly talk behind their senior’s backs.”

“Madam, it wasn’t....”

“See? I just said one thing, yet she tries to say a hundred back to me. Look at her trying to win against me, huh?”

“No, madam. I’m sorry.”

“If your skills are so pathetic that you’re playing roles like that, then don’t think about talking bad behind others’ backs and start practicing. You’re so shit because all you do is chit-chat without even practicing. If I were you, I would be too embarrassed to even speak on the set. If you don’t have any willpower, then just quit. Don’t make people who try hard lose energy.”

The supporting actress lowered her head. Gaeul clenched her hand right next to her pants. Miyoon was speaking while looking at Gaeul herself, as though the supporting actress was getting an earful because of her. If she fell for her taunt, the supporting actress may get into even more trouble, so she had to hold back. She had to get the dirt on herself. After uttering a barrage of words, Lee Miyoon caught her breath. Usually, she would step back after this, since she had achieved her objective of rebuking someone.

“But I feel like it’s going to get uncomfortable for me if I keep seeing your face. What should I do?”

The supporting actress’ face turned pale. It seemed like she had no intentions of letting her go. Gaeul stood in between Miyoon and the supporting actress.

"It looks like you have a lot to talk about with me, so stop venting your frustration on the wrong person, senior."

Only then did Miyoon put on a satisfactory smile.

"Are you siding with her right now? Two rude fools are doubly doing bullshit."

"I don't see who's the rude one here. The person behind me, you know? She told me that your acting is really good and that she looks up to you. But hearing that, it made me flabbergasted. What's so great about your acting?"

The supporting actress pulled on her arm. Gaeul signaled her that she was okay and faced Miyoon.

"You picked the wrong day today. You don't know what kind of mood I am in, do you?"

"I do. That's why I'm saying all this to you. Are you not a pro, senior? Are you saying you're proud to bring your private emotions into work?"

"Your little foul mouth is getting worse by the day."

"While you, senior, seem to be getting pettier by the day. Why don't you learn to look after your juniors a little? How long are you going to live as that unrelenting general?"

"Shut your trap."

"I will, so please, do the same."

Lee Miyoon turned around with an absurd laugh. Gaeul looked around. Due to the commotion, many people, including staff and actors alike, had gathered around. Maybe she became concerned after seeing that many eyes had gathered. It would be fortunate if things ended here. As for the supporting actress, she was just a way to pick a fight with her, so that woman wouldn't pick on her later. Gaeul also turned around. She saw the supporting actress looking uneasy.

"Don't worry. That woman picked a fight with you just to say something to me."

"Are you really okay?"

"This is not the first or second time she's done this to me. It looked a little dangerous today, but it seems like it won't be any different from usual."

Just as she finished off her words with a smile, she could see the supporting actress' eyes becoming wider. The onlookers also uttered 'huh?' in astonishment, so feeling uneasy, she turned around about halfway when something hit her left cheek and chin. It took a few seconds for her to realize that she had been hit. She moved her eyes, which were looking at the ceiling, back down to look at Lee Miyoon. She saw a bag in her hands. Did she just get hit by that?

"Miss Gaeul!" the supporting actress shouted.

Gaeul raised her hand and caressed her chin and cheek. It was warm. A sense of pain rushed in a bit later. More than the impact, a sharp sensation as though she was cut by something spread out from her chin. She looked at her hand. There was something red. Blood?

“Unni!”

Mijoo ran over. She looked like she was about to cry. Her hands were shaking in worry for her face, and she looked so worried that it made Gaeul worry for her.

“It’s not a big wound so it’s fine. Do you have a mirror?”

She asked Mijoo, who said that they should go to the bathroom, and checked her face in the mirror on the spot. There was a thin red line reaching all the way to her ear from her chin. The sound didn’t seem too serious. It seemed like she got a cut from a metallic ornament on the corner of the handbag.

“Are you crazy?” Mijoo shouted at Lee Miyoon.

Gaeul grabbed Mijoo’s shoulder and pulled her back. There was no need to reignite a fight that had already ended. The staff came around as well. They were in a fuss, asking if she had to go to the hospital or not. Gaeul asked for a bottle of fresh water and a makeup cotton sheet. She soaked the cotton with the water and wiped her wound. It seemed like it would heal cleanly as long as she applied medicine and treated it well so that there wouldn’t be any infections.

She wiped the blood on her hand and looked at Lee Miyoon. It seemed as though she had returned to her senses a little as she was looking towards her.

“Satisfied?”

“You.”

“You don’t seem to be in a great condition today, so why don’t you go back?”

Lee Miyoon definitely seemed strange today. She was usually like a dictator, yes, but she wasn’t foolish enough to cause an injury on an actor’s face. It was good that the thing in her hand was a handbag. If she was holding scissors or something, she would have really swung that around. So this was why she was told not to fight with someone with their eyes loose. She felt sorry when she thought about how Maru would be worried.

Even the director, who was usually servile towards Lee Miyoon, frowned as though he couldn’t hold back as the person in charge.

“Madam, apologize to Gaeul. You clearly went too far.”

“Director, it’s fine. It’s not a big wound. Rather than that, let’s start the shoot. It’s getting late.”

“Go to the hospital first. Before that, I’m not doing the shoot.”

“I’m fine though.”

“But I’m not. If you want me to write apologies in bulk, then you can stay. If you have any pity for me at all, then go to the hospital. Miss Saebyeol, please go with her.”

