

Once Again 681

Chapter 681

Maru took a deep breath of the air in the set. He felt that he was becoming more and more sensitive with the repeated cues and cuts. Jayeon was someone who knew what she had to shoot. As she had a clear sense of objective and directionality, she solved what she lacked - instructions for the actors - by talking to the actor about it. For an actor, working with a producer who listened to their words is something happy but also rather pressuring. It might be an opportunity if the actor was ambitious with acting and knew a lot of things, but if the actor was someone who relied on the director for everything, they might find it a disaster.

He could see Yuna through the gaps in the set. She was licking her lips as she flipped through her script. Maru could tell from afar that she was nervous. The set should still be an unfamiliar stage for her. She was someone who once turned her eyes away from the fact that acting was difficult and tiring because she forced herself to think that acting was supposed to be enjoyable.

"You're good."

"Thank you."

While producer Jayeon checked the footage, they got a break. The one who talked to him was the camera director who went into the set with him. Jayeon called this man 'senior Kim'.

"You're used to shoots, huh? You don't look nervous at all."

"Well, I guess I do have more room to relax after dipping my feet into it a couple of times. During my first shoot, I was so torn between whether I had to look at the camera or not."

"It's a problem if you're conscious of it, but it's also a problem if you aren't."

"Yes, that really was the case."

"You're doing well though, so don't worry about it."

The camera director put his hands in his pocket before taking out a piece of chocolate.

"Would you like one?"

"I'll gladly take it if you're willing to give it to me."

The chocolate, which was wrapped in plastic wrap, drew a parabola in the air as it flew towards him. Maru thanked him before putting the chocolate in his mouth. When something sweet spread around in his mouth, he felt like he had gotten energy.

"I have a kid your age at home," said the camera director.

"Is he in his 3rd year of high school?"

"No, he's in his 1st. Because the work I do is like this, I don't really have a lot of time to see him, and when I became aware of it, he had turned into an adult already."

"I guess that must have made you both proud and a little disappointed."

The camera director blinked once before putting on a faint smile.

“I’m not that proud. He’s still immature.”

“You know there’s a proud smile on your face right now, right?”

“Was it that obvious?”

The camera director laughed.

“He’s also getting ready to be an actor. I stopped him at first. I mean, I’ve seen a lot of things. This place is so desolate that studying towards success seems easier.”

“I personally found studying much harder. Maybe it’s because I’m not that smart.”

“No way, you look smart at a glance. If the almighty director Yoo asked you for your opinions and followed your words, then that explains everything. That girl, she’s more than willing to kneel to the people she could learn from, but to anyone else, she would never be subservient even to her superiors.”

“She’s a female general.”

“That’s right, she’s a female general. A fussy one too.”

As he was listening to the camera director’s words with a smile, Yuna caught his eyes again. She was muttering something with her eyes closed before she opened her eyes and checked the script. From the way she was sighing, it seemed that she incorrectly memorized her lines. It was something that everyone experienced. The lines they could practically sing before reaching the shooting set would disappear the moment they stepped into the set. They would be as clean as a new slate.

“Uhm, director.”

“Hm?”

“May I have another one of those chocolates?”

“This is my medicine, you know?”

Despite saying those words, the camera director chucked two at him.

“It’s tasty, isn’t it? They’re foreign-made.”

“It’s good. I’m planning to give one to her over there, do you mind if I do?”

“Over there?”

The camera director stepped sideways to look at Yuna who was outside the set.

“Oh, her.”

“I think she’s very nervous right now, so I was wondering if something sweet might make her calm down.”

“I see, you can give it to her if you like. Don’t forget to tell her that I’m the one who gave you them,” said the camera director with a smile.

Maru left the set with the chocolates in hand. He could see producer Jayeon and Ganghwan talking in front of the monitor. It seemed that something wasn't going right.

"Yuna."

Yuna raised her head. Maru tossed her one of the chocolates. Yuna, who was in a daze, hurriedly closed the script and received the chocolate.

"What's this?"

"What do you think?"

"Oh, chocolate."

"The camera director gave it to you. He says you'll ease up a little if you eat it."

Maru pointed at the camera director who was waving his hands inside the set. Although the camera director was in his middle ages, his actions looked somewhat cute. Yuna immediately bowed towards him.

"I know nothing I say will be helpful, but don't try too hard to memorize it. If you've prepared properly, you'll naturally remember everything once you start."

"You don't feel nervous, do you, seonbae?" Yuna asked as she fidgeted with the packaging.

"I do. I just don't show it. Ultimately this is a group project. The actors are the ones who will show up on screen, but everyone else here make all that possible. If the person going on the screen is nervous, the staff here will feel exhausted."

"That's true."

"So eat it and relax a little."

After seeing Yuna eat the chocolate, Maru entered the set again.

"You're looking after her?"

"She's someone I know, so I should take care of her when I can. Though, I won't be able to do it if the hot potato falls into my hands."

Maru took out the script he put underneath the bed. The start was good, but to maintain this current atmosphere, he had to increase his understanding of the character.

"You're earnest," said the camera director who approached him.

He pointed at the script which was filled with notes everywhere,

"It's the same for every job. Regardless of what you do, you always have to keep studying. Did you write all that?"

"Yes, it's become a habit now. If I see any blank space on the script, it makes me feel like I haven't done enough."

"I wish my kid knew that being an actor isn't simply about consuming emotions."

“He’ll probably realize it once he starts doing it for real. There’s nothing in this world that can be done without planning.”

Just as he was about halfway through the script, producer Jayeon came in.

“We’re going to do the next scene. If there’s any improv you want to do, then try putting it in. I’ll see how it goes and will cut if necessary.”

“Okay.”

Maru chucked the script beneath the bed again.

* * *

Feeling something sweet in her mouth, Yuna looked inside the set. Maru-seonbae’s shoot was currently underway. Like the two people before him, his shoot was progressing smoothly. Cut signs could be heard, and whenever that happened, producer Jayeon talked to seonbae with a pleasant smile on her face. It felt like two pros working towards the same goal.

Yuna thought that she shouldn’t get nervous, but she was still worried that she might derail everything. She had recovered to the point that she was able to look around her thanks to seonbae’s consideration for her. 10 minutes ago, she was so out of it that she couldn’t hear anything around her.

She could see Maru behind the door in the set. He lied on the bed before standing up and going to his desk. They were simple actions that did not require anything technical, but Yuna knew that the less technique there was, the more an actor’s skill would show.

“I did about that much when I was his age.”

Hearing the voice next to her, Yuna was startled and turned around. Ganghwan was there. Yuna stared at him with her mouth slightly agape. Ganghwan’s act, which had started off the shoot, shocked Yuna a lot. Actually, when she saw him for the first time during the get-together, she just thought that he was one of the seniors who had spent a long time as a nameless actor. Even after hearing that he had been an actor for a long time on the theater side, she didn’t think he was that amazing. That was because of her bias that actors who were active on screens were generally better than the ones in theaters.

He seemed light-hearted and laughed very easily. She just thought that he was a cheerful senior actor when she heard about his life stories, which she couldn’t tell whether they were true or not. However, the moment she saw him acting, her bias was shattered to pieces. She felt ashamed for thinking that actors in theaters would be inferior to actors who were active in dramas.

Producer Jayeon asked for a few changes because of his vocalization and speech tone which was unique to theatrical acting, but that only happened once. From the 2nd time onwards, he looked just as professional as veteran drama actors. Ganghwan expressed a rather successful writer who hit a writer’s block with just his movements and breathing since he did not have any lines. Even viewers who did not know the scenario would instantly realize that this man had a big worry.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“N-nothing.”

“I guess I am a little handsome.”

Hearing the joke, Yuna chuckled. She then realized that she was laughing in front of a great senior and tried to hold back the laugh, but she couldn't do anything about the fact that she had laughed already.

“If it's funny, you should laugh.”

“What?”

“You know? For actors, there definitely comes a time when they have to look at their own feelings honestly and express them. When you first start acting, you would probably think that hiding yourself is the essence of acting, but once you keep doing it, you realize that there's a limit to hiding and that revealing yourself is the only way to survive. How do you feel right now? Are you nervous?”

“Yes, just a little.”

“Then try getting close to that nervousness. Don't just think ‘I'm nervous’. If you are nervous, observe what kind of changes are happening to your body, from the tip of your head to your toes. Since I said that, let's try that right now instead of watching that kid over there, who can take care of himself.”

Ganghwan pointed at Maru with his index finger. Yuna inwardly flinched. This wasn't the time to be looking at other people. She had to use this time to improve herself. Just as Maru said, she had to do it for the sake of the people working here.

She closed her eyes and focused. She intended to find out how every one of her cells was reacting to her current feelings.

* * *

“Kids these days are scary.”

Jayeon, who was still standing up after shouting cut, tilted her head when she heard Ganghwan's words. Ganghwan was pointing at Yuna, who was standing next to the set with her eyes closed.

“They absorb everything they're told. At this rate, I will use up my arsenal of tricks.”

“Is there even an end to that?”

“If I keep taking things out, it will bottom out eventually.”

“So it's not happening for a while, huh. Anyway, I'll let you take care of the others when it comes to acting. That's why I picked you after all.”

Ganghwan cringed one eye.

“If you're gonna do that, do that after you pay me extra. I might look like this but I once taught at the Myeongdong Arts Hall, you know?”

“I'll treat you to meat.”

“Good. I accept that deal.”

“You're such an easy man.”

Jayeon smiled.

“But Han Maru, where the heck did that guy pop out from? He’s really good.”

“I told you he’s a precious disciple of mine. Try using him well. There’s probably no one who has made full use out of him yet.”

“I’ll drain him to the bones so don’t you worry.”

Just then, Jayeon saw Yuna making a resolve behind the shrugging Ganghwan.

“Looks like she’s ready too. I guess we’ll be able to finish today’s scenes before sunset.”

“Do we get a get-together if it ends early?”

“Uhm, hello, actor Yang? We don’t have a lot of budget, you know?”

Jayeon pushed Ganghwan away and walked over to Mira who was waiting.

“You ready?”

“I’m always ready. It’s a matter of whether I do well or not.”

“All of your comments are gold. Just keep doing that. It fits your character.”

“I think I’ll have an easier time thanks to that. The character has a similar personality to me.”

“That’s why you were picked. So show me perfect acting.”

Jayeon stood in front of the B set. The set that was Byungjae’s room before had changed into Mira’s room. The position of the furniture had changed, and when the color of the walls changed, it felt completely different before, despite the fact that it was the same space. There were posters of rock artists on the wall, as well as a shelf full of hiking boots. Mira’s room was a stark contrast to Byungjae, who was an examinee who lived a strict everyday life, since she belonged to a well-off household.

“We’ll do a rehearsal and shoot in five minutes.”

“Okay.”

“Show your confidence in the form of acting.”

Jayeon looked at Mira, who boldly walked into the set, before turning her eyes over to Yuna. These were the actors that she chose. Until now, there had been no problems. As long as that girl shows her colors, this drama would definitely do well.

“Well then, let’s get ready!”

Chapter 682

The shoot began in the set after it was cleaned up. The slightest bit of noise disappeared, and everyone’s attention was focused on the firmly shut set. Maru walked silently behind producer Jayeon. He saw Mira captured in the monitor that she was looking at. On it, Mira was dancing on the spot joyfully with her eyes closed. When producer Jayeon grabbed the walkie-talkie and said ‘more’, Mira shook her body even more violently.

“Cut, Mira!”

Jayeon stood up from her seat and ran over to the set. Maru saw Jayeon appear on the monitor when she rushed in. Jayeon’s hands moved up and down. After explaining something with big hand gestures, she suddenly started dancing. A rather abrupt dance session unfolded. The two people, who looked at each other inside the screen while dancing, eventually returned to normal and started walking around. The dance was hot, just like the instructions.

“That’s the first time I saw a dance without music. Dang, it’s something,” Ganghwan said.

“They’re adding the music afterwards, right?”

“Probably.”

The two women inside the screen exchanged a quick conversation. Jayeon quickly returned to the monitor and ordered through the walkie-talkie to standby. Maru became quiet and breathed as shallowly as possible. Jayeon, who was staring holes in the monitor, would react to even the most minute sounds. The Mira inside the screen let her body loose to the soundless music. She waved her hand above her head and shook her head so that her orange hair was fluttering around. Apparently, it was a dance that was recently trending in night clubs, and it looks like it would strain the neck bones considerably.

A newly debuted writer who has hit a writer’s block after writing a good work, an exam student who lived a plain life and was now living inside a ravine and was having a hard time escaping, a college girl who focused all her energy into the things she wanted to do, a high school boy who decided to throw out his ordinariness for the sake of his first love, and a high school girl who likes that ordinariness and has a lot of pains. Characters who might exist somewhere had been polished and fitted into a scenario, and were being brought to reality through the acting of the actors.

