

## Once Again 941

### Chapter 941. Crank Up 5

The title 'senior' sounded more pleasant than 'madam'. Usually, it would seem really cocky for a junior around that age to call her senior, but when Maru said it, it really sounded friendly and amicable.

"Were you in high school when we first met?"

"Yes. I was just playing a minor character with insufficient skills, but you took good note of me and helped me a lot."

"I didn't take good note of you or anything. I only said you were good because you were good. Now you don't look immature anymore, and you're a fluffy grown adult now."

"It has been some time. I've been to the military too."

"I thought you'd rise soon since you weren't like those other kids, but I didn't see you around for some reason. So you went to the military, huh? It's not bad to do it early."

Miyoon moved her eyes to look behind Maru as she conversed. She looked at the woman looking her way from in front of the computer. The woman, who seemed feeble, definitely seemed like the female journalist she saw through a photo a long time ago. Just as Kim Dongwook said, it seemed that the woman had gone through a lot of suffering. She had become a completely changed person in the past few years. If Han Maru grew up with the accompaniment of time, the woman looked like she was eroded by it. Miyoon could instantly tell that Dongwook wasn't exaggerating when he said that she slit her wrists. As he said, it seemed that she regained some stability thanks to psychotherapy, but a thick shadow still seemed to be looming over her. She would collapse at the touch of a hand.

"Owner, the flowers here are quite pretty. I plan to buy some as gifts. Would you recommend something to me?"

"As a gift?"

"Yes."

Miyoon could tell that the woman was trying her best to stay calm; however, she flinched twice as she walked over to the display of vases from where the computer was, as though she couldn't control her body properly. She looked bad to the point that Maru, who was watching, asked her if she was okay. Miyoon could see why Dongwook was sharpening his blade. What would've happened if Hong Janghae was here instead? It wouldn't be strange if she passed out on the spot.

"Who do you plan to gift it to?" said the female journalist after having barely calmed down.

Miyoon said that she was going to present it to a woman she knew and that she was someone in her mid-30s.

"Lately, these colors sell out pretty quickly. You can also write something on the vase too. You can either get a sticker or draw it yourself, but there's a cost difference between the two. Drawing it yourself will also need about three days for it to be ready."

“Can I get it right away if I get a sticker?”

“Yes; as for the writing, you can either write it yourself or have me do it for you.”

“I’ll write it myself. As for the color, I like this light blue one. For the cactus, this one seems pretty.”

“If you’d like to get it wrapped up, you should write the note here. It’s tedious to open the packaging, stick the sticker and close it again.”

The female journalist became calmer the more she talked. Miyoon received a sticker and sat down at the table in the middle of the store. As she slowly wrote, she looked at the female journalist organizing the display. If she was filled with hostility, she would’ve shown a big reaction. There was some remnant heat, but it didn’t look like it would explode. She seemed to be avoiding getting involved as much as possible.

“The store’s really pretty.”

“Thank you.”

“Also, you know who I am, right? Not to boast, but I’d like to leave behind an autograph wishing for your success, but I thought it’d be pretty weird to do it if you don’t know me.”

“I know. You’re an actress.”

“Actually, I’ve gotten old now, so I was almost dejected because people didn’t recognize me. I’m grateful that you did. Let me pay for it now.”

She handed the woman her card. While she took care of the transaction, Miyoon put the final period on her comment. She took the sticker and put it on the vase. I hope your business is successful — it read.

“Here.”

After taking the credit card, she gave the female journalist the vase. The woman accepted the vase with two hands.

“It’s for you.”

“What?”

“It’s a gift for you. Place it where you can see it. I have good energy, so I’m sure your business will go well.”

The female journalist hesitated before eventually placing the vase in the display case next to the entrance. She didn’t put up any resistance and just let everything flow past her. She was probably so exhausted that revenge wasn’t even an option in her head. Kim Dongwook was probably brandishing his sword in her place. Since she checked that man’s objective with her two eyes, it was time to go to the next stage. It would be quite meddlesome if the woman brought out her desire for vengeance at the bottom of her heart for survival, but she had to take that much risk at least.

“Owner,” she called out at the door.

The female journalist, who was clasping her hands and staring at her, replied ‘yes’ in a small voice.

“Should I come again later? Or should I not?”

It was a simple question, but it took dozens of seconds for the female journalist to speak,

“I hope you don’t come.”

“Alright, okay, then. I guess it’ll be better for both of us if we don’t see each other. It’s true that I wish you success with this business. I believe that you’re more suited to handling flowers than holding a pen.”

The female journalist nodded heavily. It was her expression of her intent that she did not want to face the incident that drove her life against a corner ever again. Miyoon turned around, relieved. This woman was completely fear struck. If someone close to her told her that they would help her get revenge, she would likely stop that person. It was probably natural as she had to go through all those things. Kim Dongwook also said that he hadn’t told her anything about it while doing what he did. From this encounter, she judged that there were no lies in what Kim Dongwook said at the restaurant.

She opened the door and left the store. The night air was more refreshing than ever. She even had a premonition that things would go well in the future.

“Senior.”

Maru, who had been staying quiet during her conversation with the female journalist, followed her out. She had also thought this during their first encounter, but this young man truly was rather smart.

“I’m not sure whether you’ll like it or not, but here.”

The thing Han Maru held out was a tall cactus. It was something she paid close attention to when she entered the store because of its peculiar shape. This young man’s actions were quite cute. It was also rather interesting that he closed the distance without difficulty.

“Is it a gift?”

“Yes. If you don’t have anywhere to put it, then I’ll take it back.”

“My house is big. I have plenty of space for something like this.”

She placed the vase in the passenger seat. Today, everything seemed to be going well without hitting any blocks. She even received an unexpected gift from a young man.

“Do you know the owner here?”

“She used to be a journalist before. She’s also the one who gave my first interview. We’ve been out of touch for a long while until I was passing by this place and I happened to see her running this store. Ever since then, I’ve been coming here every so often.”

“This country is pretty small.”

“That’s true. I didn’t know that a journalist would become a florist.”

Maru’s eyes contained pity as he looked back at the store. He seemed to know a little about the circumstances of the woman.

“I know her a little too. Though, we can’t be called close.”

"I see. She's doing a lot better than before. When I first came here, she was so wary towards strangers that I was worried if she could do business."

"Looks like something happened?"

Han Maru put on a smile instead of giving a response, as though it was a difficult matter to talk about.

"I remember her being quite cheerful."

"She was. But right now, she seems to prefer staying quietly in that place over going around. When I first saw her, she took interest in many things just like a journalist would, but right now, she's satisfied with just focusing on the people that come to the store."

Maru made an awkward expression as though he had said something he shouldn't. Miyoon said that it was okay. In fact, she even felt grateful. She was able to confirm that the female journalist had holed herself up in her own little world from a third person. As she got in the car, she recalled the agency standing behind Maru.

"You belong to JA, right? Are you still there?"

"Yes. I'm still at that company."

"Do you perhaps know about a journalist named Kim Dongwook?"

"I do. He used to be at our company."

"I see."

"What about it?"

"Nothing much. I happen to come across someone talking about that person. Since you said you know him, let me ask you: What kind of person is that journalist in your personal opinion?"

"A good person."

"How about when it comes to work?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but I can say for sure that he won't look back once he's absorbed in something. He told me about the things he did back in his journalist days like it was some heroic story, but I could tell that those things aren't something that an ordinary person can do with a sane mind. He's an incredible person."

"Really? Then I guess the rumors are false. Don't worry about it. It's commonplace to hear bad rumors about journalists in this field. Are you perhaps still in touch with him?"