The director had the supporting actress tag along. He seemed to be looking out for her. It seemed like his intention was to send the people involved to the hospital first and then clean up the aftermath. Gaeul decided to listen.

“Then I’ll be back quickly.”

“Miss Gaeul, wait for me.”

Gaeul left the set with the supporting actress.

Chapter 907. Crank Up 2

It was probably around the time he was ten. He brought a transforming pencil case that he got as a gift from his grandfather. He had more than enough toys, but the pencil case he got from his grandfather was special. Just as he was boasting it off to the other kids in class, that kid put her hand out. She was an especially tall girl. She, the leader of the kids who ‘played around’ in class, snatched the pencil case away from him and touched all over it, toying with it. He asked for it back, but that was of no use. She tossed the pencil case in the air for fun, and when she received it, the arm of the robot broke and fell on the floor. A gift he personally got from his grandfather had become distorted into a weird shape. The head had snapped backwards and did not return to its normal place, while the chest, which had a cool symbol on it, had been dented inwards. His pencils and eraser fell out of the pencil case like guts.

“I was just playing a joke. You’re not upset, are you?”

That was what the girl said. He immediately realized that she did it on purpose. Was it because he won the class president election? Or was it because he didn’t go to her party? Or maybe, was it because he refused when she asked him out to play? All of them had reasons. He didn’t want to do the class president election, but he got voted for it and ended up being elected, he was sick on her birthday, and he had already made plans to go rollerblading with his friends when she asked him out to play. No matter how hard he thought about it, he did nothing wrong. He kept thinking about what he did wrong as he picked up the pencils from the floor. He put the eraser in last and picked up the no-longer-transformable pencil case. Only then did he realize that he was crying.

“Hey, hey! Kang Giwoo’s crying. He’s crying because his pencil case was broken! He’s a crybaby!”

He could see the girl’s fingertips. She was laughing her heart out as though she had watched a funny scene from a cartoon.

The ear-piercing giggle, the razor-sharp fingertips, the gaze from above, and finally, the broken pencil case.

“You’re a boy, but you’re so petty just because of a broken pencil case.”

The pieces of the puzzle spinning around all scattered and gathered together. He used the girl’s voice as the adhesive to piece the puzzles together into a solid, unshaken thought. Giwoo realized that his tears had stopped. He put the pencil case on his desk and stood in front of the girl who was still laughing.

“Right, you were just playing around, weren’t you?”

He made a refreshing smile. A month later, that girl no longer came to school. Apparently, the girls he was close to had bullied her. When the homeroom teacher said that she transferred to another school due to family circumstances, Giwoo thought: he was just playing a joke, a small joke.

“Are you crazy?”

Kang Giwoo blinked. The event from ten years ago was reflected in his eyes before disappearing. Gaeul's stylist shouting, Gaeul stopping her, and the director interrupting - his floating sense of reality returned to his body. Giwoo stroked his chin. Gaeul's fair skin started bleeding. Even though it was perfectly reasonable that her stylist was shouting, Gaeul just checked her wound in the mirror and calmly washed it off. An aura that overwhelmed the crowd had seeped out of her entire body, just like a scene from a beautiful movie.

The broken pencil case from a long time ago overlapped with Gaeul for a brief moment, but it no longer did. The cool pencil case went into the trash after it was broken, but Gaeul had not lost her elegance. The one fact that she was not broken echoed in his head. He looked at Gaeul boldly walking out of the set. His heart pounded more than when he got the pencil case from his grandfather. She was an item that he desired so much. A lover, a companion, a wife, a friend for a lifetime - those were the kinds of labels he wanted to put on her. He smiled subconsciously. Ever since he had started shooting Doctor's Office, he had not bedded anyone. Giwoo wanted to applaud himself for making such a decision. Compared to Gaeul, every other woman was classless. The only one that suited him, who had to have the highest class by his side, was Han Gaeul.

Giwoo looked at Lee Miyoon. The inflated desires and pleasure he got while thinking about Gaeul were extinguished instantly. The handbag that Lee Miyoon was holding entered his eyes. This woman wounded her with that cheap thing. That woman dared to create a flaw on an item that even the owner just let be. Had he been slightly close to Gaeul, he would have pushed Lee Miyoon away. A good opportunity to score some points with her had been lost.

Hearing the words 'back to work', the staff scattered and checked on the equipment. The noisy set became quiet with three words from the director. The director stared at Lee Miyoon for a long time before turning around, as though he would not sit this one by. Giwoo met eyes with Lee Miyoon who was glaring around everywhere while swallowing her frustration.

"Giwoo, Giwoo."

And she went off again. Giwoo left the set, slowly so that Miyoon could catch up with him. Miyoon also followed him out without causing a fuss. On his way out, a staff member he came across told him to watch out. It was funny, because the one who should watch out was the old woman behind him, not him.

"Why did you do that?"

"You should've seen that bitch's eyes. Those terrible eyes that look down on people. Did you see her glare at me just because she got hurt a little? She's a vicious bitch."

The word 'bitch' really got on his mind. Lee Miyoon should have already been notified that her era of leeching power to rise had been finished. It was not good for her to think that he would still treat her as an elder like before. If she had any wits, she should be getting on her knees, but she kept nagging him to give a call to his grandfather. He didn't like that.

"I must meet the chairman once again. I think something's gone wrong. I'm sure someone tampered with something in the middle. I need to meet the chairman alone and set this straight."

"Set what straight?"

“My position, my power. My everything.”

“I see.”