Mira was expressing a college girl whose entire body was filled with passion with all her body. She was dancing in silence, but looking at her expression, it felt like some strong beats were flowing out from somewhere. At that moment, the lights stretched in a long fashion next to the set had turned blue. Even psychedelic lights had appeared and started flashing. Jayeon also jerked up and down as she watched Mira shaking her body. About 40 seconds passed like that before Jayeon shouted cut.

“That’s it! That was very good!”

Jayeon even snapped her fingers in joy. Inside the screen, Mira was panting heavily with her hands on her waist. She had done some vigorous actions, so she must have been out of breath.

“The production is just like the script.”

Maru thought about Mira’s scene. In the script was a line that said: a nightclub-like environment formed inside the room. Whether the final version made it look like it was the imagination of the character or like a sitcom, Jayeon would be the one to decide.

Maru took out his phone and checked the time. It had been 3 hours since they started shooting. Up until now, they finished his own scene, Ganghwan’s, Byungjae’s, and Mira’s scene, but in terms of the actual air time, it wouldn’t even be 5 minutes. The scenes they shot were the introduction scenes where they showed off the characters one by one. These scenes would allow the audience to deduce the nature of

the characters through their actions as well as their rooms. If it was a play, they could just introduce the characters to the audience in detail, but the moment someone said 'I'm someone and I have the role of X' in a TV series, the viewer forums would explode and the channel would be switched to something else.

"We're moving now!"

The assistant director's voice could be heard. The staff, who had gotten into position in front of set B, moved over to set C with all the equipment. Maru looked at Yuna. It was her turn now.

"Do your best."

"Yes, seonbae."

Yuna walked over like a machine that wasn't oiled properly. It seemed that nervousness had gotten to her again. It was impossible to avoid being nervous in a situation where one was about to do what one came to do. There was only one solution - to overcome it. As long as one was a pro, the option to run away or to give up did not exist. She would either have to finish the act successfully or leave behind a terrible act. There was nothing inbetween.

Maru stood in front of set C. This was the space he had been acting in just a little while ago, but everything had changed. There was a blanket on the floor which looked really old. The blanket had cute characters on it, and it was stained as though it had fungus growing on it. It was small as well. Even Yuna, who didn't have a big stature, would have her feet sticking out if she lied down on it.

Against one wall was a circular metallic table. On the surface of that table were many dents indicating that it was used for a long time. The only thing that could be considered 'furniture' was a shelf, and even that was completely empty. On the floor were textbooks and various problem solving books, and the problem solving books had been discolored into a yellow color. Everything in the set indicated that she was poor. Yuna entered the room that looked like the manifestation of poverty. Her shoulder-length hair was tied with a rubber band, and she was wearing a pink 'jersey' that had been discolored from the wrong use of bleach and had holes at the knees.

"Looks good on you," Jayeon said.

Yuna laughed. Her lips were slightly shaking as she laughed. It seemed that there was still a hint of nervousness.

"I hope she does well," Ganghwan said.

He looked rather worried. He no longer had a joking tone, and his words sounded heavy.

"Have you ever worked with the director?"

"No, I haven't. But I did watch her."

"How was she?"

"She was similar to how she's doing now. Jayeon is an angel when everything goes well. She's probably happy that the actors she picked are doing their jobs properly."

“How about when things are not going well?”

“I told you, she’s an angel when things are going well.”

Maru stopped asking. Dramas were the work of many people working together, but for the shoot alone, the responsibility would lie with the actor. It was something very difficult and solitary. It was especially worse when the actor caused a series of NGs and people around started looking at the actor with displeased eyes. By then, the shooting set would become hell on Earth for a new actor.

“But don’t worry too much. This is something that has Yoo Jayeon’s name on it. She might not show it, but she should be feeling very responsible. It’s not that surprising since the number of digits of money that’s being moved around is different, and there are a lot of people putting their effort into this. If she doesn’t feel the pressure, that’s also a problem.”

After listening to Ganghwan’s words, Maru looked at Jayeon’s face from the side. She was explaining to Yuna her movements and she definitely looked confident, but after what Ganghwan said, Maru felt that she seemed somewhat nervous.

Ganghwan made a rectangle with the thumbs and index fingers. He captured the two women in the rectangle like he was taking a photo.

“I’m saying that strictly speaking, this is the first time for both of them. It’ll be a debut piece for both of them. They should be just about as nervous as each other.”

“Why didn’t you give them some advice?”

“I will if they reach out to me. If they come to me, then I’ll help out at that time. Director Yoo is someone who would growl at me, telling me not to pity her if I tried to do that. I’m not sure about the details, but apparently, it’s not an easy thing for a female producer to survive in the drama field. She climbed up all the way here after going through all of that hardships. I can’t help her out so easily. There’s her pride on the line.”

Ganghwan crossed his arms.

“She tells me in passing to help her out, but that shouldn’t be what’s really on her mind. I know a little about her. She’s an unrelenting general. She’s the kind of tree who would manage to take root even in the desert. If I stick my head around trying to be gentle to her, I’ll get hated instead. Yeah, no matter how much I think about it.”

This will be the best piece ever! - Maru remembered Jayeon saying those words during the get-together. The shadow from that high self-confidence of hers should be that stifling nervousness. If things went well, she would gain momentum and climb the ranks, but the moment she looks back, she might fall in despair because of the drastic difference between her ideals and reality. It was at those times that Ganghwan would reach out. After all, he was a veteran among veterans. As Ganghwan had experience both directing and acting in a piece, he was probably well aware of what Jayeon was going through. The fact that there was someone to support her would relieve her a lot, just with him being here. Even if she did not rely on him, she would be a lot more relieved knowing that he was here and could proceed onwards.

Maru had a look at Yuna. He was the only one who could be considered her 'peer' in this wide set area. If Yuna felt pressure and reached out to him for help, what could he do for her?

"I wish I had confidence like you, hyung-nim. If I had the ability to solve everything that people ask me to do, then I would feel confident too."

"The fact that you're thinking about such a thing means that you are a good man. There are kids who need a friend's encouragement more than an adult's advice, so you should try to do that. From the way I saw it, she seemed to follow you a lot?"

"I'm the only one around her age here after all."

"Well, to my eyes, she looks like a girl who's acting embarrassed in front of the oppa she likes though?"

"No way," Maru said as he looked away.

He couldn't be sure that Yuna had resolved all of her feelings towards him. However, it was impossible for him to date her when he already had a lover. People betraying each other wasn't something that happened frequently, and he did not experience that a lot, but for some reason, when he thought about that word, rage boiled up inside him. As such, he did not plan on accepting other people's feelings towards him as long as he maintained a good relationship with Gaeul. It was a student romance that would end one day, but as long as that romance existed, he wanted to give her the best memories possible.

"Just think of her as a cute junior and listen to her a lot. An actor is a solitary job after all."

"Okay."

"Also, I saw that your acting has improved quite a lot. I also feel like the way you do it has changed somewhat."

"The way I do it?"

"Until last winter, you felt like a machine. You were good. You were good, but it somehow felt artificial. But right now, a lot of that has dissipated. I feel like you're finally acting like a person of your age."

Maru smiled inwardly. I'm actually thirty-one - if he told him that, he wondered what Ganghwan would say about it. Since he was at it, he thought about how he acted before. He couldn't understand before he heard about it, but now that he looked back, he did somewhat understand. The way he acted was similar to now, but back then, he just had no leisure.

'Rather than leisure... I might have thought that I had to do it that way.'

It was a strange feeling. There was a sense of disparity between the current him and the past him. Was it happening because the memories had been fading this past half a year? He felt like the naturally mature child had now become a natural youth. Mature... naturally mature, huh.

As he was thinking deeply about it, the shoot started and the first cut sign fell. He saw Jayeon standing up in front of the monitor. Her expression didn't look that good. She started moving. Thud, thud. The sound was heavy like an elephant's footsteps. It seemed to be representative of her heavy heart.

Chapter 683

The words that Maru-seonbae said still remained in her heart. Acting can't always be fun. Those words were like a lighthouse that shone on the path that she should take.

Ever since her attitude towards acting changed, acting was no longer just a fun thing like what seonbae said. Learning was a painful process that birthed another learning process, and it became harder to taste a sense of achievement. The sense of satisfaction became faint and she became more afraid of acting, but simultaneously, she started seeing what she couldn't see before. Only after realizing that acting was something hard did she find herself changing. When acting was a form of refuge for her, she always stopped when she felt stuck. After all, it wouldn't be good if the joy broke. It was a 'play'; something joyful that does not include pain.

After escaping just 'playing', acting became a series of hardships, but unlike before, it gave her a lot of other good things. She finally felt like the her of today was different from the her of yesterday, and that she would change yet again tomorrow. The joy of walking forward little by little made her accept the hard practice. While she was going through that process, she gained a challenging mindset. She also gained the confidence that she would be able to digest the roles given to her to her satisfaction, even if it was not perfect.

"Yuna, is there something you're angry about?"

Hearing producer Jayeon's words, Yuna shook her head. The confidence she had before they started the shoot could no longer be seen now. If there was a sense of nervousness at least, she felt like she could burn up in passion, but right now, her head had turned blank.

This was the third time already. Producer Jayeon was repeating the same words. Yuna felt afraid of looking at the producer in the face. It would be better if she was scolding her, yet instead, she was apologetically asking her if something was wrong as though it was her fault. Yuna felt that the sense of guilt had increased severalfold.

"When you said your line, before, you were too relaxed, and right now, you're putting too much strength into it. Also, your eyes. I think you're making your eyes like that to show that your character has been raised in a difficult environment, but you're exaggerating too much. You're too sharp throughout the entire call. The character known as Yoon Jihae is a strong girl who befriends others at school and boldly goes to school despite many external influences. And I don't think that becoming angry on a whim is being strong."

Yuna nodded. She was entirely right. When she analyzed the character, she also thought that the girl was like 'Candy'[1], who never cried despite the environment she was in. A Candy with an angry voice was not Candy. Yuna set herself straight.

"Sorry."

"Eh?"

Yuna raised her head when she heard the sudden apology. Jayeon patted her on the shoulders before continuing to speak,

"I should have guided you better, but I'm still lacking. Let's think about it together and find a solution. We still have a lot of time for the shoot. You know what I mean, right?"

"Yes."

Jayeon left the set. Due to the sudden apology from the director, she felt like her dazed mind was becoming better. She thought of what she had to do.

"Just shake it all off. Acting is something you can't put too much energy into. Though, I can't be sure about that since it's not my specialty," said the camera director who was also on the set with her.

First, the chocolate, then the words of encouragement - Yuna thanked him twice in a row. It came to her that this wasn't something she was doing by herself. Just knowing that there were people to lead her and push her from behind made her calm down a little. However, she couldn't entirely calm down. Once the camera started rolling and the cue sign fell, she had to fight by herself again. She wanted to finish this quickly even if it was for the sake of the staff who were being considerate of her.

The assistant director gave the cue sign. Yuna became conscious of the character and started acting. She opened the folded table in the corner and put her textbooks on it. She opened her notebook and picked up a pen before resting her chin on her hands. Following that, the assistant director outside the set gestured to her to pick up her phone. Yuna picked up her vibrating phone. She opened the phone and put it against her ear. She couldn't hear anything.

"Oh, you want to go out over the weekend? I'm so sorry. I really want to go, but I don't think I can make it. Yeah, okay, I'll definitely go with you next time. Alright, see you tomorrow."

She pictured an imaginary conversation in her head and thought about the speed before hanging up the call. She looked at her phone with a slightly relaxed expression before turning her eyes to the notebook. She started copying down the formulas in the book into her notes expressionlessly. The pen scratched against the paper, making some noise. Yuna waited for the cut sign to arrive. This was one cut. This time, she didn't make any mistakes and did not act too tragic either. Did it look like a plain act? Just as she thought about that, she heard the cut sound.

She stood up as she pressed on her strangely stiff shoulders. Was producer Jayeon satisfied this time? She heard footsteps approaching the set. Following that, the door opened before Jayeon came in. The moment she looked at her lips, Yuna realized that she was wrong this time as well. She knew because she saw. When actors successfully finished a cut, Jayeon would cheerfully run over. The four that acted before her all managed to digest the scene and hear that laughter from her.

"You're better than before. You definitely are, but...."

Jayeon couldn't continue. Yuna felt her neck stiffening. Her head kept going down.

"Yuna, how did you feel?"

"Yes?"

"Were you satisfied with your acting?"

When she just finished acting, she thought that that may have been enough, but the moment she saw Jayeon's face, that belief disappeared.

“No.”

“Okay. Good, let’s take a break. I heard a few seniors tell me that the first shoot is always the hardest. But you know the advantage of shooting beforehand. I don’t care how many times you make a mistake. If I can get a finished cut during that process, I will be satisfied.”

