

Once Again 661

Chapter 661

“You’re proactive, seonbae.”

Yuna said those words as she looked at Maru right when the train made a loud noise as it went through a tunnel. She remembered him walking over to the pojang-macha. Maru continued to hold a conversation with the owner and his wife, who were cleaning up the store, and he eventually managed to bring both parties to the negotiation table. When he returned with a deep breath and said to the producer that the owner of the pojang-macha was willing to hear what she had to say, Yuna, who was standing next to Jayeon, was deeply impressed, and at the same time, disappointed in herself. When the producer said that they should go, she just left, feeling disappointed. She thought that they could always try again next time.

Maru-seonbae was different. He immediately walked over to the owner of the pojang-macha as though there was no next time and started talking to him. While she was thinking about a ‘next time’, Maru-seonbae took action and brought back good results. Even if he failed, his action of approaching the owner without hesitation was definitely worth respecting. Yuna was envious of his proactivity, his skills, as well as his confidence.

The train escaped the tunnel. Yuna’s ears felt a little numb. Just as she opened her mouth wide to take a deep breath as though to yawn, she felt Maru-seonbae’s gaze. Yuna quickly closed her mouth. She felt awkward because she felt like she had shown something she shouldn’t.

“Isn’t everyone like that?”

She thought that he wouldn’t have heard it because of the noise, but it seemed that he had heard it all, Yuna fidgeted as she replied,

“I’m not like that though. I don’t think I have the confidence to do things myself like you did. It was like that just before too. Talking to the owner didn’t even cross my mind, but you were different.”

“That’s because I have more social experience. That wasn’t something amazing like courage. It’s a fight of chances, and if I think I can do it, I will try to do so. What I did was just provide suitable flattery; not something grand like courage.”

Yuna thought to herself as she heard those words. They were in their 1st year of high school and 3rd year of high school respectively. Was the gap of 2 years that amazing? Normally, it wouldn’t be. Maru-seonbae wasn’t someone who quit school and focused everything into the entertainment industry. He was working as an actor after taking all the regular classes at school. From the perspective of time, there wasn’t that much of a difference between the two. In fact, she invested more time when it came to acting-related stuff. Excluding school classes and acting classes, the rest should be what he referred to as ‘social experience’, but was two years enough to justify such a drastic gap in experience?

Maru-seonbae was different. She might be feeling reliant on him because he listened to her worries but even putting aside personal reasons, this seonbae felt different from others of his age. Like today, the thought of trying something like that never crossed her mind, yet he went straight for the crux of the issue and solved the problem. When she was thinking that doing nothing was the natural course of

action, this seonbae faced the matter straight as though what-ifs were meaningless. He also crossed that difficult stage of persuasion. Did he have some extraordinary qualities?

"I don't understand. I also wonder if I can act like you in two years."

"I think 'like me' is a little difficult?" he replied without hesitation.

He didn't seem like he was boasting. In fact, he seemed to be feeling pity instead. What was so pitiful?

"Your skills in dealing with people will increase whether you like it or not with the more people you deal with. It will increase rapidly once people tell you off for your attitude. What can I do to be hated less? How can I reply so that I earn the goodwill of the other party? There will come a day where you think about such things in front of other people."

"Is that the moment when you become an adult?"

"Rather than becoming an adult, I would say you're becoming better at hiding your weaknesses. Honestly speaking, I find you even more amazing."

"Eh? What about me?"

"Because I can't speak like you. I don't have the confidence to reveal what I'm thinking or talk about my worries without holding back. That's because those things will become my weaknesses. People who have difficulty believing others will not talk about what's inside them. It's the same when it comes to talking about your worries. They don't have the courage - The courage to believe in others."

Maru yawned before turning his head away. An apartment complex that was under construction was flashing past. Red lights flashed on the tower crane. Yuna stared at the construction zone that was becoming distant before speaking,

"Do you say what's inside you to the people you believe in?"

"I do. I'll be like a chatterbox."

"Do I count as one?"

"To a certain extent."

Yuna somehow liked what he said because it felt neither distant nor close. She looked at his face. It was neither far nor close. There was a sense of relief stemming from the suitable amount of distance. She was worried about how to face him after confessing to him, but she felt at ease right now. Perhaps because of that, she thought of a rather bold question.

"Uhm, seonbae. Can I ask how you and Gaeul-seonbae met?"

"Me and Gaeul?"

"Yes."

"Two years ago, when I was in my first year, we met for the first time in Daehak-ro."

"Through an event held by your acting club?"

“No, we just came across each other on the street. We just passed by each other and she caught my eyes.”

“Does that mean you fell in love with her at first sight?”

“At first sight, huh? Maybe you can call it that.”

It was a rather vague answer. Yuna tried picturing it. The scene where the two came across each other coincidentally and then became conscious of each other felt like a scene from a drama. Maru and Gaeul were definitely a couple that suited each other. They had a clear sense of their objectives and were producing results in their field. Yuna thought about Gaeul-seonbae and thought that she should try harder. Though, try harder at what, she did not know.

“Did you confess first?”

“They say everything’s hard the first time, but it becomes easy the second time... you feel like you forgot about your embarrassment. It was just a few days ago when you boldly confessed to me.”

“P-please forget about that. I did it without knowing. Why did you have to make me feel embarrassed again by bringing that up?”

“Because I feel grateful.”

“What?”

“Honestly, if it was someone who held it within her without saying it like you did, it might have been hard to act together. How could we act together if you can’t even meet me in the eyes? In that sense, perhaps it was a blessing that it was you. Thanks to that, we can talk with ease like this. And now that I think about it, it’s pretty interesting. When we first met, you ended up bursting into tears while speaking of your worries, and the next time we met, you suddenly confessed to me. You sound like a splendid character to use for a film.”

“You’re quite a prankster, seonbae.”

“Didn’t you know that? I talk about nonsensical stuff quite a lot. That’s why if I say something absurd during the shoot, just ignore me. I won’t get hurt by something like that. Well, if you are in a good mood then you can hang out with me.”

“I don’t have such a numb personality, you know?”

“Well, you’ll gain resistance if you hang out with me for a while.”

“I don’t want such a resistance.”

“I guess I can’t help it then.”

Yuna giggled. When she saw him at the café with the producer, she felt like the world was collapsing in on her, but now, they were talking with ease. It was probably because of Maru-seonbae’s consideration. She looked forward to the shoot with him already. The shoot would probably be arduous, but she felt like many enjoyable things would make up for it.

“Going back to what we were talking about earlier, I confessed first. Actually, I wanted to confess on the day we met, but that would be a little too weird. When we met for the second time, I told her my name, and we started meeting frequently through a noona who knows her. Then, one day, I went to her house on a snowy day and confessed.”

“On a snowy day?”

“It was a coincidence. I was quite reckless about it. I told her that I will barge into her house if she doesn’t come out of her house.”

“Did, I mean, could Gaeul-seonbae hold back after hearing that? I think she would have done a shoulder throw on you.”

“She almost did that. The reason I exercise is to get hit less by Gaeul.”

“That sounds plausible. So did Gaeul-seonbae accept?”

“She did. Oh, there’s something I want to boast about.”

Maru-seonbae put his hand inside his pocket before taking out a ring. It was a ring with a rabbit engraved on it. Yuna remembered the pale, thin finger that had the same ring on it.

“The ring that Gaeul-seonbae’s wearing... is a couple ring?”

“Cute, isn’t it?”

“Gaeul-seonbae bought it, right?”

“No, I did.”

“Really? That so doesn’t suit you.”

“You really don’t have good eyes. I’m a romanticist, you know?”

“Seonbae, now that I look at you, you are totally cocky.”

“That’s good, I feel like we’re getting to know each other better. Since you’re so direct with your words, shall I give you the title of ‘neighborhood foolish little sister’?”

“I’m not foolish. Well, I guess I did commit two foolish mistakes.”

Yuna had a look at the ring that Maru put on. She felt envious, yet at the same time, thought that they were a really fitting couple. She confessed unknowing of the two, so she could imagine how flustered he would have felt, and how much he laughed about it. She felt her face become hot again.

“Then why don’t you put it on usually?”

Yuna spoke up when she saw Maru put the ring back inside his pocket. Now that she thought about it, Gaeul-seonbae always had the ring on other than when she was practicing. She also saw her treat the ring preciously when she washed her hands in the bathroom. Compared to that, Maru had not been wearing the ring whether it was the first time they met or now.

“Because it’s a bother.”

“Ah, okay.”

Unlike the series of sweet words she heard until now, the reply this time was very casual. What mattered was that they liked each other, not the ring. Yuna looked at Maru, who kept yawning.

“Maybe you’ll appear on TV as a popular celebrity couple in the future.”

“I would love for that to happen, but don’t you think it’s quite improbable?”

“Why would you say that? Both you and Gaeul-seonbae will become successful. When I see Gaeul-seonbae acting during practice from time to time, she surprises me every time. She’s not the same as she was at the beginning of the semester. Her acting skills just make me exclaim. I think Maru-seonbae is really good at acting too.”

“Thanks for saying that.”

Maru locked his fingers before putting them behind his head. At that moment, the train entered another tunnel, and at the same time, there was an announcement about an energy saving campaign before the lights became dim in the train. It seemed that the air conditioning was turned off as well. When she got used to the heavy noise made by entering the tunnel, Maru spoke again,

“Even if we both become successful, there’s no guarantee that we would still be dating by then. You never know what will happen. Even if I continue to like her, it would be over if she says she doesn’t like me. The opposite holds true as well. Romantic relationships between students are shallow after all. I like her, but I don’t know how long that seriousness will last. That’s just how dating is when you’re young.”

When he finished his words, the train left the tunnel. The dim lights turned back on and the air-conditioner started again with some machine noises.

Yuna turned around slightly. She still couldn’t look at Maru straight in the face. Her heart worked harder than usual. She felt like the blood flowing in her blood vessels were moving quicker than usual. She tried putting her hand on her cheek. It was hot as though she had a fever.

“So look for someone you like. You will never be able to date freely if you don’t do it now, you know? You know that, right?”

Maru closed his eyes after saying those words. He then fell asleep. His head, which was jerking back and forth, leaned sideways. Yuna had a look at her shoulder. Maru-seonbae’s face was right there, breathing regularly.

The train shook as it sped across the rails. Yuna sat there without being able to do anything. She hoped for the train to go a little slower. A naughty thought raised its head inside her, but she did not put her shoulder out. His words reverberated in her ears. I don’t know how long the seriousness will last - these words kept echoing inside her head.

OK, I was just kidding before but it seems like the author is actually setting up a breakup. Which tbh I am still not totally opposed to. I mean hear me out. Not only do we get the cinnamon roll that is Yuna, we even get the adorable Bitna as a packaged 2 for 1 deal.

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The fog was thick. He reached his hand out the window, and his hand became wet as though he had just dipped it in a bucket of water. The headlights of the car dissipated into the darkness without being able to penetrate 3 meters. The road was quiet without any other cars going by. Maru turned the wheel to park by the side of the road. It wasn't even close to the sea here, and yet the fog was so thick. He was quite surprised.

"We'll wait here for a bit. Fog like this should disappear soon."

"Okay, then."

Maru rested his chin on the wheel as he listened to the answer that came from the seat next to him. He was now used to driving early in the morning, but the fatigue of his body piled up regardless of the proficiency of his mind. He even thought that he might end up in the hospital at this rate. He sometimes wondered to himself if the fuel inside the car contained a part of his life-force or something.

"You should get some sleep if you're tired. I thought we were going to be late, but it looks like we'll have time left if we continue at a speed like this."

Maru turned his head next to him. A woman wearing a khaki-colored coat was looking at him with clear eyes. A 'fill-in' road manager and a 'fill-in' actor. They were colleagues in the sense that they weren't able to go mainstream.

"I think I won't be able to wake up again if I sleep now."

"Must be hard for you."

"Who in the world doesn't have it hard? Being an actor is hard too, isn't it?"

"I'm okay because acting is fun."

"If you put it like that, I guess I am in a worse position. Driving isn't that fun."

A dry laughter escaped her mouth. The thick fog dissipated. As the view became clear, the end of the bridge could be seen. Light was slowly rising in the sky that was deep indigo.

"I'll start the car again now."

He turned the wheel and got on the road again. Just as the engine of the car started sounding like a lullaby, the woman sitting next to him started humming again. It was the same song she hummed when she first got in the car. The woman's hum was pretty decent, to the point that Maru didn't feel bored even with the radio off. Maru also followed her tune inwardly as he drove.

"I don't think that's a pop song you're singing," he said as he looked at the rear-view mirror.

The woman stopped humming before smiling faintly.

"It's something my father used to hum. I don't know what song it is either. I just heard it many times and got used to it, and before I knew it, I was humming the same thing. Did I disturb you?"

"No, it was pleasant."

"That doesn't sound like a lie this time."

“Is it really that obvious that I’m lying?”

“No, it’s not like that... but I can tell through feel.”

“Looks like you’re quite developed in that aspect. Good for you. You have a lie detector installed inside you, so I guess you will never get deceived when you face other people.”

“Uhm, that’s not true. I do get that I’m quite witty, but this is the first time I got it right like this. Strange, isn’t it? It’s not like this for other people, but when I look at you, I feel like I can tell what you’re thinking. Oh yeah, it feels strange for me to talk to you like this, doesn’t it?”