Giwoo nodded and switched places to somewhere less crowded. He went to the back of the warehouse for the set. As it was under construction, no one would come other than construction workers during the day. He walked slowly and observed if there was anyone nearby. Fortunately, there was no one.

“Looks like you’re in a tight spot, senior.”

“It’s not that. There’s a slight misunderstanding. Everything will go back to normal as long as you can arrange a meeting for me with the chairman. So Giwoo, allow me to meet the chairman one more time.”

“That’s different from what I know. From what I hear, everyone under you has all left.”

Lee Miyoon’s face contorted. She seemed to be curious about how he knew.

“You might not know, but grandfather tells me a lot of things. He explained to me the other side of power ever since I matured, saying that I must know these things. One of the most impressive things to me was the parasites that leech power.”

At first, he tried to let her off with nice words. Had Lee Miyoon not hurt Gaeul’s cheek with her handbag, he would have grabbed her hands and cheered her up. However, this old hag touched something that she shouldn’t have. He almost ruined that fair line.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you, senior. Grandfather told me in deep detail about those parasites. There are supposedly many different parasites, and they each leech off power in different ways. But funnily enough, all parasites eventually fall under one misconception and drive themselves into doom; the misconception that their power stems from them.”

Giwoo took a step toward Lee Miyoon.

“You should’ve lived off the moss that the shade made. Why were you dissatisfied with just that and end up thinking that you were the one who created the shade? Did you really think that the connections you invested decades into making were truly yours? Think about it carefully. What did you use when you first had them work for you? It was money, wasn’t it? Do you think there’s anyone who would stay next to you for the person you are when it’s so ugly? It’s all about money. In the end, those people are bound to move to a person who pays them more.”

“Kang Giwoo, what are you....”

“And the people you stayed close to. Those people are in positions where they create power. The reason they stayed close to you temporarily was not that they trusted you, but that they trusted the name of my grandfather who backed you. You should have known that when you started off, but as I see it, it seems like you too have fallen under the misconception that it was your own name after you became old.”

Giwoo grabbed the handbag that Miyoon was holding.

“Since you must have known the position you’re in now, let me tell you one last thing. I dare you to come to my set one more time and cause a commotion. At that time, I’ll make you end not just your broker life, but your actress life as well. You should retire cleanly, don’t you think? You don’t want to go missing from the screen while others point fingers at you, do you?”

Lee Miyoon’s cheeks trembled. She seemed to be gnashing her teeth, enduring her anger. Giwoo raised his hand slowly and tapped on Miyoon’s wrinkled forehead.

“I am warning you in consideration of our relationship until now. I usually don’t do warnings. So just quietly focus on acting work in the future, okay? If you try pulling off something funny for the sake of revenge, you’ll find yourself at the depths of life. I’ve seen it many times; about what happens to those who pointed their knives at grandfather. Personally, there were times when I thought that they might be better off biting their tongues off and dying.”

Giwoo dusted his hands before turning around.

“You should return for the day. I’m sure you’ll be ashamed once our Gaeul returns.”

After all that was said and done, Lee Miyoon was called the ‘national mother’ among the viewers. He wanted to break a bone somewhere, but there was no reason to create a controversy. The only thing that an old woman could do after all her limbs were cut off was to just act.

“You said that back then too, our Gaeul.”

It was when he took about two steps. Lee Miyoon said those words.

“What about it?”

“Are you doing this to me because I bullied Han Gaeul?”

“Do you think so? You really have gotten dull. Even I, who doesn’t know the details, can clearly see that you’ve been abandoned because you were doing things in vain. Well, I did add a couple things when you asked me to meet grandfather that day.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Why do you even want to know? It’s all over now. Since we’re at it, don’t touch our Gaeul. You know that precious stones are supposed to be handled carefully with gloves, right? If your dirty hands touched her and she got dirt on her or something, I feel like my heart is going to break.”

Lee Miyoon threw her handbag on the ground. Her eyes had been flipped about halfway.

“You don’t know what kind of person I am, do you?”

“I do. A pathetic human who can’t even secure her own food bowl.”

“Whether it’s you or Hong Janghae, it looks like the chairman has decided to dry me to death, huh? Fine, then. That’s how you’re playing this game. I won’t go down alone.”

Giwoo smiled and looked at Miyoon.

“Think about it. Think about the face of the people you’ve been dealing with. Do you think you can win in a legal fight against the people whose job is to deal with the law? Or fight financially against a company? Or politics? I’m saying this for your own good. You know I’m serious, right?”

The gasping woman soon drooped her shoulders. She nodded a few times like her soul had left her before collapsing on the spot. Giwoo turned around as he engraved that figure into his eyes. This woman who had lost her will to fight was not worth worrying about now.

Chapter 908. Crank Up 2

She suddenly felt like she had gotten old. She no longer had the confidence to defeat those who shook her while scoffing at them. It was like that now too. The moment she heard those words from a man all too young, blood rushed to her head and she lost strength in her legs. If it was before, she would have grabbed his head or tackled him down.

Lee Miyoon hugged her handbag. Was the chairman really behind this? She was extremely angry when she had a call with head manager Park, but she had a sliver of hope, thinking that there must have been some kind of mistake, that it would be all okay if she met up with him and talked to him. However, she got shot down by Kang Giwoo. What the chairman gave her was truly poison.

If it was Hong Janghae’s independent action, she would have room to attack, but if that was done by the chairman, she really couldn’t do anything. She could bring a few people down with her to their graves if she used the ledger, but that would put her in the grave as well. It would be meaningless if she didn’t survive. She would not put filth on herself just so that she could go down with a few people.

