

Once Again 671

Chapter 671

Yuna opened her eyes as her right leg flinched. She had a dream where she ran to her heart's content until she slipped, but the place she slipped turned out to be right in front of a cliff. Was she about to grow taller[1]? She rubbed her arms, which had gotten goosebumps. There was the freaky dream, but there was also the air conditioning within the train that was pretty chilly. She sighed a little and looked next to her. Maru-seonbae was sleeping with his arms crossed.

"Seonbae, are you asleep?" she called out in a small voice.

There was no reply. The man sitting to her right seemed to be dreaming as he widened his legs while licking his lips. Yuna was pushed towards Maru a little. She was able to see her seonbae's face - his eyelashes that protruded out of his closed eyes, clearly. Yuna looked at his face for a while. He had a cold-looking impression when he had his eyes open, but he looked much softer when he had his eyes closed. Perhaps the reason he looked so cold was because of his eyes.

Maru-seonbae, who was sleeping soundly, suddenly frowned. Was he having a bad dream? Looking at his face, she felt worried. He lowered his head even further and curled up his body. He seemed cold. If he was having a nightmare, she thought that she should wake him up. Yuna touched Maru's shoulders. Tap, tap. She tapped his shoulder a few times, but he did not open his eyes. The sound of stale breathing came out of his mouth. Yuna lowered her head and checked his face. Fortunately, his frowning face had returned to normal. It seemed that he was cold due to the air conditioner as well.

-This stop is....

Yuna opened her bag that she placed on her lap. Although it was summer, she had brought a cardigan because she thought that it might get cold during the night. She took out her cardigan and covered Maru's back.

"The air conditioner is too strong."

Yuna crossed her arms and kept rubbing them. The words 'air conditioned carriage' on the sticker on the door opposite her looked rather mean.

* * *

Warning: Gore, Depression

-How many times, huh. Well, then. How many times indeed.

The masked man's voice was devoid of any vitality. His cheerful hands had calmly sunk into his lap and the shoulders he jerked every time he spoke looked like they were fixed in position. He put his mask back on again.

-Talking face to face is a little uncomfortable after all, right?

"Just what are you?"

-Don't you have the answer already? But let me introduce myself anyway, shall I? Greetings, my name is Han Maru. However, this is all meaningless. You will end up forgetting this anyway.

"I'm aware that my memories are becoming blurry. But this isn't right. My memories aren't fading out, they're changing. And what are you? Why are you inside me? Does the personality split if you get another chance at life?"

-If it's now, I can tell you about the things I am not allowed to, so let me answer your questions. First, I'll tell you the same thing I said just now for your first question. Greetings, my name is Han Maru. As for the reason I'm inside you, I don't really know either. That's because I also don't know why I remain. And lastly, it's not that your personality was divided.

The masked man stopped and tapped on his mask before speaking with a rather prankster voice.

-Strictly speaking, you can consider me closer to the original.

"Original?"

-Yes. I'm saying that I'm closer to being the first one. I'm not saying that I am the original. Mr. Han Maru - that is, you and I - has experienced several deaths. Every time we experienced death, our memories were reset to a certain point as though we've gone back in time for the first time. I was like that as well. I first started off living with the memories that I've gone back in time before I got hit by a car. In other words, there have been several deaths before me as well.

"Did you hold a conversation like we're doing now too?"

The masked man shook his head.

-In my case, I didn't have an 'inner ego' to speak of. In fact, there was nothing. I only did acting based on experience.

"Then why are you inside me?"

-That, I don't know either. However, I can tell you some things for sure. My memories were cut off the moment I became aware of my death. According to the sequence until now, I should have started another life with the memories of an actor in his thirties who died in a traffic accident, but without the memories of the life before it, and I would think that it's my first time going back in time. However, something interesting happened. I was inside a Han Maru who started a new life. Of course, back then, I wasn't in a state where I could speak or even be conscious. I was like a cockroach. A trivial being that lives in hiding inside the house known as Han Maru. I could not speak nor think properly. The only thing I could do was one thing - to view the new life of Han Maru as a third person.

Maru saw through the point of his words immediately. He asked the important question,

"How many times have you seen it? Just how many Han Marus were there that started anew?"

-Twenty-one times.

"Twenty-one?"

-Yes. You are the twenty-first. Until now, Han Maru - though it's kinda funny to say your own name like it's a stranger's - anyway, I quietly watched the life of the Han Maru who began a new life. It was a curious experience. The characters in it are the same. It's the writer who changes every time.

The masked man raised his head. His eyes were directed at the ceiling lights above.

-The first and the seventh Han Maru lived a surprisingly similar life. Oh, the thirteenth and the fifteenth was like that too. Both of them wedded the woman they loved, had a child, and died on their children's first birthday. When they died, they were guided to begin anew. I kept watching the process without missing a single thing.

"That sounds horrific."

-Yes, it was horrific indeed. I couldn't even begin to imagine who or what was doing such a terrible deed with what kind of intentions.

"From the moment you started remembering the first life, you remember all of the lives of Han Maru that have died? Not missing a single one?"

The masked man said 'yes' in a small voice. Maru groaned. What would it feel like to watch his own life in third person? It definitely wouldn't be a good experience.

"Do you share the sensations as well? I mean like the five senses."

-If that was the case, I would probably have been trying hard to commit suicide even now. Interestingly, I became a totally separate third person and watched my death. It was like watching a movie. A life began, ended, and then began anew. In that process, the twenty-plus Han Marus lived without even suspecting the fact that it was their first revival.

"In terms of time, then...."

-It should be meaningless, but I've lived here for at least 300 years. Among them were Han Marus who lived until forty-four. But all Han Marus did not live past forty-five. Forty-five, I also tried hypothesizing the meaning behind this number and...

"The first Han Maru that died probably died at forty-five. Considering that none after that could break that barrier."

-I thought of something similar. You are Han Maru after all, huh, as I am.

The masked man smiled bitterly.

"Can you tell me about those that died before?"

-If it's now, it's not too hard. Hm, the ninth should be interesting. The ninth Han Maru died of overexhaustion. Work stress, frequent overtime work drove him to have a heart attack. He fell on his desk and died just like that. He was found the next day by another employee. The tenth Han Maru, who remembered that life, abandons the route of being a salaryman and turns his eyes to self-employment. He worked as a blue-collar to save up money and opened his own store. He seemed to do well after marrying the woman he loved until his store went out of business. He became homeless and worked unstable, daily jobs until he eventually died at Seoul station. The last thing he did was to send his wife

money. What he saw as he died were other homeless people looking at him from a corner as though he was a nuisance. Like that, the eleventh life begins. The eleventh Han Maru. In the memories of the eleventh Han Maru, the memories of the death of the ninth Han Maru do not exist. The only thing the eleventh Han Maru remembers is the tragic death of the tenth life as well as the self-employment that led to it. What do you think he did then? He studied hard, went to college, and got employed by a super company. He gets married to the girl he loves, has a child, and strives towards the middle point of his life until he dies due to a traffic accident. He was driving slowly in the 2nd lane, but a drunk truck driver crashed into him from all the way on the other side of the road. His torso breaks right through the windscreen, kisses the front of the truck killing him instantly. During the twelfth life, the new Han Maru does not choose to be a salaryman and walks the path of an actor through a background actor part time job he chanced upon.

“But he must have died eventually as well, huh.”

-Yes. He dies two months after he gets married. The reason for his death? He slipped[2].

“The cause of the death is not consistent.”

-There is a lot, but most of the time, it's traffic accidents. The second most frequent is illness.

Maru breathed out faintly. He felt like something important that made up his body was slipping away along with his breath. He wanted to believe that the masked man was lying. He wanted to believe that this entire situation was an illusion created by his brain. It would have been much easier if it wasn't true. He really had the urge to deny everything, but his head, his heart, and a mysterious something that transcended the judgemental powers of his brain, all whispered to him that the masked man's words were nothing but the truth. Prediction, premonition, hypothesis, intuition - everything indicated that this situation was indeed true.

A life that was repeated twenty one times, or even more. A life that was moving around like a hamster wheel was no different from punishment. Maru wanted to know why such a thing happened to him.

-Oh, no. Time's up. It's time to part.

“Wait! I still have more to ask!”

Maru saw cracks appearing on the stage around him. Light seeped in through the cracks. The dark stage became brighter.

-Don't worry too much. If you don't know it, there will be no pain either. Once you leave this place, you will forget everything. Everything down to the fact that your life has been repeating. You're returning to the lucky child who received another chance at life. Nothing changes for you.

“Just because I'm not aware of it doesn't mean that the terrible thing disappears!”

-Yes, that is true, too. I'm experiencing that very thing myself. But what can I do? I don't know how this all started nor how to end all this.

“Was it because of the desire to live again? If that's the case, why is it me who got this opportunity? Before that!” Maru shouted as he resisted the force that pulled him back.

“Who is that woman that guided me? What’s up with the woman who told me that I was given the opportunity to live again? Is she god? Is she the god that planned out this goddamned life?”

At that moment, a white rabbit jumped in through one of the cracks. Maru looked into the rabbit’s eyes. All the sadness of the world was contained in its eyes. The rabbit hopped onto the masked man’s shoulder. The masked man slowly took off his mask. He was faintly smiling.

-Looks like time will tick faster. Thanks to that, I think I can tell you a few more things. First up, I actually know the reason why all of this started. This little rabbit, she told me everything. However, just because I know, it doesn’t change much.

She - the masked man pointed at the rabbit on his shoulder.

-Second. I said this the last time we met, but don’t hate her too much. She should have spent even more despairing times than you and I did.

“She? Who’s she!”

-The woman you’ll love forever.

“Hey! Han Maru!”

Maru was pulled back. His feet were lifted into the air and his body started heading towards the ceiling. Amidst the collapsing stage, the masked man was waving his hand. The rabbit on his shoulder was gone.

-It will be our first meeting again the next time we meet, right? It was nice knowing you, Mr. Han Maru. The twenty-first you was very special.

At the same time the masked man said those words, the world split apart.

* * *

Having opened his eyes, Maru placed his hand on his shoulder. He touched an unfamiliar cardigan. When he looked next to him, he saw Yuna dozing off. There was no way a stranger put this on him, so this cardigan should belong to Yuna.

He was smiling due to her kindness when he felt an aching sensation around his heart. The chest pain wasn’t that serious, so he became okay after taking a deep breath once. The images he saw in the dream came to his mind along with that pain, but he couldn’t understand the meaning of any of it. He tried his best to connect the fragmented memories together, but they were blown away the moment he heard an announcement.

“That’s what happens with dreams, I guess.”

Maru crossed his arms while yawning.

[1] There’s a myth in Korea that dreaming about falling off will make you grow taller.

[2] Korea classifies a lot of things as ‘slipping to death’. You might have fallen off a high place. You might have slipped and fell into a body of water and drowned, or simply slipped and hit your head on a bad place. All of these are classified as ‘slipping to death’. The specific reason for the twelfth Maru’s death is not mentioned.

Chapter 672

The 27th. The heat of August seemed to be cooling down a little. It had been raining since early morning, the wind was pretty cool, and since heat came early, Maru wondered if it was going away just as fast, but he soon realized that it was nothing but a delusion.

-The motto of our school is to try hard. I hope you spent your summer holidays with the faith of....

After they spent twenty minutes just lining up properly, the sweat that formed on his forehead started falling down. The rays of the sun hit them at a right angle, scorching their heads. Maru tried touching his hair a little, and it seemed like he could fry some eggs on it with ease.

-As I have emphasized, the safety of playing around water and....

The voice of the principal, which was broadcasted out the front speakers of the school, still was full of energy. Maru predicted that it wouldn't end for at least ten more minutes. The principal, who couldn't stand on the dais platform all summer, seemed to have taken a liking to the microphone he hadn't grabbed in a while. Maru couldn't see because he was too far away, but he felt like he could see the principal smile. He decided to believe that the one who just chuckled with a 'pfft' was not the principal. Whether it was due to humane reasons, morals, or common sense, he shouldn't do that.

"Is anyone willing to fall over? I think it'll only end if someone collapses."

Someone from the front spoke. Maru nodded energetically. Any traces of the rain during the early morning had disappeared. The black dots on the floor were from the sweat of the students. The teachers lined up underneath the dais also looked stiffer and stiffer as time went on. You have it good, teachers, at least you get to stand in the shade - Maru thought.

Maru wiped his sweat with the back of his hand. Sometimes, he thought that schools were even more absurd than the military. Even the military made its soldiers refrain from outside activity when the sun was scorching, but this principal did not seem to have any intentions of doing that. 20 minutes lining up, 10 minutes waiting, and 10 minutes of speech. It had already been 40 minutes since they came out here, but the principal probably didn't even consider the 30 minutes that they had been waiting before he came out. Maru looked next to him. He saw Dojin, Dowook, and Daemyung, who belonged to the next class over. All three of them were glaring at the principal with killing intent. Even Daemyung, who always looked at other people with gentle eyes, was fiercely staring at him. The heat was enough to make any man a psychopath.

-Your principal appreciates the fact that you have returned to the school safely and....

Maru had the thought that the same students who returned to the school safely might meet their demise right here. He tried wracking his brain. What did he need in order to escape this terrible trap of words? The answer was simple. It already came out from the front. Someone had to take the brunt and collapse.

Maru scratched his eyebrows. That was when he met eyes with his three friends in the next class. They exchanged short gestures and eye signals. Dojin crossed his neck with his thumb, Dowook laughed fishily, and Daemyung nodded heavily as though he was some revolutionary preparing for a grand scheme. Maru understood the grand scheme immediately and expressed his will to participate.

“Uh?”

Someone groaned. Dojin became the fuse. He suddenly collapsed on the ground before leaning back slowly. Dowook supported him and made some noise. He didn't shout out loud. It was a restrained shock. He didn't show up to acting practice a lot because of his work at the petrol station, but his acting skills had not rusted. Maru raised his thumb as he looked at them. If there was a high school acting competition, that guy would probably win the male actor award.