The woman covered her mouth and smiled faintly. What a strange person. Maru looked at the woman through the corner of his eyes. On her left hand, which was by her mouth, there was a ring with the symbol of a rabbit on it. She was in her mid twenties, definitely not an age where a rabbit ring suited her. It was a ring that looked like it would cost 1,000 won on the street. Was it a friendship ring?

“Is it strange?”

The woman asked while touching the ring.

“Looks like a friendship ring. You know, the ones you match with your friends.”

“No, I just bought it because I thought it was pretty. This caught my eyes on my way home from buying groceries. I picked it up without hesitation. I like rabbits.”

The woman boasted her hand. Maru stepped on the brakes to slow down a little. There was a traffic jam at the end of the bridge. Was there an accident or something because of the thick fog? He felt like he could hear a siren.

“Looks like there was an accident.”

“That’s a pain. If it’s a big accident, we’ll have no choice but to stay stuck here for a while. We’ll be late like that.”

Maru tapped on the wheel with his fingers. If they were late, it would be him, not the actor next to him, who would get into more trouble. His superior would mock him for not being able to make it on time, the production team would give him glares, and if there’s a director or an assistant director with a bad personality, he might get a load of insults.

“It would be great if we can fly at a time like this. Or maybe find a secret underground path. Do you know Alice in Wonderland? There’s a magical cave that leads you into a different world, and whenever I get stuck in traffic, I get reminded of that. Once we go in and come back out, we’ll be at our destination. Of course, the big bad rabbit only leads us inside the cave without telling us the way out.”

Maru stopped everything and looked at the woman sitting next to him. In this chaotic situation where loud car horns could be heard everywhere and where people were busy making calls, she was peacefully talking about a fairy tale. He didn’t understand if she was bold or didn’t have a sense of crisis. The woman leaned against the back of the seat before pushing the chair back. Half-lying back, the woman stared at Maru.

“You should get some rest at a time like this.”

She closed her eyes and started humming. That humming blocked out all the noise from the outside, and the faint splashing sound below the bridge became faint. People's voices also disappeared into the rhythm of her humming. Only the space where she was lying felt like it was separated from reality. When he looked at her, who was enjoying the rhythm, he found himself rather laughable for being in a hurry. Que sera sera, huh?

The nervousness disappeared in an instant. His tense mind also became relaxed. If they were late, they were late. An irresponsible thought came to his mind. Maru rested his neck on the headrest and calmed his breathing to match the faint hum. He didn't know how long had passed before he heard the other cars moving along with loud car horns. When he opened his eyes slightly, he saw the cars moving forward on the first lane.

"Thankfully, it was solved quite early," said the woman sitting next to him.

Maru stretched his arms and started driving immediately. Maybe thanks to the short sleep, he felt a lot more clear-headed. The fatigue that had built up was definitely not something that would dissolve with a few minutes of sleep, too. It was quite a curious thing.

"You look better now."

The woman was smiling. She opened the window slightly. A damp early morning wind entered the car. Her hair started fluttering, and her exclamations could be heard distinctively within the wind. The light that lit up the sky colored her cheeks in a reddish color. Maru continuously stared at her face, her smile, her fluttering hair, as well as the sunlight breaking into pieces on the river.

"What's your name?"

That question escaped his mouth without going through his brain. Maru turned his head forward in a fluster after saying those words. He could feel her gaze hitting his cheeks. She looked at him for a while before speaking with a chuckle.

"Isn't it courtesy to introduce yourself first before asking for someone's name?"

"That's true."

"So, what's your name?" she asked.

Maru felt a strong sense of nervousness as though he was doing an interview and barely opened his mouth.

"Han Maru."

Speaking his own name couldn't feel more strange than that. He felt like he was uttering some scientific jargon he had never heard of before. He even explained because he wondered if he said his name properly.

"Quite strange isn't it? Apparently, Maru means the sky."

"Really? That's a different meaning from what I know."

"Eh?"

“The meaning of Maru I know has the meaning the summit. It also had a meaning of the sky, huh?”

She nodded. Maru focused on driving with his ears perked open. It was her turn to say her name.

“My name is....”

* * *

Maru woke up, feeling a chill. He saw a man holding a briefcase. Next to him was a group of people wearing hiking clothes. Tudum-tudum, the vibration of the train shook his head. Maru heaved out a hot breath that was inside his chest. He had a headache.

Did he fall asleep? He didn't feel that tired, but it seemed that he fell asleep because he was sitting down. Just as he was about to twist his body to stretch, he realized that there was something on his shoulder. Yuna was sleeping deeply. He moved his left hand to take out his phone. It was 11 p.m. There were still seven stops until Suwon station.

He tapped on Yuna's shoulder. He thought that she would wake up soon, but she didn't budge. Just as he was wondering if he should shake her awake, he saw Yuna licking her lips. It seemed that she was tired.

Maru put down his hand. He decided to pretend to be asleep until they arrived at Suwon station and to shake his shoulders to wake her up when they arrived. Now that he thought about it, Yuna might feel embarrassed if he woke her up now.

Just as he stretched his neck slightly so that Yuna wouldn't wake up while he was yawning, he remembered his dream. He was driving and a woman was riding next to him. Maru blinked his eyes in a daze. He remembered that it was a very pleasant dream, but he couldn't remember the conversation they had nor what situation he was in. Only fragments of the sound reverberated in his head. Car horns, complaining sounds, the sound of the wind that entered through the window, the splashing of the river.

He felt like there was a conversation as well. He remembered asking for the other's name. Han Maru - that was what he said. What did the woman say? The moment he remembered the woman's lips moving, the woman's face was colored in darkness as though a drop of ink fell into the water. He could remember the khaki-colored coat, but her face was hidden behind a black dot. What did the woman in his dream say?

He thought about it before stopping. It was just a dream. It wasn't worth it to be so hung up on it. Just as he was about to put his phone back into his pocket, he touched the ring. Maru took out the ring and put it in front of his eyes.

“I guess it is childish.”

Why did he buy such a childish ring? When he stared at it, something came to his mind. The animal that Gaeul liked was a rabbit. Maru nodded before putting the ring back in his pocket. It wasn't something he was interested in. Whether she liked rabbits or whatever, they were dating right now, so there shouldn't be a need to be considerate to such detail in order to fit each other's preferences.

At that moment, he felt Yuna, who was leaning against him, moving. Maru slowly closed his eyes. He inwardly counted to 30 before opening his eyes again. When he looked next to him, he saw Yuna looking at the train map nervously.

“Oh, I fell asleep.”

“Seonbae, were you sleeping until now?”

“Yeah, I was. Why do you ask?”

“Nothing, it’s nothing.”

Yuna sighed in relief. Maru thought that he did the right thing not to wake her up. It was obvious that she would’ve been uneasy if he woke her up before. After a while, there was an announcement about arriving at Suwon station.

“Should we get off then?”

“Yes.”

After getting off the train, he did some stretches by twisting his body. As he had been sleeping while sitting for quite a long time, he felt rather stiff. Yuna also seemed to feel stiff as she was spinning her arms around.

“Well done today.”

“You too, seonbae.”

“Looks like the next time we’ll be meeting is during the shoot.”

“Probably.”

“Do your best practicing for that. We must shoot a good drama, right?”

“Yes. I’ll try hard.”

He told Yuna to go first. Yuna, who looked stiff, took a bow before leaving the station. After checking to see that Yuna left, he massaged his shoulder. He thought back to Yuna, who was dozing off on his shoulder, and smiled when an ad entered his eyes. A couple wearing a tuxedo and a wedding dress were standing with bright smiles. It was a wedding hall ad.

“I won’t live as a bachelor in this life.”

A loving wife and child or maybe children. Just imagining such a thing made him happy. Living alone in his forties was a pretty sad thing. If he had a lot of money, he would live a decent life, but with the wage of a bus driver he had a hard time preparing for his retirement. On days where he felt sick after working, he would suffer by himself and....

‘I felt like someone cooked porridge for me. Was it Kim-hyung? Or Choi-hyung?’

Maru scratched his head before turning around. Wasn’t it okay now to forget about a life that was past him? He had a bright future in his hands. It was time to focus on reality. Passion and a challenging mindset. He would be able to do anything with those two. Maru put his hand in his pocket before

starting to walk. When his hand touched the ring, he felt slightly stuffy in the chest, but he soon felt okay. Perhaps this was why people slept while lying down. Shaking off the slight headache and chest pains, he headed towards the bus stop.

Chapter 663

“I think breathing is hard to explain. There are definitely parts you need to be conscious of and parts you should cut off subconsciously, but it won’t be easy to make you understand with just words. For example, take this line, ‘I want to give up on independence’. Let’s have a look at that one, shall we? If you read the line while being conscious of the spaces, then you can separate your breathing like this: ‘I. Want. To. Give. Up. On. Independence’. Do you want to try it? Think of it as intentionally putting a gap between the words.”

Maru gave a signal by lightly clenching his hand into a fist. The acting club juniors seated around him all started saying the same line at the same time. Blunt voices, thin voices, tense voices, loose voices - many different voices repeated the same line about 3 times.

“If you think about how you talk in reality, cutting off every word like that will probably sound awkward. Even on stage, you will only speak like that when it’s intentional. In that case, let’s have everyone say it as they want to, shall we? Don’t think about the people next to you, and don’t think about the meaning of the line. Just read what’s in front of you. Of course, you can’t be completely devoid of emotion. Don’t apply the emotion into the line, and just think about whatever emotion comes to mind when you read the line. Three, two, one.”

Voices burst out everywhere. The calm ones read as though they were reading from a textbook while the more proactive juniors even mixed in hand gestures. Maru watched as the same line took many different forms through each of these individuals. This time, listen to other people’s voices when you say the line - he repeated the same line about five times like that.

“It’s completely different, isn’t it? The way you read is the same, but the voices you each made were completely different. There are two reasons they sound different. First is the tone of your voices. The ones who were born with good voices and those who weren’t will have differences even when they say the same lines. If you practice your vocal exercises and watch out for your pronunciation during everyday life, your tone of voice can definitely change, but that’s not something you can achieve in a short time. There are only a few days until the competition, so it would be a waste of time trying to change your tone at this point. Thus, you have to focus on the same point. It’s none other than emphasis or stress. By stress, I don’t simply mean stressing some words while not stressing some others; it’s a method of expressing what the most important word is in the line that the actor thinks, as well as what kind of intentions he or she has by saying those words. Let’s see. Jiyoong, can you say that line from earlier? Say it ordinarily.”

Jiyoong cleared her throat before speaking. Her voice did not have any ups or downs.

“This time, you can stress or de-stress the parts you want or even drag your breathing out. Don’t think about the character of the play, just the line itself. Think about how you would say the line if you were the one saying it.”

“I want to... give up on independence.”

Maru had a look at the juniors. After giving them enough time to digest what they were feeling right now, he asked Jiyoong once again.

“Can you explain why you slurred before you said ‘give up’?”

“I want to express my hesitation. I thought about when I would say such words and how I would feel. I want to run away - that was how I felt.”

“Thanks for explaining in so much detail. Well, then. Let’s have a listen to what the character has to say about this line. Gwangjoon, do you want to try? Try saying the line like you’ve always practiced until now.”

After taking a deep breath, the junior shouted in a loud voice.

“I want to give up on independence!”

From the way he clenched his fist, there was no regret or escapism in his words. In fact, it was filled with passion and challenge. Maru clapped. The juniors applauded after him.

“The line we’ve been practicing and listening to until now was that, right? !! Don’t have any intentions of dedicating my life to this kind of independence. I’m going to aim for a more practical benefit. That’s what I want to do - this is the basis of the character’s psychology. Lines change according to what character they’re said by, and the changed lines have a different breathing pattern. The stress also changes. You won’t have a hard time understanding this character based on Gwangjoon’s line alone. After all, we all have a stereotypical villain in our minds already. However, let’s take it a step further. We’ll put more detail into the character.”

Maru opened the script and placed it in front of the juniors.

“I want to give up on independence. The character in the play is fed up with independence. That’s why he tries to hand the information to the Japanese army in order to prolong his life. If you keep looking at the script, you should be able to find out that he’s the stereotypical opportunist. This is the character’s root that can’t be changed, so you have to build a personality on top of that. First up, Gwangjoon. What do you place the most focus on when you act out this character?”

“I tried to be as sneaky as possible. Instructor Miso also said that he’s such a character.”

“Good. A sneaky character is good and all. Then what does it mean to be ‘sneaky’?”

After a bit of thinking, the junior spoke,

“Being annoyingly good at reading the atmosphere.”

“You can look at it that way. After all, such people will definitely feel ‘sneaky’ if they use their heads for the wrong purposes. Let’s have a look at that line again after putting the word ‘sneaky’ in your mind. There’s a stage direction that says ‘worked up’, right?”

“Yes.”

“Not ignoring the stage directions when you’re acting is definitely an important thing. However, the subject of the acting is, in the end, you. You have to follow those directions, but it would be even better

if you could add your own character into it, and lines are a great method of projecting that character. Well then, in order to show that 'sneakiness', what do you think you have to do in order to show that sneakiness through the line?"

"I don't feel like it's a good thing to shout so strongly. I think it would be more sneaky if I say it in a way that stimulates sympathy."

"Once you're at that point, you should think about how you should express that, right? You don't have to go much into detail, so show me what you think."

The junior closed his eyes and licked his lips. He was probably saying the line inwardly. Maru put his index finger on his lips. The other juniors waited with their breath abated. Eventually, the junior said his line again. The line, which contained a mocking laugh, definitely had differences from when he said his line while clenching his fist.