Miyoon neatened her messy hair. She also dusted her clothes. While looking dirt poor, she would only be able to come up with poor ideas. She slowly walked a lap around the opening behind the set, where no one came by. Would she die as the ‘national mother’ following the chairman’s words to live obediently as an actress? Or should she die as ‘madam Lee’ who smoked alongside the authoritative figures of the country and talked about politics? Madam Lee was better than the actress. The occupation known as actor was too meager. She did not want to meet her end in a petty world where the roles actors could play would become limited when they were old regardless of skill.

After walking for a while, Miyoon looked at the tall building in the distance. No matter how hard she thought about it, going against the chairman was suicide. She had to regain her authority without going against the chairman. The chairman would acknowledge her if she managed to take down Hong Janghae with her own skills. After all, that man judged people based on their achievements.

The people she commanded had all left her, and the people who backed her up had also cut all contact. She had returned to how she was 30 years ago when she jumped into a pile of garbage with nothing but her own body.

Getting an earful from Kang Giwoo helped her in a way. The overflowing anger instead helped her calm down. She felt like she could do anything as long as it did not go against the chairman. She felt like she could even bury someone alive right now.

She returned to the set. The staff that met eyes with her frowned outright. Something unimaginable had happened in front of her eyes, but she could understand. This was reality. Now that the only thing she had left was her shell as an actress, she wasn’t able to do anything to a single staff member. If she set

her mind to removing this nuisance from her vision, she might be able to do it, but now that even the station's president did not pick up her calls, she could not make a big deal out of it.

"Senior, please return for the day."

The director stopped her. Miyoon barely managed to curl up her lips.

"I'm not that foolish, so get out of my way for a moment."

The director walked next to her, as though to tell her that he would be watching her actions. Miyoon walked up to Han Gaeul, who was staring right at her in the distance.

"So you visited the hospital?"

"Thanks to you. I guess that was the first time ever since I fell over."

"I'm sorry about that before. I was out of my mind for a moment. It hurt, didn't it?"

"Not really. Everyone goes through this at least once, right? Not that I ever imagined a senior would do this to me on a set of all places. Is your handbag okay? You always told me that I had a thick face, so I was worried that I might have damaged your leather handbag."

"It's fine. It didn't seem that tough. Tell me how much you had to pay at the hospital later. I'll pay for it."

"Even if you didn't worry about it, I was going to give you the receipt anyway. I heard from someone I know that setting monetary problems should be done properly."

"That's good. I'm asking just in case, but you're not going to make a big deal out of this, right? The Han Gaeul I know is not a junior who would cause trouble like that."

"So you're calling me a junior for things like this, huh? Don't worry. I don't want to ruin a drama that's just about to finish because of some random scandal. But please, bear this in mind: Don't come to the set when you don't have a scene in the future. I'm not sure about anyone else, but I'll find it extremely displeasing. It's a cheap price to pay for injuring someone's face, don't you think?"

"I will."

"You will have to. Otherwise, even I can't be sure what I might do. It wouldn't be fun if two actors working on the same drama got into a scandal because of some violence, right?"

Gaeul smiled. She wished to spit at that face and sneer at her, but she did not have the energy to. She just told her good luck before turning around. She walked towards the dark exit where the lights had been turned off before turning around. Kang Giwoo was looking at her with sharp eyes. Lee Miyoon smiled and waved at him. While that boy made her guts twist in anger, he was still the grandson that the chairman doted on so much. However, she would soon tell him that a woman's obsession would multiply with age.

* * *

"Why are you so persistent? I'll report you to the police."

“Go ahead if you want to. I’ll just stay there for a few days. But keep this in mind: Even if I come back out, I’m going to come looking for you again. In my prime, I used to be called Mr. Persistent. Also, I’m sure reporting me will get you into trouble too.”

The woman scanned him from top to bottom before turning around. Dongwook snatched the plastic bags that the woman was holding.

“You really don’t come out of your house once you hole up, huh? I know it’s heavy, so let me carry it for you.”

“Please, just go. I don’t have anything to tell you.”

“Excuse me, missy. I’ve been in this field for 20 years. I may not be able to smell good things, but I’m incredibly good at catching stinky things. Of course, not that I’m saying that you’re stinky, miss Mari.”

“My name is not Mari.”

“Yes, it is.”

Mari’s eyes twitched as she got ready to shout, but she eventually stayed quiet. A couple walked over from the other side. Mari could not take her eyes off them. Dongwook talked to her.

“The man who came with you from Japan, don’t you want to find him? You seem to like him a lot.”

“Who likes who now?”

“You’re obviously in love. I’ll have to hear the details from you, but I do have a bit of information. I know why you quit your work in Japan and came over here.”

“What are you really?”

“I’ve been telling you for over a week now. I’m an ex-journalist. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I’d like to tell you that I want to help you.”

“If you are really a journalist, then I really can’t tell you anything. How am I supposed to tell anything to trash?”

“Trash, huh? Right, I’m trash. However, unlike the incompetent trash, I don’t suck out the sweet juice and then spit things out. You can see from how I came to find you. I’m pretty good at investigating. Room 301, right?”

Dongwook carried the bags as he got on the stairs. He put down the plastic bags in front of room 301 and dusted his hands. Mari, who followed him here, sighed and opened the latch to the door lock.

“You should get going now. I really don’t have anything to tell you.”