“Dojin!”

Maru shouted in a moderate voice. He provoked the vigilance within people as he approached Dojin, and the lines they painstakingly stood in became twisted. The students murmured as they looked at the fallen Dojin. Some people sat down as well due to this opportunity. This looked like the textbook definition of 'all for one'.

Maru approached Dojin, who was lying down obediently. Dojin winked at him before closing his eyes again. The teachers waiting beneath the dais and the back quickly ran over. Piiiiii - noise could be heard over the microphone, and the principal's speech stopped.

* * *

“Our hero is here!” Maru said as he waved his hand.

Dojin, who was sitting down with the food tray, started chuckling.

“What did the nurse say?”

“I just found a way out. We can't have anything serious happening, right? I just said I fell over because I felt dizzy, so the nurse said I should drink some water and lie down. Thanks to that, I was able to spend first period with air conditioning. But how was I? Did I not look awkward when I fell over?”

“The year of acting practice shone through. It was perfect.”

“I also had the feeling when I fell down. That this was gonna be perfect.”

When Dojin clicked his finger and laughed, Maru saw the girl who approached him from behind. It was Iseul who was looking down on the back of Dojin's head with a serious expression.

“Hey.”

Maru gave him a signal. Dojin's eyes became round and he turned around.

“You deserve a beating.”

Iseul's hand hit Dojin's back. Dojin struggled and tried to use his hands to protect his back, but Iseul's hand fiercely aimed for the vacant spots. Only after 'I'm sorry' came out of Dojin's mouth about ten times did Iseul sigh and sit down next to him.

“I heard that someone collapsed so I peeked over and I saw this guy. All sorts of things crossed my mind. Did he help out at the restaurant too much throughout the summer and it took a toll on him? He said that he had a stomach ache yesterday, so did that become a problem? But then I found out that... what?”

Pretending to be sick? It was so absurd. Considering how surprised I was, you deserve to get hit even more.”

Iseul glared at him. As Iseul was quite pretty, she didn't look scary even if she fiercely glared at someone, but it showed that she was truly worried. Dojin kept apologizing to Iseul with an uneasy face.

“Thanks to him, we got to rest. Isn't that good?” Dowook said as he put down his food tray.

Daemyung was next to him. Iseul glared at Dowook, but it wouldn't be Dowook if he backed off from that. In fact, he snorted and kept eating.

“Park Daemyung. You of all people should have stopped them.”

“I know, sorry. It looks like I was out of it because of the heat,” Daemyung made an excuse.

Iseul did not drag things on with Daemyung either. Her arrows were pointed at Dowook, yet Dowook just picked his ears as he moved his spoon.

“Han Maru, you let them be because you didn't know, right?”

Maru, who was eating some tofu, shook his head.

“You knew?”

“I did.”

“Then why didn't you stop them? What were you going to do if the teachers found out?”

“Things like this are okay once in a while, right? It's impulsive and thrilling.”

“What?”

Iseul looked at him with a shocked expression. Everyone else did the same.

“Why are you saying something that Dojin might say?” Dowook asked as he scanned Maru from top to bottom.

Maru pressed Dowook's cheek with his finger to turn his head away.

“Well, I guess it was strange that everything clicked together. You're the type to hold everyone back. As for Daemyung, he's the type to go with the flow if we shake him up a little,” Dojin said.

“The weather was way too hot. I felt like falling over if I stayed any longer, so since you were doing it, I even felt grateful.”

“It feels strange when you say stuff like that.”

Maru shrugged at Iseul.

“I can't interfere with my friends when they are saying that they are going to do things together. Also, the risk of being found out was small. The weather was hot enough that it wouldn't be strange if someone fell over, and the principal's speech was no different from torture. If Dojin didn't act like he collapsed, maybe we would've seen a real heatstroke patient. Iseul, there are quite a few girls in your class, right? Some of them should have said that they felt dizzy, you know?”

“That’s true, but it was still too reckless.”

“When else would I do something as reckless as this?”

“Did something happen to you over the summer? Or did I miss out on practice too much? Daemyung, was he always like this?”

Everyone’s focus was directed to Daemyung, Daemyung, who was putting laver on his rice, thought a little before speaking,

“Maru did change a little. He treats his juniors well and teaches them acting in his spare time. I think he’s no longer the guy who drew the line and will not interfere with anything. He jokes and smiles a lot now.”

“Han Maru, you became human now, eh? You were such an outsider in your first year.”

Maru looked at Iseul, who patted his head as though she was proud of his growth, before speaking,

“Maybe I finally feel like I understand high school students? These days, I feel a lot younger.”

“Now of all times? We talked about this amongst ourselves, but you did seem like an old dude.”

“Dojin, Daemyung. That’s how you saw me all this time?”

Dojin and Daemyung nodded without the slightest bit of hesitation. Maru made a bitter smile. He might be mature on the inside, but he looked like a completely normal high school student on the outside, and yet they still thought he was an old dude. He would much like the expression ‘mature’ or ‘composed’ instead. Or maybe even ‘kkondae’[1] instead. Kkondae felt like it was the essence of survival in society, so it didn’t make him feel bad to be described as one.

“That’s unfortunate. I took care of you guys so much too.”

“I know. I do know that, but during the beginning of first year, you definitely had a stiff side to you. You didn’t have a good relationship with the seniors either. When I found out that you sacrificed yourself for the acting club, I honestly felt really disappointed. You never talk about your own worries yet you care about the ones around you. That’s not what being friends is about, is it?”

Dojin drank some water after saying those words. Maru faintly smiled.

“In that sense, I really like your attitude recently. You moderately play around and joke around. Before you were like - how should I put it? - distant? I felt something like that, but you don’t feel like that these days. Though, you’re still hella smart.”

“That’s strange. I’ve been treating you all with my whole heart since the beginning.”

Dowook said ‘bullshit’ in a small voice next to him. Everyone chuckled. Maru looked at them composedly. Everyone had their circumstances, but they had smiles that were truthful. He felt relieved when he thought that he had contributed to those smiles. Distant, huh. Looking back, he felt like he was rushing ahead too much. It would’ve been fine to look around him from time to time and get some more breathing room. When he thought about it now, he only wondered why he was so hung up on success.

What good would it be if his life after succeeding was lonely? Matching his steps with his friends, who were sharing his time, was probably just as important as success.

For a brief moment, he was reminded of a railroad that went straight towards success. For a strange reason, what lied at the end was not success but something else. Something more important than success, and something that was founded on success seemed to lie at the end of the rail, but even if he focused, nothing specific came to mind.

“What are you thinking about?” Iseul asked.

Maru talked about what he just thought in his mind,

“It just suddenly came to mind, but why do we need to be successful?”

“Is there a reason to need to be successful? It’s better than failing. If you fail, your life will be doomed,” Dowook said in a grumbling tone.

Daemyung replied that it was because success felt good.

“Like what Doowok said, don’t you think it’s because success is better than failure? If you ask me precisely why people need to be successful, I think it’ll be hard to answer.”

That was Iseul’s reply. Just as everyone was coming to similar conclusions, Dojin spoke as he grabbed the yoghurt that came out as dessert,

“Only if I become successful would I not make the woman I love suffer.”

Iseul asked if that woman was her with an evil grin on her face, but Dojin refrained from answering. Maru looked at the two quarreling. They were a couple that did not show any signs of breaking up. For a brief moment, he felt dizzy as though he woke up with a hangover. Maru drank some water. Amidst the fading pain, blurry figures could be seen. A young woman and a little girl were waving at him as they looked at him.

“Hey, do you feel sick?” Dowook asked as he grabbed his shoulder.

Maru smiled and shook his head.

“Looks like I basked in the sun too much in the morning.”

“Just eat your stuff and sleep. That’s the best cure.”

“Couldn’t find a better answer.”

Maru put the last spoon of rice in his mouth.

Chapter 673

“I don’t see you in the drama these days. Did you get fired?” A classmate sitting next to him asked.

They had switched seats ever since the second semester started, and Maru got someone he had never talked to as his neighbor.

"I guess my appearances did decrease. I wasn't fired. You know how the story is all about the love relationships of the main characters, right? Just that takes up all the time."

"That sounds unfortunate."

"I guess, I do get paid by the episode."

"You don't get a contract fee or something? Like in the tens of millions."

"Those that sign a contract are the amazing people. In my case, I'm similar to a part timer. I get paid according to how many times I show up on TV."

"Is your face all that needs to appear? Then do you still get paid if you don't shoot but still show up in the episode?"

"If I don't participate in the shoot, but my face shows up through someone's memories or through a photo, I do get paid, though, not as much as shooting a full episode."

"That sounds good, but it'd be better to get proper treatment by raising your value, right?"

"Obviously."

His classmate nodded. Maru remembered this guy as one of the quiet kids in class, but it seemed that he was no different from a chatterbox. Did he not know because they weren't close?

"Uhm, can I ask, is it hard to become an actor?"

For the first time, his classmate asked after a bit of hesitation. He looked rather embarrassed.

"Why? You wanna become a celebrity too?"

"No! I hate standing in front of people. I don't have the confidence either."

Wait - his classmate added before taking out his phone and showing him a photo. There was a girl who looked to be in elementary school. His classmate was in the photo as well, and the girl was smiling brightly while grabbing onto his pants.

"Who?"

"My sister."

"You two look like you are far apart in age."

"She's ten. She's a late child. She's really energetic, and she always sings and stuff whenever our whole family has a meeting, right? She doesn't do that well, but my relatives always tell her that she should be a singer since she sings without getting embarrassed, and it looks like she took it seriously."

"10? Isn't she only in her 2nd year of elementary school then?"

"Yep."

"I don't think you should take it so seriously then. I mean, we were like that when we were young. You'd dream of becoming the president, a scientist, or a fireman. We just said whatever looks cool. Maybe kids these days find idols and celebrities cool, so that's why they're saying that it's their dream?"

“I think so too, but the problem is mom. The mother and daughter duo have set their minds on it. Mom’s fanning the flames every single day, so my sister’s always talking about how she’ll become a celebrity.”

Maru could draw the whole picture now. To a parent’s eyes, babies doing cute things might look like talent to them. They would wonder if their child might have talent in music just by seeing their child blow into the recorder, or they might think that their child had talent in soccer when they just kicked a ball around. Even a hedgehog would find their offspring pretty, so how proud would a parent be if their child did a little better in some field than other children? As the parents would have seen the downsides of the competitive society every single day from the news, it was natural for them to worry about the future of their children. As a parent, any talent that might guarantee their children’s future, on top of studying, would look like a tasty fruit. With minds like that, they would think their child was a superstar even if their child just acted a little cute in front of relatives.

Just then, Maru realized that he deeply sympathized with parents. As though he had first-hand experience, that is. Did something he read from a novel overlap? Maru stopped thinking about it and looked at his classmate for now.

“From the way you sound, you’re opposed to it, huh.”

“Honestly, I am neither for nor against the idea. But I am a little worried. My mom is - well, how should I put it - a little reckless at times. That’s why my dad is in charge of the accounting at our house.”

“You know stuff like that too?”

“Our family is a little close. Anyway, my mom keeps asking my sister if she wants to become a celebrity, and my sister says she wants to do it, so she’s looking into entertainment agencies, child acting schools, and stuff like that, so I’m a little worried about her.”

“Talent is something you need to polish to be sure of, so I don’t think it’s a bad idea to try it out once. From how you’re talking about acting schools, it sounds like you’re pretty well-off.”

“I guess we are. From the way mom’s putting so much hope in my sister though, I’m reminded of when I was young, so it does make me feel a little off.”

His classmate stroked up his hair. It seemed that he was feeling complicated.

“Actually, my mom dragged me around to places when I was young, saying that I had talent in playing the piano.”

Hearing the word ‘piano’, Maru had a look at his hands. He had short and blunt fingers, like a typical boy of his age. It seemed far-fetched from the stereotypical image of a pianist’s hands, which were thin and long.

“Having short fingers doesn’t affect playing piano that much. Of course, the ones with long fingers do play better.”

“You seemed to have learned quite a lot, huh?”

“When I was young, yeah. I spent more time playing piano than playing around with friends. That gives you a rough estimate, right?”

“You were quite studious. Do you still play now?”

“As a hobby. The grand piano we bought when I was young is still at the house.”

“Oh, a grand piano....”

It seemed that he wasn't 'pretty well-off' but 'very well-off'. He could understand his classmate's mother's feelings. If the household was financially well-off, it would allow them to do more things than just study. After all, learning something couldn't escape the bounds of time and money. Maru looked at his friend, who was smiling awkwardly. If he was tied to the piano his whole youth because of his parents saying that he had talent in the piano, it would be natural for him to worry about his sister.

“What a good brother.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing, just talking to myself. So the conclusion is, you want to help your sister not take the same path as you?”

“If it's possible, I want to make my mom think about it more deeply. Right now, my sister is excited and saying that she's going to do her best, but if she ever starts thinking that it isn't right for her, she would want to stop. But it would be too late by then. My mom will tell her to try just a little more after all. My sister might be quite hot-headed, but she actually has a lot of patience. One time, she fell off a slide midway, which made her knees bleed, but she came home by herself without crying and washed it. She said that mom would worry if she cried. That's the kind of girl she is, so I think she'll endure even if she doesn't want to do it. I don't want to see that.”

“If it's like that, you should first talk to your mother about it. Like about how you heard from a friend of yours that being a celebrity is no easy task and that preparing from an early age does not guarantee that she would blossom and stuff like that.”

“Would mom hesitate after just that? I think she will start looking for institutes starting tomorrow.”

“Then let her be for now. Perhaps your sister might really have the talent. You said she will look for institutes, right? Then try persuading her to send your sister to Film Academy in Gangnam. That place doesn't have any college test classes since it specializes in nurturing professional actors.”