"How is it? Does it feel different now?" Maru asked the juniors.

The majority nodded their heads.

"Well done, Gwangjoon. If you want to go further after analyzing your characters like this, try adding more detail into your words. It might be difficult, but it's worth trying. However, you should only do that when your basic practices are in a perfect state, and if you change the emphasis of the lines, get it checked by Aram. Harmony is key in plays after all. Acts that might look decent when separated might change the flow minutely. Aram knows the overall flow and atmosphere of the play better than anyone here, so if you want to change your individual acting style, then definitely consult her about it, okay?"

"Yes!"

"Good. Let's stop here for today. You still got practice to do, so I guess I shouldn't hold you back."

As soon as he said those words, the juniors started shouting.

"We don't mind though!"

"I like Maru-seonbae explaining things to us. Of course, I like instructor Miso too."

"Hey you guys, you are setting up insurance by saying that, aren't you? Instructor Miso is quite concerned about things like that after all."

"Was it obvious?"

"Hey, hey, shut it, idiot. Maru seonbae-nim still looks like he has something to say. Right?"

"Can't you show us more acting?"

Maru shook his hand. Since the preliminaries were right in front of them, they needed more time to practice rather than listening to someone else's words. Just as he was about to stand up with a soft sigh, a hand pressed his shoulder. When he turned around, he saw Aram grinning at him.

"Seonbae-nim, show them. I don't think they understood properly since you only used words to explain."

As soon as Aram said those words, the juniors agreed with her, saying ‘that’s right’, ‘we want to see it’, ‘please do it,’ with big grins on their faces. Maru looked at Aram and said ‘maybe next time’, but Aram did not budge. This junior was merciless even towards seniors.

“How would you play this character if you were the one acting it out?”

“There won’t be a big difference.”

“Show us anyway. It will help Gwangjoon out a lot. You should act like a senior from time to time. Of course, you’re helping us really passionately these days, but when else would we be able to see your acting if not now?”

Maru raised the white flag when Aram sneakily mixed the current situation into it. He stood up with the script in hand. He coughed awkwardly when dozens of pairs of eyes looked at him.

“Don’t expect too much.”

“Oh, yes we will!”

“Seonbae-nim, do your best!”

After making an awkward smile, he looked at the script. Passion and sneakiness. It was a combination of words that felt rather distant yet interesting if mixed suitably. The junior’s line had its own taste. The mocking laugh, which was a symbol of being nasty, emphasized the evilness of the character, making the character more three-dimensional.

Since he was putting on a demonstration, he wanted to change the trail of thought a little. After thinking about what would be helpful to the juniors, he cleared his thoughts with a short breath. He could picture it now. There was no depth because he came up with it on the spot, but since it was the best he could do as improvisation, he decided to show them for now.

He took a deep breath and held it in his stomach. A passionate opportunist was going to appeal to other people’s emotions. He was going to grab their sympathy and shake it to make the general opinion lean towards his side.

There was no need to act strong, so he revealed all of his weaknesses. He loosened his shoulders and un-focused his eyes as though he was a herbivorous animal after an attack. He was shaking, but he said his line clearly so that he got his meaning through. I, want to give up on independence - he emphasized that the individual was exhausted because of the grand duty of independence. After raising his voice on the ‘I’, he squeezed out the rest as though he was dragging a heavy cart downhill. As he finished, he had a look at the imaginary group of people. Since he was a sneaky character, he couldn’t miss the process of checking for other people’s reactions. Then, he finished off his acting with a cough.

“Or you can do it like how I did. Of course, Gwangjoon’s act was more true to the script, so it would be better to do it like that.”

Maru looked back at Aram and just moved his lips to ask ‘done now?’. Aram raised her thumbs up towards him.

“I, want to give up on independence.”

“That’s not it. It’s - !! Want to give up on independence.”

“That’s not right. What Maru-seonbae did was say the rest of the line after resting a beat after ‘!’.”

The juniors burst out into discussion. Maru looked at them with satisfaction. These juniors weren’t just baby birds looking for food from their mother’s mouth; they knew how to act in order to pick their food up.

“You’ve become a lot more lenient recently, Maru-seonbae. If it was before, you wouldn’t have done it with a simple ‘no’.”

“Me?”

Aram nodded vigorously. Maru shrugged. He was just about to explain that he wasn’t so cold but did not do so because he felt like he would be seen as a cheapskate. How many seniors would refuse to speak when their cute juniors are asking for help? When he looked back, he did feel a little cold, but right now, he was wholeheartedly helping out his juniors.

“Seonbae-nim! You got a call!”

Bangjoo, who was sitting by the window, called out loudly. Maru told Bangjoo to throw the phone. He caught the phone and opened it.

“Hello?”

-Didn’t you see the text message?

It was producer Jayeon.

“I’m in practice right now.”

-Then okay. Do you have time today? Don’t say no. You’re my lucky boy after all.

“I can make some time, but can you not call me like that?”

-Why? Doesn’t ‘lucky boy’ sound good? Anyway, come over later. The actors decided to hold a meeting before the whole get-together. You know that these occasions are important, right?

“Of course.”

Chapter 664

“Hyung, over here.”

Jayeon waved her hand over her head. The man wearing a baggy t-shirt and jeans with holes in it walked over with loose steps before sitting on the chair in front of her.

“You should wear some proper clothes. People might think you’re a beggar.”

“Normal people think this is fashion, not me being a beggar. Also, how long are you going to call me hyung?”

“Then do you want me to call you oppa?”

“I’m about to throw up what I just ate, so let’s just go with senior.”

“Hell no. Senior is used for people I can learn from, so I can’t call just anyone senior. Just take hyung. I mean, doesn’t it sound good, hyung?”

“If you ever date a man later, call him oppa. Otherwise, he might dread you.”

“Life is supposed to be lived alone. Hyung, don’t you know that gold miss[1] is the trend these days? Relying on men to live is no fun.”

“So you’re going to live alone your entire life?”

“I might change my mind if someone says he’ll do the household chores, but... nah. I won’t be able to work if I get a kid. Also, I don’t have any confidence to raise kids. I still wonder how my mom raised me all this time.”

“That’s true. Your mother should be on the level of Mother Teresa if you consider how she raised Yoo Jayeon into a person. Had it been me, I would have given up a long time ago.”

“I think so too. That’s why I don’t plan on getting married. Living alone is much more comfortable. There’s no need to match other people, and there’s no need to deal with in-laws either.”

“Doesn’t your family say anything about it?”

“Hyung, I’m Yoo Jayeon. Who do you think can say anything to me?”

“Probably no one. If anyone did, you’ll turn the whole house upside down. Who would be daring enough to do that?”

“Hyung, I’ve been thinking this since before, but you have talent in making me feel upset.”

“Don’t do that here. It’d be scary. Rather than that, can I order something? I feel hungry because I haven’t eaten anything. Oh, by the way, I didn’t bring my wallet.”

“Hah, great for you. You don’t even eat properly at that age. Order lightly. The actors are going to come soon.”

Jayeon pressed the bell on the table[2]. As soon as a waiter came, this ‘hyung’, who had been sticking his nose in the menu board, ordered four different dishes consecutively. Jayeon canceled three of them.

“Order more when other people arrive.”

“You’re being too much. How can a producer treat the main actor like this? I’m crying because I’m so sad.”

“There’s no one who calls for you if it isn’t me. I know that already.”

“Oh, no, don’t give me that. I’m going to start practicing for a musical starting in November.”

“A musical? With a face like yours?”

“Don’t look down on me too much. I’ve never heard that I’m ugly at least.”

This 'hyung' giggled. Jayeon shook her head. He hadn't changed at all from before. She first met this man during an MT[3] for the department of theater at college. He was wearing worn-out clothes like he was wearing now back then as well. The seniors from college pointed at him, who was drinking soju by the bottle in the corner, and said this: that dude is a madman, a madman for acting. Unlike the other return students, who tried to stick to other girls[4], that hyung left the lodging with a red face. As she was interested in him, she observed his actions. She was attracted when other people called him a madman. Back then, she was known as a crazy bitch as well. She left behind the semi-corpses of drunk people and followed him out. That hyung was acting in front of the lodging. He seemed to throw his body into the embrace of the air and seemed to squeeze something out from within his body. His vocalization was so good that his voice could be heard clearly despite the many noises from the people inside the building. Jayeon watched his acting while hiding. She was shocked, surprised, as well as regretful. She realized the moment she saw him - Ah, I will never be like that.

"Aren't you gonna eat?" hyung asked.

"You can eat all you want. But hyung, is it true that Miso-unni got married?"

"Yep."

"I can't believe it. She actually got married. I definitely thought that she would be forever single. Or live with you."

"That's the most horrific thing I've heard this year. But from the sound of it, you didn't go to Miso's wedding?"

"I'm not that close to her to get a wedding invitation. I only met her with you sometimes. Though, the impression she left on me was so deep that I thought she would never get married."

"You have the same opinion as Miso on that. Miso said the same thing when she met you for the first time. She said that it's the first time she met someone worse than her."

"Worse at what?"

"Don't ask if you know."

Hyung smiled as he picked up his spoon. Jayeon sipped some water.

"Talk about Russia."

"I said everything the last time we met. That's all of it."

"Talk about it in more detail. So that I can get something out of it."

"It was disgustingly cold, and the acting was vigorous. That's it. Oh, I also saw a bear. Done now?"

"What did I expect from you...."

"I won't do your drama if you keep acting like that."

"Why don't you try saying that again? Oh, and bear in mind that I know your address."

"Sorry. Looks like I was out of my mind just now. I don't dare pick a fight with the almighty Yoo Jayeon."

Jayeon looked at her hyung, who was scraping the bowl pretty hard. This hyung, who lived his whole life drowned in acting in his twenties, was still swimming in the sea of acting right now even though he was in his thirties. He would probably step into the lava if it was for acting. He was someone who was more than willing to do that.

He was one of the few people that Jayeon called regularly. Whenever she heard some absurd news about him through other people, she called him on the spot. She would first ask if he was still alive and then ask what he was doing. When he disappeared for a few months saying that he wanted to know what it felt like to be homeless, she even held a funeral for him in her heart. Don't become a resentful ghost at least - like that. After that, he seemed to be living a docile life, but he would throw his life into the extraordinary if he deemed that it was necessary for his acting. Jayeon had the confidence not to be surprised even if he said he was going to be an astronaut. That was at least within the realm of reason after all. If he said he was communicating with an alien, she might be a little surprised.

"Anyways, you actually got to produce your own thing huh. I should call you director, now, right?" hyung said as he put down his spoon.

In his bowl were just traces of what was once some fried rice. He ate incredibly quickly.

"Of course. On the set, you have to call me 'director, director' with politeness."

"Hey, I don't think I can do this drama after all. I belong to the stage."

"It's too late for that now. I'm not sure about anyone else, but I will not change you out. You're the perfect fit for the owner of the pojang-macha. I cannot imagine someone else doing it."

"I'm not good at acting in front of the camera though."

"That sounds to me like a monkey that can't climb trees. If you can't act, then the actors in training should all go and die."

"Why don't you use your mouth more prettily? Your mouth got a lot more vile ever since you joined the TV station. Even someone I know, who directs stages, speaks more kindly than you."

"It's just a method of survival for me, so bear with it. It will be over once I don't get taken lightly because I'm a woman."

"Is your work hard?"

"If it isn't hard, is it even work? It's work because it's hard. At first, I felt like I was going to vomit blood, but these days, I can handle it with just a nosebleed. I get into less trouble with other people, too. Or rather, people avoid me. Hey, there goes the crazy bitch - like that."

"You must be proud, director Yoo. You got to be a crazy bitch in the TV station too after being called that in college."

"You tell me, actor Yang."

Hyung took a sip of water before speaking.

"Rather than that, why did you suddenly switch to production? I thought you would become an actress."

Hearing that question, Jayeon had to do her best at hiding her bitter smile. She entered the department of theater in college to become an actress. After all, she believed that she would be able to become one if she tried hard. That faith did not shake until she saw this hyung's acting during the first MT she had after entering. When she felt that she couldn't become an actor like him, her ambition to become an actress snapped a little. Jayeon thought - was her dream so shallow that she would give up so easily?

"Who do you think made me switch to become a producer?"

"Who did that?"

She had the urge to swear at that curious-looking face, but she held back.

"Hyung, you know? You should be more aware."

"Of what?"

"The feelings of a firefly who happens to fly past a lighthouse."

"What the heck is that?"

"I don't know. Anyway, I forbid you from talking about this in the future. If you bring it up one more time, I'll take it as you picking a fight with me and smack your face, so bear that in mind."

"What a temper. Anyways, how many people are coming today?"

"All the main actors. Two high school students, two in college, and then you. For now, these five. You should say hello before you shoot at least. You should get to know each other."

"Get-togethers and stuff like that don't suit me."

"It's nothing grand like that, so don't worry about it. We'll just have a chat with everyone. Geez, you are more shy than you look."

"I'm not shy. I just don't like people gathering. It's no fun."

Jayeon checked the time. There wasn't long until the promised appointment.

"Ah, right. Hyung, why don't you tell me now?"

"Tell you what?"

"The one you recommended. Who is it?"

"I thought all the main actors were gathering today. I'll tell you once they're all here."

"I might have dropped him, you know?"

"You said you picked two high school students, didn't you? Then one of them must be it. It was me who taught the guy, so there's no way he failed an audition held by a newbie producer. If he didn't make it, I will have to doubt the qualities and eyes of the producer."