“Then I’ll come back tomorrow. I saw that all you bought today was instant noodles, snacks, and drinks. Are you eating properly? In the short term, it might be okay for you to eat like that, but if you keep that up, you’ll ruin your body. I know it must have taken a lot of effort to groom your body like that, so it’s such a waste.”

Mari, who was looking at Dongwook in displeasure, touched her wrists discreetly. Dongwook did not miss that small gesture of hers. This was the first time she reacted to his words. This was a contrast to the 'I don't know, go away, be quiet' responses that he got until now.

"It's true that I want to help you, miss Mari. If I didn't, then I wouldn't have kept coming like this. Heck, to put it bluntly, have you seen anyone just return obediently? Even after they found out where you live? I'm just waiting until you're ready to talk. But you should spend your time looking after your body. Your life's not over yet. I'm sure you've had a meticulous self-management scheme until now. You should keep that up."

"I know that you're thinking of me as a dirty woman who sold her body as her job."

"What relation is there between me thinking that you're dirty and you actually being dirty? I'm not going to express any opinions about your occupation. Heck, look at me, I'm one of those trash journalists. Who am I to say anything about anyone? Don't you think?"

Mari smiled. It was a self-loathing smile that did not express any of her true emotions, but to Dongwook, that looked like a fanfare.

"Smiling makes you look much better."

"Are you always so reckless?"

"I'm like this because I'm in a similar situation you're in. I have a junior who just won't listen to my words that I still cherish, but that girl got caught up with a case. It is closely related to Hong Janghae. I'm sure you know that name too, Miss Mari."

"I do. I may not know who was superficially in charge, but I do have to know the name of my true boss to talk to people."

Mari quickly entered the passcode on the door. After an electronic ringtone, she pulled on the door. Dongwook put his hands in front of him and waited quietly. Mari turned around after putting her bags inside. Her hand was on the doorknob.

"You should look after your health. These days, good instant rice can be gotten easily. Tomorrow's a weekend, so I'll come back on Monday. Don't try to go missing on me. I found you with difficulty. I'm sure you don't want things to end like this too, right?"

Mari gave him a glance before closing the door. There was a reaction, but was today a failure as well? The door shut closed with a thud. Dongwook looked at the iron door with the gray paint on it while putting a cigarette in his mouth. There was nowhere else for her to go, so she would be staying here for a while. He had the person assigned to him from Lee Junmin wait in front of her house so that he would be able to catch her tail if she decided to leave in the middle of the night. He reached into his pocket looking for a lighter. He could touch a hidden lighter underneath the crumpled receipt. He took it out along with the receipt, but the lighter caught onto his trouser and left his hand. Just as he sighed while looking at the lighter strewn on the floor with the receipt, the firmly shut door opened.

"Hey, you know how to cook?"

"I do, I'm good. I've been living by myself for twenty years, so you can count me on it."

“Then come inside and cook for me. We can talk a little too.”

“Of course, let’s do that. We’ll eat and talk a bit too.”

“But can you really help me?”

“Looks like you haven’t been listening to a word I told you in the past week. I told you that we should strive to achieve a good result by helping each other. Well, then, please excuse my intrusion.”

“Come in. It’s a bit messy inside.”

Dongwook sighed and went inside.

Chapter 909. Crank Up 2

Mari’s story was long. She talked about herself and her past: what kind of student she was, what kind of household she was raised in, as well as how she felt when she started working as a prostitute. He carefully listened to the story he wasn’t the least curious about while nodding and sometimes responding to her. He could not afford to have her stop talking after he finally got her to talk.

Mari was just like the stereotypical prostitute women Dongwook had met a few times before. Due to circumstances, she could not do anything about, she ended up finding shelter at a prostitute business and started earning money. He buried deep his meaningless question about whether there was truly nothing she could do. Instead, he asked a few questions to change the direction of the conversation that he barely got started.

“So that’s how you met that man. I’m sure you must have relied on each other a lot.”

“I was foolish. He was a really good man, but I didn’t realize anything until I was in this state. He helped me adapt in Japan, and I was foolish enough not to notice.”

“Was he a decent man?”

“If I look back, he shouldn’t have met someone like me. If it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t have run into any trouble either. We were short on money at that time, so we ended up making a big mistake.”

“As far as I know, you two became like this because you tried to bring something to Korea.”

“It was a photo.”

“A photo?”

Mari hesitated for a bit before replying that it was a photo of her lying in a bed with an old man.

“He was one of our customers. We didn’t accept just anyone. Unlike when we were working in Korea, we had a set schedule when we were working in Japan. As long as we could keep that schedule, we were free to do whatever we wanted to do in the meantime. That didn’t mean that we were playing around all the time. We learned a lot of things. Before every customer came, we would learn about that person’s preferences, hobbies, what movies they recently watched, and what their interests are.”

“So you were something like high-class prostitutes?”

"I guess you can call it that. Thinking about it now, I did have something like pride for my job. We didn't simply just sell our bodies, we even exchanged high-class conversations. Though, it's all bullshit."

"So you didn't know what your customers actually did for a living?"

"We don't talk about it properly, but having a conversation gives you a general idea. A businessman, a man who writes, an extremely powerful man. Honestly, an ordinary person is hard pressed to know their faces unless they are famous politicians or bigshots in an industry. Above all, the people we call 'royal family' were catered to by the unnis above me, so it was hard to see their faces."

Mari puffed a cigarette. Dongwook also took this opportunity to smoke.

"What happened to the photo?"

"It was taken. Phones, email accounts, everything."

"You don't have any backups, do you?"