"The thing is, I can't get through to him these days. I came across him a while ago, and he seemed very busy. He seemed to be angry at something too. Maybe it's because of that, but he doesn't come to this store that often recently. He used to come here quite frequently too."

"Are those two close?"

"I don't know that much."

Han Maru finished his words with a smile. Miyoon said okay and got in her car. She got a satisfactory result so she didn't feel disappointed. This was an unfunny tragedy of a ruined woman and a man lamenting for not being ruined in her stead. She just had to dip her feet into the sad love story between the two people and bring Hong Janghae down. Whether the two journalists lived happily ever after or committed mutual suicide, she didn't care.

"Have a safe trip back."

Miyoon started the car as she looked at Han Maru's reflection through the mirror. The vase that he gave her shook on the passenger seat. Now that she had a second look at it, there was a sticker on it. I hope all the things you do become successful — it was a vase that contained a quite cute wish. It was also a sign that removed her hesitation. She raised the volume of the radio by two levels. The loud boom of the music was quite welcoming today. It seemed that the heavens left her a way out, looking at how things were going well. As taking the first step was important, it wouldn't be impossible to deal a blow to Hong Janghae as long as she stepped past the halfway point. She looked forward to the day Kim Dongwook contacted her again.

### **Chapter 942. Crank Up 5**

He suddenly craved a cigarette. Maru twisted his dried-out lips. His head boiled like a furnace, and his throat felt prickly as though a beard was growing inside. He was confident in lying with a smile on his face since it was his specialty, but it drained him of energy since he was up against Lee Miyoon. He had inwardly shouted at her to leave several times. He only came back to the store after giving Lee Miyoon's car one last glance after even the rear lights couldn't be seen anymore. Choi Miyeon was sitting at the table, her head lowered and her hands clasped like she was praying.

"Did she leave?"

"Yes, she left."

It was a short time that didn't even last ten minutes, but it seemed to have been an eternity for Miyeon. She had shriveled up like a hydrangea flower that hadn't been watered for days. Maru took out some water from the store's fridge and gave some to Miyeon.

"I wonder why she came here so suddenly."

"Indeed."

"It probably wasn't a coincidence. She looked like she knew I was here."

Miyeon looked at the vase she placed in the display case next to the entrance. It was the vase that Lee Miyoon left as a present. Maru picked up the vase and placed it on the floor.

"Should I throw it away on my way home?"

"No. I should leave it here since that woman may come and look for it later. Also, the cactus would be wasted."

Miyeon gulped down the water in one go. She was probably confused by Lee Miyoon's presence which had appeared suddenly like a traffic accident. Maru closed his mouth. He couldn't tell her that this was a foreseen event and that he had come here in order to prevent the worst-case scenario from happening.

“Are you okay?”

“I thought my heart would stop when she first came in, but I became better soon. It seems like time is really a cure for everything. I thought I’d pass out or charge at her upon seeing her, but I managed to hold back.”

“Well done. She’s someone who would enjoy it instead if you went against her. Ignoring her might be the best thing to do. She went back obediently today.”

“But why did she come looking for me so suddenly? We made no contact until now.”

Miyeon was in deep thought as she pressed between her eyes before turning her head around. She looked like she had noticed something. Maru asked if she had an idea without showing any ripples on his face.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Although she had long since put down her pen, she was a journalist who had once almost pushed him to a dangerous boundary. He couldn’t look down on her intuition, so he had to be careful, and he also had to watch his choice of words so that her intuition did not reach Dongwook. Things would only go smoothly if Miyeon stayed still. If she found out that Dongwook was heading toward a dangerous area like her in the past, she would probably stop it at all costs even if it meant that she had to reveal everything. Maru stayed next to her for around ten more minutes before picking up a vase to take home and standing up.

“I think you should close the shop early and get some rest.”

“I think I should.”

“I’ll place the vase you picked for me at home. Thanks for consulting me about various things today.”

“No need for that. Just come again later. I don’t know that much about interior design, but I can give you consultation when it comes to aesthetic plants.”

He put the vase inside a paper bag. He also received some fertilizer and some plastic ropes used to hang the vase on the ceiling before he left. Miyeon followed him out.

“Please go back inside. The air is chilly.”

“Uhm, Maru.”

“Yes?”

“There’s nothing going on with Dongwook seonbae, right?”

It seemed that she hadn’t put away her suspicion. Maru asked back with a questioning look rather than a smile,

“Something going on? There’s something going on with hyung-nim?”

There was nothing harder to face than a pair of eyes without any shaking. Miyeon's eyes looked like crystals embedded deeply in the ground. They were crystals that would not shake no matter how much they were hit with a hammer from all sides.

The sudden appearance of Lee Miyeon, Han Maru's late night visit asking for a consultation about interior design for around an hour, as well as Kim Dongwook who hadn't contacted her even once for the past while — all these clues seemed to have allowed her to make her own conclusion.

Did he have to tell her the truth? Or lie to her until the end? If he avoided answering right now, the conviction she had in her heart would probably turn into the truth. Should he persuade her at this opportunity and have her participate in this matter? — that option was scrapped before he could even blink. If Miyeon could be with them on this, they would have never acted so discreetly in the first place. Above all, Dongwook would not want her to get involved in this matter. If a person who had already collapsed once becomes ruined again, attempted suicide probably won't be the end of it.

What moved her, when she looked like she wouldn't budge until she heard an answer, was a phone that rang inside the store. Miyeon turned around and walked over to her phone. Now that he had gained some time, he had to come up with an excuse so that there wouldn't be any trouble.

"Senior?"

The word 'senior' popped out of Miyeon's mouth when she picked up her phone. Was it Dongwook? That was great timing. Maru looked at Miyeon calmly. She, who had been prepared to interrogate him, walked around the store with her phone.

"Alright. Come around one time."

After finishing her phone call, Miyeon let out a sigh and spoke,

"Did you know that he was preparing to start a business?"

The masters of excuses inside his head started working quickly. Maru smiled awkwardly and replied,

"Was that him just now?"

"Yes."

"So I guess you must've heard then. I only found out a little while ago that he was preparing to start his own personal business. I only heard that he was incredibly busy. Actually, I wanted to tell you about it, but he told me to stay quiet because you might be worried."

"So that's what it is."

"Looks like things have settled somewhat since he's calling you. He said he'll visit you later, didn't he?"

Miyeon nodded.

"You're more experienced than him when it comes to starting a business, so you should help him if he asks for help later. Anyway, thank you for today. I'll go back now."

"Have a safe trip home."

After saying goodbye, Maru turned around. He heard the automatic door closing as he took his first step. Thanks to the suitable timing of the call, her suspicion was directed at something else. She would probably treat what happened today as a mere coincidence. He took out his phone to contact Dongwook, who helped him out at the golden time. Just then, a car parked on the side of the road while flashing its high beam. The intense light blinded him for a moment. He frowned and looked inside the car that came over. Dongwook was in the driver's seat.

"No wonder your timing was so godly. You were watching us."

"I rushed over as soon as I got a text from you. I couldn't exactly stay still when she's with Lee Miyeon."

"Good. Thanks to you, I managed to get myself out of a predicament. She also seemed rather suspicious, but she seemed to have resolved her suspicions thanks to your call."

He got in the passenger seat. He could smell the thick smoke of cigarettes. The whole box of air fresheners wasn't able to do anything.

"How was Lee Miyeon?"

"She seemed to have come to probe her out. I was wondering if she would really come, and she really came."

"Looks like it was a good thing that I listened to you and prepared for it. It would've been very difficult if Miyeon was by herself."

Dongwook laid back against the backrest as though he was relieved. He was stroking down his face while laughing like a fool, and he looked tired like he had stayed up for days on end.

"How did things go with Lee Miyeon? Looks like it went well from the way she acted at the store."