“Film Academy? Is that place good?”

“It is good, but it doesn't accept just anyone. If you're going to register here, you need to have her take the test. Also, there are numerous people going there to take the tests.”

“There's a test to register for an academy?”

“Their intention is to filter their entrants for the pride of their name. You'll see when you get there. Once you go there, you'll see photos of current professional actors in the lounge. If you do go there, you'll probably see what you can do for your sister. Also, she probably won't pass in one go. Most of the time, people train for it before going there.”

“If she's going to fail anyway, doesn't that have nothing to do with talent?”

“She needs to slip up once. Only people who cling to their dreams even after hearing that they have no talent will make their talent blossom. Talent isn’t like an ATM where you can pull things out at will. In the end, you have to polish it through effort and hard work. Once you start doing that, you’ll eventually start to see the limits of your talent. Only then can you discern whether you have the talent or not. The important thing here is that she needs to do all that willingly. Being pushed to do it by someone else is meaningless. After all, even if she has the talent, it would be the same as not having it if she doesn’t have any intentions of using it.”

After listening, his classmate nodded.

“I feel much better after talking to you about it. You’re right. It’s not the talent that’s important but her will to do it. Maybe I would have played the piano more seriously if my mom didn’t bother me so much about it.”

His classmate looked down at his hands. He looked like he was thinking of something old.

“Uhm, Maru.”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you questions next time as well?”

Maru replied ‘anytime’ to his friend, who seemed quite cautious. Maru told his friend to give him his phone.

“You don’t know my number, do you?”

“Huh? I don’t.”

“I’ll type it in for you, so call me or text me once something comes up. I’m no one great and I can’t tell you much, but I’ll tell you the things I know.”

“Really? Thank you so much.”

“If you’re so grateful, treat me to a meal. Meat should be good.”

“Okay. I’ll definitely treat you next time.”

His friend smiled and controlled his phone. Soon, Maru got a text. Thank you - it said.

“I did so good talking to you about it. Actually, it was kinda hard to talk to you.”

“To me? Why?”

“Uhm, you look a little cold. I also wondered if it’s okay to ask questions like this. I mean, you’re an actor after all.”

“You’re needlessly worried about it. We’re in the same class.”

Maru chuckled and looked at the clock. There were about 10 minutes until the next class.

“I’m going to sleep. Wake me up when the teacher comes.”

“Oh, go on. I’ll wake you up as soon as the teacher comes,” his friend made a big deal as he said that.

Maru fell on the desk and closed his eyes. Just as his mind was becoming hazy due to the sleepiness, his vision suddenly brightened up before darkening again, unfurling a completely different scene in front of him. It was the stage he had gotten used to seeing now. The owner of the stage was sitting on the chair today as well.

“These days, I can come here just like that, huh.”

-True. Perhaps it's because the firmly locked door has opened up a little?

“You're going on about that door again.”

Maru looked at the masked man. Ever since the summer holidays began, he had been able to talk naturally with this man. If he wanted, he could move his consciousness to this place. The stage, which was sunken in darkness, had the effect of calming the mind, so Maru visited this place pretty often.

-You are giving your friend consultation about his worries, giving him directions, and you even told him your number. Your social skills are splendid.

“Normal people do this much.”

-Really? Someone I know was the king of drawing the line between himself and other people until just a few years ago. He also didn't interfere with other people's matters that much.

“There you go again. That's because when I just came back to life, I couldn't make out the things around me, so I was really scared. If I think about it now, it feels rather weird. What was I so scared of that stopped me from taking challenges and made me look for safe routes? If I don't taste failure at this age, when will I?”

-So you're trying your hand at everything?

“No, that's not it. I do have to seek things that are beneficial for me. It's just that I am thinking that I should look around myself a little more. They're all good people after all.”

-Aren't people fundamentally evil?

“They might be, but don't you think they're generally good? At least the people I came across were like that. Even in my previous life, that is.”

-Previous life. What a magical word. I asked you last time, and you said you died as a salaryman, correct?

“Yes. That was when I was trying my hardest. I, with a couple of colleagues, was doing my best to get promoted. Back then, some lacking kid came under my wing, and I gave him a bad memory. I made him witness a corpse.”

-You said that the new member was the son of an associate company, right?

“Yes. He did use his connections to join.”

-It's a little funny to think about this after you died, but it would've been pretty bad if that person decided to betray you. He had the connections while you didn't after all.

“He was my direct junior. He was a little picky, but he's not the type of person to betray people.”

-You never know, he might have embezzled some funds.

“Why do you talk so bad about him? Do you have a bad memory related to that or something?”

-No, it's nothing.

“That was bland.”

-I guess I am a little bland.

Maru looked at the masked man who just laughed.

Chapter 674

-Following last time, why don't you tell me your story, Mr. Han Maru? Hearing your story is my only solace here.

“Your life is quite pitiful, having to spend your time in here. But do you really not plan to tell me who you are? I'd be grateful if you could tell me your name at least.”

-Just know me as a pretty well-known actor who's going to die in the future.

“How cheap. It'd be good if you tell me something. Why don't you try being in my shoes? If someone suddenly shows up at your house asking to live together, don't you think it's the right of the owner to know something about that person? I could only sleep soundly if I at least know if that guy is a thief or not.”

-I don't have a knife nor do I have any intentions of stealing something. In the first place, I can't leave this place, so it's not like I can do anything. Also didn't I tell you last time? It's a secret I cannot tell. Please be understanding.

“If you ever become able to say it, then tell me everything about it. I'll be understanding even if you turn out to be some evil ghost that has resentment towards me.”

-I'm not that, so don't worry about it. I may look like this, but I was a very kind person. I abided by the rules and the law.

The masked man was extremely reluctant to talk about himself. Was he going to die if he said something? He didn't have a physical body, so would 'disappearing' be a more correct term than death? Maru stared at the masked man before loosening his eyes.

“I don't think you're lying, so I guess I have no choice but to fall for your tricks.”

-Thank you every time.

“I'll ask this just in case, but can I help you with passing on? Maybe you'd be able to rest if I go to the cathedral, church, or the temple.”

-I don't think it's a problem that can be solved like that. Rather than that, tell me about yourself. Once you wake up, I'll have to be by myself for a while.

“You get really lonesome, huh.”

-Anyone would long for the warmth of people if they're left alone here.

A teardrop appeared on the masked man's clown mask. He was a refreshing man who did not lose his humor even as he talked about his solitude. Maru had talked to this mysterious man for a long time. Before the new semester started, he had spent the whole week talking to this man every night. They talked about a lot of topics, but most of the time it was related to acting. If he went to the man with a drama or a movie he watched in order to learn from it, he would discuss it with the masked man and broaden his vision, which helped him out quite a lot. According to Maru's thoughts, the masked man was likely to be a child actor who's pretty popular even now. He had the destiny of dying an unfortunate death due to a traffic accident and leaving behind his wife and daughter, but the masked man enjoyed the present without grieving. From how he did not warn the current him even while knowing that he's going to die, it seemed that an existence that transcends human willpower was binding his actions.

"Don't you wanna live? If you give me hints, I'll warn him for you. If he's in his 30s in 2020, he'll be similar in age to me. I'll probably be treated like a psychopath if I walk up to him and say that half of his soul is inside me, but don't you think he'll watch out for traffic accidents regardless as a result of saying that? Or maybe, if I tell him that he dies in 2020 and even tell him the location of the convenience store, don't you think he'll avoid that place even if he's not conscious of it?"

-Thank you for being so considerate. But I can't do it. The only thing I can do is to watch, whether it is my death or another person's death.

"What a stuck-up man. Both you and the god preventing you from speaking."

-You tell me.

Maru leaned back against the chair. It was a stiff wooden chair, but when the masked man snapped his fingers, it changed into a soft sofa. He spoke as he felt the comfort against his back.

"Where were we again?"

-You were talking about how you failed to find a job after graduating.

"But this isn't really fair, is it? You can't tell me a single thing about yourself, yet here I am, revealing everything about me. Pay me back with acting later."

-Yes. I'll help if possible.

"I feel like I'm being scammed."

The masked man tilted his head. He was wearing a mask, but Maru felt like he could see his expression. A scam? No way - he seemed to be saying.

"Let's see. I was a road manager. Those were hard days. I felt like I did all the driving in my life back then. Moreover, I was up against a wall mentally too. I told you about it, didn't I? That I started the road manager job thanks to a senior's introduction after failing to get a job many times. You know? After failing so many times, people's self-confidence falls to rock bottom. When I just graduated, the news was talking about how youth employment rates were at an all-time low, but all the people around me got jobs. So I thought I'd naturally join their ranks. I was quite nervous when I drank beer with some of my college friends. I thought that when I actually got a job, I'd say that getting a job was nothing much

and that doing the job was much harder. But the reality was that I couldn't even step past that barrier. Whenever I was texted by my friends who got jobs, my annoyance hit the skies. You won't know how many self-introductions I wrote, how many copies of resumes I had to send, and how many interviews I took. I was regretting it, thinking that maybe I shouldn't have graduated and should have taken those interviews as a student instead. The offer of work that came to me at such a time was like a savior to me."

Maru thought about what happened back then and sighed. It was still an unnerving experience even now. The mental pressure of a person who did not reach the 'average' was similar to balancing on the edge of a cliff.

"I couldn't say no, so I took them up on the offer immediately. What I needed was stamina, driving skills, as well as a waist that could fold 90 degrees. Actually, when I was told that I was going to be a road manager, I actually kinda looked forward to it. I thought that it was an opportunity to see famous celebrities from up close. Unfortunately, it turned out driving famous celebrities isn't something that anyone did. Their value is so high that there's no way they'd let a newbie like me drive them to places. Above all, the company I worked for did not have any famous celebrities in their ranks. That was around the time when the idol market was just becoming hot. Right now, TTO has full control over the boy's side and TheGirl has full control over the girl's side, but when I was in my late twenties, the market was much bigger than that. The more well-off groups went to Japan or China, and the latecomers tried to fill in the gap they left. The kids that I drove in the van were like that as well. They got on the cramped van and went to lesser-known festivals to sing and dance. Meanwhile, I had to drive them day and night."

-You must have been to many places then, right?

"There's not a province I haven't been to in this country. I would sleep in the van as I waited for the kids, and when they came back I would then take them to the next location. After repeating that a couple of times, I would return to the company and get some sleep before the alarm rings again. Then it's the same thing over again. This time with another group. The agency nurtured so many idol groups without caring. If I think about it now, there were a lot of reckless people. They didn't even look into the financial state of the company and just signed the contracts. The idol world was already saturated yet the promise of hitting a jackpot if they became famous did not change."

-That's because people are easier to manipulate if their dreams are held hostage.

"That's how it is. After working in that company for a bit, I switched to another company. The team leader that worked there left the company and set up another agency, and I switched on the condition that I would get a pay raise if I went there. He was a guy who looked after me quite a lot, so I thought that it wouldn't be bad to work with that person. That team leader started his management company with the actors he knew. I just did what I did before. I took actors to their shooting locations on schedule in the van. I had a lot more free time than when I was driving idols. I saw a lot of actors I could only see on TVs back then too. Unless the actor was very picky, I was quite free when I arrived at the shooting location. Other than the fact that I couldn't leave the premises, I didn't have a lot of restraints. Of course, that differed according to the shooting locations. If the director was not so nice, I had to wait with the staff all the time. Those people were the type to have the managers do work if they lacked manpower."

-It is not easy to support other people.

“Oh, you were a pretty well-known actor yourself, weren’t you? How was your relationship with your manager?”

-A friend of mine worked with me for five years, and I paid for his honeymoon. He was a grateful friend. He worked without complaints, and he was someone who knew how to plan his future.

“That must have been a nice person. I was gonna boast about how I got a new phone on my birthday, but I guess that’s nothing compared to a honeymoon.”

-I told you, didn’t I? I was a pretty famous actor.

“Alright, alright. Anyway, when I spent time busily like that, I suddenly had this thought. How much longer can I do this job? I had no confidence in making connections since it wasn’t like I was social like the team leader, so it wasn’t like there was a future in being a road manager for me. That was when I started preparing to join another company. I also wanted to try working at a desk.”

The masked man nodded before asking,

-Wasn’t there any woman who gave you a deep impression?

“A woman? You mean an actress? Don’t even joke about it. The only thing I learned while driving was that actors lived in a different world. I did feel quite excited when I saw pretty people. After all, they’re pretty. But that is all. It’s not like I’ll ever get involved with them, so I never placed any feelings on them. It was just like looking at dolls.”

-Even if it wasn’t a famous actress, you were at an age where you should be looking for love. There must be someone who caught your eyes.

“You know? You’re actually quite adamant about talking about women. From how you asked me if there was any girl I liked a few days ago, I think you want me to talk about the lewd stuff, don’t you?”

-Lewd stuff is good, but I want to hear stories about pure love more.

“Pure love, huh. Let’s see. Now that I think about it, I think there was a woman who I was really attracted to.”

-When was that?

“It was when I had to fill in for someone in the early morning, I think? I drove a pretty peculiar woman.”

-What was she like?

“I don’t know.”

Maru focused, but while he could remember the weather, the scenery, and the sound of that day, the appearance of the woman sitting next to him was foggy. After probing around his memories, Maru shrugged and stopped thinking about it.

“I can’t remember. From how I feel rather fluffy about it, I think something happened. Well, the fact that I can’t remember it immediately probably means that it’s nothing much.”

-Why don't you try focusing a little more? She might have been a very beautiful woman.

"Forget it. I can tell that these kinds of memories will forever be vague. It won't work even if I try to remember it more clearly. It's like seeing lottery numbers in a dream. It's clear when you're inside the dream, but once you wake up, it'll be all gone."

The masked man said 'I see' in a composed voice.

"You seem disappointed. Is it because you didn't get to hear a story about a pretty woman?"