Jayeon turned around as she brushed up her hair with her hand. Yuna also left the set. Her footsteps were heavy.

“Why do you look so dejected?”

Ganghwan was standing in front of her. Behind him, she saw Byungjae, Mira, and Maru as well.

“I’m sorry, it’s all because of me...”

She didn’t know until yesterday that not being able to act the way she wanted was such a frustrating thing. She had the urge to cry. If she was by herself right now, she might have been sniffing.

“Is your act not going well?”

“Yes.”

“Did you try everything you prepared?”

“I think I did.”

“Thinking that you did and actually doing it is strictly different. You know that, right?”

Yuna nodded.

“What should I do? I don’t get it. Was my preparation not enough?”

“I wouldn’t know that. We didn’t practice together after all. Do you want to try doing it here? What are seniors for? We should help out in a time like this,” Ganghwan said as he looked behind him.

The eyes of the staff were directed their way. Yuna felt like all the eyes in this place were looking at her. She felt her heart race, but there was no reason to hesitate. She started acting immediately. She was in dire need of advice right now.

After acting, she looked at the four.

“You did that?”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t look bad to me,” Ganghwan said.

Yuna then had a look at Maru. He was the first person to shock her when she watched his acting and was the one who helped her out with coming up with her new resolve, so she felt like she could trust his opinion.

“I also think it was okay though. There might be a difference in taste, but don’t you think that it’s worth keeping?” Maru said.

Ganghwan nodded in agreement.

"It wasn't too bad. If you were awful, then I would have said so. What I saw, though, was really decent for your age. You'd also be in the top few among the people I have taught. There's something called the 'feel' you get when you watch, right? In that sense, Yuna, you gave off a pretty decent feel."

"Then do you think that the director wants even more than this?"

Yuna had a look at Jayeon, who was sitting in front of the monitor. Were her expectations too high? Or was she not giving an okay sign because she was lacking when compared to the people that went before her? The problem ultimately came down to the fact that something was wrong with herself. What excuse could she make when she was an actor who couldn't satisfy the producer?

Just as she was in deep thought, Jayeon called out to her.

"Have a look at this."

She looked at the screen that Jayeon was pointing at. The scene they just shot was being played. The noise that could be heard before the cue sign fell disappeared as soon as it fell. She momentarily gasped at the fact that she was being shot from three angles before she started frowning. Her acting on the screen was terrible. Her eyes were wavering everywhere, and her actions were clumsy. Her pronunciations were okay, but her breathing was unstable from time to time. The problems she wasn't aware of were plain to see in the video.

"Is that how I did?"

"Yuna."

"Yes?"

"Are you perhaps afraid of the camera?"

"No, that's not the case."

"If your level of skill was just this, I wouldn't have picked you in the first place. When I watched you act just now, I could tell from this distance that you were pretty decent. But why were you like that inside the set? I thought that you were nervous and tried to encourage you as much as possible, but from the way things are looking right now, I don't think it's nervousness that's the problem."

Yuna had a look at the screen again. She felt like she was watching someone else's acting. Not only that, they seemed like a beginner. She felt her hairs standing on end. Just what happened?

"Especially when you take that call."

Jayeon showed her the part where she picked up her phone. Her movements became awry the moment the phone started ringing. It was to the point that her acting before the call looked good in comparison. When she took the call, her pronunciation was mangled. She felt like the line of emotions that she was barely holding onto was blown away. It was such a strange thing. She thought that she did quite decently when she acted inside the set, but from the video, her act was beyond saving.

"At times like this,"

Just then, she heard a voice behind her. Ganghwan, who was watching the screen with sharp eyes, pushed Maru forward.

“We should try using this guy.”

“Me?” Maru retorted.

Yuna didn’t understand what was going on. Use Maru? Use him where? Ganghwan and Jayeon exchanged words in a small voice.

“Should we go then?”

Jayeon’s eyes were filled with vitality. It seemed that she had found a good method. Yuna wanted to ask what was going on, but before she could ask, she was pushed from behind into the set. Following her, the camera director came in after taking the camera from the first cameraman.

“You don’t look good. Get an earful?”

“No, it wasn’t like that.”

“Then why do you look so dejected?”

“I just realized that my acting skills are terribly lacking. I saw my own figure through a screen, and I looked really bad.”

“Don’t blame yourself too much. Everyone starts learning like that.”

As thankful as she felt, those words sounded too bitter for her right now. She calmed down as she looked at the camera director’s gentle smile. There was no way producer Jayeon pushed her in without thinking like this. Her eyes looked like she had found a method. Yuna looked outside the door which was still open. Ganghwan and Maru were having a conversation. She wondered what it was about until she met Maru’s eyes. Maru waved his hand as though to tell her not to worry.

“Well, then. We’re starting now. Standby!”

The assistant director’s voice hit her ears. Yuna closed her eyes and tried to fish out her confidence that had sunk deep inside the lake in her heart, but the only thing that was fished out was unease.

“Ready!”

Yuna opened her eyes. Get yourself together - that was the only thing she could tell herself right now.

Chapter 684

It felt like all the sound in the world was being cut off. Her ears became numb and she could only hear the beating of her own heart. She felt like she could hear the sound of her blood coursing through her blood vessels if she tried hard enough. Yuna shook her head.

“Action,” said the assistant director who was standing in front of the camera director.

Yuna reached her hand out while picturing the actions she had repeated several times. Her own figure in the video made her frown. She would only be able to act well if she took away the exaggerated actions and expressed the character more mildly. Her imaginary self in her mind was acting without any wasted

movements, but what about in reality? The video kept overlapping in her mind. The video where her acting looked pathetic.

She unfolded the table and started writing in her notebook. What was she supposed to do next? Just when her head started working hard, she heard a vibration. It was time to act like she was on a phone call. She picked up her phone and put it against her ear. Hello? - she opened her mouth and said. At the same time, she counted the time. After all, talking non-stop on the phone would not be a phone call; it would just be complaining.

-Yuna?

The phone, which was supposed to be silent, made some sound. She realized that it was Maru the moment she heard that voice. Her attitude changed immediately. She raised her head a little and took her eyes off of her notebook. She felt her jaws opening slightly. She almost uttered 'what is it?' out of confusion but managed to hold herself back. She was acting right now. Her reason cautioned her.

"Yeah, Yumi."

-We thought about going on a trip over the weekend, wanna come with us?

Maru made a nasal sound. He seemed to be pretending to be a girl. She almost burst out in laughter because of the funny voice. She also heard other voices telling her to hang out with them. They were Ganghwan, Mira and Byungjae. Her actual friends asked her like this as well. Let's go together, you can't miss out, etc. She was feeling a lot more relieved after hearing those voices when she heard the familiar patterns.

"You want to go out during the weekend?"

-Yeah, let's go.

"The weekend..."

There were a few more words in that line in the script, but those words didn't stick right now. She subconsciously turned her head to look at the calendar, as though she was really checking the date.

"I really want to go, but I don't think I can make it."

-Come on, come with us. You couldn't make it last time either.

"I know. I really want to go too. I'm so sorry."

-You really can't make it?

For a moment, her heart raced because she felt like Maru-seonbae was asking her out on a date. She pictured a Maru who was asking her desperately to go out together. There was quite a disparity between that and the real Maru, but she wondered how good it would be if Maru actually did that. The moment her heart moved, she was reminded of the reality that such a thing would never happen. Her lips softened and she sighed.

"Next time, please bring me with you next time."

The original line was 'I'll go with you next time for sure', but what came out of her mouth was 'please bring me with you'. This line felt like there was a lot more regret in her words. Yuna wiped her mouth in order to wipe away the trace of the words in her mouth. At the same time, she closed the phone. She looked at the phone she put down before pushing it away until it stopped after hitting the blanket.

Everything she did after the call ended was improvisation. She knew that she should stick to the script, but her emotions ruled her actions. It was impulsive, and she felt like she would lose the base of her acting if she didn't do that. She didn't even take another glance at the phone she pushed away. Instead, she fixed her eyes on her books as though she was going to melt herself into them.

"Cut!"

The assistant director shouted. Yuna turned around to look at the assistant director's face. He, who was wearing a hat, was raising his thumbs up.

"Okay. That was good."

The pressure that shackled her was released all at once. Yuna stretched out her legs and put her hands on the ground before sighing. She could see the ceiling above her. Ah, so it was so high. She felt like she could take a breather.

She stood up and opened the door to the set. She saw Maru who was waving his phone in the distance.

"Well done!"

After a loud slapping sound, she felt that her back was becoming numb. It was painful, but she smiled. Yuna asked if she was okay after seeing Jayeon rush over to her.

"That's the kind of acting I expected from you. I knew my eyes weren't wrong. You're completely fine, yet you dared to tease me like that."

"That's good. I was wondering what I would've done if it was no good this time as well."

"If it was no good, we could just take another shot. Why is there a need to worry? Come here for now. I need to take a few shots of you pushing your phone away and you looking away."

Yuna entered the set again and pushed the phone away just as Jayeon had instructed. Only her hand was captured this time. After a few repetitions, the producer said that it was enough.

"Senior, we'll take a few more cuts with the calendar and her POV shot. Yuna, you can leave."

"Yes."

She left, sighing in relief. She never knew that the 'okay' sign after the cut sign would be so sweet.

"Well done," Ganghwan said.

"Thank you for your help. I don't think I could've continued acting if it wasn't for that phone call."

Yuna looked at Maru. It was just a meaningless conversation, but just listening to his voice cheered her up. The voice, which felt like it was consoling her not to worry, supported her from behind very softly.

"Thank you too, seonbae."

"It's Ganghwan hyung-nim's idea. But that really was curious. Your acting became much better even though the only thing I did was reply to your lines. No wait, it must have been your usual skill that came out on display."

"Right."

Yuna looked at Ganghwan. She was curious about the meaning behind that splendid prescription, about why he had Maru say those lines over the phone, and what made him think that it would make her do better.

"Do you want to know the reason?"

"Yes."

Ganghwan raised two fingers.

"First up, you were stiff to the point that you weren't aware of your nervousness. You were doing well in front of us, but you were doing terrible in front of the camera, right? However, you didn't look that nervous. Then there's only one answer - It's the fear of standing on the stage for the first time. This place doesn't have an audience, but it's still a stage in a sense."

"I've been on the stage a few times while I was doing plays. This isn't my first stage."

"But I heard that this is your first time doing camera acting. A change of environment means that it's no different from your first time."

Yuna nodded. A subconscious nervousness ruled her body, and perhaps that was why she was so terrible in front of the camera. In retrospect, she pictured each of her movements before putting them into action. Perhaps that process created a disparity between her head and her body, creating a completely different result from what she was thinking. Did this indicate that she still wasn't used to acting? Learning and practice - these two words came to her mind.

"And secondly."

Ganghwan lowered his voice. Then, he spoke in a small voice right in front of her.

"The power of love."

"What?"

Before she had the chance to ask what that was about, Ganghwan turned around and left. Love, love. Her head suddenly felt dizzy as though she had been on a roller coaster. She felt her cheeks heat up. She immediately raised her hands and put them against her cheeks. Thankfully, they weren't burning hot.

"What did he say?"

Mira approached with a suspicious gaze. After hanging her arm around Yuna's shoulders, she kept shaking her, urging her to answer. Yuna shut her mouth with all her might. She could never say it.

"Uhm, don't bully her too much."

Byungjae spoke up with an awkward smile.

“Do you see this as bullying her? We’re getting intimate. Yuna, do you hate me?”

Yuna shook her head. Mira nodded before taking her arms off.

“Don’t be nervous and tell me if you have any worries. If it’s anything you can’t tell the men about, you can always come to me about it. I might look like this, but I’m somewhat of a consultant amongst my friends. This unni is always on your side.”

Seeing Mira’s smile, Yuna thought of the word ‘cool’. She thought that she was incredibly lucky for shooting her first piece with these people.

“Byungjae-oppa. Come and go through some lines with me.”

“Oh, okay. Which part?”

Mira and Byungjae left. When she looked at the two, who practiced during their free time, she couldn’t help but think that she should try harder. She found out her position in the first shoot. This drama - it was her who had to do well. Everyone else was doing fine.

“I guess you’ll do fine now,” Maru said.

Yuna made an embarrassed smile. She somehow felt rather ashamed to look at him.

“It’s thanks to you, seonbae.”

“Nah, I didn’t do anything. It’s you who prepared well. Whether it’s Ganghwan hyung-nim or other people, they’re all people who are willing to help you out, so don’t hesitate to ask.”

“No, I will get myself together and do my best not to hold you back.”

“I like that attitude, but it’s fine to rely on us a little. I also ask him a lot of things when I get stuck. They’re all seniors after all. They might not know the correct answer, but they will definitely lead us in the right direction.”