"We decided to join hands for the time being. She was convinced that an enemy of an enemy is a friend. I practiced a few times, but I was still nervous. Had I been a little more inexperienced as a journalist, she would've found out."

"That's why I told you to just tell her the truth. She's been selling people for decades, and she would've instantly seen through you if you lied to her. I'm sure she was won over because it is true that you are moving because of revenge, and that you have noonim in your heart."

"I don't think it's true when you say that she's in my heart."

"She isn't?"

"If what you're referring to is something like a deep bond between a man and a woman, then you're wrong. The only feeling I have towards her is apologetic. Had I watched out a little more, she would not have had to go through that. If she resented me and cursed me, I would've retorted to her that it was her own fault, but she didn't even do that."

"I thought you'd confess your love once you're done with this matter."

"She's not my ideal type. Also, I'm a celibate. I don't even know how I feel, so it would be hell to live together with an even more complex creature than me."

“Marriage has its funs.”

“How would you know when you didn’t even get married?”

“There are things you can know without doing it.”

“Thanks for that weird nonsense.”

Since they had pulled Lee Miyoon to their side, it meant that the foundation had been laid out. They probably wouldn’t go against each other until the roof was built. The only thing left was to create a place for Lee Miyoon to take.

“The thing I’ve talked about will be handled quite soon. There are rarely any people who would hold onto things while risking their life.”

“Do it as soon as possible. Lee Miyoon is probably urgent right now.”

“I will,” Maru said as he fidgeted with his phone.

### **Chapter 943. Crank Up 5**

He bought some coffee from the convenience store in front of the apartment complex. Some warm coffee was a great companion that allowed him to last through the cold. He sat at the table under the parasol with the coffee in hand, then started counting the apartment floors in front of him. One, two, three.... The lights were off. Gaeul had gone to Jeju island, so it would be a big problem if the lights were on. It was 9 p.m. Maru called Yoojin, who was in Japan, through the messenger app. It seemed that she was on her phone as she picked up immediately after the first ringtone.

-What got into you that would make you call me?

“Some business. You aren’t busy, are you?”

-I picked it up because I’m not busy, don’t you think?

“Are you resting?”

-Yeah. I’m just gazing at the ceiling while in bed.

“Good.”

Maru opened the canned coffee and wet his lips. The things he was about to say now would hurt Yoojin. She might even snap out at him, asking him how he could do such a thing as a friend.

“I have something to talk about regarding your mother.”

-Wait a sec.

He could hear the door close over the phone. A few seconds of silence passed. Maru waited with his hands in his pocket.

-Speak.

“First up, I hope you can keep in mind that I’m not doing this in order to report your mother to the authorities or anything like that.”

There was no response. That should have made her feel complex already. He wanted to wait, but his entire objective was to give Yoojin a sense of urgency. He did not give her any time to relay that information to her head and continued,

“Just like how you talked to me about something important regarding your mother, allow me to tell you something important as well. I’m not sure if this will happen soon or will take some time, but what I can tell you for sure is that the matters your mother is involved in will become a huge issue.”

-Issue? Are you saying that you’re going to rat out my mother to a journalist? You’re selling my mother?

“Not immediately. As I said before, I have no intentions of selling your mother out at all. In fact, I’m telling you this because I want to help. I want to take her hands off this matter before the danger arrives.”

-Danger?

“I can’t tell you the details. But I can tell you that it won’t end so easily. If things go as planned, your mother’s partner will not get off scot-free. The person behind the curtains will also cut off their tail.”

-Are you talking about Hong Janghae?

“My objective is not your mother, but Hong Janghae. A bridge is required to reach Hong Janghae, and your mother is currently playing the role of that bridge. As long as she stays in that position, it will be incredibly difficult for her to escape the fire. In fact, she might be blamed as the main culprit and get all the sins on her. This is prostitution involving high members of society. It will be very noisy once it goes public. Of course, it will probably not influence the mastermind behind it all, but the middlemen will likely all be cuffed. Even if she manages to escape punishment, she will not be able to prevent images of herself from being leaked to the public. Once that happens, she will not be able to maintain those shops that she’s running under her own name.”

-Hey, Han Maru!

Yoojin screeched. It was the right decision for her to close the door. If her screeching voice echoed inside the whole house, there might be hindrances involved in this matter, ones that should have been dealt with rationally. It was ultimately Yoojin’s mother that he had to settle this deal with, but it would become a lot easier to pull Yoojin to his side first.

“Don’t raise your voice. It’s nothing to get angry about.”

-How could I not? Do you even know what I was feeling when I talked about all that to you guys?

“Calm down and listen to me. That’s why I’ve been telling you that I’m not doing this with the intention of socially burying your mother, but to save her. How did you feel when you talked about that secret to us back then? Did you want to feel refreshed by taking out what was holed up within you? No, you didn’t. If that was the case, you would’ve shouted to the sky. You want to save your mother, don’t you? Before she strays off even further, you want to pull her out before it’s too late.”

Yoojin’s angry gasping calmed down rapidly. There were no falsities in her feelings towards her mother. How worried must have she been when someone she couldn’t oppose had chosen the wrong path? And

how much would she have blamed herself? These two were the psychological dilemmas that Maru wanted to stimulate within her.

"I'm sure you suffered. It must have been hard. I'm sure there were many other things that you weren't able to tell us back then. I can't say that I understand how you felt back then, but I can sympathize with your pains. That's why I'm trying to help. Because you're a friend; because she's family to my friend."

-I cannot go against my mother.

"I'm not telling you to go against her. Change your thinking. This is about helping your mother. It is definitely the wrong thing to get involved in bad matters. However, people can return to their original track through self-reflection. I'm sure your mother dipped her hands into dangerous business because she wanted power, but she has been pretty successful even without that, hasn't she?" Maru said as he rested his chin on his palm and looked at a docile cat.

It was easy to add a bit of a lie when talking to someone who he could not see. If his relationship with Yoojin was just a little more distant, or if Gaeul would not be sad about it, he wouldn't care if Yoojin's mother set her course in life straight to doom. He was only doing this because it would be a lot easier to coax Yoojin's mother out of the equation and because a few people would be relieved.

He was also sugar-coating when he said that people could change through self-reflection. While he did not deny the fact that people would change through hard efforts, he did not agree with the fact that those that stepped over the line of morals would change through effort. Anyone who had been educated moderately would know a 'line' to never cross. Yoojin's mother crossed that line. Those who had committed a crime of their own will would only stay low when being suppressed through the law, and they would reach their hands into the darkness once the guard was a little lax. Even if this whole ordeal went well and she becomes distant from this whole matter, she would join hands without hesitation if a second Hong Janghae reached out to her.

-Right. My mother is doing plenty well even without having to get involved in that business. I still don't understand why she decided to expand her business into such a terrible thing.

"Anyone can make a mistake. Your mother is not a perfect human being. Don't you think so too? A human cannot be perfect."

Yoojin softly echoed the words that even her mother cannot be perfect. Maru had to give her motivation. If he managed to persuade her that she could become a hero that helps her mother, Yoojin would make a move. After all, to Yoojin, her mother was a sun that she could not afford to have disappear or fall. She would reach the conclusion that she would have to talk to her mother in order to protect her.

-What should I do?

"For now, try persuading her on your own. Is she with you right now?"

-Yeah, she's downstairs.

"Then go up to her and bring up the topic directly. Don't talk about what I told you and ask her if she could take her hands off that business. If things go well, your mother might pull out with just that."

-No, that will absolutely never happen. Mother listens to my requests quite well, but she will never relent when it comes to her own matters. Heck, I can't even get her to let me change her pillow covers without permission. There's no way she would stop doing that through my words alone.