-Yes, I am very disappointed.

"You womanizer. I died single, so there's nothing special about my love story either. Don't expect anything."

Just then, Maru felt a hand grab his shoulder and shake him. Maru gave the masked man a signal before taking a deep breath. The sensation of his body became vivid again before he opened his eyes. He saw the teacher open the door.

"I get that you're sleepy because it's 5th period, but don't sleep from the beginning, okay? Okay, open your textbooks," the teacher said.

* * *

After Han Maru left, the masked man took off his mask. He sat down on the sofa in front of him and sighed. At this point, he was used to the darkness and the silence as though it was his own body. Once Maru's consciousness surfaced, this place became a world severed from reality.

"Thirty-three."

Han Maru's memories had changed enough to the point that now he thought that he died at thirty-three.

Thirty-three. After entering a company, he worked arduously and was acknowledged for his efforts, and was close to being promoted. He had not been sacrificed to the injustices of the world yet, and he was at an age where he hadn't tasted the unfairness of using connections. The current Han Maru returned to the Han Maru that he trusted his colleagues, did not hesitate to take on challenges, and always looked forward. There was a faint trace of his distrust for people and his cautiousness of when he was forty-five, but the scale tilted towards the Han Maru that shone in his fresh youth.

The masked man closed his eyes slowly. This Han Maru was definitely different from the previous Han Marus. The fact that he could talk with 'him' was different, and the fact that the alteration of his memories was extreme was also different. The previous Han Marus did lose their memories of traveling back in time as time went on, but the memories of their times of death did not change.

He felt like he could hear the pivot of the hamster wheel being put off-axis. Whether this was a positive sign or the sound that was leading to fast destruction, the masked man did not know. There was one thing that was clear though.

This time was different from before.

Chapter 675

He realized that he had left his textbook at home. He opened his bag just in case but the only thing he saw was a script and a novel. He had forgotten to bring his textbook, which he had taken home over the summer holidays because of homework. Having no choice, he stood up. He was sitting right in front of the teacher's desk, and the Korean teacher always checked for textbooks. There were two reasons he had to go borrow it.

He left through the back door and peeked his head through the front door of the next class over. He was planning on borrowing it from Daemyung, who was sitting right in front of him.

"What are you doing here?"

Kang Sora, the junior from the film production club, was standing in front of Daemyung's desk. When they met eyes, she waved her arms in the air in a flurry before hiding a notebook behind her back. Daemyung, who was sitting down, also feigned ignorance like he was caught stealing.

"That looks suspicious."

"Wh-what is?"

"You're even stuttering too."

"That's because you're looking at us in a strange way, seonbae. Why did you come to another person's class so suddenly? You startled me."

"I can say the same thing to you. Why would a first year poke her head around a 3rd year classroom, not to mention that it's the electronic engineering class[1]?"

He was now curious about the contents of the notebook she hid behind her. When he took a step close to Sora, Sora took a step back. He walked another step. She went back another step.

"Park Daemyung. Are you two-timing?"

"NO!" Daemyung shouted as he stood up.

Ever since he started exercising, 'burly' fit him better than 'fatty', so when he stood up, the desks, which had a short distance between each other, made loud noises and became disoriented, with Daemyung's desk even falling over. They got the attention of everyone in the class. Daemyung smiled awkwardly and quickly straightened up the desks.

"If they fight, I bet 500 won that Han Maru wins."

"I bet a bread on Park Daemyung."

Everyone giggled and gathered round, but when Daemyung said that it was nothing much, they soon lost interest and scattered. Dowook and Dojin also looked at them suspiciously before returning to their seats.

"I was startled because you acted like that. It's not like there's actually something going on between you two, right?"

“N-no, there isn’t. I wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Maru-seonbae! Daemyung-seonbae definitely might be kind, but he’s not my style, you know? You made me mad, sheesh.”

Daemyung sighed in relief after hearing those words.

“Fine, I’ll stop. But if it’s not like that, then what were you two really up to? It looks like it’s related to me since you’re so startled. If it’s something like a surprise party, it’s fine even if you tell me now.”

“Do you think we’re doing this because we want to have a party? Anyway, Maru-seonbae, you should just stay out of it. We’ll tell you everything when the time comes.”

“When the time comes? So you two are preparing something, huh? I wonder what it is. If you’re planning ideas in a notebook, there’s not much you should be able to do. Ah, now that I think about it, you came looking for Daemyung last time during practice, didn’t you? Looks like it requires a lot of work, huh?”

“Stop there. Don’t think about it anymore and just wait. They say good things come to those who wait. It’s nothing harmful to you, okay?”

Sora spoke firmly and loudly as she looked straight at him. Maru felt like he would get scratched by her if he kept interfering. Maru looked towards Daemyung.

“Can’t you just trust us and wait for us?” Daemyung pleaded.

Maru nodded right away. It was the words of a friend he trusted. There was no reason to disagree.

“What the? You grinned deviously and tried to pry more when I asked you to wait.”

“Your credit rating is pretty low.”

“And Daemyung-seonbae’s is high?”

“Higher than yours at least.”

“Daemyung-seonbae! Is that something to laugh about? Your business partner just got disdained.”

“Ah, sorry. Maru, you should trust Sora as well. I’ll tell you everything once what we’re preparing is complete.”

Maru looked at the notebook that poked out of Sora’s waist. Sora frowned and hid it even further.

“I don’t know what it is, but if you’re doing it in secret, hide it well.”

“I get it, so get going already. We still have things to talk about.”

“Fine, fine. The hindrance will go now.”

He waved his hand, left the class, and took two steps before he was reminded of the purpose of his visit.

“Uhm, can I borrow your textbook?”

“Ah, seonbae, please!” Sora shouted.

* * *

“The preliminaries, especially your first performance, will be the hardest. However, you guys managed to pass that. Now, the only thing left is for you to go up on the stage, which you have gotten used to, and play around to your heart’s content. 1st of September. That’s the date of the regional finals. Once you pass that as well, you’ll go to Seoul.”

“Yes!”

Miso clapped to signal the end.

“You worked hard today, everyone. Until the finals, Aram will lead the practice. From now on, don’t do useless things like trying to change up your acting. Focus on bringing out the details. Check your movement paths as well. It’s not good to push yourself in practice just because the competition is coming up, but it’s even worse to just let go of it completely. Just do what you have always done. You get what I mean, right?”

At Miso’s ‘that’s it for today’, Maru picked up the indigo-colored jersey that he had taken off during practice. The juniors, who had been standing nervously, all sat down as though they had lost their tension. They had been practicing for five hours, from five to ten, without rest in order to get back the tension they lost after the preliminaries. Those that weren’t participating in the play this time were preparing for the winter competition, so they were just as exhausted as well. Maru encouraged everyone before following Miso out of the hall.

“I heard you were gonna start shooting soon,” Miso said as she walked down the stairs.

She wasn’t looking back. Maru spoke as he looked at her back.

“Yes, there are two days left.”

“You should strike the iron while it’s still hot. If it’s someone Ganghwan introduced to you, then that person is pretty trustworthy. I can’t say for sure since I only met that producer a couple of times, but she definitely wasn’t the arrogant type who would get boastful just because she got to be at the helm. She’s worth trusting.”

“Of course I’ll place my trust in her. If I don’t trust the producer, who else would I trust?”

“That’s not always the case, but well, I guess you’ll be fine by yourself.”

He followed Miso all the way to the parking lot. Miso opened the trunk of her car and gave him a box. It was some snacks and drinks.

“Eat it with the others.”

“You should eat with us.”

“Hey, I’m still a newlywed. I don’t have time to play around with kids. Also, no matter how close we become, it’ll be uncomfortable to have a superior nearby. Console them well, especially the kid that made a mistake during the preliminaries. Give him some advice. At your age, it’s better for someone your age to tell them something rather than having an adult say it.”

“You should tell Aram that. She’s the president.”

“Aram is - well, how should I put it - good at controlling a group but is quite awkward when it comes to managing the individuals. She’s like me. She ditched any sort of the delicate side of women.”

“I wholly agree with that.”

“Do you wanna get hit after all this time?”

“I want to live a long life, so no thanks.”

“If you do, then watch that mouth.”

Miso smiled and got in the car. He was waiting for the car to depart when the door to the passenger seat suddenly opened.

“Han Maru.”

“Yes?”

“You look good these days.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I did like you when you were like a precise calculator, but it’s not bad to see your humane side like this. I don’t know what brought about that change of heart, but you should enjoy your emotions when you’re young so you won’t regret it when you’re older. I don’t need to explain, do I?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Good luck with the shoot. Once you become used to the schedule, you should leave some time. Let’s drink together with my husband.”

“Isn’t that a little wrong? I mean, a teacher and his student drinking in the same spot.”

“Like hell you care about that sort of stuff.”

“I guess that’s true. Watch out on your way home. I’ll get these to the others.”

“Alright, thanks.”

He looked at the car disappearing into the distance before returning to the hall. No one said anything until the guys resting by the wall and on the floor all suddenly shouted ‘food’ before rushing over.

“Don’t forget to thank the instructor later.”

“Yes!”

“Also, Aram, see me for a sec.”

He called Aram and stood a little away from the rest.

“The instructor seemed worried about Jincheol. Daemyung and I will see him, but you should give him some care as well. You should probably tell him not to get traumatized since anyone becomes nervous if they go up on stage.”

"I was planning to do more practice today anyway."

"Even more?"

"Yes. Just today, though. Practice is the best method for overcoming your nervousness. I told everyone about it."

"You should spare the ones who are tired."

"Maru-seonbae, it's them who told me that we should do more practice. It looks like they felt good passing the preliminaries in 1st place. They're rearing to take the grand prize, so I can't exactly not help them as their senior."

Aram laughed reliably. Maru nodded.

"Alright then, work hard."

"Are you going to go, seonbae?"

"Do you want me to stay behind?"

"I just tried saying it. I heard that your shoot starts soon. You should look after yourself then. You should become big and shoot commercials."

"You're going way too far with that."

"I thought that's how it went though?" Aram said in a prankster manner.

* * *

When he was dusting off the water from his hair after a shower, he got a call. He put the towel around his neck and picked up his phone.

"What nice timing. I just left the bathroom."

Gaeul's laughter could be heard over the phone.

-Really? That's good. Are you home right now? Didn't you say you were gonna be late because you're looking after their practice?

"That's just until yesterday. I should look after myself now. I don't wanna be all powerless from the first shoot."

-Ah, right. You had a shoot, didn't you? Looks like you must be busy if you're going to do it alongside New Semester.

"It's okay since I don't have a lot of scenes in New Semester anymore. It'd be a pain if the schedules overlap on the weekend though. How's practice these days? Is it going well?"

-I'm doing it to the death. Oh, right. I had a reason for calling you.

"What is it?"

-I'm shooting a commercial.

“Really?”

Maru threw the wet towel into the laundry basket. As the towel entered the basket, Gaeul spoke.

-It's a commercial for a company, and I'm a running girl.

“Wow, you're doing much better than me. Is it solo?”

-Of course not. I think a lot of people are participating in it. I'm one of them.

“Still, that's a good thing. Did you take an audition or something?”

-I'm doing it on the introduction of my teacher.

“Looks like the one teaching you looks at you in a good light. Is it gonna be on TV?”

-It's an internet ad apparently. The ones you see before each video.

“Tell me about it if you shoot it. I'll look it up.”

-I feel like I'll be running all day but not even appear for a single second though. I mean, ads are short, aren't they? But still, I'm quite excited since this is the first time I'm doing something for money. Though, it's not much.

“It's not the money that's important, it's the experience. Make yourself known to everyone there. Who knows? The advertisers might look for you again.”

-No way.

“I can hear the excitement in your words.”

-Was it obvious?

Maru laughed. Bada peeked out the door asking what it was. He waved his hand as though he was chasing away a fly.

“When's the shoot?”

-This weekend.

“So it's good news and bad news.”

-Sorry. It's been a while since we met too.

“There's nothing to be sorry about. Right now, work is what's important. Also, both you and I are busy because of acting club.”

-How's next week?

“Well, I'll have to get there to be sure, but right now I'm okay with Wednesday and Thursday.”

-I have lessons then.

“Ah, right. So our time is crossing again. If I knew it would be like this, I should've seen you more during the holidays.”

-You were held up with the acting club throughout the whole vacation. You passed the preliminaries, so you should do your best there too.

"You don't wanna see me?"

-Not that much.

"How disappointing. Bye."

After a bit of silence, Gaeul started giggling first.

-We should go on a date sometime. It's been a while since we last watched a play together.

"Alright. You must be tired, so get some rest. You should've gone to Seoul today too, right?"

-Yeah, thanks. Thank you for your work too. Also, good luck with the shoot.

"Good night."

After hanging up, Maru stretched his arms out before standing up. When he had a look at the time, he saw that it hadn't even been 3 minutes since they started the call.

"Well, both of us are busy after all."

Maru yawned before going inside his room.

[1] The engineering class doesn't have any girls.

Chapter 676

"Cut, we'll flip around and start again."

After hearing producer Park Hoon's words, Kang Giwoo and Ahn Yeseul, who were looking at each other nervously, relaxed their facial muscles and smiled. When their faces, which looked like they were about to touch, moved apart, the makeup artists approached and fixed their makeup. It was 6 p.m. and the heat had cooled down somewhat, but due to the lights and the heated air, the actors were still filled with sweat.

"Just how many times are we going to do the kiss scene? They should just get it done already," Dongho complained as he sat down.

As this was an important scene where their romantic feelings were reaching their peak, the shooting time was becoming long. Maru received a cup of iced water from Dongho. Half of the ice had melted already. Wasn't it too hot for September?

"It must be because it's their first time."

"If it was me, I would've hugged her and just!"

"That's why you're no good. Nervously twitching, just barely touching, heart throbbing - that's the feeling you should go with. Are you going to push her onto the bed during your first kiss?"