"I gave them everything, because I felt like they would really kill me if I didn't. Oppa was getting beaten up right in front of my eyes, so I didn't dare lie. They said that they would stuff us into a barrel of concrete and throw us into the sea if they found anything wrong later, so how am I supposed to think about anything else?"

"Well done. You might have gotten into big trouble if you had other thoughts. There's nothing more important than life."

"They were crazy. I'm sure they must've killed people before. Some people had strange accents, and it's terrifying even when I think about it now. Some of them sounded like Korean-Chinese men, or just Chinese men."

Dongwook nodded. Ever since this country declared war against crime, men who punched for a living mostly died out. In an ecosystem where the police had a full understanding of the local gangs, it was hard for those gangs to survive through violence. However, there were bound to be occasions where force was necessary, and the alternative that rose was foreigners who smuggled themselves in, especially, the Korean-Chinese people.

"You made a good decision by coming to Korea right away. We're in a country where CCTVs are everywhere, so it's hard to kill someone without anyone knowing."

Killing itself was easy though, but he didn't say it because it wasn't necessary. Mari puffed out some smoke before rubbing the cigarette out. Her hands were shaking as she stuffed the cigarette butt into an empty can.

"I'm not sure how reliable I may sound, but I'm going to prioritize protecting your safety when I do this work. If you want, I can ask the police to provide you protection."

"Mister, there were high-ranked policemen among the people I've faced. I can't confirm this, but they definitely felt like that."

"Of course, I don't have any power at all, so I can't protect you. But the person I know has great power."

“Then that person with great power should do this himself. Why is he doing all this through you?”

“As you know, those higher-ups don’t move so easily. Above all, if they do move, they might run into difficulties, so people like me run the front lines. Even the most influential people are the same in the regard that they only have one body.”

Mari stroked up her hair before leaning against the wall. It seemed like she was feeling complex. It didn’t seem false when she said that she cared about her man. When she talked about her past, she didn’t say a word about her family, but she talked in pretty high detail about her boyfriend. Dongwook could easily tell that her words contained affection towards him.

“Whether it’s you, or that man, you should begin anew. You can’t live in hiding like this forever.”

“But there’s nothing I can do. I have nothing. No money, no photo, no information. The contact list of customers I had was taken away from me too.”

“Those are important, but what I really want is your help. As long as you are willing to help me, I can use my abilities to the fullest extent. Of course, we won’t be able to just get the results we want. Things might go down a weird path and turn out strange. However, I will do my utmost best as long as you are earnestly working with me.”

“And how do I trust that? You might be just probing me out, whether I’m keeping my secrets as I was warned or not.”

Dongwook put down the cigarette that he had finished smoking.

“You know full well that you have no one but me to trust. You probably don’t have many acquaintances and dare I say, family, in Korea. Only then will your work be smooth.”

Mari nodded faintly.

“In the end, it’s up to you to decide. I’m sorry to tell you this, but if you refuse until the bitter end, I can just go back. It will take some time. What I want is to dig into Hong Janghae, Lee Miyoona, and their contact in Japan, and give them a blow, and if possible, give a blow to the big boss of their group as well. Of course, this might be difficult. But I’ll definitely try my best to cut the tail off the lizard.”

“Just why are you working so hard for this? A sense of justice? Journalist spirit?”

“There you go again forgetting what I said. I told you. It’s for a junior I cherish. My motto in life is to live a docile life, but I can’t just turn a blind eye after she became like that.”

Mari pulled her knees towards her and spoke,

“It’s a girl?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like her?”

“I’m not entirely sure about that. She’s more boyish than any man out there.”

“So you do like her. Are you crazy? You’re investigating people who lock people up and beat them half to death just for a reason like that?”

“You mean just like how you’re talking with me for the sake of that man after you went through all those terrible things?”

Mari rubbed her face with both of her hands. She covered her face with her hand and stayed still for a while. Dongwook stayed silent so that she could make up her mind.

“Can you find him?”

Those were the words she said after a long time.

“I should be able to, as long as you are willing to help. If I’m to ask around, I do need to narrow down the region.”

“I’ll be safe, right?”

“You’ll be an important witness. There’s a reason for me to protect you at all costs.”

“I know I’m not in a position to ask for this, but if things go well, umm...”

Mari looked away. Dongwook noticed what she was going to say.

“I’m sure you’ll need some money to start anew. I can’t say how much right now, but you will be able to get your hands on a decent amount of money. My backer, who is also my client, is quite powerful and is watching this matter with interest.”

“But why is that powerful person helping out? You said it was a personal vendetta.”

“To cut it short, those people tried to touch a person under my client’s wing. That seems to have upset him.”

“They didn’t touch that person and just tried to, yet that client is responding this hard?”

“He’s someone with a strong attachment to people under his wing. I also find it fortunate that I work with him.”

Mari nodded after fidgeting. It was a sign of acceptance and a symbol of trust.

“Very well, Miss Mari. In order to gain your trust, I guess I must find your man first.”

“If you do, I’ll do anything. I’ll testify, even if it’s dangerous.”

“Okay. For now, you’ll have to go through your memories. How and where did you get caught after you came back to Korea, and where were you dragged to? Also, you have a photo of the man with you, right? I’m sure the dangerous photos have been confiscated.”

Mari took out a small passport photo and a photo she took with him in a park from her wallet. Dongwook took photos of them with his phone.

“Just in case, I’ll keep this photo with me.”

“Go ahead.”

“Then rest up for the day, is what I would say, but the faster we do this, the better, so starting now, tell me everything you encountered since you started working in Korea to when you were in Japan. That’s where I’m going to start investigating. I’ll find your man and their weakness.”