"Still, go ahead and try. You should show her that her daughter is desperate so that we can take this to the next stage easily. It will soften the conversation between me and her after you tell her your own feelings rather than me suddenly bringing up the topic. If you fail to persuade her, then talk about me."

-Okay. I'll do it right now.

The phone hung up. Maru sipped the coffee that had turned cold. The cat that had been lingering around him looked like it was startled or had found out that the human in front of it would not give it a can of tuna, and had disappeared. Maru leaned back on the chair and looked at the cars coming inside the apartment complex. Over the sea in Japan, Yoojin was probably making the resolution of her life before barging into the living room. Maru only hoped that he would get a call back soon whether things went well or not.

He didn't get a call back even after he finished the canned coffee. He went back inside the convenience store and bought another one. The part-timer, who he had gotten to know after seeing him for a few months, asked if it wasn't cold outside.

"It's bearable."

He put the coffee against his cheek and sat down. He did not want to bring this matter home. If Yoojin's mother was just like she was known to be, he would probably be able to get this dealt with before the end of the day.

A cat poked its head out from below the car parked in front of the store. Now that he thought about it, the cat probably appeared according to the chimes of the convenience store door. So it was planning to get some food in exchange for looking cute if it found some soft-hearted person. Maru went inside and asked if there was some cat food. The part-timer smiled and pointed at the cat outside.

"That one's a player. The owner even places an order for cat food specifically for it. Pretty smart. It would keep meowing for food if it sees some in a human hand."

"That's much better than people. It doesn't at least hide its intentions when approaching."

Maru left the convenience store. Just as the part-timer said, the cat jumped out from below the car when he waved the cat food. This cat had completely learned how to get by in this forest of gray. He also took some photos for Gaeul, who was helpless against cats. There's no free food in this world, so act as a model in exchange for the food — he thought.

He took photos without restraint. Just then, he got a call from Yoojin. There was no power in her voice.

-I screamed at my mother for the first time in my life. I'm still shaking.

"Well done. You should show her that you're that desperate. So? What's the conclusion?"

-She wants to hear things out. Mom wants to call you.

"Perfect. Good job."

-You're really pulling my mother out of this, right? You aren't deceiving me, right?

"I don't want to be hated by Gaeul."

-That sounds reliable. If you said that it was for me, I would've been suspicious until the end.

"Then hand her the phone now. We should finish this off before the day ends."

-Alright. Wait a minute.

Maru put his phone down on the table. The cat that was eating in front of him had disappeared, as though it had no more business with a human after having fulfilled its objective.

#### **Chapter 944. Crank Up 5**

Park Okhwa looked at the door that her daughter just left through. Her daughter was an obedient girl. She educated her that way. Her education started when she was still breastfeeding. She warned her daughter with her eyes when the little infant tried to bite. The young girl had yet to even take her first step, but ever since then, she would no longer use her teeth. Her early education showed during kindergarten as well. All of her teachers would say that there was no one more obedient than Yoojin. Even throughout puberty, she would grumble but never disappoint her. Okhwa believed that this was the ideal parent-child relationship. She would do diligence as a parent by focusing everything on raising her, while her daughter would fulfill her filial piety by respecting and following her parent.

Okhwa did not want her daughter to achieve success after many hardships. Was it necessary to choose a path of suffering when there was an obviously easy route? She alone was enough when it came to being disdained and looked down upon just because she was a woman. Her daughter just had to reap the benefits. She had given her daughter the know-how of life that she had learned. It might be rather authoritarian, but from how her daughter followed her without complaints, it definitely wasn't wrong. As a result of all that, things did turn out quite well.

Okhwa pulled her lips with her fingers. She could still vividly picture her daughter shouting at her from right in front of her. She had never seen that before. It was sudden, unfamiliar, and above all, disconcerted. The change in her daughter that had arrived without warning pressured her heart and made her head dizzy. It was also shocking that her daughter knew about the 'ladies.' Since when did she know that? How did she know that? Okhwa had never let those women inside the house nor ever talk about them at her shop. She always proceeded with everything in this room quietly with Hong Janghae or his head manager. If her daughter found out, there was only one possible cause: she came to this room without permission.

She was puzzled even more by this, as her daughter had done something that was disallowed to her, than that she raised her voice. Yoojin was not that kind of girl. She was someone who was unable to do something like that. Her chaotic mind started stabilizing. The words that her daughter said started to be put in order. Cautiously asking about the truth, telling her to take her hands off because it's dangerous, and lastly, the fact that a friend of hers was aware of this matter — that last one jolted her head. This was no time to be surprised by her daughter's sudden actions. A stranger knew about this matter, which would not end with just an apology if it was exposed to the public.

Okhwa hurriedly went to the 2nd floor. Her daughter was sitting on the stairs with her arms hugging her knees. Okhwa hurriedly spoke,

“I need to call that friend of yours.”

Her daughter complied and put her phone against her ear. It seemed that she was calling that friend. Okhwa sat on the sofa in the living room and waited for her daughter to bring the phone. Did that fellow find out about the prostitution service through Yoojin? Or maybe it was from some other route? It would be okay if it was the former. It would mean that there was no source of leaks. If it came from somewhere else though, it would be a big problem. This was supposed to be a confidential matter that staked the lives of many.

“Mom.”

Yoojin gave her the phone, telling her that this was for her sake until the end. Okhwa ignored her words and put her ear against the phone. Right now, she was more concerned about this ‘friend’ of hers rather than the sudden change in her daughter.

“Who is this?” she asked right away.

She blatantly wanted to ask where the information was leaked, but she held back for now.

-It has been a long time, madam. My name is Han Maru. I wonder if you still remember me.

“Han Maru?”

When she probed her memories, she did recall a boy that looked rather aloof. Although she had heard about him through the people around her, she did not watch dramas these days and only remembered what he looked like when he was young.

“So it’s you. It’s been a long time.”

-How have you been?

“I’ve been doing well until moments ago, but I can’t be sure of that now. I’ve heard something rather absurd through my daughter. It made me flabbergasted.”

-So you’re feigning ignorance for the time being?

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to say. If you’re doing this because you trust what my daughter said to you out of a misunderstanding, this won’t be good for you. This old lady has a lot of acquaintances you see.”

-Of course this is how you would act. It’d be funny if you admitted it immediately. I’ll fall for your probing question then. This is not something I found out through Yoojin. You know what that means, right?

Her teeth clattered. This was what she was worried about. There was a possibility that he was lying, but from the confidence in his voice, it seemed that he was ready to back it up. Perhaps he even had concrete evidence.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I'll listen to you anyway. Forget the details. Go straight to the point."

-I will. It's not polite of me to take away the time of someone busy. Madam, please take your hands off what you're doing. You're doing more than enough by running those shops of yours. I don't know what you receive in return for being a middlewoman, but if you keep holding onto that, you might lose everything that you have built up.

"Are you threatening me?"

-Did that sound like a threat? I am helping you so that you can avoid the impending catastrophe. The dam has been broken, and the water is overflowing, so you might end up getting swept by the tide if you keep watching.

"I will not get swayed by someone's words. No matter how much you threaten me, I am firm and proud so I will not be scared. It's funny to get scared because of something I never did. I'm sure you're lying when you said you heard it from another sour...."

-Should I tell Mari that you said hi?

Okhwa felt the back of her neck stiffening up. She never imagined that that name would pop up right now. Her daughter only knew that she was involved in the business and not the details. Not only that, Mari was someone she had crossed off the list. Knowing Mari was not something to be taken lightly. It practically meant that he knew everything. There was no way he would say 'Mari' just by guessing.

She went inside her room, away from her daughter's prying gaze. It was too early to admit to and reveal everything, but this was no time to be acting tough either.

"Mari? Who is that woman?"