"Don't joke with me."

"Do you think I'm joking?"

Jayeon frowned. This hyung acted quite arrogant and yawned a lot, but the expression he showed at the end was pretty serious. He acted immaturity a lot during private occasions, but he wasn't someone who would speak lightly. He was someone who knew the weight of his words.

"Are you so confident?"

"If you watched properly, you should have picked the right person. I thought you only looked at the name and acting, right? You didn't consider anything like connections, agencies, and things like that."

"I don't have enough leisure to take all of that into consideration."

"Then that's that then. In terms of acting, you shouldn't have had any reason to fail that person. The two of you are quite similar in the humane sense as well. You are similar in the aspect that you glare at people in order to keep yourself fed."

"Am I even a human in your eyes, hyung?"

"You were a human?"

"Do you want me to go mad today?"

"Why do you become scarier and scarier as the years go by?"

Ganghwan shrugged and pulled back.

"If I really dropped the kid you recommended, are you really going to quit?"

"I'll see how things go. I'll do it if the people you picked instead of him are acceptable in my eyes. But if that isn't the case, I won't be able to do this either. I won't do it. I only do two types of acting: acting that I want to do and acting that I have to do. Among the two, the latter consist of the pieces that my proud president prepares for me. Honestly speaking, your piece isn't something I want to do nor is it something I have to do."

"Then why did you give me the okay when I asked you to join me?"

"Because I believe that you have the skill. It's enjoyable to do something together with a skilled director. But if you have a defect in your eyes for actors, then it means that you don't have the skill, and I don't want to work with people who don't have the skill. If you beg me to do it, I guess I can do it... but the Yoo Jayeon I know isn't someone who would do that."

"Hyung."

"Yeah?"

"Why don't I give you solid smack later? Also, another smack if I picked the one you recommended."

"Wait, why is this suddenly about that?"

Just as he gripped his fist in order to defend himself, the door to the restaurant opened and the first actor arrived. Jayeon waved her hand and shouted.

"Hey, lucky guy! Over here!"

Mr. 'lucky guy', who came over after taking a bow, looked at 'hyung' in front of Jayeon before speaking.

"Why are you here, hyung-nim?"

* * *

Smack - it was a refreshing sound. Producer Jayeon, who had an evil grin on her face, stood up rather abruptly and smacked the shocked Ganghwan on the head before he could even dodge. When Ganghwan lowered his head with a tearful face, the producer slapped Ganghwan on the cheek. The producer did not take her hand off Ganghwan's face as though to immerse herself in the aftermath of the pain.

"Uhm, can anyone explain?" Maru said as he took a step back.

He didn't want to join this duo for some reason.

So that's the reason why Ganghwan said 'come back alive' to Maru... It was a physical thing.

Chapter 665

"I guess Maru has such traits. I mean, taking a jab like that. You're not entirely wrong when you call him 'lucky boy'. He did poke the gold vein after all. You will probably be shocked if you know what kind of deal he made with our president before joining the agency."

"What is it?"

"I don't want to tell you, but I'll tell you since you're holding the fork in a reverse grip."

Ganghwan whispered into Jayeon's ears. As she listened, Jayeon's eyes became wider and wider. Maru could read a lot of things from Jayeon's eyes. It started with disbelief before changing into interest and then turned into curiosity. Maru turned his head away and drank some water. He was given a sticky gaze from a viper looking at their prey.

"What a guy. 300 million huh," Jayeon said as she held up three fingers.

"Hyung-nim, it's not that good to reveal other people's contract terms like that."

"I should tell her stuff like this beforehand so that she knows you aren't a cheap actor, and so she can make the most out of you. Who knows? You might get more screen time."

"If that does happen, I don't have any complaints either."

Maru smiled at Jayeon. Jayeon laughed and said that she would think about it.

"Yoo Jayeon. You really struck gold. You won't find anyone like him anywhere. He's smart, and he's quick-witted, not to mention his acting skills are good. Sir Yoon doesn't treat him dearly for nothing."

"Sir Yoon? Which Sir Yoon?"

"Sir Yoon Moonjoong."

Jayeon turned her head to Maru.

"You know Sir Yoon Moonjoong as well?"

“He doesn’t just know him. He’s one of the few drinking friends that he cherishes,” Ganghwan said all that before Maru could say anything.

Maru just drank water instead of saying anything. The expectation placed on the three characters ‘Han Maru’ was rising. He didn’t know what Ganghwan’s intentions were, but he felt like they would arrive at a weird conclusion if he got caught up in their conversation.

Maru looked at the two people whispering to each other. Jayeon called Ganghwan ‘hyung’ while Ganghwan used a casual tone to speak to her. From the way they naturally touched and looked at each other, did that mean that they had feelings towards each other? Or were they just long-time friends? When Ganghwan told him to take the audition, Maru thought that it was just one of the producers he knew through his connections, not someone that was close enough to him that they could call out to each other casually.

“I have two things I want to ask, may I?”

“Go ahead. I’ll answer my lucky guy’s question anytime,” Jayeon said.

“Are you two dating?”

As soon as he asked that, Ganghwan threw some tissue at him. Maru tilted his head to dodge. Jayeon was gripping her plastic cup hard.

“Care to ask again?”

Jayeon asked in a mild tone. Maru said no before going to the next question.

“Did you pick me because of Ganghwan hyung-nim’s request?”

“What do you think? Do you think I would have listened to him or not?” Jayeon replied with a question as she crossed her arms.

“If hyung-nim did ask you to put me in, then I should be thankful. After all, it would mean that I passed the audition thanks to him. But I’m asking because it doesn’t seem like that.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because you said that you won’t look at connections. The producer I know doesn’t look like she would get swayed by something like that.”

“Look at this guy. He’s trying to score points since he’s joined us. Hyung, is he always like this?”

“That’s the type of guy he is,” Ganghwan replied.

“Hey, do you have confidence in your acting?”

Maru got a question this time. Maru replied immediately,

“I don’t.”

“If you don’t have any confidence in your acting as an actor, why would a producer use that actor?”

“Well, I’m not sure. I will not say I’m confident in myself no matter what I do, not just acting. Even if I possess the skill to finish the job precisely and have the eyes to determine that level of skill, I would still never say that I am confident.”

“Why?”

“Because they say it’s better to not say anything you can’t take responsibility for. You’ll go halfway if you stay still - I like these words quite a lot.”

“Who would want to buy a product that’s promoting itself as a flawed product?”

“You won’t promote the flaws. You just don’t exaggerate.”

“Hey, you might end up in the warehouse without anyone recognizing you.”

“That’s why I’m praying all the time that a good director will fish me out. I’m not perfect, but I promote myself as a useful product.”

“Oh man, this boy is totally like an old man. The way he acts is similar to my uncle,” Jayeon laughed.

“Did things go well for your uncle?”

“Extremely.”

“Well, there’s a role model. I guess I should maintain my attitude.”

“Alright. The decent ones are bound to get used even if they’re in a heap of trash. Why is that? Because they will shine amidst the rusty metal pieces. Unless someone’s blind, they’ll pick it up. Like how I did.”

“This girl, she always finishes up by complimenting herself,” Ganghwan commented from the side.

Jayeon did not mind his comment and chuckled instead, telling him to praise her more. She was rather different from what she showed during the audition and at the pojang-macha. During the prior occasions, Jayeon spoke as though she was a bomb that had its fuse almost all burnt, but all of her actions were trapped within a frame. Even when she shouted, drove people into a corner, or introduced herself as a crazy bitch, she looked like someone who stuck to the rules, even if she looked rather chaotic.

“Hyung, it’s not like that.”

Laughing next to Ganghwan, she looked very liberal, but it felt like the frame that formed her core was out of place a little. There was a sense of hurry or unease. Ganghwan called Jayeon casually while Jayeon called him just hyung. To Maru, it looked like she was drawing the line. Perhaps Jayeon found Ganghwan hard to deal with. Maru kept editing his impression of the two people and kept observing them. He was going to work together or clash with her a lot from now on. The common point between an enemy and an ally was that the more you know, the better.

“Hello.”

A voice sounded behind him. Maru turned around. There was a man with curly hair dyed brown. He was very tall to the point that he would have to raise his head to see the man’s head. He seemed like he was at least 185cm tall.

“You’re here. Have a seat.”

Jayeon pointed at a seat. Maru moved inwards. The curly hair nodded before sitting.

“You should introduce yourself.”

“Ah, yes. My name is Ha Byungjae. I’m twenty-five this year.”

“Byungjae is well, how should I put it, very kind or very bland? Well, I like that part of him too. The one sitting next to you is Han Maru, and he’s going to work with you.”

Maru shook hands with Byungjae.

“Also, the cocky dude next to me is Yang Ganghwan. You’re forty this year, aren’t you, hyung?”

“Hey, don’t just add numbers to people’s age like that. Ignore her. I’m thirty-three. No, wait, was I thirty-two? Maybe four? Being younger is better, so let’s go with thirty-two, shall we?”

“As you can see, he’s a worthless man when it comes to something other than his acting. He’ll be playing the owner of the pojang-macha. Say hello to him, you’ll be acting the most with him in the future. Hyung, you should take a closer look at this boy as well. In my eyes, he’ll become big in the future.”

“Really? Then I guess I should get to know him. When would a worthless stageman like me get to shake hands with a TV star if not now? Nice to meet you, actor Ha.”

“D-don’t say that, senior.”

Byungjae and Ganghwan exchanged greetings. Maru looked at Byungjae, who was sitting upright as though he was nervous. He had looks that looked like he was cast from the street. He didn’t look as ripe as the other actors in their mid-twenties to early thirties who were becoming big, but he looked like he would not lose out to top stars in terms of appearance depending on how he put on make-up. Maru subconsciously touched his chin. Do male actors do a lot of plastic surgery too?

“Why do you look so nervous? Relax.”

Byungjae only then faintly smiled. Maru felt like he needed more time to observe him to see whether he was weak-hearted or was just warming up to them.

“I’m not late, am I?”

The one who came next was a woman who dyed her hair orange. Yes, orange. The bright tangerine color that would make her head look like it was floating by itself when she walked during the night. The woman with the eye-catching hair color looked at the seats before sitting next to Byungjae. The moment orange hair sat down, Byungjae pulled his chair inwards to gain some distance.

“If you’re here, you can introduce yourself.”

“Do I have to do something childish like that?”

“Then should I call you delinquent-unni?”

“Okay, fine. I’ll do it. My name is Choi Mira. My hobby is reading, and my specialty is reciting poems. Usually, I stay at home reading books. I’m a total shut-in.”

Maru scratched his eyebrows and looked at Mira. What was her hobby and what was her specialty? Mira finished introducing herself in a joking manner and added that she was twenty-four.

“Reciting poems? Do you have something you can recite off your mind?” Ganghwan asked.

Mira immediately recited a poem as though it was nothing that difficult. She recited the poem with a fair voice as though was singing and finished off with a ‘satisfied?’ at the end. Maru applauded. It was unexpectedly good. The poem recited by a woman with a flashy hair color and ear piercings was good enough to be called a specialty.

“Byungjae, don’t you think you have to show us something after that?” Jayeon asked without thinking.

Byungjae hesitated for a moment before impersonating someone, but no one could tell who he was imitating. Mira giggled and Byungjae looked down at the table in dejection. Maru stayed still. It wouldn’t do any good for him to show a reaction here.

“Whew, the youngest one is the latest. We should have a penalty for that, right?”

The moment Jayeon said those words, the door to the restaurant opened and Yuna rushed in. She looked around the restaurant while panting before rushing over to the table.

“Sorry for being late.”

“There’s still 10 minutes until the appointed time, so you aren’t late. Buuut, while you aren’t late, you are the last one here, so you have to show us your specialty, you know?”

When Jayeon said that while resting her chin on her hands, Yuna gulped before looking at everyone in the seats. She looked like a young gazelle that was separated from the herd.

“I’m just joking so don’t cry. I hate crying kids.”

Jayeon quickly waved her hand and said that. It seemed that the pure-looking eyes were something that even the cold producer couldn’t handle.

“But you should at least introduce yourself, right?”

“Yes! Hello. My name is Kim Yuna and I’m in 1st year class 2 of Myunghwa High School. No wait, forget the class. Uhm, I’ve been practicing since I was in middle school, and I was lucky enough to get the opportunity to participate in this drama. I may be lacking, but please take care of me.”

“I’m not a caretaker though,” Ganghwan, who was watching, suddenly uttered.

Yuna hesitated before speaking again,

“I will do my best not to bother you. I hope we can get along!”

“Jayeon, where did you find all these unique people? I totally love them,” Ganghwan said as he raised his thumb.

“Well then, sit down for now. We should commemorate the first get-together for the drama. Excuse me! Waiter!”

Jayeon put her hand against her mouth and shouted.

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"I wish I could see everyone's bottom lines by drinking until we lose our minds, but we're with minors, so let's just talk about healthy stuff," Jayeon said as she opened the soju bottle.

She was practically saying: I'm not going to give the two minors any, but the rest of you should prepare to die. From how Ganghwan, an alcoholic, was freaking out, it seemed that Jayeon's drinking ability was incredibly impressive.

A cup of soju went around to all the adults. Maru drank soda and Yuna did the same. He inwardly wanted to drink as well, but Jayeon clearly drew the line. She was quite firm in unexpected places.