"Just saying."

Maru drank the cold water. He felt like the hot air filling his body was going away somewhat.

“It’s hot. You should’ve waited inside. Why are you suffering all the way out here?”

“Because it’s stuffy inside. Plus, even though it’s melting temperature if you’re under the sun, it’s somewhat cooler in the shade.”

Maru pointed at the sunroof installed over the stands in the school field.

“If you’re all gone, what would I do by myself?”

When he turned around, he saw Joomin standing there. She was moving her fan busily and was watching the shooting location, which was about 10 meters away.

“It’s still that scene?”

“They flipped the camera now, so it should end soon.”

“They’re sure taking their time. Looks like a kiss scene is hard after all.”

The three of them sat down side by side. Just as the camera location changed and they thought that the shoot was going to resume, someone from the shooting location ran over to them. It was a staff member from the progression team.

“Uhm, the camera director asked you to move away because you’re in the frame.”

Leaving behind those words, he ran back to the scene. Maru picked up his bottle of water before leaving the stand. It was definitely hotter outside the shade.

“If you aren’t going to go inside the classroom, we should go there. It looks better over there.”

Joomin pointed at the platform. They walked around the stand on top of the platform. They subconsciously smiled when they felt the slab of concrete that was cool due to the shade, touching their butts.

“It’s much clearer from over here.”

Dongho grabbed the banisters and stood up. Right below was the camera that was doing the shoot. Giwoo and Yeseul, who were staring at each other on the stand, slowly pushed their upper bodies towards each other. When Yeseul flinched back and was about to pull away, Giwoo grabbed her arm and pulled her forward.

“Cut. Yeseul, you’re too hurried when you’re pulling back. You’re already set on him, okay? You’re hesitating only because you lack the courage to take that final step; you are fully willing to take that step. That’s how your character is feeling in this scene. But right now, you’re pulling away like you clearly don’t want it to happen.”

“I’m sorry. Let’s do that again.”

“I’m giving you a lot of directions today. This isn’t good. I’m interfering only because I feel like the whole day wouldn’t be enough if I left you to your own devices. Understood?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Straighten out the clothes of the actors and redo their makeup! Let’s do it again after drinking some water.”

Producer Park Hoon spoke as he waved a rolled-up script over his head.

“The producer is serious today. He’s so sensitive. Is it because of the weather?” Dongho wondered as he turned around.

“I heard that he’s on the edge because he’s preparing for his new work.”

Joomin said that as she looked at the producer standing below the platform.

“Noona, is that true?”

“I’m not sure. I kinda overheard it from some people, so I can’t be sure if it’s true or not.”

“The producer’s doing this, isn’t he? Is it possible to do two dramas at the same time?”

“Probably not. If it’s true that he’s preparing to do a new one, he’ll probably be preparing for the one after New Semester. But hey, that’s not the important thing here. When are we going to do our shoot?”

Joomin sighed.

“At this rate of NGs, we’ll probably have to wait another hour or so.”

“I only have one scene today, yet I’ve been waiting for three hours for it. Whenever this happens, I always resolve that I should become a popular actress. It would be great if I can set the shoot to match my schedule.”

“I want to get that kind of treatment too,” Maru said as he looked at Giwoo and Yeseul, who were getting ready for the shoot.

“Oh, right. Maru, I heard that you’re starting a new drama tomorrow?”

“Yes. The first shoot is tomorrow.”

“That sounds good. You’re part of the main cast, aren’t you?”

“I guess things turned out that way.”

“A main character of a one-act play, huh. I wonder if you will suddenly become popular and your importance in New Semester will rise as a result.”

“No way. There are main characters already, so what would the viewers say if a side character suddenly rose up?”

“You never know what will happen with today’s dramas. You know that weekend drama that ended a while ago right? Viewers kept posting on the bulletin board begging not to kill that one side character, and the writer changed the script in the end. There were so many people who said that they wouldn’t watch the drama if that character died, so the production staff should have been in a fix too.”

“Looks like that supporting actor was popular.”

“He’s the Terrius[1] of ahjummas. My mom also never left the TV since she was watching that drama on weekend nights.”

“Terrius, huh. That sounds good. There’s nothing better than being an actor loved by the viewers.”

“As a bonus, you get more popularity too.”

“And get paid more.”

Dongho shushed them and pointed down. The shoot was resuming. Stand by! - Along with a loud shout, the atmosphere at the scene became tense again. The camera started rolling, and the kiss scene of the two followed that. However, silence didn’t last long. An unwanted guest crossed the skies.

“We’ll do it again once the plane goes past!”

It seemed that the shoot was going to get delayed today - Maru thought as he followed the plane with his eyes.

* * *

She felt good in the morning. This was her first time shooting a commercial. It didn’t have that important of a meaning, but a ‘first time’ was always exciting after all. When she left her house with her uniform in her bag and when she got on the train, she was looking forward to the shot, but now that the sun was setting, she only wished to finish the shoot as soon as possible. The joy and excitement had long since disappeared.

“Okay then. Let’s shoot that again. Student roles, please get ready.”

Hearing the word ‘ready’, Gaeul pushed herself up by pressing on her knees. Other people next to her also sighed and went to their designated positions. She wanted to admire the Han river during sunset, but the moment she saw the rail right next to her, she came to her senses. She had to run again, with all her might, that is.

Initially, after hearing that she just needed to run, she thought that it was something simple that didn’t require her to act, but that was a mistake. She gulped and exercised her wrists and ankles. Ever since she saw a boy running with her fall over, she consciously tried to loosen her muscles. The boy that fell over went home. The reason was that his injured knees weren’t aesthetically pleasing.

“There, there. The sun is setting. If we miss this opportunity, we won’t get another one. Let’s just work hard for another hour,” the director said.

One hour. He said those same words when they were running under the scorching sun. Gaeul closed her eyes before opening them again. Bring it on.

“It’s so hard,” said a girl standing next to her.

She looked young, but apparently, she was in college. The school uniform she was wearing was given to her by a staff member. Around thirty people lined up into lines. Gaeul was in the front line.

“Over there! Front row! Don’t make a tired expression when you run. Smile! We only shot for two hours. You got plenty of rest, so I’m not accepting tired faces!”

It seemed that the director didn't care that they'd been running for those two hours. Gaeul re-tied her shoelaces. She didn't hear what this advertisement was about. The only thing she heard about the ad was that the theme was 'youths energetically running to their future'. Gaeul looked at instructor Choi Gyeonmi who had a sleepy expression next to the director. Follow the director as much as possible - her expression seemed to be saying. She came to her during the break and told her this: Not all shoots treat the actors properly, so try experiencing what it's like to shoot under harsh treatment.

"I wanna go home!"

That voice was loud enough for all of the thirty people to hear.

Gaeul chuckled and looked at Lee Heewon, who was standing at the far left of the front row. Unlike everyone else, who was standing up and getting ready, Heewon was still sitting and putting his hands on the ground as though he wanted to become one with the ground.

"Lee Heewon, we're going to run again now," Gaeul said.

Heewon looked at the instructor with resentment. He took the bait of 'an easy advert', but it seemed that he might use up a week's worth of energy here.

"Well then, ready! Cue!"

Along with the director's cue sign, Gaeul started running. The camera in front of her slid across the rails as it moved backwards. The whole shoot consisted of just chasing that camera from a certain distance. It was simple but definitely not easy.

"Hey, hey, hey! Number three! I told you not to frown, didn't I!"

The director never used polite speech. He looked like he was more than willing to swear at a person he never met before. The runners all stopped and returned to their original positions.

The director, who was sitting in front of the monitor, stood up and walked over. Gaeul looked at the director while suppressing her panting.

"Front row. Do you lack understanding? You need to show the vision of looking forward to tomorrow. You're going home after passing the test for a famous college exam. You might be out of breath, but your expressions must look excited. I passed. This isn't a dream, right? What do I say to my family when I get home? How proud will my mom be? - all sorts of emotions must cross your mind making you forget that you're running out of breath! Also, don't laugh like a fool. Who laughs like that when they're running?"

The director listed a bunch of requirements before turning around. When the director walked away, people started swearing. Idiot, why don't you try running? - these words were the most gentle and nice-sounding out of all of those words.

"Hey, Han Gaeul," Heewon called.

Gaeul turned to look at him.

"What?"

"I was just wondering if you were still alive."

"I am."

"Tell me if you're too tired."

Oh? - Gaeul narrowed her eyes before she heard what Heewon added.

"Because I'll tell you, I have it even harder. I'm dying, goddammit!"

Heewon was practically about to cry. Gaeul picked up a small pebble and threw it at Heewon. Being hit on the calf, Heewon glared at her.

"Don't say nonsense and just run. Don't try to cut corners."

"Can you run in my stead? I really don't wanna do this. Or maybe Haewon can fill my spot."

"The instructor will never allow it though."

"Damn that hag."

"Can I tell that to the instructor?"

"Do whatever you want! I'm going to die running anyway."

As soon as Heewon started snorting angrily, the director raised his hand.

"Ready!"

Gaeul clenched her teeth.

* * *

-I thought I was gonna die.

Maru got on the bus with a smile. Gaeul had finished her 'debut' in quite a flashy way.

"So, you're lying down with plasters on you?"

-Yeah. I can't budge. I've never run as much as that in my life. If it was sprinting all the way, it would've been refreshing at least. Running ten meters then back, ten meters then back - urgh, the director looked hateful.

"I would have been the same. So you're resting for the whole day?"

-No, the instructor wants us to come.

"Even though it's Sunday?"

-Yeah. There's something she has that we have to watch.

"Must be hard for you. Should I give you a piggyback ride?"

-I know you aren't coming.

"That you know well."

-Are you on your way to the shoot now?

"Yeah. It's my first shoot too, I guess."

-I got our share of bad luck for the shoot with the advertisement, so the drama should go fine.

"I hope so."

-I want to see you.

She said that in a soft voice after laughing.

"Do you really want me to go? Should I just ditch everything?"

-This is why I can't say things like that to you. Just go and shoot! Become big!

She hung up after wishing him good luck. Maru put his phone inside his bag. This was his first piece where he would put his name as one of the main cast. As this was a one-act play, the producer's preferences would be on full display, but perhaps it would be for the best if it was to bring out his character. Amidst the buildings that were whizzing past him, he saw a photo of an actor wearing a suit. He wondered how high he had to climb to shoot an advert like that.

He got off the bus at Suwon station and looked at the clock. He was 3 minutes later than the appointed time.

"Seonbae, you're late."

Those were Yuna's first words when they met up in front of the ticketing office.

[1]A nickname given to handsome, long-haired men. Its origins seem to be from a Japanese manga titled 'Candy Candy' (The character is "Terrence/Terrius "Terry" G. Grandchester.")

Chapter 677

"Get ready to scout out another location just in case. Senior Kim! You have to grab an exceptional angle today, okay?"

"Director Yoo, we've known each other for three years now. Don't you know my skills?"

"I do, that's why I'm asking you. You know that this is my first piece, right?"

"I do, I do. But don't put too much energy into it. I've seen many cases where people shot too much and it ruined the editing process."

"Of course. Let's just do the necessary parts and fulfill every producer's dream - go home on time."

Jayeon fired herself up before walking over to the arts director.

"Senior Park, whose idea was it to put a water bottle here?"

Jayeon pointed at a water bottle on the desk. It was a rather crude bottle that was reminiscent of the old milk bottles that couldn't be seen these days.

"It might look crude, but the feeling it gives off is somehow cozy. I like the pencil here too."

"It's from our newest member. Pretty decent, huh?"

"Please introduce me to that guy later. He knows what I want."

"Alright. But hey, how does it feel to produce your first work?"

"Crazy bitch gunna be real crazy."

The arts director turned around while laughing. Jayeon looked at the main character's room which had been completely decorated. This was a place where a man in his thirties, who ran a pojang-macha in a secluded alley, lived by himself. He liked the quiet and did not like noise, but he liked the bustling of people.

On the old desk was a laptop, a lamp, a water bottle with a pencil inside it, and then finally, a manuscript. The main character's job was as a novelist. He made himself known through short to middle-length novels after debuting, but he hadn't been able to make any progress since that. He would try to write every night in this shantytown where no engine noises from cars could be heard, with the company of the moonlight, but the white cliff of the manuscript would always stop him.

Jayeon tried matching the objects in the room to the character's current situation. She smiled every time she found something matching, and whenever she found something lacking, she noted it down on a memo.

"Good, this is splendid."

The slightly study-looking room seemed like it was enough to represent the main character's feelings of being driven into a corner. The piled manuscript papers as well as the worn-out keyboard of the laptop showed that the main character did not give up even in the middle of despairing. The room, which had an overlap of many different feelings, was very much like what Jayeon was imagining. If there was something lacking, it was that the wallpaper was a little too clean. That wasn't anything much since she could just consult the arts team and have them fix it.

"It looks like the company is supporting you quite a lot, eh. They're lending you such an expensive camera even though it's a one-act play," said senior Kim, the camera director.

"It's pretty long, so as long as you shoot well and put effort into the editing, it'll have a film-like vibe to it."

"Maybe it's because it's the last one-act play."

Senior Kim nodded.

"So YBS is quitting one-act plays huh."

"Because it doesn't make any money. It doesn't look like they're planning to invest as much as RBS does either."

TV stations were places where the latest trends and traditions coexisted. If they only focused on the tastes of the younger generation, the older generation would turn away, yet if they focused too much on the older generation, the younger generation would turn their backs. They had to broadcast daily lifestyle programs for the elders, and also tell the younger generation about the latest fashion. Or, they

had to combine the two into one. Unfortunately, one-act plays catered to neither. In the first place, one-act plays were an experimental stage for the writers and the producers. As it prioritized the ideals of the maker before viewing rates, it was a place where the witty ideas of new writers and the daring direction of new producers were forgiven. There was an era when some refreshing ideas shone like a pearl hidden in the mud causing the three major television companies to heavily invested into it, but the times had changed. TV schedules became longer and more competitive. There was less room for an experimental show with an unstable theme to stand on. Rather than challenges, they pursued stability. Perhaps it was a natural course of action for the TV stations who had become massive.