-Sounds like she's someone you know. I only said the name, yet you already decided that she's a woman. I thought it must be a dog's name when I first heard it.

She was being played. She was hectic right now because the problem came on top of the changes in her daughter. Had she maintained her calm, she would not have made such a mistake. Did Han Maru expect this when he told her daughter to talk to her first? She could vaguely recall the rather bold-looking eyes.

-Should I send you a photo or something? How about a photo of her with her boyfriend? Still, though, you went too far, locking up a person. I wonder what Yoojin would think if she found out. She must be plenty shocked as she is, but once she finds out that her mother tried to tamper with someone's life....

"That was not me!"

Okhwa cut in midway. The moment Maru talked about Yoojin, she was given a big jolt. Only then did she realize that while she was afraid of being socially buried after being exposed for being a middlewoman for prostitution, she was even more terrified of her daughter Yoojin looking at her with complete contempt. She didn't care about anyone else, but she had to be a perfect mother in front of her daughter. That was how she had lived until now.

-Indeed. It was not you who did it.

“What?”

-I said it's not you. Only the one who is holding the knife at the very end will be labeled the culprit. If you clean your hands before that, who would even know that a woman known as Park Okhwa was involved? It hasn't been that long since you started that business, right?

Han Maru seemed to know everything. Her body loosened. Any strength to resist was drained through her feet.

-You know it already, don't you? Who will take the brunt of it if this is exposed to the public? Do you think the leaders of huge conglomerates and government officials will even go on the investigation list? Half a year ago, a photo revealed that the chairman of some company had an orgy party, but what happened after that? Did the stocks fall? Did the chairman abdicate from his position? No, it was just quietly buried. The same thing will happen this time as well. However, someone will have to stand on the execution ground in order to quell the fury of the masses. Like back then, only the broker will be the one to die. Do you want to let Yoojin see you like that? The figure of you sitting down in the interview room wearing prisoner clothes?

For a brief moment, she could imagine that. She had been to the prison a few times since there were some people among her acquaintances who were related to trouble. Whenever she looked at those people who were smiling like fools with lifeless faces, she always resolved to herself that she must not fail. She even felt that it was better to die than become like that.

“Why are you telling me all this?”

-I told you. I really want to save you.

“Who the heck are you? How did you know about this?”

-To tell you the truth, I'm nothing more than a meddling guy in this. There's someone else who's doing the real work. That person should contact you in a while. You should get the details from him. I only found out coincidentally that you were involved in this and said that I would try to persuade you. The mother of a friend of mine is about to run into big trouble, so I can't exactly stay still.

It only took an instant for a goddamned guy to turn into a savior. The more she listened to him, the more she felt truly grateful. She thought that a catastrophe might have befallen her if her daughter wasn't friends with this boy. Not long later, she came to herself with the thought that this might be a trap, but it was true that her anger had died down. She also had some vague hope.

“But how do I believe you? I believe that you know a lot about this matter, but when it comes to helping me, I can't help but....”

-That's why I told you that I'm just a meddling guy. I am going to go to that person and tell him that I've successfully persuaded you. Then, you should get contacted by him. You should decide for yourself at that time.

There were many things she wanted to ask, but Han Maru drew the line, saying that he should hang up here.

-I'm telling you this out of worry, but the moment our conversation is exposed anywhere else, you will become a kite with a snapped string. The man known as Hong Janghae is more than capable of doing that. The moment he realizes that he's exposed to danger, he will immediately start tampering with the evidence or erasing them outright. Though, I'm sure you know that better than me without having to tell you since you've been working closely with him.

The phone then hung up. Okhwa put the phone down on the bed. Despite that she was exposed, there was a way out for her. While she said that she couldn't trust him, she honestly felt like she would cling to whoever would call her tomorrow. Mari alone was enough to prove what she had done. She could picture herself praying that she would escape this safely.

"Mom?"

Her daughter put her head through the door. For some reason, her daughter looked really tall today. When did she grow up like that?

"Go back to your room for now."

She wanted to get consolation, but the person doing it could not be her daughter. She had to keep the image of a perfect mother for life. Yoojin slowly closed the door. As the door closed, Okhwa could see her daughter sighing in relief, as though she was glad that her mother ordered her firmly like usual. Okhwa let out a deep sigh. She felt like she wasn't going to get any sleep tonight.

#### **Chapter 945. Crank Up 5**

"I think you can try contacting her tomorrow. I sized her up, and I don't think things will go badly. She seemed urgent, and more than anything, scared. She dipped her hands into it for immediate benefits, but I'm sure she must be uneasy. Above all, I think she's thinking about her daughter, unlike how she looks."

-There are many vicious criminals who are endlessly warm towards their families. Rather than that, you actually dealt with the whole thing in less than an hour after you got separated from me. I thought it would take at least a few days.

"I find that delaying matters like these usually lead to trouble. It's also a lot more comfortable for me to do them as fast as possible. Anyway, you should call her tomorrow."

-I will. But hey, you were brought up to the surface. Is that okay with you?

"She'll definitely keep quiet. She knows that her life is on the line. Also, I should help out a little."

-Well, I'm thankful since it makes my job a lot easier, but still....

Dongwook trailed off as though he was worried. Maru sniffed before replying,

"Don't worry. I'll push your back when it comes to the really dangerous stuff. Don't tell me that you're disappointed in me later. That's just the kind of guy I am."

Maru hung up before returning to his home. He washed away the chill covering his body with a warm shower. While he got washed, he heard the two dogs jumping around in the kitchen. They probably wanted some food.

After giving them some food, he turned on the TV. Back when he lived by himself, he usually never watched TV, but ever since he started living with Gaeul, he started hating the silence in the living room. He brought a handful of nuts and a can of beer before sitting down on the sofa. He hadn't drunk by himself for a while. He happened to see Sooil holding some beer on a TV ad too. He flicked the can of beer in the air —For the smooth success of the project, cheers.

He watched a documentary talking about the dangers of obesity for a while before changing the channel. There was a program telling the news about the entertainment industry. He put down the remote control and focused on the screen. There were actors trying to promote the movies that were about to be released, talking about interesting, and sometimes dangerous episodes, they had during the shooting. They then finished it off by asking the audience for support. The screen switched back to the studio, and the main host was on camera.

-The next news comes from the actor Lee Heewon. We'll hear the details from Miss Nayoung, who is at the scene. Miss Nayoung, I heard you've met Mr. Heewon, yes?

The scene changed again. A reporter wearing a denim overall skirt picked up the conversation.

-Hello everyone. Sorry for making you wait. I've finally met Mr. Lee Heewon. Let us get right to the interview of Mr. Lee Heewon, who has received a lot of popularity for his acting in the drama 'Doctors.' To the pojang-macha we go.

The dogs sat down below the sofa. They liked jumping around excitedly, but they liked watching TV just as much. Sometimes, Maru wondered if they were human when they danced along to a music program. While Maru petted their heads, the reporter went into the pojang-macha on the street. Heewon was sitting down in a cramped corner.

-Hello, Mr. Lee Heewon. It's been a long while.

-Yes, I think it's been quite long since I last did an interview.

-There are many people who want to see you. Why do you not do any interviews?

-I just like staying at home. I also don't have the energy to do anything once I'm done acting. I only managed to show up since I finished the drama.

-You're just like the rumors say. You said once before that you wish to stay at home and do nothing for a whole month, right? You should have some time since the drama is over. Are you really staying at home?

-That was the plan, but my little brother won't let me be.

-Your brother is currently acting as your manager, right? It's quite well-known among the fans. You two are known to be quite close.

-It's because everyone doesn't know his true self. He is so vicious and simply can't see me resting for a single instant. Actually, I wanted to rest at home and not do this interview, but my brother forced me out.