Yuna looked around. She felt lonely while she was acting, but right now, she had a strong feeling that she was one of the people working towards the same goal. Together - that word suddenly came to her mind. At the same time, Maru’s face caught her eyes. Together.

“Should we go through our lines together too? We’ll be acting together in the next scene.”

“Yes! I’ll just go get my script.”

Yuna suppressed her uncontrollable smile and entered the set. Producer Jayeon, who was talking to the camera director, gave her a glance before continuing to talk. After returning to Maru with the script, Yuna calmed down her expression. She had to feel goodwill towards him as a colleague in acting. Any more than that was not acceptable.

“Should we go from here?”

Maru pointed at the position in the script. Yuna nodded before saying her line. The shooting set had a strict atmosphere just a moment ago, but now that she was practicing with Maru like this, the entire space felt a lot more relaxing.

“You should decide on the nature of your character before you start. That will make things much easier. Even though characters are three-dimensional, there is always a trait that lies in the center. If you act with that as the basis, your character will seem more consistent and you’ll have an easier time acting.”

“Ah, okay.”

Yuna looked at Maru’s script as he replied. There were notes in every blank space. She somewhat felt embarrassed about her script, which only had a few underlines.

“Seonbae.”

“Yeah?”

“Can you tell me how to analyze characters later? I mean, like the things that are written in your script.”

“This? It’s nothing much. I just wrote down what came to my mind, so there’s no big meaning.”

Yuna showed him her own script. Maru spoke with a smile.

“Everyone has their own style that suits them. Ganghwan hyung-nim’s script only has a few circles. That doesn’t mean that his passion for analyzing and researching character emotions is shallow. I only do it this way because writing makes it easier for me.”

“I also like writing.”

“Then I guess it won’t be a bad idea to try.”

Maru pointed at the notes he wrote in his script and started explaining. Yuna looked at him from the side. His eyes were filled with concentration and were shining with passion.

‘I’ll do my best.’

Yuna cheered up inwardly. She thought that she should cherish this short time.

* * *

“Was it that good?”

Jayeon thought about Yuna, who was running with a big smile on her face with her script.

“Was what good?” Ganghwan asked from the side.

“I’m talking about Yuna. She looked dejected because she caused a few NGs, but she looked like she was about to fly after the okay sign. The girl is so cute. Hyung, what do I do? I don’t think I can scold her. How cute can she be?”

“Like hell. Rather than liking it, she must have been relieved. There’s another reason she looked so good.”

“Another reason? What is that?”

“You can just think of it as something delicate that young girls have. Sheesh, you call yourself a producer when you don’t even know what your actors are up to.”

Ganghwan clicked his tongue and said that he was going to the bathroom. Jayeon crossed her arms and looked at Maru and Yuna, who were going through the lines together.

“Something delicate that young girls have, huh.”

She thought about it for a moment before stopping. She would rather pursue the delicateness of the production, not something that a young kid would have. It was helpful for her shoot, so she decided to look into it, but she had no intentions of prying into it. After all, she had to put a clear distinction between public and private matters.

“Well then. Let’s finish up,” Jayeon shouted.

Chapter 685

“Well, then. It’s the first shoot after-party you’ve all been waiting for!”

“Isn’t it strange to have an after-party when we just took the first step?”

“Shaddap! That’s why I said it’s the first shoot after-party. I waited for this moment and pushed away all the people that annoyed me. Anyway, forget the trivial talk and everyone raise your glasses!” Jayeon shouted as she raised her glass.

The fifty-something people in the restaurant all raised their glasses.

“To 50% viewing rate of ‘Pojang-macha’! Cheers!”

After chanting, Jayeon gulped down the mixed drink in the beer glass.

“Producer, 50% isn’t your neighborhood dog’s name, you know?”

“That’s a bit impossible.”

“Director Yoo, wish for something more realistic. I would die satisfied if it gets 5%. 50% is just being shameless. It’s a value that’s only possible in your dreams.”

Boos came out from everywhere. Jayeon glared around and said that she wasn’t going to accept objections. The people who raised their glasses faintly smiled and shouted ‘50%!’.

They exchanged drinks in this noisy atmosphere. Jayeon, who hopped between tables and toasted, was a literal mood maker. A get-together with a leader-level personnel being overly enthusiastic would usually make the lower employees suffer, but this place seemed to be an exception. The horizontal relationship that Jayeon wanted probably stemmed from trivial things like this.

Maru also got drunk on the atmosphere and drank some soda. He wanted to drink some soju with pork gukbap, but he had to hold back since there were a lot of people here. He thought that he should only drink in a quiet place with only the people he knew.

“You again.”

Maru took away the glass in Yuna’s hands. Her cheeks had turned red.

“Why?”

"I warned you last time not to drink. It seems you didn't even listen."

"Who are you to dictate what I do, seonbae? Give it back. I'm going to drink that."

"It's a problem because I have to take care of the aftermath. Also, who did you get this from?"

Maru glared at the people sitting around. Everyone was talking to other people, but there was one person that was looking at the two of them with a strange smile.

"Mira-noon, you gave it to her, didn't you?"

"I never gave it to her. I just poured one and put it in front of her."

"You did that last time too. Don't make her drink. I will have a hard time if she gets drunk."

"Alright. But isn't Yuna cute when she's drunk? Look at that, she's smiling like a puppy."

Maru sighed and downed the drink in Yuna's glass. He thought that it was just beer, but it was a mix of drinks. He wiped his mouth with his thumb before looking at Mira. Mira just drank without doing anything and replied 'alright'.

"You, don't you ever drink. If anything, you should drink orange juice instead."

"But you drank just now, seonbae."

"It's alright for me to drink."

"Why?"

"Because I don't get drunk."

"I don't get drunk either!"

Yuna had raised her voice.

"The fact that you're raising your voice like that means you're drunk. Don't throw up and cause a mess like last time. Just stay still."

"You always tell me not to do things."

"What else did I tell you not to do?"

"You said I can't do anything. I can't drink, and I can't like you."

She pouted before putting her spoon in the jjigae in front of her. She scooped some bits of the jjigae into her rice bowl before mixing and eating a big spoonful. Maru watched it all happen. Unlike how bold she sounded when she said those words, Yuna was avoiding his gaze right now.

"Hey, you're acting like that because you're embarrassed after realizing what you just said, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Also, what do you find so good about me that you can't give up? I'm pretty sure there are a lot of good people in Myunghwa High's acting club, aren't there? If you look around, there should be good people around so go take your romance there."

“How can you say such a thing so easily like that, seonbae?”

“Is there a reason to find it difficult?”

“N-no, I guess that’s true.”

Maru gave her some napkins. Rice grains had gotten onto Yuna’s pants because she was talking while eating. It seemed that her organ that detected embarrassment was still working perfectly despite being drunk, as she wiped the food off her clothes without saying anything after receiving the napkin.

Maru faintly smiled. She looked similar to his sister, Bada when she was drunk. She would complain and raise her voice when things didn’t go her way. When they got hit on the bullseye, both of them would look away from the incident. If there was a difference, it was that Bada would exert violence when faced with a difficult question while Yuna would blush and turn silent.

“Liking someone is only a temporary thing. Especially at your age. Of course, you might not feel like that right now, but you’ll realize not long later. You’ll see that talking to a wall isn’t that fun.”

“But you are no wall, seonbae.”

“In some aspects, I can be a wall.”

Yuna lowered her eyes.

“I’m a bad girl, aren’t I? I know that you are dating someone and that I shouldn’t like you, but you’re treating me too gently.”

“So the problem’s simple then, huh. I’ll stop talking to you about private matters from now on. We’ll only talk about work. How about it?”

“I don’t like that. Also, aren’t we a couple in the drama?”

“That’s what I want to say. Whether you like it or not, we’re going to be acting together for a while. I wish for you to treat me comfortably. Just like how the feelings of liking someone don’t appear out of nowhere, they won’t disappear so suddenly either. I just think of you as a good little sister. You’re a junior that my girlfriend looks after a lot too. If you run into difficulties, I’m going to try to help you. I’ll listen to your stories, too. However, I don’t think I can reciprocate your feelings.”

“I know, I already know that. I’m just liking you all by myself, so don’t mind me. Just like you said, these feelings won’t disappear so easily, but they will turn into something like friendship eventually, right?”

“Precisely.”

“You know what, seonbae?”

“What?”

“You look like a really good person, but you’re actually a really bad person.”

“I never thought of myself as a good person in the first place.”

Yuna sniffled. She wiped her nose with the napkin she was holding.

“You should look away when a girl is doing something like this.”

“It’s you who blatantly wiped your face. If you tell me beforehand next time, I’ll turn my head away as a form of manners.”

“You really are a bad guy.”

Yuna stared at the table before reaching out. She was reaching out for Mira’s half-empty glass. Maru tried to take it away, but Yuna’s lips had already touched the glass. Yuna clenched her eyes shut and gulped down the transparent liquid in the glass.

“So you decided to become a drunkard.”

“Because drinking this gives me the courage to talk.”

“Words that you can only say after drinking are ignoble words. There’s no meaning to them either.”

“Why should that be? A senior of the acting club said that you can’t talk honestly without alcohol.”

“Perhaps you can bring out their inner mind as it is. You might be able to blab on about things you usually wouldn’t be able to do. But nowhere in that lies your true intention. You’re leaning on the power of alcohol to speak after all. Even if it’s what you’re truly feeling, relying on alcohol to say something like that is useless.”

“I’m being scolded right now, aren’t I?”

“It’s fine as long as you know.”

Maru poured some soda into his glass and drank it. There was something that tugged on his mind while he was talking with Yuna. There was a sense of iffiness as though he had left the gas on at home. Whenever he walked through the warehouse of memories, something kept catching his feet. Even when he focused due to the feeling that those things were asking for his attention, he could not find out the identity of the strange feeling. Just what was the problem?

Maru looked at Yuna, who was dozing off, before moving his eyes to the glass in front of him. A soju glass with meat oil all over it caught his eyes. Would he be able to take a step towards that sticky feeling if he removed his reason with the power of alcohol? Just as he was thinking about such things, Yuna leaned towards him. Her head touched his shoulder. At that moment, he was reminded of a woman’s face. The girl who had no hesitation when revealing her feelings despite not having any drinks at all - Lee Chaerim. She, who used to belong to Blue, one of the top girl idol groups, had confessed to him. She was bold, didn’t have any hesitation, and was honest.

It was that he questioned. Why did he refuse that confession? Back then, he was dating Gaeul as well, but he rejected her coldly even though she was a top idol, and she even showed tears. Since he was dating someone already, rejecting her was common sense, but when he looked back at the feelings he had back then, he was incredibly calm and mild. He acted as though he was someone who wouldn’t give a second glance at someone other than Gaeul.

It wasn’t something strange to doubt one’s past actions. There were many people who regretted their past choices after all. However, it was strange that he rejected Chaerim’s confession without a second thought and only thought about Gaeul as though he was a gambler who was staking everything on one

number without any fallback plans. If there was the slightest ripple or even the slightest sense of regret, he would understand that, but the fact that his emotions weren't stirred at all was something to be thought about.

Just the fact that a girl was leaning against him, dozing off, made him smile. He had no intention of dating her right now, but since he didn't know what the future had in store, his mind went off on a tangent of imagination and delusion, picturing a future filled with desire.

Maru stood up before letting Yuna lie down across two seats. He asked Mira, who was at the same table, to take care of her before leaving through the door. He walked around on the noisy pavement in front of the store before sitting down on a bench. He wished that he could smoke right now.

"Then we're dating starting today, okay?"

"F-fine! Let's go out!"

A man and a woman, who had put their arm around each other's shoulder, were walking past him while shouting in loud voices. Maru looked at the two of them and dipped his hands into the pond of memories. The pond that seemed clear enough to see the bottom, had now turned into a murky color.

"Is this related to the fact that my memories are becoming faint?"

His 31 years of memories were becoming fainter. However, from the way he remembered old events from time to time, he didn't seem to have completely forgotten about them. He knew that his firm personality was also becoming more and more relaxed with the change of his memories, but in the first place, he thought that it wasn't a big change since he wasn't a stuck-up person in the first place. He was only 31. He didn't have that much social experience, and perhaps his mental age was not that different from his current, high school student self.

Then why could he be so rational when he received Chaerim's confession? When he thought about the situation back then, he felt like the Han Maru that received Chaerim's confession was a completely different person from the current him.

Maru opened the cabinet that contained the memories right after his revival. The memories of his previous life were becoming faint, but the things he experienced in this life were clear. He took out the folder inside that cabinet and opened it. Did the distortion occur back then too? Maru was going through his past memories when he came across the trial that came to the acting club. Geunseok's mistake became a trigger that increased people's distrust in each other. No one mentioned Geunseok's mistake since he was the ace of the club, and they kept continuing practice amidst an awkward atmosphere. No one had the guts to face that situation head on.