Bottles of soju and beer started piling up on the table. The meeting, which was originally intended for them to get close, turned into a drinking session of sorts. Byungjae, who drank every glass Jayeon poured for him, had gone to the bathroom around 10 minutes ago and did not return, while Mira said she would not drink after drinking four glasses. Jayeon offered her another glass, but Mira shook her head. I don't like getting drunk - that was what she said as she pushed away the glass. After that, Jayeon did not offer her another drink either.

"Uhm, can I drink just a little?" Yuna asked when Byungjae, who had gone to the bathroom, returned looking haggard.

Jayeon stared at Yuna.

"You never drank before?"

"I haven't."

"You're like a natural treasure in an era like this. Do you want to drink?"

Yuna slowly nodded.

"Unfortunately, I definitely won't let you drink today. Later, if we meet somewhere else instead of a restaurant like this, I will definitely treat you to some. If I let you two drink and law enforcement shows up, both I and the owner of this place will get into trouble. I was just joking before, I will not treat you like children. It's just that I don't want to cause unnecessary trouble. There's nothing more annoying than something happening before the start of the drama, right?"

Jayeon sipped some soju. She frowned and sighed a little before putting the glass down with a tapping sound.

"Since we drank for about an hour, it's good enough to get talking, right?"

"He looks like he's gonna fall asleep at any moment though," Ganghwan said as he pointed at Byungjae.

"Byungjae, do you want to go home and sleep?"

"No, producer. I can talk. I can do it. Of course I can."

Maru looked at Byungjae through the corner of his eyes. Was he the type of person that would repeat his words when he was drunk? He swayed back and forth while sitting before running to the bathroom again.

“Don’t give him alcohol in the future. People who accept all the drinks they’re given are dangerous.”

“Okay, hyung. I was planning to do the same. Mira, you’re going to drink some more after you clear your head a little, right?”

“I’ll see how things go. I really hate becoming drunk, so I’m not going to drink if I think I’m the slightest bit drunk.”

“I really like that attitude of yours. You look like you’d drink from the bottle though.”

“And you drink just like you look.”

“Look at her speak. I might as well be suppressed by her during the shoot.”

Jayeon smiled in satisfaction. A while later, Byungjae returned, looking much more exhausted. Maru gave him the orange juice he ordered beforehand.

“If you drink this now, you’ll have an easier time emptying your stomach.”

“Thanks. But I emptied everything just now, so I don’t think any more is coming out.”

Byungjae drank the juice with difficulty.

“Maru, sorry to ask, but can you buy some hangover drinks?” Jayeon asked as she took out some bills.

Her eyes were glued to Byungjae. Byungjae stood up, saying that he will go instead, but he soon collapsed back onto the chair as though he lost strength.

“I’ll go then.”

He accepted the money and stood up.

“I’ll go with him.”

Yuna hurriedly pushed back her chair and followed him. Maru looked at the people sitting around the table. It would be quite awkward for Yuna if she was alone amongst a group of drunk people. Jayeon also told them to go together. It seemed that she was being considerate of Yuna.

“I saw a convenience store right in front of this place when I came here.”

They left the restaurant. The air was very humid and hot.

The convenience store opposite the restaurant was very crowded. One part-timer was dealing with dozens of customers. There was also a line of people waiting outside, so it seemed like it would take time to get inside.

“I saw another one up there.”

Yuna pointed at a sign that could be seen afar. There was a faint logo of a convenience store. Maru started walking and Yuna followed suit.

“Have you ever drank alcohol before, seonbae?”

“I have. Have you not drank at all in your entire life?”

"I haven't."

"That's quite peculiar. Don't people around our age drink out of curiosity or something?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think any of my friends have tried drinking either."

"Myunghwa High must be a great school then. You should learn how to drink from adults in the future. Don't learn from guys that say they'll treat you to a drink."

"Did you learn from an adult, seonbae?"

"No. People who say righteous stuff like me are always enforcing what they couldn't keep to others. It's quite pathetic."

Maru shrugged after saying that. The convenience store located a little away from the store was in better condition. At least they could go inside. He bought four hangover drinks before asking Yuna,

"What are you going to drink?"

"Can I pick?"

"You're supposed to take the errand fees by yourself."

Yuna grabbed a strawberry milk.

"You like strawberry milk too?"

"Yes. Gaeul-seonbae treats me to it quite often."

"Looks like the strawberry milk faction is prospering by the day. Can you grab me one as well?"

Yuna brought another strawberry milk. They paid for the items before leaving the store. Maru turned around because Yuna wasn't coming out, and saw that she kept uttering 'I'm sorry, excuse me' amidst a crowd of people. She looked like she was on a crowded train. Maru asked the man blocking the entrance to step aside before going inside and bringing Yuna out.

"You should have pushed your way out."

"If I do that, people might feel displeased."

"You look like you're going to live a tired life."

"I do it when I need to. It was just that there were too many people before...."

Yuna muttered those last words in a very small voice. Maru handed Yuna her strawberry milk.

"Let's finish them before we go back. You were just staring at the table before. Wasn't it boring for you?"

"I was too busy listening to the producer and uhm, senior Yang Ganghwan. Their words were so interesting that I wasn't that bored at all. But you seem to have known senior Yang Ganghwan before this meeting, right?"

"He's the one who taught me acting after all."

“That must have been fun. That senior looks like he’s a jolly person.”

“He’s not just jolly, he’s a freak. He had me do all sorts of stuff when I learned from him. Though, they were quite helpful.”

“All sorts of stuff?”

Maru placed his palm over Yuna’s eyes since she looked curious.

“You can’t see, right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s one of the things I learned from him. Experiencing what it’s like to live as a blind person. I walked the street while covering my eyes, and man, even now it gives me the chills.”

“Did you really do that?”

Maru nodded before drinking the milk. He crumpled the empty carton and threw it in the recycling bin. Yuna folded the carton neatly and put it in the recycling bin as well.

“Shall we go?”

They went back the way they came from and entered the restaurant again. They seemed to have asked the waiter to clean their table as the empty bottles of alcohol in the corner were gone. Byungjae also looked better than before.

“Are you finished drinking?”

“Yep, and thanks.”

While the four of them drank the hangover drink, a boiling-hot budae-jjigae came out. It seemed that they didn’t eat a lot of side dishes with the drinks because they were going to have a full-on meal.

“We should talk about work over food rather than drinks. I ordered portions for you as well, you are going to eat, right?”

“I am.”

Yuna also said that she’d eat. They ate the budae-jjigae as though they were relieving their hangover. When they emptied about half of the rice, Jayeon spoke,

“The production schedule is set for September and October, these two months. It will air starting late October or early November. There will be four total episodes. If the Wednesday-Thursday drama series do decently well and continues until the end without finishing off early, it will air starting early November, and if they have to cut two episodes short because of bad results, it will start airing in late October. If it does really well and they shoot extended episodes, maybe it will start mid November?”

“Aren’t YBS one-act plays aired at 11? I also thought it was a Friday-Saturday series,” Maru said.

“That’s gonna disappear. We’re the last ones.”

After saying those words, Jayeon blew on the ham before putting it in her mouth. Everyone, who was listening, kept staring at her. The fact that they were the last members made them feel very iffy.

“What do you mean by that?” Mira asked as she put down her spoon.

“It’s just as I said. The one-act plays are going to disappear now. It’s going to be excluded from the regular schedule. It doesn’t have good viewing rates and we don’t get any ads. We only consume money without earning any since it’s self-produced. It’s a natural course of action, really. There is the title of the gateway to becoming a star, but those stars don’t make the TV station any money. Also, there haven’t been any stars from it recently.”

“So it’s a filler between the regular series,” Maru said.

Ding dong - Jayeon replied while tapping on her bowl with the spoon. He could see Yuna make a dejected expression. Byungjae, who sat next to him, also resumed eating with a not-so-pleased face. It seemed that they didn’t like that they were ‘filler’.

“It’s an opportunity, huh.”

“It is.”

Maru scooped out some sliced sausage and put it on his rice. He put a big spoonful of rice in his mouth and was chewing when he saw Yuna staring at him. Why is it an opportunity? - she seemed to be asking with her eyes.

He believed that Jayeon would explain, but she seemed busy eating. Ganghwan also seemed to have finished thinking things through but he didn’t look like he intended to explain.

“10 p.m. is golden time.”

The answer came from Mira. Yuna still looked puzzled. Maru added,

“Did you see the viewing rates of the YBS Wednesday-Thursday drama that started yesterday?”

“Yes, it was 18%.”

“Late-night one-act plays have a single percentage viewing rate. And that’s only when famous actors are on it. It won’t become a hot topic if there are nameless actors in it, and the same goes for the producer as well. Moreover, there’s a special series in the same time slot by RBS with all the big stars, isn’t there? Which one would you watch?”

Yuna did not reply. Maru drank some water before continuing.

“In such a situation, it’s a fortune that we can enter the 10 p.m. lineup. Even after the drama airs, there will be many viewers who keep YBS on due to sheer momentum. No matter how good our work is, we’ll only get evaluated if there are people watching it, right?”

“If you look at it that way, I guess it really is an opportunity.”

Jayeon raised her spoon high.

“Yes, it is an opportunity. At the same time, it’s also a very big risk as well. There will definitely be more viewers than usual. The fact that there are more eyes on us, means that there will be more criticism as well. I’m one thing, but you guys should get prepared as well. Actors live off their image, don’t they? If you start off good, the industry people will call for you, but you know what happens if you do badly, right?”

Jayeon pushed her spoon into the budae-jjigae and started twirling it. Maru felt like he was one of the ingredients in the budae-jjigae. It was an opportunity to get his face known, as well as a stage where he could get evaluated. If he became known as a gemstone, he would be sold, but if rumors spread around that he was a defect, he would have to focus on practicing for a while. Considering that a single piece could change the life of an actor, this piece could be considered pretty important.

“We now share the same fate. Directed by Yoo Jayeon, scripted by Yoo Jayeon, produced by Yoo Jayeon. Welcome aboard the Yoo Jayeon ship. Men, start rowing!”

Jayeon raised her spoon high into the air. Ganghwan, who sat next to her, also reached out his hand. In his hand was a spoon as well. The spoons crossed each other in the air. Maru was reminded of a movie he saw a long time ago. It was the three musketeers.

“What are you doing? We should consolidate our resolve,” Jayeon said.

She seemed very drunk. Maru faintly smiled and raised his spoon. The atmosphere was very ripe. It was very childish, but he couldn’t help but go with it. Six spoons crossed each other in the air.

“To Yoo Jayeon’s first step to becoming a CP[1]! Cheers!”

Jayeon tapped on the spoons with a cheer phrase that contained her ambition. The sheer strength made Byungjae, Mira, and Yuna’s spoons fall on the ground with a loud noise, while Ganghwan’s spoon fell into the budae-jjigae. Red soup spilled everywhere.

“That’s a bad sign. It’s a sign of doom,” Ganghwan said.

Jayeon immediately blocked Ganghwan’s mouth.

[1] Chief producer.

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“You know? I believe that the total quantity of happiness and unhappiness is equal. If something good happens to one person, someone somewhere will definitely encounter a mishap,” Jayeon said as she grabbed her cup.

“It’s the case when I look back at my life as well. It might look like only shit stuff happened which makes my life looks like a shithole, but if I keep going through my memories, there are definitely happy things taking up space in a corner. If life was a series of downhills with no room to breathe and no moments of happiness, that person would have jumped into the Han river in order to find happiness. They are only able to live because there’s a reason that allows them to endure.”

Maru ate a piece of sliced peach. There was a slight bitterness after a sweet taste. Was happiness and unhappiness like this as well? Like what Jayeon said, the total quantity of happiness and unhappiness should be equal. In a general view, happiness should fill 50% of society while the other 50% is filled with

unhappiness. He could agree with that. But when it came to the individuals? The first thing that came to his mind was 'really?'. The total amount of happiness and unhappiness might equal each other when you consider society as a whole, but he believed that it would be different when it came to individuals.

"It might be possible that the majority of the people take up unhappiness which means a small minority might be taking up a lot of the happiness. In the broader sense, the ratio of the total quantity does not change even if it's like that," Ganghwan said.

Maru nodded.

"Well, you might think like that, hyung. You're a pessimist after all. In any case, the point of the drama is simple. Their happiness and unhappiness. I want to show a slice of those. If there's a beginning, there should be an end right? You can consider the start as happiness and the end as unhappiness."

Jayeon placed two almonds and two peanuts on the table.

"One couple is the main characters of a youthful love story. They are not conscious of each other at first, but they become aware of each other and their feelings for each other start blossoming."

Two peanuts disappeared into Jayeon's mouth.

"While there's the peanut couple becoming happy, there should be a couple somewhere that's becoming unhappy, right? The almond couple feels their love cooling down as time goes by, and they become further away from each other's awareness."

Jayeon chewed on the almonds and the peanuts.

"I'm going to express it as plainly as possible. I will add some dramatic devices, but I want to show what it's like to be human. Love that anyone might have gone through, parting that anyone might have gone through. People who look like they could exist anywhere might become the main characters to a rather bland story. Love begins, it ends, then begins again. I want to show a simple logic that we cannot escape through the drama."

"From the look of things, these two are the starting couple, right?"

Mira pointed at Maru and Yuna. Being pointed out, Maru looked towards Jayeon.

"Maru and Yuna couple will fall in love with each other, while Byungjae and Mira couple will start off as lovers but become strangers in the end. That process will repeat again. Maru and Yuna will part, and Byungjae and Mira will meet again."