“Okay.”

Dongwook returned to his car and brought back a voice recorder and his laptop. The sun had set, but there was still a lot to do.

* * *

“It’s a pity, but I guess I can’t help it. Then you should come and eat tomorrow.”

Maru closed the pot lid and put it in the refrigerator. He cooked dongtae-tang^[1], but she said she couldn’t come, so he had no choice.

-I’m sorry, even though I said I wanted to eat it.

“Work is more important. Anyway, you don’t sound energetic. Did something happen today at the shoot?”

-The shoot? No, nothing happened.

“Are you sure? Why does it sound like you’re hiding something from me?”

-You’re being way too cautious. I’m completely fine, so don’t worry about me. Oh, I gotta go now, people are calling for me.

“Alright.”

It seemed like something had happened after all. The way she said she was ‘completely fine’ got on his nerves. Gaeul didn’t use that expression. I don’t feel tired, I’m not tired – she would usually say these lines. The only time she said she was completely fine with an energetic smile was when she was in hospital after collapsing. He thought about calling her again but decided not to. He might be overthinking, and even if something did happen, Gaeul should have her reasons to hide it.

“Mommy’s not coming today, you lot. You’re sleeping with me,” Maru said to the two dogs staring at him.

[1] Tang(soup) made with dongtae(frozen pollack)

Chapter 910. Crank Up 3

Maru grabbed the back of Woofie’s neck and dragged her to the side. She had her own food bowl, but she always wanted to eat out of the Pit Bull’s bowl. It wasn’t like she ate a lot either. She would stuff her mouth in the Pit Bull’s bowl and eat for a while before walking away. She didn’t look at the food in her bowl at all. As for the Pit Bull, it was only after Woofie went away that he slowly walk over to his bowl and continued eating. The funny thing was that upon seeing the Pit Bull eat, Woofie would come back again. The same thing was happening now. She was so greedy, like a certain someone.

When he let her go, Woofie immediately went back to eating out of the Pit Bull’s bowl, so he picked her up and went to the sofa. When Woofie was the only one here, she would never eat unless the food was

in her bowl, but now that the Pit Bull was here, she looked like she wanted to set the hierarchy straight. When the Pit Bull first came here, the two of them created an emotional scene by licking each other's wounds, but now that she had discovered that the Pit Bull wouldn't strike back, she was being bossy. Only after Maru saw that the Pit Bull had finished eating did he let go of Woofie. She then walked right up next to the Pit Bull with her limping leg. She really was unpredictable.

Maru put away the dog bowls and turned off the lights. He also closed the curtains about halfway. It was 10 in the evening. He sat on the sofa and closed his eyes. He slowed his breathing and thought back to the day he went to the dogfighting arena: the chilly mountain air, the light sticks that guided him, the coinlady selling rice wine with a smile, two dogs slowly walking into a cramped cage, cheers from the audience, blood and flesh splattering, a road of gravel, the vinyl greenhouse, the nose-piercing foul stench, the sharp rod, the boiling water, the barks seeking help.

What director Park Joongjin wanted from him was plain lunacy. Putting aside calculative acting, it was probably necessary for him to become one with the character and express emotions that could not be calculated. Fundamentally, his method of acting consisted of meticulous investigation into the concept and then recreating the whole scene. The reason he was hung up on details was also for the sake of more delicate acting. Once he had a satisfactory amount of data in his head, he would recreate the set and the people inside and have the characters move according to his imagination. If he had a script, then he would base things off that, and without one, he would base everything on the basics of acting he had learned until now.

There was a man inside the greenhouse. There were dogs inside cages. The man walked around while holding a kettle of boiling water and poured it on the dogs little by little. What kind of emotions were he supposed to harbor while watching the dogs run amok? He had to think about Han Maru's perspective, the character's perspective, as well as the perspective of the audience who would watch his act. He may not be able to perfectly objectify himself, but he could create a rather plausible-sounding opinion. Perhaps it was thanks to the know-how that he had gained through his acting experience in this life, as well as many of his previous lives. Know-how that did not remain in his memory, but was engraved somewhere on his soul. Whenever the character moved and took action, Maru kept asking questions. He broke down the answers that came from those questions and reflected them into his acting.

The man in his mind had poured water on the dogs a few dozen times already. Maru kept watching and analyzing so that he would be able to respond to the most random requests given to him.

He stood a step away as an observer and kept writing down records. His brain was exceptional in providing long-term memory for things related to acting, so he didn't need to write anything down. He just needed to narrow it down to a few big keywords on a note or the script. He now had dozens of opinions about the character. Maru stopped there. With more time, he would be able to produce more stories, but that wouldn't be efficient. It was also difficult to objectify the depths of a character's nature from a single scene.

He opened his eyes. It was 10:37. Maru tried acting out the image of the character he drew in his head. He brought an empty bottle of water from the kitchen to act as the kettle of boiling water. He walked round and round around the living room while holding it with his right hand. He thought about how and where to pour the water. He was aware that doing cruel things repetitively would make that person

eventually become numb to it, but there should be differences in the degree of numbness. The hesitation at his fingertips would probably stem from those differences.

Maru mechanically repeatedly recreated the same situation and did the same actions. He dissolved the list of images that he created in his head and varied his acting slightly each time. As there were no lines, he was only conscious of the keywords 'plain lunacy' as he continued practicing. He sometimes walked boldly, sometimes hesitantly. As there was no correct answer, he just continued endlessly until he produced a satisfactory act.