-You say that, but you actually worry about your brother a lot, don't you? Your post on Instagram became quite a hot topic. You wrote that you were always grateful while uploading a photo of your brother sleeping.

-I'm always grateful to him since it's thanks to him that I got into acting. It's just, you know, just because I'm grateful to him doesn't mean that he can't be annoying sometimes. Haewon, please get some rest, so that I can get some rest too.

Heewon spoke while looking straight into the camera. That probably wasn't on the script and came from his true heart. Maru watched the interview for a while over some beer before standing up. He made some food to eat tomorrow before cleaning his house that had been messed up by the dogs. When he came back to the living room after taking out the sock that Woofie had pushed underneath the bed, the interview was coming to an end. After having an on-the-spot fan meetup and giving them a hug, Heewon returned to the pojang-macha.

-I wish I could talk to you some more, but you have something to do, don't you?

-I'll get dragged around by my brother again. I really wish I can stay here a little longer and enjoy this bowl of udon.

The reporter covered her mouth with the questions sheet and laughed. Meanwhile, Heewon glanced outside the scene before stuffing his mouth with some udon. He was probably looking at Haewon. Maru could clearly see that Heewon was trying to eat some carbs with the interview as an excuse. He could already picture Heewon being scolded by Haewon after the shoot.

-Lastly, I must announce some unfortunate news. Mr. Heewon, I heard that you were going to get drafted soon?

Heewon put the bowl down and replied,

-Yes. I can't tell you the specific time, but I'm getting drafted early next year. I already have a date.

-You're twenty-five this year, aren't you? You're at the age where you should be focusing on work. Don't you find it a little bit of a pity?

-Many people around me told me that. I should be focusing on work, I can't miss this golden time, I should row while there's still water - I don't think they're wrong. However, this is the right time for me. It's the perfect time to go to the military. I've never done something seriously ever since I was young. I only focused on wasting my time as much as possible and acting was the first thing I put so much effort into. Though even that was something I started because I was pushed to do so because of a friend. Now, however, it's my everything. I luckily managed to make a debut, and I received a lot of attention from the people and was told that I'm pretty good, but the way I see it, I'm still starting off and insufficient. I don't think right now is my golden period. I believe that I should experience a little more of life and prepare to leap even further. That's why I decided to get drafted. I thought I needed some time to show more things in my acting.

Heewon again spoke while looking straight into the camera. There was even a sense of desperation in his voice. He showed with his words and expression that the decision to get enlisted came after deep consideration and deep thought about his acting career. Anyone would cheer for him after seeing that.

Maru nodded while listening to his manly words before frowning. Something didn't feel right. While he was caught off-guard by the graveness in his voice, Lee Heewon was not someone who would speak so logically. Instead, it was Haewon who was on the more logical side.

In the past, Heewon chose to get enlisted to get a break. He said his objective was to escape from the tight schedule, as well as Haewon who enforced that tight schedule upon both of them. Was he acting? If he said 'I'm tired of work, so I'm taking a break' while laughing like a fool at his last interview before getting enlisted, it would probably tarnish his reputation, so he may be using his acting skills to cover things up.

Having come up with a rather plausible-sounding deduction, Maru started laughing. He should probably be able to find out the truth if he gave the guy a call later.

-I heard that your brother is getting joint-drafted with you. Is that true?

-Yes.

For the first time in his fluid answers, Heewon gave a curt answer. Although it was for a brief moment, he couldn't maintain his expression either. He frowned like a mosquito had landed on his ear. Although he proficiently smiled right after that, Maru could see how much he disliked that situation as he knew full well about Heewon's nature.

"So it was acting."

Maru sat down on the sofa and watched the rest of the interview. The reporter finished off as the OST for 'Doctors' started flowing out.

-I enjoyed the interview today. Thank you.

-Me too.

-Please come again once you get discharged.

-I will.

-Finally, you should tell something to our audience. There must be a lot of fans who will be disappointed to not see you for a long time.

Heewon turned around on his chair. He clasped his hands and put them on his lap.

-I was really happy that everyone cheered for me and gave me a lot of support when I'm very insufficient. Since this is the start, not the end, I will try my best to do even better in the future. Also, it's not like you'll stop seeing me immediately, so don't feel too disappointed. To give you a little hint, I am doing one final piece before I get enlisted.

The reporter asked back in surprise,

-Really? Looking at the timing, it must be a film.

-Yes. But I'm not the lead character. I don't have the time for that either. I'm just a cameo that will appear briefly, but this is something I'm doing with a really good director and someone I've always wanted to act with, so I'm planning to do my best.

- Even just as a cameo, I'm sure many of your fans will be happy to see you on screen.
- Don't expect too much. I might not show up that much. In fact, I might be edited out.
- No way, that won't happen, will it?

The camera backed off and captured the two of them at once. The reporter took a bow and finished off with a closing commentary, while Heewon waved both of his hands in the air. The main host came back on screen again. The segment ended with the main host saying that he would look forward to Mr. Lee Hewon's last acting performance before getting enlisted. Maru watched with his arms crossed. He recalled the brothers saying something ominous during the afterparty: Please take care of me.

"No way, right?"

While his mouth denied it, his head whispered to him that it was probably right.

### **Chapter 946. Crank Up 6**

"Okay, hyungnim. As long as Lee Miyoon does well, everyone can return to their original positions. What I'm worried about is that the chairman might choose not to use Lee Miyoon again."

-That's something Lee Miyoon is confident in, so we have to let her do it. If she can't, we can only try attacking Hong Janghae with the evidence we have procured until now.

"We have a witness, but not clear evidence, so I don't think that will be enough. Unless the procuress in Japan gives us evidence directly, then maybe, but she'll likely focus on cleaning her hands off it, so she'll likely erase all evidence that might be used against her."

-Ultimately, it comes down to people. I've prepared as much as I could, so I should pray for the rest. Alright, good work. We'll have to watch for a while, so you should focus on your work.

"You should get some rest too. If you have the time, you should visit journalist, no, owner Choi's florist shop too."

-I'm planning on not seeing her until I finish this. I think that will be better for both of us. Lee Miyoon might start suspecting if I start visiting her.

"That's true."

-I will call her though.

"Alright. I'll visit you on the weekend. Let's go over what we should tell the others in the future while eating."

-Then see you on Sunday. Good luck with work. I'm hanging up now.

"See you."

Dongwook hung up. It seemed that Park Okhwa decided to turn around. There was probably no one who would daze out in front of the tetrapods when they knew that a tsunami was coming. She should be starting to clean up her surroundings and creating a reasonable excuse to cut ties with Hong Janghae.

Yoojin's rebellion against her probably helped her make the decision as well. It was great that she was not a parent who treated her child like an auxiliary piece like Hong Janghae.

He took a shower and had a look at the time. It was 10 a.m, about time to leave. He put his coat on and consoled the two dogs that tried to follow him out before going down to the parking lot. When he got in his car and turned on the radio, Gaeul's voice started coming out. There was no way it was a live radio from all the way on Jeju island, so it was probably a recording. A trot song started flowing out, along with the words that it was requested by a bus driver in his fifties. Maru hummed along and tapped along with the rhythm on the driving wheel. Not long after he went on the road, he saw the destination. It was a restaurant that specialized in a baby's first birthday party. He parked the car in the underground parking lot and went up to the first floor lobby. He looked at the guidepost at the front desk and headed to the 2nd floor.

"You're here?"

Director Park Joongjin greeted him. The hall was completely empty with only a ritual table in the middle. The pig's head, the main character on the table, was grinning widely. At the head of the table was a sign that said 'wishing for no accidents.' Usually, it would read 'wishing for fortune' instead.<sup>[1]</sup>

"It doesn't matter if the piece does well or not, you see," said Joongjin as he pointed at the sign.