"You can do all that in just 4 episodes?"

"It's 55 minutes for each episode. That's more than enough for two whole movies, so do you think we'll run out of time? I'm going to do this without the boring background explanation and just focus on the characters. There is no cool background like the super-scale historical dramas. The main stage for the drama will be a pojang-macha in the middle of nowhere, a school, and then an office."

"That sounds so dry," Mira said as she drank a sip of beer.

"I said we're not shooting Cinderella. We're shooting the love stories of ordinary civilians."

“Don’t you think it’ll be hard to find the ‘drama’ that you like so much in that?”

“Mira, what is a drama?”

“A play.”

“That’s too basic.”

Maru was pushing a piece of watermelon into his mouth when Jayeon gave him a stare, which made him pull the watermelon back out again.

“A dramatic incident, of course.”

“This guy is like that too. Yuna, what do you think a drama is?”

“Me?”

With the question directed at herself, Yuna fidgeted for a bit before replying.

“The story of people similar to me doing different things from me.”

“Yuna.”

“Yes?”

“Did you just go inside my heart or something? You’re thinking the same thing as I am. Here, let’s toast.”

Jayeon held out her beer glass. Yuna raised her cup with two hands. The glass and the plastic cup hit each other, making a blunt sound.

“There are many different reasons for why people watch dramas. Vicarious satisfaction, to kill time, for the feels, for the fun, to learn something. There must be numerous reasons. But if there’s a basis for all of those reasons, it’s that they are watching a story that is different from theirs. Do you think I would watch a video that portrays Yoo Jayeon’s life as it is? I will never watch it. Why would I watch something I know already? That’s why dramas have to be something close to me yet different from me. That’s the reason I talk about Cinderella all the time. Anyone can be the poor Cinderella before she gets on the pumpkin carriage, however, no one can become Cinderella in the pumpkin carriage. She’s similar to me, yet she walks a different path from me.”

“Uhm, wouldn’t it be difficult to attract public attention if it’s an ordinary story?” Byungjae asked cautiously.

Jayeon nodded before speaking.

“Everyone here knows the lineup of the mini-series for the three main companies, RBS, KBS, and YBS, for the four weekdays[1], right? Mira, tell me about them.”

“KBS is ‘Return of the Castle’ for Monday-Tuesday, and ‘My Lovely Flower’ for Wednesday-Thursday.”

Jayeon looked at Byugnjae.

“RBS is the ‘The Judge’ for Monday-Tuesday, and ‘Hooray Girl’ for Wednesday-Thursday.”

“Han Maru, what about YBS?”

“The Monday-Tuesday lineup is ‘Chivalrous Knight’, and the Wednesday-Thursday is ‘My Wandering Diaries at Twenty-three’.”

Jayeon clapped to get everyone’s attention.

“You know how dramas compete with each other these days, right? They don’t clash with different stories. They compete with similar genres and similar content and fight head-to-head. That’s why if one side gets 40% of the views, the others will simply be forgotten. The genre is the same, so it would be over if they lose in terms of interest.”

Jayeon drew a line across her neck and smiled mockingly. She looked like the perfect villain character for a movie.

“Ever since the historical drama season ended, all three companies nailed romantic comedies in the Wednesday-Thursday slot. Moreover, everyone uses the same Cinderella story. All of them are about simple girls meeting rich boys. Although only the first and second episodes have aired, the viewers should have seen enough to know the rest of the plot. They should be thinking ‘ah, it’s the same thing over and over again’.”

Jayeon raised two fingers.

“Two years. Ever since KBS hit a viewing rate of 50% with ‘Beautiful Lovers’ back in 2003, Cinderella-style romantic comedies kept coming out for a whole two years. Do you know why?”

“Because proven steady-sellers have steady sales. If they’re lucky, they might ride the flow and become a bestseller again,” Maru replied.

Jayeon nodded.

“That’s it. The TV stations do not like adventure. This tendency is even more pronounced with dramas. There is only one reason why genres like detective, mystery, and horror rarely appear on TVs. It’s because they are extremely unstable. If they do well, they will do really well, but if they do badly, there won’t be a way to fix it. Moreover, these kinds of genres aren’t popular with women, especially women in their twenties to forties. Would the advertisers like that? Of course not. That’s why romantic comedies prevail. After all, as long as it doesn’t do too badly, they will get suitable advertisers for it. In this situation, let’s think back to the definition of dramas. The one that Maru mentioned before.”

“Dramatic incidents,” Maru said to Jayeon.

“Yes, dramatic incidents. What does it mean to be ‘dramatic’? Dramatic, spectacular. A twist from an ordinary progression of events. If it’s red, it has to be an apple, but it turns out it’s a banana. Well then, in the last two years, Korean dramas have kept riding the Cinderella rails. On the internet, there are loads of articles and comments about being fed up with it. In a structure where the fancy love of Cinderella is everywhere, would an ordinary love with ordinary people really be ordinary? Or....”

“A new story. Or in one sense, a dramatic story, huh,” Mira said as she grabbed her lower lip with her fingers.

“That’s right.”

“You’re producing the drama after taking all of that into account?”

“There aren’t any idiots who don’t take into account such trivial stuff. Ultimately, dramas are about trends. You lead one or you get dragged by one. If possible, I want to do the leading. That’s the quickest route to success after all.”

Jayeon emphasized the word ‘success’. Maru smiled pleasantly as he felt that word hit his ears. Success, wasn’t that everyone’s dream? It was the magical word that made everyone feel hopeful.

The table became quiet for a while. It wasn’t an awkward, unnerving silence. Everyone seemed to have forgotten to talk because they were digesting the word success. Maru put a grape in his mouth. Sweet success.

“But that doesn’t guarantee that ordinary stories will work, does it?” Ganghwan remarked.

He didn’t seem to be saying it lightly. He seemed to be asking the producer for her opinion as an actor participating in the production.

“It’s ordinary, but it shouldn’t look ordinary.”

“Just like how rich boys don’t look like they’re rich?”

“That’s right.”

“Do you know what advice I hate the most? It’s ‘try to get more out of that feeling’. I don’t know what ‘feeling’ that is, so how am I supposed to get more out of it?”

“Hyung, don’t worry about that. I will give you clear directions until your act is to my liking, and until you can act the ordinary in an extraordinary way.”

Jayeon’s declaration came with an evil business owner’s smile. Maru pictured himself brooming the garden as a manservant. He was in a pitiful position where he had to obey every whim and gesture of the producer that was sitting in comfort.

“It’ll be an interesting shoot for sure. I believe in the power of you actors. I can do that, right?”

Maru looked at Ganghwan. He asked ‘is this gonna be okay’ with his eyes. The reply came back immediately. ‘We’re all dead’ - Ganghwan’s cloudy eyes seem to be saying such words.

* * *

“Careful on your way back! Make sure you take Yuna home!”

Jayeon waved her hand over her head while laughing. Ganghwan, Byungjae and Mira were standing next to her. Looking at the three who were going to, no, dragged to a 2nd round of drinking, Maru took a bow. It was his way of expressing his condolences - hope you don’t drown in alcohol.

“Seonbae!”

Yuna shouted loudly enough to ring his ears as she stuck to his back. Maru frowned and looked back. Why is the docile girl acting like this now?

“Did you drink?”

“Yes!”

Maru looked at Yuna, who had turned red like a tomato.

“When?”

“Mira-unni gave me some.”

When she said that, he remembered Yuna drinking some water while frowning. So that wasn't water.

“Hey, are you drunk?”

“No, I only drank one glass, so there's no way I'm drunk. But why do people drink? It tastes so bitter and doesn't seem like it will be tasty at all.”

“Good for you for drinking something that doesn't taste good. You drank it with your water cup, didn't you?”

“Eh? I think I did, but I don't remember.”

After chuckling, Yuna started sniffing.

“Seonbae, you can smell chicken skewers, can't you?”

“I can.”

“But why does it smell so disgusting?”

Yuna covered her mouth. Maru flinched and tried to gain some distance, but Yuna grabbed onto his sleeve.

“Your stomach doesn't feel good, does it?”

“N-no, I'm fine.”

“You aren't fine. Your expression doesn't look good.”

“It's fine. I can swallow it.”

“Swallow? Swallow what?”

“It's okay.”

Yuna frowned after laughing again. Maru could smell it. She was practically just before throwing up.

“Yuna, if you feel like vomiting, you should go to the bathroom.”

“I'm fine. Why would I vomit when I only drank one glass? I definitely won't do that.”

“Your face says otherwise though.”

“Does it, seonbae?”

Yuna, who kept chuckling, ended up sitting on the ground.

“Do you feel dizzy?”

“No.”

“Gosh, this girl. She’s trippin’ after drinking one sip.”

“Trippin’? Trippin~.”

“What the....”

Maru stroked his face. He had to look after a girl younger than him. If it was a boy, he would have abandoned him here and now. Or maybe he would take him to a back alley and stick a finger inside his throat.

“Sit down for now.”

“Okay.”

Maru looked at Yuna, who staggered while grabbing onto his sleeves. He didn’t know who would wed her in the future, but that person should have a tiring life.

[1] Monday-Tuesday series + Wednesday-Thursday series. Friday-Saturday series are considered weekend series.

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“Why did you become an actor, seonbae?”

Maru looked at Yuna. This young junior, who had bashed her head into the table in front of the convenience store while breathing heavily, had raised her head. From the rather abrupt way she asked the question, it seemed that she hadn’t sobered up yet.

“You feel okay now?”

“No, seonbae. My question was, why did you become an actor, okay?”

Yuna’s head made a big circle as she asked the question. It seemed like there was a large weight attached to her head. She seemed to be experiencing her world turning upside down as she bashed her head on the table again. She kept muttering something as though she was reminding herself of something, but Maru did not want to know what was happening within her.

Maru gave her a hangover drink he bought from the convenience store. Yuna accepted the canned drink and started scratching the lid. Tic, tic - after wrestling with the can, she looked at the can with teary eyes.

“Seonbae, why doesn’t this work?”

“Hey, don’t you ever drink when you’re with me next time.”

Maru stole the can away from Yuna and opened it for her.

“Drink.”

Yuna, who accepted the can with a dazed expression, drank a sip before frowning.

“It’s not tasty.”

“Just drink.”

"I have to drink it even though it isn't tasty?"

"Do you want me to force you to drink it?"

"No."

Yuna sniffed and kept drinking it. She gulped it down in one go before sticking her tongue out with a frown.

"It's not tasty."

"Consider it as medicine. Don't vomit it out."

"I feel even more strange now that I drank it."

"If you feel like vomiting, run over to the corner over there."

"You're too cruel, seonbae."

"You're even crueler for holding back someone who should have gone home. You should've held back if it was your first drink. You drank a whole cup because you were given one? And in secret too? You might really get in trouble for that, you know?"

"I'm also regretting it. Don't tell me off."

Yuna glared at him, but she soon made a displeased expression again because of her upset stomach before bashing her head into the table.

"If you don't feel good, it'll be easier if you throw up."

"No. I don't want to do that in front of you."

Yuna groaned as though she was sick, but she became better as time passed by. Though, she still had her head planted on the table.

"Can you tell me why you became an actor?"

"You're quite persistent, you know that?"

"Can't I be?"

"Why are you so curious about my story?"

"I'm curious because I'm curious. Do I need a reason for it?"

It was a strange logic, but he couldn't think of a retort. He had the confidence to win if he dragged things out and disputed with her, but quarreling with a drunk kid was a tragic thing. Maru looked at his watch. It was 10:40 p.m. He calculated that they should stay here for about twenty more minutes. After twenty minutes, Yuna should either feel better or throw up.

"I think I said something like this before, but the reason I became an actor isn't because of anything grand. I just had an opportunity, and I grabbed that opportunity because it looked good."

"So you never intended to become an actor in the first place?"

“That’s right.”

“Lies. In my eyes, you seem to like being an actor more than anyone else.”

“And what makes you think that you know so much about me?”

“I have seen you a lot. Do you know how many times I played back your acting in Twilight Struggles? How about The Witness? I even practiced the same interrogation scene, you know?”

Yuna, who had been sitting obediently, suddenly fiercely glared at him and shouted while slapping down on the table. Maru quickly reached out and covered her mouth. Thankfully, no one was looking at them. As this street was filled with pubs, this kind of noise wasn’t even considered noise.

“That now was just like you, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, yeah. It was similar, so please be still.”

“I can also act your character in New Semester.”

“Okay, you’re good at acting. So be quiet, okay?”

Yuna nodded slowly. Just as Maru was about to feel relieved, she started acting. Maru fixed his eyes on Yuna, who said some lines that were familiar to him with a serious expression before standing up and walking a little away.

“Seonbae, where are you going?”

“You do your thing. I’ll just watch from over here.”

“Are you embarrassed by me?”

“Would I not be?”

“I’m not embarrassed at all though.”

Did the alcohol get to her brain a little late? Yuna stopped using polite speech. Maru took out his phone and started shooting a video. Yuna, who acted for about 2 minutes while swaying, suddenly stood upright before swallowing something. She fell back onto the chair as though all the acting churned her stomach.

“I feel like vomiting.”

“I knew it’d come to this.”

“Can I throw up?”

“If you’re going to, do it over there.”

“But I don’t want to. I’m going to hold it in.”