Another hour had passed when he placed the water bottle on the floor. The two dogs were staring at him from the sofa. Owner, you sick? – their eyes seemed to ask.

Maru shook his hands lightly and walked circles around the living room again. He had more or less consolidated the man's image. That was the result of being hung up on just one character during his rest. He had the confidence to look semi-decent even if he was to act now. However, director Park Joongjin was clearly not someone who would be satisfied with something semi-decent. Maru had seen that personality of his during the kal-guksu incident. He was the type of person to make him stay up all night with a smile.

It would be very difficult to get an okay sign from the director with just a character design that stemmed purely from calculations. A time where he had to leave behind a minimum amount of reason and become the character itself to express emotions would definitely come. Method acting. This was something that the masked man used to take care of. The masked man still shared this body and sometimes talked to him, but he wasn't as active as before. Ever since he remembered the fact that the masked man was another Han Maru and had watched more than twenty repeated lives, the masked man's lips became tight. It was probably because of that being called god that both Maru and the masked man cursed. The most he could get out of trying his best to talk to him was a trivial conversation. The masked man had also quit doing the dynamic acting that he enjoyed doing before.

-Even without me, you'll do well by yourself, Mr. Maru.

"Rather than encouragement like that, I would like practical help."

Maru voiced his complaint out loud at the masked man's sudden call. He could hear the masked man laughing.

"You seem like you're enjoying yourself."

-Because I'm talking to Gaeul as much as I wish. Of course, I'm not talking about the Miss Gaeul that's next to you.

"Is the rabbit doing well?"

-Yes, she is. She's agonizing, but she's still happy that you are next to her. But the thing is, it's quite strange. The person Gaeul – let's call her rabbit since it's confusing – likes is you, Mr. Maru. And you are also me. So, it is perfectly natural for the rabbit to look at you sometimes with worry, sometimes with satisfaction, and at times, with disappointment. But why is it that I feel jealous when I see her like that? I am you and you are me.

"Because strictly speaking, you and I are different persons."

-As you say, I'm closer to being the original. You can see that from just the amount of memories I have.

"I think it's childish logic to decide on who the original is based on by the number of memories one has."

-I thought you'd say that.

"Because I am you and you are me. Strictly speaking, we are different, but in any case, we do share a lot. Rather than that, what do you think? Do you think I'm closing in on the day of my death?"

-If I knew that, I would have told you already so that you can try changing that thing called fate.

"If possible, I don't want to feel a lot of pain when I die. I definitely don't want to get into a traffic accident."

-Traffic accidents are terrible indeed.

The masked man's voice disappeared. Maru looked at the dogs sitting on the sofa. They were looking at him, seemingly even more worried than before. It seemed that even the dogs found it strange that he was talking to thin air.

"Can't you see ghosts or things like that?" he asked.

As a response, all he got was panting noises. Maru grabbed the water bottle on the floor. It was time to throw himself at the character that he had formed, however, he couldn't do so immediately like his calculated acting. Erasing his sense of self and synchronizing with the character never went that well. It was especially slow since it wasn't his area of expertise. He stuffed the rational observer self into the character. The eyes of the observer that never stopped analyzing, his third pair of eyes, were no longer there.

He dug into the depths of the character. There were a few obstacles in the way due to the lack of concrete traits, but he should be able to recreate the situation he saw in the greenhouse.

He walked around with the water bottle in hand. Where are the disobedient dogs? – he had to make those that didn't listen learn what reality is. Whenever he poured hot water, the dogs scratched the ground and growled in pain before whining. Only then did he feel at ease. It would be annoying if the products kept being noisy. When would he be able to leave this dog cage? There was a limit to poking them with sharp rods. A dog that had never tasted the hot water started going crazy again. Maybe he should have studied like the goody-two-shoes in class when he was young? This job was hopeless since there was no future. But why were these shitty dogs so noisy today? Perhaps he should poke them on the stomach or something, or maybe pour hot water on their heads. It would be great for both parties if they stayed still, so why was it that they kept making me the bad guy? They needed a beating to become obedient after all.

Just as he took a step while snickering, he heard a sound that pulled him back to reality. Maru turned around. The Pit Bull had come down from the sofa. He had all four legs planted on the floor and didn't move at all like a wax doll. Maru blinked a few times before taking a step towards the Pit Bull.

The Pit Bull shoved his head under the sofa. He started shaking violently and started barking. It was not the unrestrained kind of bark, but a bark that contained his will to suppress his instincts as much as possible. Woofie had come down the sofa following the Pit Bull and sneaked under the sofa. Maru

sighed and went to the bathroom. He probably made all sorts of noises with his mouth while acting, and among them, he probably produced sounds that stimulated the fear within the Pit Bull. He was unrestrained with his emotions as well. It wasn't surprising that the memories of violence at the dog cages came back to him as he had been exposed to unrestrained expressions of violence. Maru looked at the mirror. He could see a face that was frozen stiff. He washed his face with cold water and forced himself to smile. The foul stench all over his body and the sound of a boiling kettle that rang in his ear finally stopped. He wiped himself before leaving. The Pit Bull looked extremely wary against him. He carefully sat down in front of him and reached his hand out. The Pit Bull slowly put his snout against his hand while preparing to back off at any moment. When the Pit Bull was right in front of him, Maru sighed in relief and pulled the Pit Bull into his arms.

"Sorry, I should've been more careful."

The Pit Bull in his arms barked softly as though in understanding.