To Maru, it sounded more like 'success is guaranteed anyway, so I hope no accidents happen.'

"What about the others?"

"They'll come soon. This is a small-scale one, so there won't be many people. I was originally not going to do this, but I felt like it would bring bad luck to the title."

"I thought you were someone who didn't believe in such superstition."

"Luck is something I cannot control. If I can benefit a little by doing this, then it won't be a bad thing."

While he waited, some people started arriving. They were the actors, production staff members, as well as the writer.

"I've never taken up work after seeing just the name of the director in my entire life. If it wasn't you, director Park, I wouldn't work like this. Did any of the actors receive a script?" asked head manager Moon, who introduced himself as the producer.

Maru did not raise his hand and looked around. The other actors also stayed still as though they did not receive the script.

"The only thing you have heard is a couple of lines about the synopsis from the director, right? If it was any other director, people would've quit already and the project would've been scrapped because of failure to upkeep the contract and whatnot. Heck, if we were using investor money to shoot this film, the company would have sued the director a long time ago. But look at him. He's using his own money for the production, his own men, and only people that trust him, so there's not a single complaint in a situation like this. That was when it occurred to me: ah, if I don't brace myself, this film might get demolished before the crank-in."

Head manager Moon spoke with a chuckle,

“That’s why I brought you into the team, head manager Moon. I’m going to have you take care of things outside the shoot. I believe in you. Don’t overwork yourself.”

“Of course. That’s why I’m here. Anyway, please take care of me. I’m going to be acting as the supervisor for our director here.”

Head manager Moon made big gestures whenever he talked. His talking skills reminded Maru of an American stand-up comedian, and Maru watched him like he would a performance. After talking about how he almost fell to his death at the Grand Canyon, head manager Moon looked at the door and waved his hand. Maru turned his head around. The baggy hoodie and cargo pants with lots of pockets caught his eye. The woman, wearing a large pair of horn-rimmed glasses, took off her hood and greeted slowly.

“You haven’t started yet?”

“You’ve overslept again, haven’t you? You should reduce your sleep.”

“I get sleepy no matter how much I sleep, and if I reduce my sleep any further, I might as well go into a coffin. Hello everyone, I’m Park Jiseon. I’m supposed to be the assistant director, but I’m not sure. Director Park is so great, so I wonder if there’s anything for me to do. I just plan to fill the headcount at the shoot.”

Park Jiseon sniffed before sitting down. Maru had a close look at her face. It seemed like she was the same person after all. She was the director of the commercial for a telecommunications commercial that he shot with Sooil a long time ago. She looked just as tired as she did back then. The bags under her eyes remained unchanged too.

“Looks like all the important people are here. Let’s do the ritual and go for a meal.”

Joongjin stood in front of the table. The other people also stood up. Joongjin inserted some money into the pig’s nose and kowtowed before giving everyone a glass of liquor. Considering that he rented such a large hall, the ritual was rather simple.

“Shall we go?”

“You called all of us so early in the morning to do this? With people you’re seeing for the first time, no less?”

Head manager Moon clicked his tongue. Park Jiseon complained as well, saying that she had two hours less sleep than usual to come here. Other than the two though, none of the others said anything. It seemed that only these two were able to grumble in front of the director. Even the person who introduced herself as writer Jung looked at everyone nervously. Maru stood next to writer Jung. Writer Jung, who had been walking while looking at the ground, flinched before giving way. She seemed startled.

“Did I approach you too quietly?”

“No. I was just thinking about something else and suddenly felt someone next to me. I wasn’t startled. I mean it, really.”

Writer Jung kept emphasizing that she was not startled. While they stopped for a while, the other people all left the hall. The employees came in and started cleaning up the table as though it was agreed upon beforehand.

“Is the script finished?”

“I’m not sure.”

Writer Jung looked away. Her eyes were relatively big compared to her small stature, so her eye movements looked really flustered. Joongjin said that he was going to write the script himself and that it would be finished soon. This was why Maru paid attention to the woman who introduced herself as a writer when she showed up. Was she like a writing assistant and in charge of looking up materials?

“Did you write the script yourself?”

“To a certain extent.”

“How’s the story? Do you like it?”

Writer Jung frowned. She raised her head and spoke,

“You’re probing me out because the director isn’t telling you, aren’t you?”

“It’s not necessarily like that.”

Writer Jung turned around before rushing over to Joongjin, who was walking at the front. Maru could see her whispering something to him. She also pointed at Maru from time to time. She looked like an elementary school kid going to the teacher to rat people out. He could see Joongjin smile. Maru stopped and watched the two. After finishing the conversation, Joongjin walked to the exit, while writer Jung stomped her way back.

“The director told me to tell you that you shouldn’t be worried since he’ll tell you today.”

“Okay.”

Writer Jung looked back for a bit. The moment she saw Joongjin leave through the glass door, she raised her voice,

“Hey, you aren’t doubting our director, are you? He might look like he lives without a plan, but he’s actually very meticulous. There is a reason he’s not showing you the script and has gathered us only now.”

“I know. He’s not ordinary. I’m sure he must have his reasons.”

That didn’t seem to be the answer she was expecting as writer Jung couldn’t speak for a while. The hateful glare softened up eventually, and a faint smile was hung on her face.

“What, so you know how amazing he is? I thought you were looking down on him.”

Writer Jung reached out her hand, asking for a handshake. He grabbed the small hand and shook it up and down.

“Let’s work well together.”

“Yes.”

Peculiar people gathered up in one spot. Maru believed that he was the most ordinary among this bunch. If he did not brace himself, he might get swayed by these uniquely distinct people.

“You were Mr. Han Maru, right?”

“Yes.”

“You’re rather peculiar.”

“I am?”

“Leaving aside the others, weren’t you worried when you didn’t even get a script despite being the lead character? You really are rather unique.”

Writer Jung winked before walking towards the exit. Maru whispered in a small voice — not as much as you.

It seemed that peculiar people only attracted peculiar people?

“Come on. Everyone’s waiting outside.”

“Okay, coming.”

He followed writer Jung, who ran outside with her short legs.

[1] This is a Gosa(??). A shamanistic ritual (usually) wishing for success. Some talismans that contain their wish are put in the mouth of the pig’s head mentioned below and the participants would kowtow towards that pig’s head. This is usually done prior to opening a business or in the face of a big project. It is a mostly deprecated custom, especially for the younger generation.

## **Chapter 947. Crank Up 6**

“Had I not restrained this man back then, the current director Park would not exist. You can say that I’m the savior of this man’s director title.”

“Fine, it’s all thanks to you, head manager Moon. Why don’t we say that I was born thanks to you too.”

Head manager Moon talked about Joongjin’s history before standing up to go to the bathroom. Some people also left, saying that they had to smoke. The heat from the grill had cooled down after the charcoal had been taken out, so it was about time to wrap up the get-together. Maru drank the soda he had poured into his soju glass before asking Joongjin,

“Is Heewon appearing as a cameo?”

“Yes. Did I not tell you that?”

“You didn’t. I heard it from the guy himself. He was talking all about it on TV.”

“I happened to get in contact with him and managed to pull him in. He said he’ll rest until his military service and not do anything public, but he accepted right away when I asked him if he wanted to shoot with you.”

“Rather than me, I’m sure he wanted to work with you, director.”

“That should be part of the reason, but if we compare the weight of the two, the fact that you’re in it must’ve played a bigger role. Rather than that though, Mr. Lee Heewon really does hate doing anything just like the rumors. I’m sure he must have been reached out to by many people since there are a few months until he gets enlisted, but I heard he turned them all down.”