'Back then... I provided them a common enemy.'

He provoked the people of the acting club, who had become sensitive, and received their frustration all by himself. He started circling around the acting club, and he worked at the petrol station during the summer holidays. It was definitely himself who chose to become an outsider. He became the prey in order for everyone else to stick together.

"Why?"

Groan-like questions kept coming to his mind. Why did he do that? Because he was asked to do so by the teacher in charge of the acting club, teacher Park Taesik?

Maru shook his head. Just because he was asked to solve it, there was no reason to solve the problem like that. Why did he create enemies? What he should've done was to help them regain faith by harmonizing and facing the problem head on with an honest, true-to-heart conversation. Yet, he chose despise as the solution to the problem. The cohesiveness of a community like that would be no different from grains of sand, no?

When he entered a company and did a group project, he did it with a colleague that he did not like. They didn't get mesh well together, whether it was their personality or their opinions, so it was hard at the beginning, but both Maru and that fellow had the thought that they would be in danger at that rate. After that, Maru took him to a jeyuk-bokkeum restaurant and had an honest talk with him throughout one whole night. There wasn't anyone who was born evil, and he believed that there was a conflict only because they pursued different things. He also believed that their relationship would become better if he showed his true feelings. After that, that person became one of the best partners in his life. That person should have cried a lot for him who died of exhaustion at 31.

Honest feelings would always work. That was the motto of his life.

"Then why did I act like that back then?"

Maru wanted to question himself from 2 years ago. Why did he not solve the problem like this back then? Why did he simply throw them something to chew on in order to solve the problem?

He covered his mouth with his hand. He sighed in frustration.

Chapter 686

He felt like he could not let go of this lead. He felt like he would enter a world where all of his predictions would be useless if he let go of this clue that he stumbled upon. Maru entered the nearby convenience store and came back out with a hot coffee can in his hand. He tightly gripped the hot can to the point that it felt like his hand was burning. The air of summer, which hadn't dissipated yet, as well as the heat from his hand, lashed out at his brain. It is not time to rest yet.

The compass pointing towards the past worked properly. Maru was able to clearly remember the memories he wanted when he wanted to. He took out the memories of when the acting club felt like it was going to disband from the cabinet of memories. Rather than going through the circumstances back then, he tried going through what he felt back then.

The acting club was experiencing the crisis of being on the brink of disbanding before the next performance. They couldn't be left alone, and they had to be returned to their original state. The method Maru chose to do so was extremely simple.

The question was, why did he not try to solve that problem with a conversation, and instead proactively made himself the prey for the others to focus their energy on. Was the past him too immature?

Maru shook his head. He didn't act like that recklessly. It wasn't that he had turned his eyes away from the frustrating reality nor had he been fleeing from forming relationships either. It was a reasonable decision that was formed after perfect calculations. Maru licked his lower lip. The memories of back

then became much clearer. That day, he chose to become the prey of all of them after a reasonable thought process. The reason was simple - that was the most efficient method.

Maru frowned. He felt incredibly displeased. What he did was not lead the kids on the right path when they were trying to look away from responsibility; he simply resolved the 'situation'. There was no effort or emotional expenditure. The students that could not express their rage to Geunseok instead attacked him when he declared himself as the enemy. The cohesiveness of the acting club increased by attacking an outsider who could only say the right things and didn't put them into practice. Declare war on another country if you want to stabilize yours - it was the plan of a schemer.

These actions were incomprehensible. If he was an adult, if it was him, who had eaten many more bowls of food than the others, he should have led them on the right path instead of thinking about efficiency, gains, and losses. As hard as it might be, they had to become honest with each other, admit that they were different, interact with each other, exchange emotions, and become a 'team' with the help of the shock absorber known as friendship; not a group of hyenas that would growl at each other if they ran out of meat to chew on.

Maru opened the can. He drank a sip of the coffee which had turned lukewarm.

The fact that his decision was wrong that day could be seen from what happened afterwards. Just like how the flap of a butterfly caused a storm on the other side of the world, he ended up buried under burning wood. Had he set their relationship straight, he might have prevented Geunseok from becoming twisted and there wouldn't be an event where Yurim would start a fire due to her delusions.

"Though, that's all just hypothetical."

There was nothing more foolish than talking about 'what if' for a situation that had already occurred, but how many people in the world did not dream of that 'what if'? Geunseok, who was fundamentally twisted because of his father's violence, was bound to cause problems one day, and Yurim, who had feelings for him, might have ended her uncontrollable love with another kind of arson. However, what Maru could be sure of was that it was his own decision that pulled the inevitable forward. Had he consoled Geunseok's twisted heart and understood and sympathized with Yurim's obsession, he might have been able to delay that event until the very end. If that had been the case, he could have avoided being hospitalized due to a broken ankle and have gone on the winter stage with the rest of the acting club.

-You're interpreting things too optimistically.

The masked man suddenly interrupted. Maru took another sip of his coffee.

"I know. What's bound to happen is bound to happen. There's a possibility that the results wouldn't have changed no matter what I did."

-Well, yes, but what I want to tell you is about your decision. You're thinking too pessimistically about your decision to make yourself the prey. As a result of your actions, the acting club could continue to exist and the stage had finished splendidly. It required the sacrifice of one person, but overall, it was a gain.

"No, I should have talked to the others much more back then."

-Would that have changed a lot? Would Geunseok, a lump of pride, admit his faults? Would the others accept that even if it happened? Would there really be harmony? Do you really think that?

“Are you saying that it wouldn’t have?”

-I won’t tell you that it definitely won’t be like that. I’m just telling you to think about it. Stones are just stones no matter how much time passes. Trees are the same. The wind and the storm might scratch them a little, but the fact that they are stones and trees do not change.

“And like those two, people do not change, you mean?”

-They do change. Just eventually.

“So you’re saying that it’s extremely unlikely for them to change in a short period of time.”

The masked man did not reply.

“Pursuing efficiency is definitely a good thing. I don’t like meaningless labor either. However, when it comes to people, you sometimes need to invest in that meaningless thing. Having a conversation with the others back then should have been for something similar. Yes, it would have been a difficult thing. It might have been frustrating and I might have questioned why I should do such a thing. There’s the easy way of creating one enemy, so it might feel like a foolish thing to try to regain the embarrassing thing known as friendship. However, you know? I think that this world only turns because of the dreams of such foolish people. While ‘what if’ is a useless thing to think about, I still want to think about it. What if I joined that group and we thought about the problem together instead of viewing it as an outsider? - like that.”

-Everyone will look away from reality, put on suitable smiling masks and prepare for their next performance, of course.

“We might have clicked and produced a good result instead.”

-But that is only a ‘what if’. The truth of the matter is, you came to a decision that day, and as a result of your decisions, it was a happy ending.

“Except for me, that is.”

-So? Did you find that unfortunate?

Maru stroked his chin. It was that question. That question popped out from the many thoughts in his head. The answer to the question that took form with the masked man’s words made him incredibly confused.

“While it was a pity that I couldn’t participate in the performance, I didn’t really regret anything about the conclusion of that event itself.”

-If you have a look in detail, you also blocked the storm caused by the butterfly with your whole body. That day, you saw the burning set and jumped in. It was for the sake of the next performance. Is there a need to blame yourself so much?

“But that decision wasn’t like me.”

-Then what is, being 'like' you?

Maru sighed.

"Just what is happening to me?"

The masked man, who kept nagging him with questions, suddenly fell silent. This man always chose to not say anything at the most important times. Maru wished for him to not shake up his heart if he wasn't going to give a solution. The man always threw out a topic to think about before disappearing like he was some old-fashioned philosopher. He was light-hearted, yet heavy; he agitated others while also being a large hill. He was completely unpredictable.

"I was wondering where you went."

Ganghwan sat next to him. Maru could smell alcohol from his breath.

"Did you drink a lot?"

"Just enough to feel good. But man, Yoo Jayeon won't let me go. She's telling me that we should go to the 2nd round. How about you?"

"I heard from one of my school teachers to not hang out with drunk adults."

"Alright. Children of the wonderland should sleep early and wake up early. Also, you have luggage to transport."

"Is Yuna wasted?"

"I dunno. She keeps twitching from time to time and mutters something like she's an old vinyl record, but I can't really hear anything because it's noisy in there. But I can tell you that she's not in a state where she can go home by herself."

"Looks like I should really tell her that I will dump her in the recycling bin the next time she does that."

"Don't you ever do that for real. I'm kinda scared that you might actually do something like that."

Maru chuckled.

"Do you really think that I'm such a bad man?"

"You aren't a bad man. You're just very calculative."

"That's strange. I thought of myself as a really affectionate guy that proactively did things that other people didn't like to do."

"You? That sounds unheard of."

"Yeah right. I also want to ask. Just what was I doing in the past?"

"Are you drunk too right now?"

"All the soju on the table won't be enough to get me drunk, you know?"

"Ah, right. You are even more of a drinker than I am. Damn, I'm envious."

“Are you going to that 2nd round?”

“I am. I have something to talk about as well. While it’s a good thing that the director is discussing things with the actor, it’s a bad sign if they can’t set the right path for the actor too. I have to tell her to keep that in mind. Even if the ship capsizes, the captain of the ship has to hold onto the rudder.”

Ganghwan looked at the coffee can and reached out for it. Maru blinked once before emptying the can in his mouth.

“Cheap guy.”

“I heard that there are no teachers who get food from their disciple.”

“The one who earns money is the big brother and the teacher. Right now, you do more work than me, so you might as well be the teacher.”

“What a cheap title, then.”

Ganghwan smacked his back before standing up.

“Humans are creatures who can’t even understand what they did yesterday. Even while resolving to quit smoking, we think about doing it ‘starting tomorrow’. It’s a natural thing to regret your past actions when you look back in retrospect. It just means that you have improved that much. If you have no regrets while thinking about the past, it’s one of two things: You’re a man who transcended mortal thinking or you’ve stopped making progress. Oh, I guess there’s one more thing.”

“What is it?”

“That you’re a god.”

Don’t think about it too much and come back soon - Ganghwan added as he walked off. Maru crumpled the can and threw it in the trash can near the bench. If you haven’t changed, you have either transcended mortal thinking or you’ve stopped making progress.

“Or a god.”

By now, his memories of how he came to the past after his death had become faint. He didn’t know the reason behind his reincarnation nor what kind of god provided him with this opportunity. The only thing he could remember was the woman in white who looked like she was the epitome of all the beauty in the world.

“Did it really just change with the flow of time?”

People do not change so easily - the masked man’s words reverberated in his ears. Change and stillness. Maru stopped thinking about the two words. However, that topic remained in his heart as though it was engraved on it.

He turned around and returned to the restaurant. Many people had left already. The ones who were still drinking until the end were Jayeon and the actors at the main table.

“Where did you go?” Jayeon asked.

"I was just getting some fresh air."

"I see. This place is a bit stuffy. Well then, should we drink a little in an open space?" Jayeon said as she stood up.

Byungjae, who sat next to her, tried to stand up before falling back down again. He was as weak as Yuna when it came to alcohol, but it seemed that he drank everything he was given today as well. Mira looked fine, but from the way the ends of her eyes had sunk a little, it was clear that she was drunk as well.

"You guys wanna go too?" Jayeon asked as she looked at Maru and Yuna.

Maru shook his hand.

"I'll bring her home and then go home."

He pointed at Yuna, who had lowered her head with her hair drooping like she was from a horror movie.

"What a pity. I was planning to have a drink with you guys in a place where I don't need to watch out. No, wait. I told everyone not to give minors drinks. When did she drink?"

"I gave it to her."

Mira raised her hand boldly. Jayeon looked at her before chuckling.

"I guess I can't help it then."

"Yes, it can't be helped."

"Mira, let's go for a 2nd round!"

"Let's go. I think I can drink a little more."

Mira pulled up Byungjae who was all wobbly. Byungjae, whose limbs looked like they belonged to an octopus, groaned and expressed his desire to go home, but Jayeon didn't look like she was willing to let him go.

"We're off first. You two, watch out on your way home and text me once you get there. This mom of yours is worried."

Jayeon and co left while giggling. Maru sighed and shook Yuna up.

"Milady, it's time to wake up."

"Eh, eh?"

"I said let's go, class is over."

"Ah, yes!"

Yuna abruptly stood up.

Chapter 687

"Why do you do acting?" Gaeul asked as she drank the cooled omija tea.

She had been drinking it ever since she heard a while ago that it was good for her throat.

“Me? Why do you ask so suddenly?”

Heewon, who was lying down in the practice room with his limbs stretched out, raised his head just a little.

“I was just curious. I was wondering what made someone who can’t be bothered with anything in life make the decision to become an actor and even take lessons like these.”