From what Maru gained from experience, an upset stomach from the first time drinking wasn’t something a human could control. Maru grabbed Yuna by the arm and went to the bathroom behind the building. The unisex toilet stank of cigarettes. Until Maru returned to the convenience store with Yuna

after she grabbed the toilet, made inexplicable noises, and came out with dark eyes, Maru did not say anything.

“Shall we go?”

“Yes, seonbae-nim.”

Yuna became much more polite again. She seemed to have sobered up as she did not raise her head properly, and walked while looking at her feet. On their way to the train station, Yuna would sometimes stop walking and rip her hair out before sighing and starting to walk again. Maru looked at her for a while before deleting the video he shot before. Showing that to her later would be a cruel thing to do. Yuna, who walked down the stairs right by the wall, shook her head halfway down the stairs. Maru, who was up ahead, stopped walking and looked at her. Yuna raised her head. They met eyes. She seemed to have thought that he wouldn't be looking at her as she hiccuped as soon as they met eyes before walking backwards.

Maru laughed out loud. He couldn't help but do so.

“It's funny, isn't it? I got drunk and I couldn't control myself. No wonder I'm funny. Why did I do that? My head and stomach still hurt. I'm never drinking again,” Yuna said.

From the way she got herself together quite quickly, it seemed that her resistance to alcohol was on the strong side. Those that didn't have resistance would often suffer until the next day when they first drank.

“Sorry, but the way you acted was funny.”

“Funny, huh. I see.”

Yuna made a dejected expression as she walked. Maru looked at her before approaching her.

“Can I continue from earlier?”

“Eh?”

“You know, what event triggered me to become an actor. Think of it as an apology for laughing at you.”

“Th-that sounds good.”

Maru put his left hand into his pocket before speaking,

“As I said before, there really wasn't anything on my mind back then. I coincidentally came across an opportunity and I judged that taking that opportunity was a good thing, so I did it. It might make aspiring actors a little angry if they heard me though.”

“Then you really have no intentions at all to become an actor?”

“Absolutely none.”

“Would you have worked on something else if an opportunity for that came before your opportunity to become an actor?”

“Probably. So don't study from my acting. It's not worth your time.”

“Then what about now? Did you really not feel anything even after you became an actor? Are you going to switch to something else if it pays you more?” Yuna asked in a hurry.

Maru shook his head.

“I might have started doing this because of a coincidence, but right now, I’m grateful that I’m doing this line of work. Of course, acting is enjoyable, and even if I come across a job that will pay me more, I think I will continue my acting career. Like I said before, there are times when acting turns into something hard and painful, making me suffer, but my efforts to endure that process is proof of how much importance I place on it, as well as how much I enjoy it.”

After passing through the ticket barrier, they walked down the stairs. A train was coming in on the opposite side. A warm wind swept past the station.

“I was lucky. Something I started because of a coincidence turned out to match my aptitude and even earns me money.”

“It’s also because of your effort as well, seonbae. I believe that fortune does not come to people who don’t do anything. I believe that you can only enjoy it because you tried your best. I’m going to try harder in the future. I’m not going to run away. I’m going to face it head on.”

It seemed that she wasn’t completely sober yet, from how she could say those words so clearly while looking him in the eyes. Maru grinned. There was an announcement that a train was coming in. Scattering bright light, the train entered the tunnel. There weren’t many people entering or exiting the train.

“Sit.”

“What about you, seonbae?”

“You’re drunk, so you should worry about yourself.”

When Yuna sat down on the one seat that was empty, the man who was dozing off next to her became startled and stood up before leaving through the closing door. Yuna tapped on the seat next to her and smiled.

“You should sit down.”

Maru sat down and looked at the window opposite him. The world of black, which could be seen between the people dozing off, only had a few dots of light from the streetlights. Soon, however, numerous stars appeared in the sea of black. The lights from buildings, and the lights from bridges as well as cars. Yuna, who sat next to him, was dozing off while leaning forward. Her hair draped over like a waterfall. She swayed left and right whenever the train stopped, and at those times, her hair looked like seaweed.

He yawned. They said sleep was infectious, and indeed, his eyes soon closed. A dark scenery like the outside world unfolded in front of him. Just as he thought that he was going to fall asleep, he felt like the floor suddenly disappeared. Chills ran down his back and his sense of direction stopped functioning.

-You must be tired.

Maru found himself sitting on a chair. He was on a stage with two top lights on. On the other side was the masked man.

"It's been a long time. You never answered my calls."

-I did answer you from time to time.

"Those weren't answers. You just said whatever you wanted before disappearing again."

-That's also a splendid form of conversation.

"If you say so. So, what made you call me here this time?"

-I didn't call you, you were the one who came here. I neither have the power to call you nor summon you. I'm a trivial existence who only gains life whenever you act.

"So I came here because I wanted to? How peculiar. I didn't really want to come here."

-There are times when individuals do not understand their own hearts. Oh, now that I think about it, you were having an interesting conversation with the cute lady sitting next to you. The reason you started acting, was it?

"Was that fun?"

-Living here, cut off from the world, you'd laugh your ass off even if you watch ants in a trail. I had the chance to listen to a conversation between people, no less, so of course it was fun.

"It wasn't anything much. It was the usual, boring stuff."

-Don't say that. Do you know how interesting that was?

The masked man stood up.

-I want to ask a few things.

"Do I have to answer you?"

-We are in a cooperative relationship in a way, aren't we? We should help each other when we act in the future. If we're supposed to help each other out, it will be better to get to know each other. I feel like we're going to have a long conversation tonight, so I hope you can hang out with me.

"The night is long?"

-Yes. I can definitely feel that the time you can reside here has increased. Oh, before we start, can I ask you a simple question first?

"If it's something I can answer."

-It's nothing much. It's about your previous life. Do you still remember when and how you died?

"I won't forget that. It's still vivid in my mind."

-Can you tell me about it?

"That's not too hard. I was a bus driver. It was the 3rd of October. The weather was cool and the skies were clear. I detected something off while I was driving, but it was too late by then. A thick metal beam broke the windscreen and hit my chest. I felt stifled and I heard screams, yet the only thing on my mind was one thing - If I'm going to die, I might as well die alone. Well, something like that."

-Splendid. Thanks to you, many people kept their lives.

"Maybe I did that because I didn't want to get insulted after I died. Since I'm going to die anyway, I might as well be a courageous bus driver, right? It's better than being a driver who took everyone with him to the afterlife because of immature driving skills."

-That's true. Do you remember when that was?

Maru sighed before speaking,

"I told you. 3rd of October."

-How old were you?

"I thought you could read my mind, yet you ask all sorts of useless stuff."

Maru reminded himself of back then and spoke in a small voice,

"I was thirty-seven at that time."

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-Thirty-seven?

"Yes, thirty-seven."

-That sounds like an unfortunate age to die.

"Is there an age that's not unfortunate to die? Whether you're seventy, eighty, or even ninety, there is no good age to die."

-That is true. But still, you were very young. If you were in your late thirties, isn't that around the time when you find your place in society and get acknowledged?

"Now, you just had to poke where it hurts fully knowing what kind of life I've led. Why would a single man have a family?"

-Didn't you have children?

"What children. I didn't even get married. Rather than that, you're kinda suspicious when talking about obvious things. You can see in my head, so why are you saying such a thing? If you were trying to toy with me, congratulations, you have pissed me off. It isn't just old single women who can become mad."

-I can read your thoughts, but that doesn't mean I know all of your history. Why didn't you get married? Being a bus driver might have been hard, but the pay should have been decent.

"Can you get married by yourself? People live alone because they don't find a suitable partner."

-So you didn't have a partner. How unfortunate. But then, why didn't you have a partner?

“How would I know? I might not have recognized my partner predestined by the heavens, or perhaps I might not have been so hung up on marriage. If I think about it, I feel like it kinda got glossed over since my parents didn’t say anything about it. If they urged me, maybe I would’ve gotten married, even if it was through a mediator.”

-Did you not have a lady you liked?

“Why are you so interested in someone else’s love life?”

-Because nothing’s more fun than love stories.

“Then why don’t we talk about your love life? I like listening too.”

The masked man raised his chin slightly. The light reflecting off the smooth mask hit Maru’s eyes. Maru frowned slightly and waited for the answer.

-Very well. It’s nothing that interesting, but I will tell you. But as compensation....

“I will also talk about my uninteresting love.”

-It’s always good to talk to a person who I can get through to. Don’t you think so too?

“Well, I can’t really look into your head. I’m not sure whether I’m getting through to you or you’re just reading my mind, so it’s not that entirely enjoyable.”

-If possible, I want to show you what’s inside my head.

The masked man spoke as he tapped on his head. Maru just sighed.

“Why don’t you get on with the talk already? I’m curious as well. Just what is the identity of the person living inside me? Why does it have to be me of all people? Is it an effect of traveling to the past? Or did my personality divide like it’s some mental disease? I want to know all of it.”

-You have a lot of questions after all. Unfortunately, my story will not be an answer to your questions. It’s just the story of an uninteresting love.

The lights on the stage focused on the masked man. The man stood up from his seat. He reached out to the ceiling and started speaking in a low voice,

-She was a peculiar person.

“Do you have to lower your voice like that?”

-Just think of it as watching a musical. Isn’t this more enjoyable?

Maru didn’t speak. It wasn’t like this man would listen to him even if he told him not to. He grabbed empty air as though he was chasing something. He looked rather pitiful.

-Her profession was an actress. Not a famous one though. She belonged to a theater troupe that sold its tickets decently in Daehak-ro. The first time I met her was in a restaurant. I was a college student, and I was working in a barbecue restaurant in Daehak-ro to earn money for tuition along with a friend of mine. It was an incredibly busy restaurant known for its taste. She came to the restaurant a week after I started working there. She brought a friend of hers as well. Actually, I don’t remember the first time we

met. After all, Daehak-ro is a place where many young and pretty ladies visit. Our first meeting was nothing special. I think she smiled at me and said ‘thank you for the food’ as she paid the bill, but honestly speaking, I don’t know if that was her or not.

“So it wasn’t a dramatic meeting or anything.”

-Don’t you think living like a drama is actually quite tragic? Characters in dramas always encounter trials. For example, the character might turn out to be an illegitimate child of someone well-known, a friend might be a foe, or you might be surrounded by enemies. Generally speaking, people would have tried to run away from such a situation. The only reason the main characters can face the depressing reality that seems devoid of hope is because there’s already a predetermined happy ending. Is there anything more horrific than running a marathon where you can’t see the end? If a person in reality lived like the protagonist of a drama, they might have fainted from just breathing.

“Maybe. Life is where accidents and incidents happen every single day. If you think about it, being a drama protagonist isn’t such a charming life.”

-A lady who went to the psychotherapist asked for consultation because her life was too dramatic. The doctor kept consulting her, and one day, the lady said these words: doctor, life is a series of ordinary incidents, huh. Then the doctor replied to her: congratulations, you’ve been cured.

Maru smiled faintly. Everyone sometimes dreamed of the extraordinary, but they probably did not dream of the extraordinary to become ordinary. Escaping from reality was only exciting if it was a one-off thing. If it became a part of life, it would be a pain to deal with.

-Returning to the topic at hand, I saw her about two more times while working. I remember our third meeting clearly. That was when I fell in love with her after all. The event went like this. She said to the auntie carrying side dishes: give that to me, I’ll do it. Nothing special, isn’t it? But to my eyes, she looked so beautiful.

“Doesn’t it start like that for everyone?”

-Yes, it might start like that for everyone. We aren’t characters in a drama after all. I just couldn’t work properly because of the woman who smiled so gently. Even as I cleaned the tables, I chased her with my eyes. That’s when I decided. The next time she visits this restaurant, I should try talking to her.

“You lack courage for being a man.”

-Yes, I’m a coward. But that was still as much courage as I could muster. If I didn’t fall for her, I wouldn’t have even tried talking to her.

“So, did you talk to that girl?”

The masked man shook his head.

-She never made another visit. Just like that. Ever since I made my resolution, I kept staring at the door, waiting for that woman to come in, but she didn’t. It was frustrating. Ah, I should have asked for her number at least - I regretted that as I continued working there.

“You never thought about looking for her?”

-Nope.

“You’re starting to lose credibility that you fell for her at first sight.”

-I must have been just that cowardly. I only fantasize about it in my head. Can I find her? If I find her, will that change anything? What if I get ignored? Then I just came to accept myself. Ah, it would never have come to fruition anyway.

“How pathetic.”

-Indeed. Despite that, I kept working there, looking at the entrance, wondering that maybe, that woman would open the door and visit again. A month passed like that.

The masked man shrugged.

“So you worked there for a whole month?”

-Yes.

“That’s incredible in one sense. I wouldn’t have done that. Whether it’s love or loss, it only begins once you start taking action. If you stay still in one spot, the only thing that remains is the regret of not having done anything.”

-You’re entirely right. I thought that in my head as well - I must look for her before I regret it. But it was hard to put it into action. I did have the will to do it, but I kept hesitating. I kept looking for a reason that I wasn’t able to do so, persuaded myself, and well, spent a month like that. Do I look like a stupid person now?

“You do. But I do understand you.”

-I knew you’d understand. Of course you would.

The masked man chuckled as he covered the red-painted lips on the mask.

-Her face, which I could swear I could draw on a piece of paper, became blurred after a month. Inside, I thought about numerous reasons why she and I would never be a thing and I leaned towards giving up. I felt a little depressed as well. Was I so pathetic that I can’t say a word to the woman I fell for?

“So, did that girl return to the restaurant?”