“If it’s the last time, we might as well do it with a blast.”

“Of course. Let’s make those executives change their minds.”

Senior Kim laughed and walked over to the camera. Jayeon walked around the room by herself and started picturing the content. The main character enters through the door. He walks around the room for a while before sitting down on the chair. He hesitates before turning on the laptop, but he only stares at the desktop. After staring at it for a long time, he pulls out his pencil and glares at the manuscript. That only continues for a short while before he looks out the window and sighs with a mocking smile. The laptop and the manuscript. He leaves behind the items that are the foundation of his lifestyle before standing up.

She could draw the picture clearly inside her head as though she was going through an already shot footage. Jayeon thought about the main character leaving through the door. The pojang-macha, which was his refuge and resting place, would become the refuge and resting place of other people as well. The story of other people would blossom there, and she had to capture it all on camera.

“It’s pretty well-made.”

“You’re here?”

Jayeon looked at Ganghwan, who was standing behind her with the script in hand. This drama wouldn’t be complete without this man. She tried substituting the main character in her head with Ganghwan. The appearance was a little awkward, however, Ganghwan would fill that discrepancy between reality and ideal with his acting. As he was someone who would fulfill her requests to perfection, she wasn’t that worried. In fact, it was herself that she was worried about. In order to bring out this man’s one hundred, nay, one thousand percent, she would have to bring out all the skills of production she had learned until now. A small bowl could only hold a small amount of water. In order to hold the entirety of the man known as Yang Ganghwan, she would probably need a big bowl.

“Hyung, since you’re here, try standing here.”

“Are you going to call me hyung during the shoot too?”

“Fine, actor Yang. For now, try standing in the set.”

Ganghwan entered the room. As the set had all four sides closed off, which was unlike normal sets where one wall was open, Jayeon had to follow him inside.

“How is it? Do you think it fits the image of the main character that you’re thinking of, hyung?”

“Well, I’m horrible at arts.”

“Just tell me what you think.”

“I think it’s pretty good. I think this kind of mild image fits a writer who moved to a shantytown because he can’t go to a temple.”

Ganghwan walked around and looked around the set. His eyes looked pretty serious.

“Please take care of me, hyung. Let me become a star producer with your help.”

“Why are you suddenly putting me on a pedestal? You’re making me uneasy.”

Ganghwan left the room.

“How about the other sets?”

“That one over there is for Maru and Yuna. There’s a limit to the area we can use, so I think we have to assemble and disassemble every time. Anyway, that one over there is for Mira and Byungjae.”

“The TV station set area is really wide huh. I thought what I saw in dramas were actual houses that they rented.”

“Are you really someone who’s been staying in this industry for over a decade? You don’t even know stuff like that?”

“Well, I never showed up on TV. At most, I just showed up briefly as a cameo or something. This is my first time on a set too.”

“Why don’t you come over to the drama side using this opportunity? I think with your skills, you’ll be able to have your name known to all the major producers, you know? Also, what company do you belong to? It’s JA, isn’t it? It must be easy for you to find connections.”

“I thought you hated stuff like using connections.”

“I mean to say that I can’t have that stuff interfere with my work, not that I’m rejecting it entirely. I mean, you can’t keep working in this industry if you ignore it.”

“The reckless street thug can now think for herself huh.”

“I’ve always been smarter than you. But really, why don’t you think about it seriously? I mean, about switching to camera acting.”

Jayeon cautiously looked at Ganghwan’s face. Leaving aside personal feelings, when viewed objectively, the actor known as Yang Ganghwan was a very desired talent. Watching his act would make anyone excited. Yes, excited. There was no other word that described Yang Ganghwan’s acting more properly than that. The viewers would forget that they’re ‘watching’ something and become synchronized with his act. They would become objectified by his acting before being drained of their energy, and only after his act ended would they start breathing again and exclaim. Ganghwan was a merciless actor who sucked in everyone’s gazes.

“Camera acting just doesn’t suit me. I also don’t like the fact that I’m restricted by the location. I heard that shooting a drama is like war, right? You need to be fierce when you’re preparing for plays too, but it’s not as bad as dramas. I want to do the leading, not chasing,” Ganghwan smiled as he spoke.

He didn’t look disappointed at all. Jayeon immediately gave up on the idea. There wasn’t a method to grab a star in the skies after all. Unless that star came down by itself, there was no way of touching it.

“Superstar Yang, it sounds good too.”

“I’ll introduce you to Hong Geunsoo later, so go chase him. He was born to live in front of the camera.”

Ganghwan said he’d look around the set a little more before walking over to another set. Jayeon shrugged. In a world where there were as many actors desperate to debut on TV as there were grains of sand on the beach, this man was rejecting the opportunity. She would understand if he was lacking skill, but he was acting like despite having more than enough skill, so she only found it unfortunate.

“Hello.”

Another one of the main characters, Byungjae, arrived. He had cut his hair cleanly like college students these days. His clothes weren’t too flashy either. If he walked around a college campus right now, he would be one of the ‘handsome oppa on campus’.

“Are those clothes sponsored?”

“No, they’re mine,” Byungjae replied with embarrassment.

“They suit you. Who did the styling?”

“A friend of mine.”

“That friend of yours has good taste. You said you don’t have an agency yet, right?”

“Yes, I’m by myself.”

“Then have your phone with you at all times. The assistant director or I will call you quite frequently. If you don’t pick up, be prepared for the consequences.”

“Yes, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Byungjae raised his head to look at the ceiling. His mouth became open and his expression looked so pure that Jayeon subconsciously smiled.

“Is it your first time at a set too?”

“Yes. In fact, it’s the first time I came to a TV station.”

“Oh my word. Was I too focused on the acting skills? You should have a look around as well. Watch out for the cables on the ground.”

“Yes!”

Byungjae trotted away like a kid on a field trip.

“Looks like he doesn’t need to do acting at all.”

He seemed like he came straight out of the script. Of course he'd suit the character since she picked the one that suited the image, but Byungjae especially had no difference from the character in the script when compared to his real character. Whether this was an advantage for him or not, she would have to find out once they began shooting.

"But hey, the oldest one arrived at the scene first, huh. What a lax atmosphere."

Jayeon looked at Ganghwan, who was taking Byungjae around the set. There were 30 minutes until the appointment. She would scold the latecomers without mercy.

* * *

"It's big," Yuna said in front of the TV station.

Maru tapped on Yuna, who was gasping at the building, and pointed at the building next to it.

"We're going that way."

"Eh? Isn't it this one?"

"That one over there is the building with the sets. This place is for broadcasting and office work."

"You're quite knowledgeable."

"I've been here a few times after all."

They walked past the guard post for cars and entered the 5-story building. The 1st and 2nd floors were combined into a huge warehouse-like area, and that place was the drama set. On the ceiling, which was high above, were bars installed at regular intervals on which lights could be installed. He took Yuna, who was marveling at the forklifts that were used to move the walls of the sets, to Jayeon, who was standing in front of a completed set.

"Hello."

"Hello."

As soon as they greeted, Jayeon placed a finger on her mouth, signaling them to keep quiet. Maru shut his mouth and directed his gaze to where Jayeon was looking. He saw Ganghwan leaning against the wall behind the door to the set. He flipped a page of a book with a bored expression before he expressed his annoyance and rolled on the ground. People laughed when a grown adult was acting like a child throwing a tantrum, but they soon became quiet upon Jayeon's glare. After rolling around in his room for a while, Ganghwan slowly stood up and sat at his desk. Only his back could be seen, but Maru could tell that Ganghwan was pondering. He heard a soft sigh. Ganghwan was clutching his hair as well. While his expression couldn't be seen it could be gleaned from his actions alone.

"About that much, maybe?" Ganghwan said as he turned around.

Maru subconsciously nodded. This person is an actor after all - these thoughts filled his mind.

Chapter 678

"Come in," Jayeon said while opening the door.

Inside the meeting room next to the set, there was only a rectangular table.

“It looks like we’re gonna have to wait for about five minutes. Have a drink or something.”

Jayeon left the meeting room. Maru sat on the left. Yuna sat next to him, and Byungjae sat opposite him.

“Is Mira on her way here?” Ganghwan asked as he sat at the table.

“She said she arrived. I got a text that she’s in front of the building, so she should be here soon.”

As soon as Byungjae’s words ended, the door to the meeting room opened before Mira came in. She looked around while not looking to be in a hurry before sitting down next to Byungjae.

“Where’s the producer?” she asked.

“Dunno. She disappeared.”

Ganghwan grabbed a paper cup that was placed on the table before pouring some orange juice from a plastic bottle.

“Let’s wait while we have some drinks. She said we’d need to wait for about five minutes.”

Yuna poured the drinks in five paper cups. Everyone thanked her before taking a cup each. The juice was very cold as though it had just been taken out of the refrigerator.

“Does everyone here have experience acting in front of a camera?” Ganghwan asked.

Byungjae and Mira replied ‘yes’.

“I know about Maru, and you said you were Yuna, right?”

“Yes. My name is Kim Yuna.”

“How about you, Yuna? Have you acted in front of a camera before?”

“No, this is my first time at a shoot like this.”

“Really? That sounds fortunate. This is my first time as well, doing it properly. Let’s get along well as beginners.”

Maru looked at Ganghwan while he drank. He was probably one of the least-fitting people to use the word ‘beginner’ for. Ganghwan looked back at him while asking ‘what?’.

“I was just thinking that if you’re a beginner, hyung-nim, I may as well be a worm,” Maru said as he looked away.

“I’m also no different from a beginner,” Byungjae suddenly added.

From the way he even raised his hand to speak, his nervousness could be seen.

“Byungjae, relax your shoulders. As you all know, producer Yoo Jayeon is pretty liberal during personal occasions, but she’ll become very strict once the shot begins. You’re gonna have a hard time if you are so nervous from the beginning,” Ganghwan spoke as he pressed down on Byungjae’s shoulders.

Byungjae twisted his body while groaning but Ganghwan did not let him go. Yuna and Mira laughed as they watched.

“If you feel stiff again, I’ll loosen you up so just tell me about it.”

“Oh, no! I’ll do it myself next time.”

It seemed that it was pretty painful. After Byungjae replied in a fluster, the door slowly opened.

“Here’s the writer who helped me out.”

Maru widened his eyes when he looked at the woman who followed Jayeon inside. It was someone unexpected. After meeting eyes with her, Maru quickly nodded.

“We meet again, huh?”

Writer Lee Hanmi waved her hand as she sat down. Producer Jayeon looked at her and asked,

“You two know each other?”

“We do. He’s in my work, and I know him personally too.”

“Your work? But New Semester is the only thing you’re doing right now, isn’t it?”

“Yeah that. He’s in it, you know?”

“Maru is?”

Jayeon looked at Maru in a questioning light.

“You’re in New Semester?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“I thought you knew.”

“I was completely unaware of it. So you must be working with senior Park Hoon, huh?”

“I saw him just yesterday.”

Jayeon nodded while crossing her arms.

“Oh well, that doesn’t matter. There’s no way I would know since I didn’t have anyone write their filmography in their application. Also, it’s not like I’m the type to watch my seniors’ works. But if there is a fixed drama, wouldn’t it be hard to adjust the schedule?”

“It doesn’t matter since my appearance has decreased quite a lot recently. Also, the schedule doesn’t overlap because the shoot for this drama is on Sunday nights and Monday and Tuesday afternoons.”

“Well, my assistant director probably took care of that. I left him to his own devices for schedule management so I don’t know much about it. It’s fine as long as it doesn’t affect my shoot,” Jayeon said as she tapped with the script.

"You're the producer in charge, and it's a YBS program, too. Don't you think it's a negligence of duty to not know that?" Ganghwan said, who was sitting next to Jayeon in a corner.

"It's fine since I can learn more about him starting now. Don't you think so, actor Yang?"

Ganghwan looked away hearing Jayeon's thorny words. He was only joking, but he didn't manage to gain anything from it.

"Looks like I only talked about a lot of nonsense with a lot of guests here. Well then, everyone. This is our touching first read-through. I'll first introduce myself. I am producer Yoo Jayeon of YBS Drama. I'll be working with you all to create a 4-episode one-act play for the next two months. It is a coincidence that we were given a whole four episodes as filler, but creating a drama thanks to this coincidence depends on our skill. I hope we can make a great drama together."

Everyone knew each other but the producer introduced herself as though to tell that this was their first official meeting. Her ambitious words signaled the start of the drama shoot.

"And this is our writer."

"There are people I haven't seen before, as well as those I've met, but anyway, nice to meet you all. I am Lee Hanmi. This drama is a co-product of me and director Yoo here. I added the flesh to director Yoo's idea, so I guess you can call director Yoo the original author. However, the characters moving inside it are under my influence. I'm going to watch whether you can bring it out or whether you ruin the whole thing. Oh, and one more thing. I'm quite picky during read-throughs. I'll be saying some words to make you feel bad and to piss you off so don't just misinterpret it as you wish. If you are pointed out, you better think about fixing it. Understood?"

Her resolve could be felt from those words. Maru looked down at the script. The fact that she was going to say stuff to piss people off did not sound ordinary to him.

"Well then, why don't we introduce ourselves starting here?"

Jayeon pointed at Ganghwan.

"I'm Yang Ganghwan, and I'll be playing the role of Lee Jaewoo. I don't have experience acting in front of the camera, so I might be lacking, but I will do my best in order to produce good results."

"Hello, my name is Ha Byungjae. My role is Choi Jihoon. I will try hard not to be a hindrance to everyone."