“You’re curious about something rather meaningless. Anyway hey, is that tasty?”

“I’ll give you a sip, so tell me.”

She poured some of the omija tea into a paper cup and handed it to him. Heewon, who was quite a glutton, gulped it down as soon as he received it.

“It’s sour and bitter too. Why do you drink this stuff?”

“If you focus, you can taste something sweet, too. It’s called ‘omija’ because there are five flavors[1]. Also, apparently, it’s good for your throat.”

“Not my cup of tea though.”

Heewon put down the cup down in front of him.

“You drank it, so tell me. Why do you do acting?”

“I can ask you the same thing. Why do you do acting?”

“I asked you first.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to answer you first.”

“What about the omija tea then?”

Heewon opened his mouth wide and put his finger inside. Gaeul sighed.

“Geez, I can’t win against you, can I?”

“Don’t think about useless stuff and just get some rest. You’ve been working hard throughout the whole class, so you should get some rest when you can. If you keep talking about acting even during breaks, your brain will burst, you know?”

“I don’t care since I love acting.”

Gaeul sat down on a chair, placed her elbows on her knees, and rested her head on her hands. The reason for acting - she looked at Heewon, who was rolling down on the ground, before speaking,

“I used to go to plays a lot with my father.”

“What the heck are you talking about so suddenly?”

“We just talked about it a few seconds ago yet you forgot already?”

“Oh, the reason for acting?”

“You leave your concentration at home, don’t you?”

“I’d love to do that. If possible, I’d like to leave my mind at home too. Then I’ll be able to rest at home. Man, that sounds so good.”

“I’m sure sloths do more activity than you.”

Heewon rolled over to the wall while covering his ears as though he didn’t want to listen. Gaeul looked at him and spoke in a small voice,

“I loved the plays I used to watch with my dad. The atmosphere in Daehak-ro was good too. Actually, I just liked going out somewhere with my dad when I was young. With one hand, I’ll hold my dad’s hand, and with the other hand, I’ll be holding cotton candy. When I walked around with those two in hand, I felt like I was flying.”

They were memories from when she was very young, but she could still picture them. The memories of those times were unforgettable no matter how old she got.

“I can still remember the play I saw for the first time. It was a play aimed at children, Peter Pan. The actor wearing the Peter Pan outfit kept running around the audience seats. He high-fived me too. I thought he was so cool. It was the same when I watched other plays as well. The actors looked so cool, and I wanted to be on the same stage as them. I think it was probably back then that I started writing ‘actor’ as my dream; from all the way back in elementary school.”

“Memories with your father, huh.”

“Of course, right now, I just like acting itself. It’s kinda curious that I can express something like those actors I saw back then as well. Also, I have an objective too.”

“An objective?”

“To be in the same work as a certain someone.”

Gaeul stopped talking and stared at Heewon quietly. Heewon made a sour expression.

“Do I have to say it too?”

“We still have 10 minutes left of break. There’s nothing else to do either.”

“I’d be happy to spend that time lying down.”

“Then you can stay still for all I care. I’ll blab on by myself. Maybe I’ll get better at talking to myself if I keep doing it,” Gaeul said with a smile.

Heewon, who was lying down and hugging his knees like a pillbug, slowly sat up.

“Well, I don’t have something grand like that. I never watched plays when I was young either. In the first place, my environment didn’t allow such a thing.”

“You’ve never watched plays?”

“I think there are more people who did not watch plays when they were young than the ones who did.”

“Then what made you like acting?”

“There weren’t any big events. I entered high school, and I was told that joining a school club was mandatory. When I asked my friends from middle school, they said that it was up to them whether they joined one or not, so it turned out to be mandatory for my school. Having no choice, I had to choose one, but going around outside needed money and time, so I passed on those, and when I looked at the ones that happened inside the school, there were the literature club, origami club, and the English-Speaking club. I’m not that good with moonrunes, so I put aside the literature club and the English club. I mean, isn’t it horrific to think about studying on a Saturday?”

“That sounds just like you.”

Heewon scratched his head.

“That’s why I tried to join the origami club, but who would’ve known that it was a club that disbanded due to lack of members, and they forgot to erase it from the print? I was in a fix. No matter where I looked, there wasn’t a club that I wanted to join. I don’t even want to imagine doing something athletic, and if club activities needed money, I would hate that even more than doing something athletic.”

“But club activities don’t need that much money, do they?” Gaeul asked.

As most clubs were light-hearted clubs that happened after school, unless it was something that the school was famous for, there wouldn’t be a lot of funding. Even if it did require a lot of money, most schools would fund those the majority of the time. Myunghwa High was famous for its acting club, and they needed a lot of money for it due to things like inviting instructors and getting materials to make props and sets. Luckily, the school funded most of it and there was practically no burden on the members.

“When I thought about living expenses, even that was too much. I do like watching movies, but how much would it add up to if I watched one movie every single week? The same goes for going to PC bangs too. I wanted to choose something that didn’t need money, which limited my range of options.”

Living expenses. Gaeul thought that he was talking about his pocket money.

“So? How did you end up joining the acting club?”

“A friend of mine from the same class asked me if I wanted to join. That’s why I asked - don’t you need a lot of money for it? He told me no, so I said okay. Actually, he bought me a lot of things since the beginning of the semester.”

“That’s how you joined the acting club? Without thinking?”

“Without thinking? I told you - I considered everything. But I let my guard down at the last moment, you know? I was so hung up on the fact that I didn’t need money for it, and I forgot about how much time it needed. It was too late by the time I put my name on the list. I had to stay behind every single day after school to practice. It was practically hell.”

“I’m surprised you’re still acting. It’s not like you’re doing it for fun either.”

Heewon hesitated a little before speaking,

“It’s not that I hate it. But it doesn’t mean I love it to death either. It’s just somewhat endurable? I just do it because I can take it.”

“Isn’t acting hard if you think of it like that? You have no motivation, no dream, nor an objective. In the first place, you don’t want to do it either.”

“Well, definitely, I don’t have any of those in me.”

Heewon yawned. Gaeul quietly looked at him. What was the motivation that moved him? What brought this lazy guy all the way here? She was suddenly reminded of the talent he had. If that was given to someone other than him, if someone who desperately wanted to become an actor had Heewon’s talent, she thought that that person would be more than glad to sweat in order to train themselves.

She met eyes with Heewon, who was rubbing his eyes after yawning.

“Well, there’s no reason I should find my motivation within myself,” Heewon said unwillingly.

His sour expression became thicker.

“It’s because it’s what Haewon wants. He wants me to act.”

“Haewon?”

Heewon nodded as he stood up. He started walking while looking at the floor.

“Even when I think about it, I’m a done cause. I have nothing I’m good at, I’m lazy by nature, and even if I want to concentrate on something, my heart and body will demotivate themselves before I even start. It’s Haewon who looked after me during those times. I’m not saying that as a figure of expression; he actually does look after me from A to Z. Sometimes, I even have this thought - maybe it’s because I, the older brother, am such an irresponsible person that the little brother matured too early. I sometimes think that if I was someone who fulfilled my job properly, maybe Haewon would focus on the things he wants and sometimes complain to me about things.”

“Don’t you think you’re overthinking? Even without Haewon, your parents will-”

“They aren’t here. Mom and dad - I’ve never seen such people.”

Heewon interrupted midway. Gaeul didn’t understand what he just said for a moment and when she did realize, she blocked her mouth as though to lock her mouth up.

“I thought I got used to expressions like that, but it makes me question every single time. I mean, not having parents isn’t something that special, is it? There are loads of people who don’t have parents.”

Heewon scratched his head as though he didn’t want to say it. Gaeul couldn’t say anything. At the same time, she realized that when he said ‘living expenses’ it really did mean money that was crucial for living everyday life.

“Then do you two live by yourselves?”

“Ever since we entered high school, yeah. There is someone who supports us and thanks to him, we were able to get a semi-basement room.”

“Was it maybe an accident that....”

“No, we just didn’t have any. They don’t exist even in all of my memories. Apparently, my surname was originally Kim. There was my name on the cardboard box that I was in or something. When I became mature enough, I heard that from the director[2] and changed it. The director was wise and never registered my name legally. I might be insensitive to things like that, but using the surname of those that abandoned me is, well, you know.”

Heewon, who walked around the practice room, leaned against one wall and sat down. Gaeul felt her throat go dry. She grew a guilty conscience and felt sorry.

“Lee is the director’s surname. Also, Haewon doesn’t know his parents’ faces either. He was abandoned around the same time as me. I kept hanging around him because I quite liked him since we were young. Haewon followed me around too. Well, from some time onwards, it was him instead of me who took care of the other.”

“It must have been h...no. Forget I said anything.”

Gaeul tried to console him but decided not to do so. She felt like it would be too deceitful to sound like she understood what he was going through. Heewon also glanced at her and nodded.

“You know? I never wished for anything much. I used to think this when I was young - just how useless was I to be abandoned in the streets? I mean, I would’ve died if things went wrong. I was a toddler after all. When I thought about that, trying hard seemed so useless. I mean, what good is trying hard? I’m a useless guy anyway. But Haewon, he’s different. He always looks ahead of him. When I am down, he always comes to me, pulls me up, and empowers me. That’s why I am planning to do whatever it takes if Haewon wants me to. He sees what my blurry eyes cannot. He is smart, hardworking, polite, and... anyhow amazing. Unlike me, that is.”

Heewon lay on the ground.

“Why do I act when I have no interest in it at all? Because Haewon told me that I can be good at it. Because he told me I can earn money with it. That’s why I’m doing it. There’s only one thing I want as an actor. I want to earn a lot of money to build a building for the director and pay back all the graces that our supporter has done for us. Haewon is smart, so he can probably become a doctor or a prosecutor or something like that. I’m sure of it.”

Heewon smiled in satisfaction. Gaeul thought about what she was thinking for a long time before saying one thing,

“I’m sure things will go well.”

“Of course. Everything will go well. If Haewon said it’s going to work, it will work. Also, why don’t you put away that weird face of yours? You’re the one who asked me about all this, so you can’t be the one crying.”

“Sorry, I’ve been misunderstanding you this whole time.”

“No, you haven’t. I really am a good-for-nothing.”

Heewon yawned and stretched his arms out before raising his head. At that moment, the door to the practice room opened and Gyeonmi came back.

“Well then, you got your rest, so let’s get back to it, shall we?”

“Teacher, I think I have a stomach ache and need to go home.”

“Lee Heewon, your nonsense is increasing by the day. Should I prick your finger if your stomach hurts[3]?”

“N-no, I think I’m fine now.”

Seeing Heewon act like usual, Gaeul realized that he was actually quite a strong boy on the inside, unlike what he looked on the outside.

“Gaeul, don’t daze out and stand up. We’re going to start again from act two,” Gyeonmi said with a clap.

[1] The ‘o-mi’ in Omija literally translates to ‘five-flavor’.

[2] Of the orphanage

[3] In the old days, parents usually pricked their children’s fingers (usually thumb) with a needle to calm an upset stomach. Acupuncture, apparently. I’m not sure if this practice is still ongoing, but I do remember having that done to me when I was little.

Chapter 688

“Fit yourself to the character or change the character to suit you. There is no correct answer, but there is definitely a better one. If you keep doing acting, you’ll be able to discern for yourself which is better. There are people who find it easier to fit themselves to the character, and there are people who have an easier time fitting the character to their own nature. It differs according to what kind of work they’re doing, but a person’s acting generally fits either of the two scenarios. That’s why it is better to find out which side you’re on as soon as possible. Like I said earlier, the only way to find out which one is better for you is to spend time. In other words, you have to undergo numerous experiences to raise your judgment and eventually find the right one for you. Only then will you be able to find the clothes that suit you. The reason why the acting of child actors look rather odd when compared to mature actors no matter how good they are is not because of their form of expression, it has more to do with whether they are wearing the clothes that suit them.”

Gyeonmi flipped over her wrist to look at her watch.

“Is the time allocated to each person the same? I don’t think that’s true. The fact that there are 24 hours in a day is only just a concept. It’s not given to me in form like this chair in front of me. Time is a tool that you can utilize. Experience absolutely requires time. That doesn’t mean that you can just sit around and wait. Just this year, there should be an unimaginable number of people around your age knocking on the doors of agencies for their dreams. Don’t wait for your opportunity. Take your time and stretch it out as much as possible and increase your experiences. Think about it outside of my lessons and even when you’re resting. If you absolutely need to rest, rest properly after determining what your mind and body really want. Beginners watch TV without meaning when they rest. That’s not resting. That’s just

meaninglessly wasting time. Don't just waste your time with something that has no meaning. You can do that when you have the leisure later."

That's it for today - Gyeonmi stood up as she picked up her book. The book she brought today was titled 'The Grapes of Wrath'. Gaeul tilted her head when she first read the title. What would happen if grapes became enraged?