-No. We met outside; in Hye-hwa station. I was walking towards the station to go home, and her face suddenly appeared when I went down the stairs. She was with a friend and was wearing a white scarf. I didn’t think about anything back then. She was laughing with her friends as though she was talking about something funny.

The man stood upright.

-I froze then and there. Maybe it was the cold wind. I was frozen stiff like an icicle beneath the roof right on her path. The distance between us kept shrinking, and eventually, she walked past me.

“Did you just send her off like that?”

-I was going to. She was with her friends, and if I had the guts to talk to her so openly in the middle of the street, I would have done so already back at the restaurant. According to my personality, it was nonsensical that I would take action in that situation. But when I came to myself, I was standing in front of her. My vision turned pure white and my head became empty. Her friends whispered among themselves and she looked at me, but I was frozen stiff, looking dazed. It was the perfect situation to be treated like a psychopath.

“So, what did you do?”

-I said my name. A self-introduction, perhaps. I fell for you, please tell me your name, I want to talk to you - I wasn't able to say anything constructive like that, so I just said my name. Hello, I'm Masked man.

“It wouldn't be strange if you got ignored.”

-Indeed. Even if she snorted at me and just walked by, it wouldn't have been that surprising. But that woman told me her name just like I did. She also added that I should maybe add what business I had with her next time.

“Sounds like she's a bold girl who's wasted on you.”

-You're right. She's endlessly wasted on me.

“So, how did it turn out?”

-It seems like she liked the immature-looking side of me. After that, we met a couple of times. Our dating location was always the theater. For me, who worked near Daehak-ro but have never seen a play before, it was a fresh experience. And eventually, I had this thought. What would it feel like to stand on stage with her? Ever since I had that thought, I made the most impulsive decision in my life. I quit college and jumped into the acting life.

“That's a little too courageous for a man who couldn't even talk to a girl.”

-I was half crazy after all, for her, that is. Well, I guess this would be boasting, but I did pretty decently at acting. I won a minor character role in the first audition I ever took to gain some experience, and through that, I kept working as an actor. She worked in the theater area, while I worked in films.

“I see.”

-Those were good days. We rented a small semi-basement and started living together. When I returned after shoots, she would be sleeping, and I would lie down next to her and chuckle. I thought it was a dream. I wondered if I could be so happy. Back then, I won a supporting role in a commercial movie, and she was pregnant with my child. The movie did pretty decently, and she gave birth to a healthy girl. Our parents met each other with the grandchild. We were scolded a lot, but we managed to get married with the blessings of our parents. I gained a decent amount of money through commercials and dramas, so we left that basement and got an apartment. She, who left the theater troupe after getting pregnant, started working as a local acting teacher in the neighborhood. When I didn't have work, I would watch over the child, and in the opposite case, she would look after the child. Every day was a blessing.

The masked man stopped talking. Maru could tell that he was making a warm smile. He couldn't see the face behind that mask, but from the way he acted, as well as the atmosphere, everything was pointed towards the word 'happiness'.

"Must have been good."

-Yes. We couldn't be happier.

Maru sighed softly.

"But the fact that you are in that shape means that she is no longer of the living, right? Or maybe I became crazy and created an ego who could create a story like this."

The masked man shrugged.

-You can make a judgement after you listen to the story until the end. Though, like I said, it is nothing special.

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-I became a pretty well-known actor. The movie I participated in as the lead role achieved good results the year my daughter became six, and not long later, scenarios started flooding my agency. I could pick a scenario! Isn't that amazing? I wanted to immediately start another one, but when I looked at my daughter, who kept asking me to play with her, it dawned on me that I've been an ignorant father. I knew I should rid the wind, but I took a year break from work thinking that that was the only time I could make memories with my daughter. I had confidence in my skills, so I wasn't that uneasy. That year went by really fast. I took my wife and daughter anywhere they wanted. The mountains, the plains, the seas - I took them to all the well-known places in the country. I can still remember it like it was yesterday. I can't forget about my girl's smile.

The masked man looked at his hands before clenching them into fists.

-Everything was going smoothly. My return was just as smooth as well. I struck a deal with the scenario I liked, and I could sign a contract with a higher guarantee compared to before. I was like a ship with a smooth sail. There was nothing in my way, but just as I thought that the only remaining thing for me now was happiness, that accident assaulted me without any premonition.

"Accident?"

-It was a traffic accident. It might sound like a comedy movie if I explain, but that day, I bought some beer from the convenience store to drink with my wife, along with some strawberry milk. I said goodbye to the part timer working at the counter and left the store. Then, I got hit by a car. The bumper hit my thigh. Actually, I didn't feel anything. My consciousness flew away at the moment of impact. The only thing I saw before I died was the beer flying into the air and the strawberry milk splashing on the ground. Like that, the masked man's life came to an end. I found out later that it wasn't the driver's fault. Apparently, the car was faulty. He was trying to do a U-turn after getting in the car on the opposite of the road, but apparently, he couldn't slow down.

"How unlucky."

-Yes, I mean, no. Maybe I was too lucky. My life was going too well after all. I did not have a nameless period, I never failed any of my works, and above all, I had a lovely wife and an adorable daughter. Maybe I was given a trial because of that. Didn't someone say this? The total quantity of happiness and unhappiness is equal.

"Do you know what happened to the rest of your family?"

-I can't tell you that. As much as I wish to tell you, I feel like something very dangerous will happen the moment I say it. There is an eye that's fiercely watching me even now. I'm just being watched and nothing else since this is an unprecedented incident, but I probably won't be forgiven if I say something I am not allowed to say.

"That fierce eye, you must be referring to god. The god that gave me another chance at life."

The masked man fell silent. Maru took it as an answer. He did not reply to what he could not answer. The masked man replied with silence instead. Just as he thought that maybe he could get a few more secrets out of him if he changed the form of his question,

-That's not possible. I really can't answer what I'm not allowed to. I could answer that last question by being silent because it didn't cross the line. Any more is not allowed.

"Can't you stop reading what's in my head without my permission?"

-That is also impossible. Honestly speaking, it's not that I'm reading your thoughts, Mr. Han Maru. It's that if you think of something, I just naturally know about it as well.

"I'm suddenly beginning to place more weight in the idea that there's something happening to my brain which ended up generating an alter ego. After all, it wouldn't be strange to say that we are sharing our thoughts if it's like that."

-You can believe whatever you want to believe.

"What a useless answer."

-Please be considerate of my circumstances as well. I also want to tell you everything.

"Okay, let's leave that aside. In my memories, I do not know of a well-known actor dying such an unfortunate death."

-I do not lie. I did indeed die like that.

"What was the year of your death?"

-2020, I think it was.

Maru breathed out slowly. If it happened in the past, he could probably find something out by searching online, but if it was a future incident, there was no way for him to judge whether what he was saying was true or not. He had memories of his previous life, but they were becoming blurry. He couldn't even remember the faces of his close friends, so it wouldn't be strange if he couldn't think of the death of a celebrity he had no relationship with.

"Okay, let's say that it's true that you died. So, why is a dead man inside me?"

-That's not something I can answer.

"Can you show me the face underneath that mask?"

-That is also impossible.

"Are you going to reply that it's impossible for you to answer anything that might let me identify you?"

-That's how it is. I do not have the right to tell you who I am. No, this isn't about 'rights'. It's about survival as well. Just like how the autonomic nervous system maintains homeostasis in order to survive, I can only watch what comes out from my mouth.

"Does a dead man die again or something?"

-From my experience, the dead cannot die again, no. Only the living can die.

"Then what is it that you're afraid of that renders you unable to talk?"

-Because I may not die, but I might get punished. Scary eyes are saying from above that if I talk, I will receive the scary punishment again. Actually, going through that again is pretty tiring.

"That means that you've already been through many of such punishments. Does that make you some parasitic ghost that haunts those that go back in time?"

-Parasitic, huh. I'm not exactly parasitic. I can tell you that for sure.

"You can't tell me this. You can't tell me that. How cheap of you, when we're using the same body. I can't really drag things on when you can't answer, so I should stop here. But if you died in 2020, doesn't that mean that you're alive since it's 2005 right now?"

-Yes, that's right.

"Then what's inside the you living in the current era?"

-Well, I wonder what's inside.

"You look like you know. Is this something you can't say too?"

-I think it's okay because what's inside my body isn't necessarily related to you, I think?

"I just found it a little curious. Were souls something that could divide?"

-Souls?

"Yes, souls. If what's in front of me is not an alter ego from a mental disease, there's no other option than being a soul, are you not?"

-Do you believe in souls, Mr. Han Maru?

"I have no choice but to believe in them. I also have vague memories of visiting something like heaven. Plus, if you aren't something spiritual in nature, how do I explain your existence?"

-I see, that's definitely true. But do you remember that conversation from before?

"What conversation?"

-The one you had with writer Lee Hanmi. I remember that you had a hot discussion about memories and the foundation of existence itself.

"Were you listening back then too?"

-My ears are always open. Even when you are asleep, that is. Well, there's nothing I can do other than listen, though. Anyway, you replied like this back then. You said that precious memories are stored in something that transcends the physical body - a soul, for example - so people's feelings of love toward other people will remain regardless of the change in memories.

"I did say that."

-Do you still believe that?

"I do. Even if my memories change, my love will not."

-Can I ask you one more thing?

"Go ahead."

-What made you think like that?

The masked man leaned back on his chair and waited. There weren't any of the light gestures that he made every time he spoke. He asked in a heavy and dry tone, unlike how he was acting until now.

Why did he think like that? He thought about it. Why did he think that his love would not change? Thinking about it, it was quite strange. There was a reason for faith. His belief in spiritual things was kinda natural since he experienced time travel, but what made him believe in eternal love? Did he even have experience with such a kind of love?

Suspicion sparked within him. It was strange. He did date people a few times, but he always broke up with them in the end. These experiences were lacking for him to have such faith that his love would not change even if his memories did. Why did he start placing blind faith in the notion that his love would not change? Baseless trust was something he avoided all the time. Just what made him possess such a faith?

"Now that you ask, I can't really answer."

-Strange, isn't it? You believe in unchanging love, but you don't remember how you came to believe in it.

The masked man pulled back his left sleeve. As the sleeve pulled back, Maru saw his watch. Maru looked at that watch for a while before looking at his own left wrist. There was the same watch on his wrist as well.

-Time is ticking. Ticking endlessly, without end. It falls down like the grains of sand in your hand. You cannot grab onto it nor can you stop it. Mr. Han Maru. Did you know that time is actually walking around the same spot? The hour hand that runs past the 12 hour mark will return to the 12 hour mark. Going round and round. Time is always going round and round.

"You... who are you?"

The masked man looked at the watch again. He nodded.

-The scary eye disappeared. It looks like time's up. You might have forgotten, but we actually met not too long ago. From then onwards, your inner time should have started flowing vigorously. This time, it was really unprecedented, so the scary eyes must have become flustered as well. No, perhaps this is also a scheme of the gods.

"Just who are you?"

-Think about it carefully. You saw my face before. From really up close too.

Maru squeezed his memories, but he couldn't think of the man's face. Thinking of something he has never seen before was akin to a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat without any preparation. Technical 'magic' and real 'magic' were definitely different things.

"I never met you before."

-You did. Your memories of it just disappeared.

"My memories disappeared?"

-Let me tell you another story. There was once a man. He was a forty-five-year-old bus driver that had a wife and daughter he loved. However, that bus driver died because some construction materials that penetrated the windscreen hit his chest. His wife and daughter cried a lot, apparently. Well, then. Whose story is this?

"A forty-five-year-old bus driver, a wife, and a daughter?"

-Did you forget, Mr. Han Maru? You should have had an irreplaceable family.

"There's no way that's true."

-You said you died at thirty-seven, correct?

"Yes. I died then. I had no family."

The masked man looked at the clock again. Three, two, one. After counting, the man raised his head again.

-When did you die again?

"Thirty...."

Maru clutched his head. It was disappearing. The scene of his death at thirty-seven was becoming faint. He was conscious of it, so he could realize that those memories disappeared. At the same time, he also had the premonition that the very fact he was conscious of it was soon going to disappear as well.

"Did I die at forty-five? And I had a wife and daughter as well?" asked Maru as though he was screaming.

-Answering that question became useless now. Time's up after all. You said before, right? That memories are intertwined like a net and that you will be able to remember the incident and the circumstances even if a portion of it was gouged out. Let me tell you this. You have underestimated god. God has removed your memories with an omnipotent scalpel before perfectly stitching together the

remaining memories with the omniscient stapler. From now on, you will have memories of dying at an even earlier age than thirty-seven.

Maru gulped. It was just as the man said. His memories whispered to him that he died at thirty-two. The masked man's hand moved. He slowly took off his mask. The face underneath the mask was revealed.

Maru was unable to say anything. The moment he saw the man's face that looked just like his, a memory that lay dormant in the river of forgetfulness leaped out like a salmon during spawning season. It was momentary but left a deep impression on him.

"That's right, you were me," Maru said as he glared at the man who had a face that looked just like his, as though he was looking at a mirror.

-This is also unprecedented. A memory that you forgot once has returned. However, it's useless. You'll forget it again anyway.

"Why is there another me inside me? What did you mean when you said you died in 2020?"

-You must know the answer to that already.

Maru clenched his teeth. Just as the masked man said, his head had already arrived at a conclusion.

"Time goes round and round... back to the same spot," Maru said as he stared at the eyes of the masked man who didn't have his mask on.

"How... many times did I die and come back to life again?"