"I'm Choi Mira. I play Kang Haeyeon, please take care of me."

Maru also stood up from his seat.

"My name is Han Maru. I was assigned the role of Park Haejoon. I want to make a good drama. Please take care of me."

The last one was Yuna.

"Hello, my name is Kim Yuna. I will be playing the role of Yoon Jihae. I'm a little nervous because it's my first drama. I will do my best."

They finished introducing themselves. At that moment, everyone picked up their scripts as though this was agreed upon beforehand.

“Then let’s begin. Maru, can you read the narratives?”

“Yes.”

“Yuna, you should read them when it’s Maru speaking. If they’re both speaking, Mira should take over.”

“Understood.”

Hanmi took out her glasses. After checking that Hanmi had put on her glasses, Jayeon signaled with a nod. Maru cleared his throat before starting to speak,

“Scene one. In front of Jaewoo’s house. Jaewoo, who is climbing a hill, quietly stares at the drainage hole. There is all sorts of trash blocking the metallic grid. After looking at the trash for a while, Jaewoo clicks his tongue before resuming to walk.”

* * *

“Is what is not possible, not possible after all?”

Jaewoo put down his pencil. He had sharpened his pencil like a knife in order to do the cleanest form of writing possible but a black dot never appeared on the white manuscript paper. Jaewoo looked at his pencil holder. This pencil holder, which was a glass bottle he picked up from the side of the road, was one of Jaewoo’s treasures. He cherished that pencil holder even more than the cutting-edge laptop that he bought at a very expensive price. The water bottle was proof that he overcame hardships.

He ran away from the keyboard to the manuscript and then to the floor again. Jaewoo lay down on the floor. He looked up slightly to look at the desk. The holy sanctuary that made Lee Jaewoo a popular author now became a place that made him sick. It would be great if he could run away.

“Goddammit.”

He went back to the days when he threw a tantrum in front of his parents to make them buy him toys. He twisted his body and expressed his frustration. He was in his 30s, so anyone looking at him would say that he’s unsightly, but there was no one to see him anyway. He was deep inside the shantytown. This was the unpolished part of the city where no one walked around.

The more tantrums he threw, the bigger the presence of his desk became. It slowly took over his small room as though to conquer it. Jaewoo leaned against the wall and looked at his desk. He despised the desk that was greedy for the little space he was in as well.

“Fine, I’m leaving then, okay?”

Jaewoo opened the door and left.

* * *

“Cut!”

Having left the set, Ganghwan snapped his neck left and right before stopping. Maru looked at the script and Ganghwan alternately before pressing the inside of his left cheek with his tongue. The acting of a beginner, huh. The character from the script was vividly alive for everyone to see. If this was what a 'beginner' was, how would the rest of the actors have to act?

Maru looked next to him, at the 'actors'. Byungjae, Mira and Yuna. The three of them had different expressions, but their feelings probably all contained the emotion of marvel. They probably felt that he was on a different level. They were feeling pressured.

"Now I have the urge to write something with that fellow as the main character."

Writer Lee Hanmi, who said that she'd watch for a bit after the read-through, had been sticking around the set for two hours already. She seemed like an adventurer who discovered a chest full of treasure and did not let her eyes leave Ganghwan even for one moment.

"Actor Yang. Everything's good, but can you show me something different?"

"How?"

"I'm sorry to say this as the director, but I don't have much to give you. I'd be okay as long as you're satisfied with it, hyung. However, if you still want to try something else, you are welcome to try more."

"Well, I'm not sure. I don't even know how I'm appearing on camera. Also, I told you not to call me hyung."

When Ganghwan got mad, the staff started laughing. He mesmerized everyone here with his skill. He didn't do anything like saying kind words, playing jokes, or acting polite or anything, yet people listened to his words and chased his actions.

Maru looked at the camera director, who just now looked like he was going to be sucked in by the monitor. Do more, more! His lips were definitely saying such words. Ganghwan was the so-called 'an actor worth shooting'.

Ganghwan walked over to the monitor. He checked his acting and nodded a few times before saying 'looks good'.

"Okay then. Let's go over to the next part."

Next - Maru looked at Byungjae. The next scene was set in Byungjae's room. He could see Byungjae sighing. Ganghwan had just shown an act that he would not dare to complain about. The pressure had to be immense.

"Byungjae, come on. We need to do the rehearsal."

Jayeon stepped up herself. The assistant director was next to her.

"Yes!" Byungjae replied energetically before walking off.

"I'm so glad that the next scene isn't mine."

"I thought the same thing."

Mira and Yuna looked at each other and laughed. Ironically, Ganghwan's perfect start raised the nervousness within the rest of the actors. Maru also stuffed his eyes into the script. Once Byungjae was done, it would be his turn.

"Man, shoots don't have that tingle after all," Ganghwan said after hitting a home run.

His leisurely attitude couldn't be more hateful than today. Maru sighed.

"If you're a beginner, you should've made mistakes and acted awkwardly too."

"I don't think I did that well though."

"Those words, Byungjae-hyung will probably froth at his mouth if he heard those words. You should've seen his face."

"You just need to do what you're capable of. Moreover, it's not a live program, is it? It's not like making a mistake is a big deal either. There's simply no tension. The stage is more enjoyable after all. Don't you think so?"

Ganghwan locked his fingers behind his head before walking away. He looked like a loafer usually, but he would become an acting monster once he stood in front of the camera. Maru clicked his tongue. With that, he was sure now. The biggest enemy at this shoot was not the producer nor the writer. It was this man in front of him. He was going to be at the shoot and be compared to this actor the whole time. He felt like he swallowed a bunch of sand.

"Seonbae, do you think I can do this well?" asked Yuna, who was next to him.

"I think 'doing well' will be a reason for an insult. Let's do it to the death," Maru said as he opened the script.

Chapter 679

I want to do ordinary acting - Byungjae never felt that he wanted to become the main character. A decent actor who wouldn't look out of place no matter where he was placed but was slightly lacking to lead the whole drama. That was his objective, an 'ordinary' actor. Those thoughts never changed throughout his time in high school when he belonged to the acting club. He was much more relaxed if he was a supporting character rather than a leading character. Your acting was okay - these words were the best compliment for Byungjae. You were the best, your acting was the best, that was once in a lifetime - these kinds of words made him rather awkward. Although he had never heard something like that before, he felt like his vision would darken if he heard those words. Byungjae simply didn't have the confidence to endure the expectations that would be placed on him after that.

"Just do what you always did."

Byungjae entered the set as he listened to producer Jayeon's words. The room was small, the bed was narrow enough that a person would fall down if they moved while asleep, and the desk was a cheap one that could be assembled with ease. The space between the furniture looked like it wouldn't even be a couple feet at best. Was a goshiwon always this small? Byungjae heard that they would start shooting in five minutes. He tried lying down on the bed for now and tried to take in the fact that this room was his residence.

The set had no ceiling. He could see lights that had been turned off up high.

“I won’t make a mistake.”

He never even thought about doing well. His objective was to digest his scenes fast so that the shoot wasn’t delayed and so he wouldn’t put any pressure on the other actors and the staff. He remembered when he first met Jayeon. Jayeon called him out when he was about to leave the audition room that didn’t have an auditioner in it. She looked at him for a while before telling him to say a few lines, so he obediently obeyed. He walked because he was told to, and he sighed because he was told to.

“You’re doing everything I’m telling you to, huh?”

After saying those words, Jayeon reached out her hand, saying that he passed the audition. After hearing that he perfectly suited the image that she was looking for, Byungjae didn’t know if he should be joyous or sad about it. Was the character that passive?

Choi Jihoon. Twenty-nine years old. He is an ordinary man who gets drafted after graduating junior college and gets discharged without any problems. After getting discharged, he is looking for employment and hears that being a civil servant is promising from the people around him. He spends the next five years in a goshiwon towards that goal. He is one of the sad youths of the times who works part time jobs in convenience stores at night and at bars on weekends.

Byungjae thought about the character he had to play. Was he similar to Choi Jihoon? Whether he looked similar in appearance to the image of the character that the director was thinking of or had similar personalities, Byungjae did not know, but when he thought about Choi Jihoon’s life, there were a lot of similarities with him. Both of them had never gone against adults or deviated from everyday life, and they just walked down the path that people told them to. After being persuaded by a relative who told him to try being an actor or a model with his decent appearance, he started acting, which was originally going to be left behind as a part of his high school memories. Luckily, he managed to reach this point.

The Choi Jihoon in the drama would also have become a civil servant if he was lucky. He might also have gotten married to a woman that he had spent a long time with since college without a fight. Conversely, the man known as Ha Byungjae might also have become a person who does part time jobs in order to get by aimlessly had he not been so lucky.

“Standby!”

Byungjae put his script under the bed. He wasn’t that confident in doing well, but he wasn’t that worried. He just had to do what he could. Like he always did.

* * *

“Cut! Let’s keep this one and do one more. Byungjae, we’ll do that one more time.”

Yes - Byungjae’s voice could be heard. After entering the set, Byungjae became limp as though he was lethargic. Jayeon inwardly cheered as soon as she saw that even time itself was being stretched out. She was somewhat worried about her decision at first, but this proved that her decision wasn’t wrong. There probably wasn’t a better person to express Choi Jihoon, who had chronic fatigue.

“He looks completely different from when we were drinking,” Ganghwan said from next to her.

It seemed that he had finally escaped the clutches of writer Lee Hanmi.

“He is. He is different, but that’s probably the real him. He easily gets swayed by the ones around him, has no challenging mindset, and has zero motivation.”

“Don’t you think you’re insulting him too much?”

“Hyung, being adventurous and forward-looking aren’t the only qualities that make a good person. If everyone was like you, the world would probably have ended a long time ago, you know?”

Jayeon looked at Byungjae. He was quietly looking at the script. He never proactively created things to do or lead people, but he earnestly did the tasks he was assigned.

“He might be frustrating in your eyes. After all, you are someone who charges towards the goal without caring about anything else if it’s for acting. However, people generally aren’t like you. If there are people who take the initiative to guide others, there should also be the people that are guided in order for society to keep working. A senior producer told me that dramas were ultimately just miniature versions of life. Is being passive a bad thing? A wrong thing? I don’t think so. The reason society is working stably is because the passive majority is backing up the proactive minority.”

“You’re suddenly talking about life philosophy. But it does put me at ease when I hear that.”

“Put you at ease?”

Jayeon turned around to look at Ganghwan. She somehow found Ganghwan rather hateful when she saw him smiling with satisfaction.

“I told you, didn’t I? I won’t work with a producer who has no skill.”

“Having such a mindset is skill in your eyes?”

“Seeing people as they are and reflecting that into your work isn’t something people can do without deep thinking. Showing the viewers everything in the raw without packaging it. To do something like that, casting an actor who has a similar image to the imaginary character means that the producer’s eyes and skills are good. After all, discerning people’s natures is one of the necessary skills of a producer.”

I’m off to the bathroom - after saying those words, Ganghwan turned around with a smile on his face.

Jayeon looked at his back. It was two years ago. She went to see a play that was produced by Ganghwan and acted by Ganghwan. She bought a ticket without knowing what it was about, and just watched the play without thinking too much. Her objective was to see his face after a long time. She wasn’t that interested in the play itself. The play started. Jayeon started watching the play in comfort, but she soon realized that her waist was becoming stiffer and stiffer. The play, which was about the life of a wanderer, expressed the people living in the streets without holding back. Honestly, it made her uncomfortable. She was uncomfortable with the fact that she had to see the problems of society through a media known as a play. The play didn’t give her any room to breathe and kept showing the rawness of the people branded as ‘failures’ by society. The audience didn’t produce a single sound. They probably couldn’t. The play pressured their whole bodies just that much. There was no reversal in the ending either. It didn’t talk about ‘splendid worker A returning to his job because he was acknowledged

for his earnestness' or anything remotely close to it. Suicide via jumping off from a bridge. That was the ending of the play. Jayeon immediately ran out of the theater. She felt horrid and disgusted. She also felt angry that she paid money to watch such a play. She sat down on the stairs in front of the theater and thought for a long time. Weren't dramas supposed to be fantasy?

"Hyung, I mean, seonbae. I still believe that there's a ray of hope in life. I am going to draw a harsh life. The ending will be a happy one. Yours is just way too sad," Jayeon said in a small voice.

The man who shook the person known as Yoo Jayeon twice. The play she watched that day became the motif of this drama. A true-to-life kind of life. The life of an 'ordinary civilian A' and not a Cinderella. A drama that didn't contain happiness the size of a magical pumpkin carriage, and instead contained happiness the size of a 100-won yogurt would be her work.

"Get ready!"

Jayeon said as she sat down in front of the monitor.

* * *

"He looks natural," Yuna said when Byungjae's act was nearing its end.

The producer gave the okay sign as Byungjae left his room with his bag.

"You should get ready too. It will be you after Mira-noona."

"I've been looking at the script for quite a while now."

Yuna walked circles around the same spot nervously. After Byungjae's shoot ended, the camera stationed in front of Byungjae's room started moving. The lights and the monitor moved along with it.

"Can you come here for a second?"

Maru closed his script and walked over to the woman who was in charge of make-up.

"Close your eyes."

He sat down and closed his eyes. The soft sensation of cosmetics brushed past his face. The woman didn't stop after his face and went to his hair as well.

"Director, how does that look?"

Maru squinted his eyes open. Jayeon was in front of him.

"He needs to look like a goody-two-shoes, so I think we should lower his eyelashes a little more."

"Then I'll also brighten up his skin tone a little more so that he looks like someone who only studies."

"Okay then. Please do that. Do his hair so that he looks neat but also rather outdated."

"I just need to lower his bangs a little."

Unlike when he was receiving make-up in the styling room, the on-the-scene make-up artist was quite rough and quick with her hands.

“Can you have a look in the mirror?”