"It's over!"

Heewon cheered. He gained vitality as soon as the lesson was over.

"Hello."

The door to the practice room opened and Haewon came in. He was in his school uniform and was wearing a backpack. She had heard that he was studying for midterms, and it seemed that he got here right on time for his brother's practice to end.

"I told you, you don't have to come."

"It's because we don't have anything to eat at home. Hyung, let's go grocery shopping on the way home."

"Ah, right. We finished everything yesterday, didn't we?"

"You just remembered?"

"How about pork cutlets for dinner?"

"If there's anything cheap, sure."

Gaeul always thought that the two brothers were just much closer than other blood-related siblings. A smart younger brother that looks after a lazy bigger brother. However, it turned out that there was a pain that she couldn't begin to estimate beneath their relationship. Heewon said that it was okay and that it wasn't anything much, but was it really? Gaeul tried placing herself in Heewon's position. A life where she did not even know the face of her parents, much less their warmth - honestly, she didn't have the confidence to last. She would have cried herself to sleep and gotten pushed around by the environment she was in before eventually disappearing into the abyss where no one could see her. Heewon and Haewon endured such an environment and were in the process of overcoming it. Pity? That would be absurd. Gaeul looked at the two with admiration. Of course, that wasn't something she could say out loud. Even if they were okay with it, this was something she couldn't speak about so easily.

"Haewon's here, so let's get going, shall we?" Gyeonmi said as she put her book in her bag.

Gaeul looked at her and asked,

"Where are you going?"

"There's a reason I ended class earlier than usual today. Let's go, I will treat you to dinner. Haewon shouldn't have had dinner yet either, so save those pork cutlets for later."

Haewon spoke as he looked at Gyeonmi,

"It's okay, teacher. We can go home and cook our food. You don't need to watch out for us."

"It's because I want to treat you. Or do you want an old woman to treat you guys to food? I'm going to get something good, you know?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that. I was thinking that you should be tired and that you're pushing yourself to watch out for us."

"Why do your words sound like they're straight out of an etiquette textbook? I'm sure you'll be loved wherever you go. Heewon, you should learn from him as well. Acting isn't everything."

"I can't do things like that. That's why Haewon is amazing."

Heewon chuckled and got his bag. His face changed when he heard that Gyeonmi was going to treat them to dinner. He looked gloomy throughout the whole class, yet now he was even blushing a little. Was food that good?

"Teacher, of course we're going to eat meat, right?"

"I can't feed veggies to the meat ghost, so yeah, we are. Gaeul, you're coming with us too, right?"

Gyeonmi glared at her slightly. Seeing Gyeonmi hint at her to come even if she didn't have the time, Gaeul smiled and nodded.

"Of course I'm going."

"Good. This old woman will bring you to a nice barbecue restaurant, so you can look forward to it."

Heewon dragged Haewon who looked hesitant. They all got into Gyeonmi's car which was parked outside the agency building. Just like the owner, the car looked neat both on the outside and the inside. On the dashboard was an egg-shaped picture frame, and in it were the figures of Gyeonmi and her two daughters hanging their arms around each other's shoulders.

"My daughters are pretty, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"The one on the right is going to get married soon. I can still remember her when she was around your size, Gaeul, yet now she has found her own partner for marriage already. It's such a curious thing. Even if I keep watching them, I don't think I'll ever stop feeling curious."

Put your seatbelts on - Gyeonmi added. Gaeul had another look at the photo while pulling the belt. Gyeonmi looked at least a decade younger than she looked right now, and she had a gentle smile on her face. She was different from the cold and rational-looking Gyeonmi that she and Heewon saw all the time.

"What? Doesn't look like me?" Gyeonmi asked with a smile.

"No, it's not like that, but..."

"I get it. Even in my eyes, the woman in the photo looks really different from me. I thought I didn't feel that bad about the divorce, but when I look at my old photos, it still startles me from time to time. It makes me think that I changed quite a lot."

Gaeul looked at Gyeonmi in surprise. It seemed that it wasn't a coincidence that the face of the father wasn't in the photo.

"Did you really get divorced?"

"Yeah, I did."

Her words sounded as though it was like saying she had rice for dinner yesterday. However, Gaeul was at a loss for words when she heard her. What could she say? It felt like her mouth wasn't functioning properly today. She ran out of words in her vocabulary, and the only thing she could do was to sigh.

"Wasn't it hard?"

Her reinforcements appeared from behind. It was Haewon who cautiously asked that question.

"Right now, I'm not sure. Back then, I thought I was being chased, but these days, my brain isn't active enough to remember all that. I'm getting old after all. I heard that you get more emotional with age and cry a lot, but it looks like it's the opposite for me. I get more and more picky as the years pass. You guys talk a lot behind my back too, don't you?"

"I never did. Also, you're still young, teacher. And pretty, and thin."

Those words burst out of Gaeul's mouth the moment she saw Gyeonmi laugh in self-loathing. It wasn't flattery. She truly thought that. Gyeonmi, who acted as a magazine model from time to time despite the fact that she was in her mid-fifties, didn't fit well with the word 'old'.

"Gaeul, having you tell this old woman that makes me want to boast a little. I'm gonna be a grandma soon though, so it's true when I say I'm getting old."

"Grandma, you say?"

"The one on the left in the photo. She's going to give birth next week. Apparently, it's a little princess who has quite a kick. I guess I'm finally becoming a grandma. Though, I guess it'll be hard to see them. To my granddaughter, I'm nothing more than just an old woman who's not related to her. But I do feel a little proud when I hear that my daughters are becoming mothers. I think that they grew up splendidly."

For a brief moment, Gyeonmi made the same gentle smile as the figure in the photo.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks. I didn't say that in order to be congratulated, but thanks anyway."

"I hope the daughter will be born healthy."

"That's my only hope as well."

Gyeonmi's eyes were directed at the photo.

“There’s something I want to say, not as your acting teacher but as an old woman who has lived just a little more than you in life. What I want to say is that everything will become experience. The hard things, the painful things - once they all pass, they will become a part of you and empower you to overcome the oncoming trials and suffering. So no matter what is happening, don’t give up on what you’re doing and overcome that immediate moment. There’s no one who’s eternally happy, and there’s no one who’s eternally unfortunate either. There is only momentary happiness and momentary misfortune. That’s how I feel at least according to my experience.”

Gaeul slowly nodded. The words went straight to her heart. At the same time, she reflected on herself for being so ignorant of her surroundings. Heewon, Haewon and now there was Gyeonmi. She had spent a lot of time with them in the same space, but she knew nothing about them. She thought that she knew quite a lot, yet it turned out that she knew absolutely nothing.

“Teacher.”

“Yeah?”

“Tell us a lot of things in the future as well. I only realized today that just because you spent a long time with a person doesn’t mean that you can say that you know a lot about them.”

“...So you realized what I was only able to realize when I received the letter of divorce. I’m proud of you. Yes, I guess it’s not such a bad thing to learn about each other in the future. The skill pool of an actor increases with the number of people they meet.”

“Yes, teacher.”

“Anyway Heewon, why haven’t you been saying anything for a while?” Gyeonmi wondered as she looked at the rearview mirror.

Gaeul also turned around in curiosity.

“Sheesh.”

Heewon was sleeping with his head resting against the window. Gaeul wondered when he fell asleep. Haewon was smiling awkwardly.

“I swear I’ll reform that kid before I quit this job.”

Gyeonmi spoke with resolution. Her eyes looked fierce. Gaeul chuckled while covering her mouth. The car slowed down. They entered an alleyway where there was no distinction between the road for cars and the road for pedestrians.

“Gosh, this place looks busy because it’s the weekend.”

“You’re right. Oh, teacher. I think there’s a spot to park over there.”

Gyeonmi, who was looking forward while raising her chin a little, drove her car that way. The street was noisy with car horns, music from the stores, as well as the shouts of the people who had gotten drunk. Gaeul rather liked this crowded place. She looked outside and was imagining where Gyeonmi was going to take them.

Just then,

“It looks like an accident happened up front,” Haewon said from the back seat.

The car, which was going forward little by little, had stopped completely. Gaeul opened the door and got out of the car in order to find out what was happening. A loud voice hit her ears. She walked a bit forward and looked up ahead. A middle-aged man was blocking a car. The middle-aged man was pointing fingers at the car and was shouting ‘get out’ in a loud voice while the person in the car just kept honking at the man.

“Someone’s blocking the way forward.”

“There are always a lot of interesting people on weekends. Gaeul, come back in. We’ll go to the left.”

“Yes.”

She tip-toed to look at the scene last time before opening the door. Was a drunk person running amok? Or was the driver at fault for driving violently? She hoped that things would work out between the two of them. Just as she was about to get back into the car, she found a familiar face amidst the crowd of people.

“Gaeul?”

“Ah, yes.”

Gaeul got in the car again and looked outside. She saw a boy and a girl walking amidst the crowd. The boy was walking, and the girl was staggering while grabbing onto the boy’s arm. Gaeul had a closer look at the boy’s face. No matter how she looked, it was Han Maru. Then who was the one staggering next to him? Just then, the girl turned around. The girl was also someone she knew. It was Yuna.

The car drove off. Gaeul turned her head and fixed her eyes on the two. When Yuna, who was about to start walking, started staggering again, Maru grabbed her hand. At that moment, Gaeul managed to spot it. What caught her eyes more than Maru’s scolding look was Yuna’s eyes that were filled with affection. Gaeul placed her hand on her chest at that moment. The figure of Yuna, who was grabbing Maru’s hand and swinging it back and forth, was engraved into her eyes.

Then, the words she said herself flashed in her mind.

I only realized today that just because you spent a long time with a person doesn’t mean that you can say that you know a lot about them.

Chapter 689

“Maybe I should’ve joined the acting club too.”

“Hey, I heard that Aram stays behind at school until 10 or 11 every single day. If taking a single day off from classes means I have to spend every single day like that, I’d rather not do it.”

“Really? Then I don’t wanna do it. The acting club’s that hard huh. Aram, you must have a hard time.”

“Good luck with the competition. Though, we won’t be able to see it.”

“The first-year students will watch it for you. Good luck!”

Aram shouted ‘fighting’ to her friends, who waved at her whole wishing her good luck for the competition. This week was the last week of September, and today was the day of the National Acting Competition Finals in Seoul. Last year, the finals were held at the end of August, but it was delayed by a month this year. Apparently, the Korean Drama Association, who was supposed to be the host of this competition, had delayed it due to rental problems, but no one knew what really happened.

“Jeon Aram!”

As soon as she left her classroom, she heard a loud voice. It was Bangjoo who was waving in the corridor. There had to be some kind of device that was amplifying his vocal cords or something.

“Thanks to you, the entire 2nd year knows my name.”

“Feel thankful now?”

“Yeah, I’m soooo thankful that I’m embarrassed.”

She reached out to grab his sleeve in order to deal him a blow, but Bangjoo lightly stepped back to dodge her. It was like that during their first year as well, but Bangjoo was getting more and more agile by the day. Apparently, he was learning Jiu-jitsu as well. He seemed like he would become a fighter before he became an action actor.

“Let me shoulder-throw you once.”

“Hell no.”

“You’re a wuss for a boy.”

Just then, Aram saw Jiyeon who was leaving her classroom while waving her hand shyly. It seemed that her classmates were wishing her luck as well. Aram ran over with all of her might and hung her arm around Jiyeon’s shoulders. She smiled when she saw Jiyeon flinch.

“Oh! That startled me.”

“I wonder when our cutie will stop being surprised.”

“Anyone would be surprised if you suddenly do that from behind them. And hello, Bangjoo.”

Aram pointed at the stairs. She had gained a lot of worries ever since new students joined the club and she became the leader of the club, but thankfully, they managed to advance into the finals.

“It was a little unexpected that Hwasoo High didn’t pass the preliminaries. Their stage was also not as good as last year’s,” Bangjoo said.

“It’s not a surprise. That seonbae wasn’t there. You know, the one that was dazing out all the time. Everything died without him on the stage.”

“Heewon-seonbae.”

Jiyeon mentioned his name for her.

“Yeah, him. The reason we lost last year is because of him if you think about it. He was no joke, wasn’t he? On a stage with more than 10 people, only he caught people’s eyes. He practically won their grand prize and he also won the individual prize. He did everything by himself.”

“That’s true. He even won against Myunghwa High.”

Bangjoo smiled bitterly as though he was remembering what happened last year. Last summer was a season filled with disappointment since they didn’t even pass the preliminaries.

“It might have been a different story if Maru-seonbae was there,” Bangjoo said with confidence.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Aram said as she thought about Hwasoo High’s stage that she saw last year.

Maru-seonbae was definitely good at acting. When she watched him from time to time, she had the feeling that an eagle was playing around in a flock of chicks. Heewon-seonbae from Hwasoo High also gave off that feeling.