“If you leave him by himself, he’ll spend years holed up at home. He’s a master at that. As long as someone plays with him a few times and eats out with him, I’m sure he won’t utter a word of complaint.”

Joongjin smiled as he ate some seasoned dried radish.

“I heard that you two were friends since high school.”

“Things happened and we became acquainted.”

“There are many such instances in the entertainment industry. They say birds of a feather flock together, and indeed there are many times when talented people already know each other. The only difference is that even if two people make their debut around the same time, usually, one or both people would not see the light of the day, but fortunately for you two, both of you seem to be doing well.”

“Compared to Heewon, I’m still far off.”

“You can’t help that. Mr. Heewon has been suppressing his laziness ever since his debut, doing piece after piece, while you, Mr. Maru, decided to go to the military for some unknown reason. If the two of you achieved similar results, that would’ve been strange instead.”

Joongjin had been closely examining a side dish plate while they were talking, and he suddenly called a waiter. When the waiter asked what was up, Joongjin picked up the plate.

“Sell this to me.”

The waiter asked again, probably thinking that he must have heard something wrong. Joongjin asked about the price of the plate. Maru stepped in to talk to the waiter who only repeatedly said ‘uhm’ and no clear answer.

“Is there a manager or the owner here?”

“Yes, he’s here.”

“Where is he?”

Maru went to the owner, who was taking care of the payments at the register, and asked if they could buy the plate. He explained to the owner, who looked at him like a weirdo since a customer suddenly asked him if he could buy a crudely-made plate, that a rather peculiar director desired the plate. The owner seemed to know about director Park Joongjin as he visited the table with a happy expression. The plate was exchanged for a single autograph from Joongjin. Meanwhile, Joongjin looked at the cleaned plate in detail and smiled in satisfaction.

“Do you like it that much?”

“I thought it was perfect as a prop. It’s the plate that will go on your table, Mr. Maru. Doesn’t it look great?”

Maru scratched his eyes. What was he supposed to feel from a plate that looked like it would cost two thousand won from a bulk seller? It looked like he would need a long time in order to understand the world that the director was looking at.

“Did writer Jung participate in writing the script?”

“She wrote a few of the scenes. She’s pretty incredible. I don’t know where she will take the plot. It’s difficult to use something that she wrote from scratch since there would be many parts to edit, but if she’s just in charge of a single facet of it, she’ll pour an incredible amount of energy into it and create an unimaginable story. The original draft I wrote was a salad without any dressing, but with that fellow’s story added into the mix, the salad gained taste and flavor.”

“She must be incredibly skilled.”

“Everyone’s a specialist in one field.”

People who left their seats returned one after another. Head manager Moon clicked his tongue as soon as he saw the plate in Joongjin’s hand, clearly aware of what transpired.

“Sheesh, he’s stubborn about the weirdest of things.”

“I also had a rough time eating with the director last time.”

Maru briefly talked about his experience in the kal-guksu restaurant in Suncheon, about how the director kept ordering again and again, and how, thanks to that, they managed to receive the eyes of everyone in the store. He didn’t mention a thing about how he stepped on a chair and sang a song.

“You have to risk that much if you want to go around with director Park. You people are all doomed now. When the director works on a commercial film, he sets everything like a machine and finishes the shoot without any waste, but he’s the complete opposite when he’s doing something he likes. The kal-guksu incident that Mr. Maru over here talked about will happen during the shoot as well. Stomach aches, esophagitis, and indigestion are pretty basic, and actors especially should scout out a decent hospital since you might get stress-induced gastric ulcers.” Head manager Moon said as he tensed his eyes.

You think this is a joke, right? You’ll see once we start — he added.

“Then let’s part ways now. As for the few that aren’t here, we can meet them during the shoot. Please take care of me for what might last a month to three months.”

Joongjin wrapped up the first get-together with that last comment. He did not speak a word about the film itself. Where was the shoot going to take place? How would it progress? What are the characters like? None of that was mentioned. While Maru felt like he was walking in the fog with his eyes covered, he did not feel uneasy. That was because of his infinite trust in the man known as Park Joongjin. He was a director that none other than Lee Junmin had acknowledged. He was someone that had the title of a

genius, or a weirdo. It wouldn't be too late to regret once he opened the contents. He did not have anything to do anyway.

"Uhm, Mr. Maru."

He stopped as he was walking towards the parking lot. It was the actors who stopped him. When asked whether he would go for a 2nd round with all the actors, Maru put his car keys back in his pocket.

"We haven't introduced ourselves properly because everything was centered around the director, right? I said before, but my name is Kim Gyungjin and I'm 30 this year."

"I'm Park Yoojung. I'm also 30."

Maru spoke as he looked at the two people,

"I'm Han Maru, and I'm twenty-five. The two of you, please drop the honorifics."

The two people waved their hands in denial, saying that they couldn't possibly do something like that on their first meeting, but when they went to the fried chicken restaurant to have a 2nd round of drinks, they soon dropped the honorifics.

"I hope we can do well like you, Maru."

"I'm not that well-off."

"If you already finished your military service at that age and caught the eyes of director Park, then all you have left is to go up. Not only that, the acting you showed in the drama was really good."

Kim Gyungjin said that he was selected for this title after participating as an extra for a commercial film that director Park shot before. As for Park Yoojung, she apparently belonged to a theater troupe in Daehak-ro, but she left and was playing minor roles in various pieces until she got contacted by director Park a few days ago. Both of them were looking forward to this piece, thinking that this would be a turning point in their acting career.

"Also, I've never worked with the director before, but is he really strict like what head manager Moon said?" Park Yoojung asked as she put down the beer glass.

It seemed that she was concerned when head manager Moon said that they should prepare some medicine for stomach ulcers.

"He was like a machine when I did the commercial film. Honestly, it didn't feel that pleasant. First of all, it didn't feel like I was acting. I moved according to the director's instructions from one to ten. If I didn't do it as he said, then he simply won't let it pass. He was just that picky. Actually, there were many people who cursed him behind his back. They said that even ordinary people who have zero experience in acting can do such a thing."

Kim Gyungjin shivered as he said so. Maru said that he experienced something similar. He added that only people who the director has acknowledged would be allowed to voice their own opinions.

"But you can't say that he's completely blocked off. If you think carefully and give an opinion that might work, the director will listen to you."

“That director listens to people’s opinions? When I did it, we were unable to utter a word. It seems like there’s a reason why the director cherishes you.”

Kim Gyungjin poured some soda into Maru’s glass, asking him to take care of him. As he told the two of them that he wouldn’t be drinking because he drove here, the two of them just gave him non-alcoholic drinks. He rather liked that.

“But the head manager said he’s different when he’s doing something that he likes. I also don’t know how he’ll act.”

“I can say for sure that it’ll be more tiring than when he does a commercial film. Honestly, if he takes the lead during the shoot, we can do the shoot without even thinking, but once the director starts asking for your opinions, it will be very hectic.”

Park Yoojung, who had been listening quietly until now, suddenly sighed. She said that she was worried.

“I have a really weak mind, you know? The two of you should help me if I look like I’m going to pass out. I want to finish the shoot safely,” said Park Yoojung dejectedly, as she rested her chin on her palms.

“Don’t worry. It won’t kill us, will it? Head manager Moon must have said all that to give us a scare. Maru, you also spiced up your story a little back then, didn’t you? To make it sound funny.”

Maru did not speak and just smiled. Director Park’s nature was not something that could be expressed in words. He was rather curious how the two would react if he told them how he visited an illegal dog-fighting arena after the kal-guksu restaurant, but he held back for the sake of teamwork. They would soon find out anyway; how persistent director Park Joongjin is.

“Let’s get along.”

Maru poured some beer for the two people.