Maru checked his appearance in front of the full-body mirror in one corner of the set. The boy who was wearing a dark indigo uniform vest looked extremely ordinary. It was a different feeling from the character from New Semester. There were similarities to the character he played in ‘Youth Generation’, but the current style was more dry. There were no distinctive characteristics at all.

“Good,” Maru said.

His appearance fit the image of the character Park Haejoon that he was playing. He liked it quite a lot because he looked like a stereotypical shy high school student. Expressing a character’s inner world through acting was important, but appearance was just as important sometimes.

“Follow me once you’re ready. We’ll do a quick rehearsal.”

Jayeon went inside the close-off set.

“The camera director will follow you inside. He’ll be standing here.”

The corner next to the desk was the camera director’s position. At that moment, the camera director came in. The director stood where Jayeon pointed.

“Once you open the door and come in, the director will slowly follow you with the camera as you sit down on the bed. You can’t be too slow or too fast. Bring out the feeling of when you just come back home with a tired body.”

Jayeon gave a demonstration. Maru inputted the time that the director wanted into his mind. It took around seven seconds for her to open the door, come in, and sit on the bed. For now, he decided to follow that time.

“Once you sit down and have a look at your desk, lie down on the bed with your feet on the ground. Did you get that?”

“Yes.”

“For now, act just like I did. If it looks okay, we’ll use some ad-libbing. Start your lines once you lie down. There will be a boom mic above you, so don’t be conscious of it. After saying your lines, the cut will end with you walking towards the desk. It is pretty long, so don’t let down your guard.”

Maru slowly nodded. Perhaps because this was her first work, Jayeon seemed to be mindful of the little details. Unlike producer Park Hoon, who just threw the work to the actors and adjusted the details afterwards, it seemed that Jayeon’s style was to decide everything beforehand and adjust accordingly. Maru looked around the room and drew an imaginary movement path. The acting had to be mild without any kind of technique. Perhaps this was why it was even harder.

-If it’s too much for you, you can hand it over to me.

The masked man’s voice could be heard from his heart. He seemed eager to act. Maru told him to calm down. His cooperation wasn’t necessary for this level of acting.

“Don’t get nervous,” said the camera director as he tapped on his shoulder.

Maru replied yes. Jayeon left, and the first cameraman handed the camera on his shoulders to the camera director. The long cable was managed by the lineman, the youngest member of the camera team, so that it was lined up against the wall and did not enter the camera frame. Maru calmed his breathing and left the room. The staff closed the door for him, and Maru waited in front of it. There were people assigned to even the trivial things for dramas.

“Please get ready,” said the assistant director who had an in-ear monitor.

Jayeon, who was watching the monitor from quite far off, was holding a walkie-talkie. Maru could only hear the vibrations of a motor. Every sound produced by people disappeared. The only person who could break this silence spoke at that time,

“Ready.”

The assistant director signaled him with his eyes. Maru uttered out a short breath and grabbed the doorknob.

“Cue!”

Chapter 680

There was a quiz. The subject was math. The math teacher was known to give out hard questions, so he studied quite hard. He checked his score after the quiz ended, and he scored 80 points. Woojin, who sat next to him, also scored 80 points. Hojoon got 82. He thought that he did pretty well, but it was just so-so.

As always, he did decently. He didn't excel at anything, but he wasn't bad at anything to the point that he was pointed out for it. Whether it was studying or games or sports, he was always average. If there was one thing he could boast about, maybe it was that he never missed a class. He had the confidence to never miss a class even if it was for a cram school. He did have the desire to do better, but he always ended average or just a little above it. He was like a mass-produced item. No matter what he did, the result was always conformed to the specs.

He lied down. Although sleep overwhelmed him, he didn't want to sleep. He thought about studying or maybe playing a game. He was more than willing to do so, but his body refused to leave the bed. Haah, Haejoon sighed and covered his eyes with his arm. He didn't know what it was that he wanted to do.

Just then, he remembered an unfamiliar smile. It was from the girl sitting next to him. They had been in the same class for the semester, and it had been a few weeks since they started sitting next to each other, but the number of times he talked to that girl could be counted on one hand. There was no real reason to talk to her, and he didn't want to do that either. Actually, the more accurate reason should be that he wasn't interested. She was just one of the many classmates that he would spend the year with. Today, she made a bright smile. He had never seen that smile before.

* * *

Hearing the cut sound, Maru took his arm off his eyes and sat up. The camera director, who had been shooting from the corner, handed the camera to his assistant and exercised his shoulders.

“The director is coming,” said the assistant director as he opened the door.

Following that, Jayeon entered the set.

“You did just as I told you to.”

“Thank you.”

“For now, your movement was according to the plan, but your mood is a little too dreary. The character known as Park Haejoon is a student that might exist anywhere. He’s not a character from a tragic story, so I think you need to adjust that tone a little.”

“Should I try being a little more cheerful?”

“Go ahead.”

Maru left the set. He shook his body off lightly before waiting for the assistant director’s signal. The assistant director, who was nodding while putting his finger on the in-ear monitor, shouted to him to stand by. Maru grabbed the doorknob. Following that, he got the cue sign.

He pushed the door open and went inside. He took his steps while being conscious of the camera director who was waiting on the left. This scene didn’t have a single line. His only form of expression was his facial expressions, actions, and sighs. He widened his steps a little to speed up a little. He moved according to Jayeon’s request and sat down on the bed before starting to act.

Maru thought back to the character known as Park Haejoon. He was someone who gained comfort within the fences of ordinariness, and yet he was also an ordinary student who yearned to be like his friends that were playing outside those fences. He sometimes sought to escape from everyday life, but whenever he was given the opportunity to, he would always refrain from doing so after thinking about the realistic problems. He was dissatisfied with the repetitive life of going to school and then to cram schools, but he had no intention of expressing that. He had a sense of rejection to revealing himself, and yet he contradictorily also wished for someone to look at him and think that he was special. However, that balance was delicate and neither pulled him up nor dragged him down. Like the Earth rotating around the sun, Haejoon was just spending his school life while in orbit.

He was a character that could bring out sympathy within people. He was an ‘ordinary’ person after all. However, transforming that ordinariness into acting was pretty difficult.

Acting had to contain an intention or a meaning. Actions that made up the act likewise had to have intent behind them for the people watching to focus. If the objective was to show an ‘ordinary student’ as it was, there was no real reason to use an actor for it. After all, having an ordinary student do that role instead would be perfectly sufficient. There was only one reason why an actor was used. It was to show the ordinary so that it did not look ordinary. The ‘natural act’ that people talked about was not supposed to be understood literally. The very act of acting itself was at the epitome of unnaturalness. When actors talked about being ‘natural’, they didn’t mean that they should show what they were supposed to as it was; they meant they should show it in a ‘convincing’ manner. The two might sound similar, but there was a big difference between the two. Shooting a class full of people would show a group of ‘natural-looking’ students. However, people did not call that acting. It was only called acting when someone that was not a student was wearing a student uniform and ‘convincingly’ expressed being a student.

To convincingly express something, the actor had to become infinitely close to the essence of the target. How would the Park Haejoon, who was analyzed and interpreted by Maru after looking at the script, act in various situations? While Maru proceeded with the act that Jayeon requested him to do, his head was looking for another form of expressing Park Haejoon. This character, who was satisfied being average, belonged to the more earnest side. From the fact that he spent time preparing for the quiz and that he was never late to school and cram school classes, it could be gleaned that he was someone who always did things ahead of time in case he was late.

He raised his arm and blocked his face. The script did not contain a detailed description of the situation. Haejoon, who enters the room, thinks about some things for a while before sitting at the desk. Jayeon had re-interpreted this description into one where Haejoon would enter his room and lie down on the bed instead.

Maru continued his thoughts as he continued to act according to what he saw during the rehearsal. Being earnest could also be interpreted as having and maintaining one's own schedule and movement patterns. Is throwing his bag on the bed despite not experiencing anything fatiguing and then falling on the bed really suited to this character? There were a number of fixed patterns after finishing school. Mixing things that an ordinary, earnest student would do might be something trivial, but it would definitely bring out character.

After finishing his thoughts, Maru sighed. He couldn't start improvising halfway through. The thing that a new actor had to prioritize above everything was to listen to all of the producer's instructions. Even if he couldn't accept it, it would be fine as long as the producer was satisfied with it. Being able to go against the director was something that only verified actors could do. New chicks had their new chick ways.

"Cut!"

The shoot ended in the same spot as the first shoot. Maru sat up. Jayeon came over this time as well. She could have told him everything through the assistant director, too. It could be seen that she was quite a passionate producer.

"It is the picture I want, but it somehow feels lacking."

"Director Yoo. I told you you shouldn't be so greedy on your first work. He looked good in my eyes. From how he didn't look awkward when it came to his gaze and actions while lying down, don't you think that that was a successful cut?" The camera director spoke with a smile.

He seemed to be acquainted with producer Jayeon as Jayeon accepted his words without feeling displeased.

"You're right, but something's just not to my liking."

"Is my acting insufficient?"

"No. You were good just as the camera director said. You were good, but it just isn't enough for me. I'm not saying that your acting is the problem. I'm saying that there's a flaw in my production methods."

Finding insufficiencies from oneself. School textbooks thought that that was the normal thought process, but anyone with a decent amount of social experience would know how absurd that was. The

higher a person climbed, the more authority they gained, and the more achievements they sought, the more they shifted the responsibility onto others. That was an unwritten rule in this society.

Producer Jayeon tried to find her insufficiencies from within herself. Meaning, she wasn't someone who would shift the blame on others. Maru couldn't be entirely sure from just this one thing, but it seemed that she was on the relatively decent side of society.

"Han Maru."

"Yes."

"Would you like to solve this yourself?"

"May I?"

"Sounds like you have something in mind."

"An actor not drawing a picture inside his head after receiving a script would be a negligence of duty."

"That's the answer I wanted. Honestly speaking, I don't really know what it means to be 'ordinary'. That's why I want to listen to as many opinions as possible. I already told this to the other actors. If there's something they can't understand or can't accept after listening to my directions, I told them to say it to me on the spot without hesitation. It will be no use if it happens after the shoot. You know what I mean, right?"

Maru nodded.

"Good. How are you going to express it?"

"As I analyzed it, I thought that this fellow needed to base his actions on the 'right actions'."

"Right actions?"

"It's nothing grand. It's those things that adults always tell the youths, the ones that appear in textbooks. To be more precise, the right actions that are generally sought. For example, washing your hands after going out or organizing your items."

"After listening to that and thinking about Park Haejoon, he really sounds like a boring character to me."

"It is as you say."

"But I also like it."

Jayeon grinned.

"Try coming up with a movement path so that the camera director can capture you accurately and properly."

"For now, the entering process is the same. However, I won't throw the bag. I'll just go to the desk and start organizing the desk so that it looks neat and tidy."

"Then should I have the desk neatly cleaned up?"

“No, we must give the feeling that Park Haejoon is going through such processes. It’s not like he’s a clean freak nor is he paranoid over things like that. Having a moderately messy desk is good since it looks like it belongs to an ordinary student.”

“Good, I got that.”

“After that, he sits on the bed.”

“Okay. After that, do the things you are thinking about as well. Also, from waking up from the bed to sitting at the desk. That will be one cut.”

“Understood.”

“Senior, please take a pretty shot. Maru, do what you just said.”

Jayeon left with the walkie-talkie in hand. Maru also picked up the bag on the bed before leaving the room. This was the third shoot. The cue sign came soon. He opened the door and went inside before standing in front of the desk. Since he was given permission to improvise to a certain extent, he used his mouth a little. He yawned and took out his textbooks from his bag before piling them in a corner of his desk. Putting them neatly on the shelf was unnecessary so he skipped that part.

He put his bag under his desk before sitting on the bed. Then he pulled his pillow towards him. He hugged it before lying down. Being conscious of the fact that the camera was tilting a little, he opened his lips slightly. Sighing deeply might feel too artificial, so he replaced that with breathing slightly heavily. He rolled around in bed a little as he thought about the unordinary ‘her’ who had barged into his ordinary life. He was in his youth, a time when he couldn’t express himself clearly because he didn’t know the identity of his feelings. Maru looked at the ceiling in a daze before walking over to the desk.

Cut, the sound could be heard from outside the set. Producer Jayeon entered the set along with some footsteps that sounded like they came from a burly man.

“Isn’t it a little too girly to hug a pillow?”

“Kids these days can get emotional, you know?”

“Are you like that too?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Okay, let’s leave you aside since you’re a little strange. Don’t you think a boy hugging a pillow and rolling around on bed is a little off?”

“If it’s strange, should we leave that out and try it again?”

Jayeon, who was tapping on her neck with her index finger, eventually shook her head.

“Did you hug the pillow to suggest that you had some feelings of first love?”

“It’s not something grand like a suggestion. I just tried expressing the ‘unordinary’ through that. Love finally showed signs of appearing to a boy who doesn’t have any ups nor downs in life. It’s rather stereotypical, but that just makes it easier to understand. It also suits an ‘ordinary’ character.”

Maru could not become Park Haejoon. Synchronizing with the character was the specialty of the masked man inside him. His specialty was to analyze everything meticulously in order to increase the level of similarity. As he had multiple analyses of the character inside his head, he didn't feel that bad even if someone felt dissatisfied with his expression of the character. He just found it a bit of a pity. If he borrowed the masked man's powers and became Park Haejoon down to his bones, he might have retorted to producer Jayeon's words - perhaps he might have asked her what she knew about Park Haejoon.

"If you don't like it, I can always go with another...."

"Nope! I will let you go for now. Your words persuaded me. Good, I really like this kind of thing."

Producer Jayeon made a satisfied expression.

"Now we just have to get a cut of the creased duvet, a cut where you stand up, a cut of the clock, and finally a cut of you sitting down at the desk and fidgeting with a pencil."

Jayeon pointed out the things they had to do in a clean fashion.