“Are you saying that Maru-seonbae is worse than that seonbae?” Bangjoo said poutily.

Aram shook her head.

“Do you think I’m capable of evaluating the two? I can only tell that both of them are really good. That’s for sure, but, let’s say the roles they play are different.”

“Their roles?”

“Look here. The seonbae from Hwasoo High is in a sense, a ‘general’. The strong champion wearing a fancy helmet stirring enemy front lines.”

“I heard you were into historical dramas lately, and it sure shows, huh,” Jiyeon commented with a chuckle.

Aram shrugged. Like what she said, Aram was currently deeply mesmerized by a traditional historical drama that was being aired on KBS. Yesterday’s episode was about a general who was marching forward with the intent to conquer the enemy castle, and Heewon had a similar image to that general.

“Anyway, the seonbae from Hwasoo High has that image. The other members are merely sidekicks. With his bow and arrow, he shoots down enemies while trotting on a horse. He can lead the whole battle by himself without any help. It’s like this - you can win the battle as long as you have him.”

Bangjoo and Jiyeon nodded at the same time.

“I guess you do get that feeling.”

“I’m not saying that the people from Hwasoo High’s acting club are bad or anything, but it is true that Heewon-seonbae’s acting is eye-catching.”

Aram climbed the stairs and continued,

“Meanwhile, Maru-seonbae is more like a strategist. He doesn’t get any attention himself, but he brings out the best of those around him. I can still remember my first stage during 1st year. It was when I had

to say my line. I felt really confident because I practiced a lot, but when it actually became my turn, my head just stopped working. I felt nervous even though I've never felt nervous during Judo competitions. I couldn't remember what my line was, and my turn was approaching. I was just beginning to wonder what I should do when Maru-seonbae told me my first line and to not worry. He looked like he understood what I was going through. Curiously, when I heard him say that, I could remember my lines clearly again."

It was quite dizzying to think about it even now. Had she stuttered there, she would have been the one to ruin the play they'd been practicing for months.

"Right, Maru-seonbae gives that feeling. I also received a lot of help from him. He tells me what I need to do when I get stuck on something, so I feel I can always rely on him," Jiyeon said.

"That's not always the case. He might act like that when he's with us, but when we went to the movie shoot with him, he was always proactive. And you know that drama, right? The one where he comes out briefly as a murderer," Bangjoo interrupted.

"You mean The Witness?"

"Yeah, that one. Take that. His acting skills don't lose out even when he's up against my sister. Maru-seonbae definitely is capable of going wild if the stage is right."

"That's true. But if I had to classify him, I feel like the seonbae from Hwasoo High belongs in the spotlight. Maru-seonbae suits that position as well, but for some reason, he looks like he doesn't want that," Aram said.

They did not hear any details, but apparently, Maru participated in club activities but avoided going on stage. He only got on stage after Miso, the instructor back then, had painstakingly persuaded him, but apparently, he never showed up to practice during summer.

"Even if you look at him now, Maru-seonbae has never wanted the main character position even in his second year, has he?" Aram questioned as she looked at Jiyeon.

After thinking for a while, Jiyeon spoke,

"Last year, there were only seven people in the club. Dowook-seonbae was in a different club in his 1st year, and he just switched over last year too."

"Ah, right. Speaking about him, Dowook-seonbae should be coming today, right?"

"Well, I'm not sure. He didn't show up at all last week, so he must be busy?"

"That seonbae has it hard. He might have a bad nature, but it is definitely reassuring to have him around."

Aram sighed. Just then,

"Hey, if you're gonna insult someone, do it when that person is not present."

They heard a voice as they were climbing up to the 5th floor. Aram raised her head. Dowook was standing there with a frown on his face.

“Senobae!”

“You were insulting me just moments ago, yet now you call me seonbae?”

“You shouldn’t mind that between us. Also, are you coming with us today?”

“It’s a great opportunity to skip classes, so what do you think?”

Dowook entered the hall while yawning.

“What the, he’s tagging along to skip classes?”

Aram made a sour expression and entered the hall. The 1st year students, who had arrived before them, greeted them.

“All the 1st years are here, right?”

“Yes!”

“Today’s the finals, so I’m sure you must feel nervous. Also, you’ll become even more nervous once you get there. But there’s nothing you can do about it. Nothing will prevent you from getting nervous after all.”

Aram gave a cursory glance at the 1st year students.

“But we passed the preliminaries after months of practice, and we’re going to the finals with that skill. We’ll be up against people from all over the country. You should’ve heard this when you first joined the club, but in the past, Woosung High used to sweep all the prizes. Recently though, we’ve never been close to winning. That’s why, let’s win one this time. Let’s show our seniors that we are better than them by winning the prize!”

“Yes!”

“Good. We’re going to go once the instructor arrives, so get your costumes and scripts. Staff, look out for the props so that they don’t get damaged. Once the truck arrives, we’re going to load them there. If you break one in a hurry or something, that’ll be worse than anything, so take it slowly and safely. Okay?”

Aram nodded as she looked at the first-year students replying. They would get good results as long as they did what they did during the preliminaries.

“Daemyung-seonbae, Maru-seonbae.”

The 3rd year students came in through the door. They looked tired for some reason.

“The speech was so good that we didn’t dare interrupt midway,” Maru said.

Aram crossed her arms and laughed.

“Why are you so late when you are in your 3rd year?”

“Daemyung, the club president is mad. Let’s be quick.”

“Huh? Yeah. We should.”

Aram grinned as she looked at the 3rd year students who were lining up behind the 1st year students.

“The instructor said she’ll be here by 9:10, so let’s do some vocal exercises and stretches until then. We’re 2nd, so when we get there, we won’t have time to do anything. We need to prepare ourselves here.”

Aram did some stretching exercises like usual. The first-year students all followed suit. They were used to these exercises by now. Miso arrived around 20 minutes later.

“You’re here.”

“Yes, I’m here. You look good, everyone. Well, I guess we did beat Myunghwa High in the preliminaries, so it’s not that surprising. Do just that and get the grand prize again today, alright?”

“Yes!”

“Then let’s go down. I’ll come once I get my honey.”

People booed when she said the word ‘honey’. Of course, when Miso glared back at them, they all shut up.

“Aram, get everyone downstairs. I rented a coach, so you can get on it.”

“Really? I thought we were going by train.”

“I spent some money as a graduate of Woosung High. So bring me that grand prize. It hurts me to see that this school didn’t get any grand prizes after I graduated.”

Miso left the hall with a smile. She probably went looking for teacher Taesik.

“Looks like we’ll have an easier time getting there. Everyone, go down. We need to get the props from the container.”

“Uhm, seonbae-nim. I went to the parking lot before I came here, and I saw all the props loaded on a truck?” one of the first-year students wondered.

“What are you saying? The truck is supposed to be here at 9:20.”

“If I didn’t see anything incorrectly, the truck was already here, and all the items were loaded as well.”

“Really?”

Aram exchanged gazes with Bangjoo and went down to the 1st floor. There was a 1t truck parked outside the school gates. She lifted the weatherproof sheeting and looked inside. The props for the play were all lined up neatly.

“Who did all this?”

Just as she was wondering, the coach arrived. Miso and Taesik waved at everyone to get on. Aram had the first-year students get on first. There was a rental coach, and the props were loaded already. Thanks to that, it seemed like they would get some leisure time when they arrived. Perhaps they would even be able to get a proper rehearsal done.

At that moment, she saw the 3rd year students get on the truck while yawning. In the driver's seat was a woman she had never seen before, and she was smiling in joy as she looked at Dowook. Not only that, she was pretty to boot. Dowook seemed to have a hard time around that woman, but he eventually put a smile on his face.

"Look at that. Dowook-seonbae is smiling."

Aram stopped Bangjoo and Jiyeon from getting on the coach. They also watched the smiling Dowook with their jaws agape.

"Who is that?"

"I don't know."

"I've never seen Dowook-seonbae smile like that before. Look at that! He's acting embarrassed, too!"

"I'm not sure what that's about, but let's take a photo for now."

The three of them took out their phones at the same time. They took photos of Dowook smiling shyly in secret. This was something they couldn't see even if they had to pay.

"I guess we're lucky today for seeing something new?"

Aram looked at Maru and Daemyung who had fallen asleep inside the truck already. From the way things looked, it seemed that those three were the ones to check the props and load them onto the truck. She remembered how Dowook was yawning when she came across him at the staircase. It seemed that they were still seniors after all.

"Let's get in. We might be able to get a rehearsal done if we get there quickly," Aram said as she clenched her fists.

Chapter 690

"You said the competition is today, right?"

After hearing that question from the person next to her, Gaeul nodded her head.

"Is it in the evening?"

"No, I have to go after 2nd period."

"Really? Then are you going to skip classes?"

"Probably."

"Sounds nice. On a day like this, I'd love to ditch class and play outside," said her friend as she looked outside.

The weather definitely looked good today. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky outside. The sun that was high up in the blue sky looked like a ceiling light in a theater. Today, her juniors would also get to act under one of those lights.

“Over there, if you’re gonna chit chat, you might as well raise your hand and do it openly,” said the history teacher as he smacked the chalk on the board.

Gaeul became quiet.

As soon as the period was over, her friends all rushed to her class. During nationals season, the school hung up huge banners above the school gates and on the walls of the school. ‘Win the Grand Prize this year too!’ - thanks to this promotion line, everyone knew that today was the day of the competition.

“Those of you going to cheer for the acting club, go downstairs and get on the bus,” said her homeroom teacher who came in as soon as it was break time.

It seemed that the 3rd year students who had gained admission into college already were all going.

“I wanna go too. I hate studying.”

“Can’t you take me as well?”

Gaeul told her friends to study since she obviously knew that they weren’t being serious.

“I’ll do well, don’t worry.”

“Yeah. Win the grand prize while you’re at it.”

“Good luck!”

Gaeul picked up her bag and stood up. She waved the cheering cards that her classmates made for her. Gaeul gripped her fists and did a ‘fighting’ pose.

-The vehicle for the supporters of the acting club has arrived. Would the faculty please lead the students and have them board the vehicle.

There was a school-wide announcement as well. Gaeul could see the 2nd year students go down in a line. When she went down to the 2nd floor, she saw the first-year students as well. She saw this every year, yet it excited her every single time.

She left the main building and ran towards another building. Having arrived at the acting club practice room, Gaeul took a deep breath before opening the door.

“Seonbae-nim, you’re here.”

“Hey, come quick! Even if you’re a celebrity, we cannot forgive you for being late,” said Choi Seol, the club president, with a smile.

Gaeul pinched Choi Seol’s waist before standing next to her colleagues.

“Well then, the 3rd years are all here as well, so we’ll depart after I say some things. Before that, instructor, do you have anything to say to us?”

Hearing Choi Seol’s question, the instructor shook her head.

“The instructor doesn’t have anything to say, but I do. Let’s reclaim the grand prize that we couldn’t get last year!”

The juniors all cheered out loud. The shout from nearly 100 people was sufficient to fill the acting club's practice room which was as large as a small-scale hall.

"Let's get results that match our practice. Those of you who didn't pass the audition, watch today's performance carefully, and put everything into the winter audition, okay? You know that skills are everything in Myunghwa High, right? This year, I'm really proud to say that there was no room for the 3rd year students since you were all so good. I'm done now so next, we'll have the mascot and the pride of our club who goes by the name of Han Gaeul, which now suits her more than her real name, say a word for us!"

The microphone was suddenly tossed over to her, but Gaeul did not panic. There was something she wanted to say to them as well.

"Go and have fun everyone. If you do, there will be great results."

Gaeul raised her hand that was holding the mic and shouted fighting. The juniors also followed suit. She then gave the mic back to Choi Seol.

"The coach is waiting outside, so get on coaches 2 and 3. Coach 1 will be for the actors and the staff that will go on stage. There are things I want to tell you as we go. Okay?"

"Yes!"

"Good, let's go!"

The juniors started moving when she clapped her hands. Gaeul also picked up her bag and started moving. As she did not go on stage, she had to support the actors that did as much as possible. When she got to the school field, she saw the coach with the cheering team leave. The first-year students, who saw this for the first time, were all gasping.

"Good for you! You get to ditch classes!"

"Good luck this year!"

"Kim Soomyung, don't get nervous and do your best!"

"Park Minji, fighting!"

Voices could be heard from the main school building. Students were poking their heads out the window and were cheering with envy. The juniors whose names were called out waved their hands in excitement or covered their faces with their bags before running over to the coach. This was the rowdy ceremony for Myunghwa High's acting club.

Gaeul patted the juniors who were frozen stiff before getting on the 1st coach. She sat on the window side around the middle. The club president, Choi Seol, stood outside to check the members. The club members boarded the coach one by one. There was a hint of seriousness on some of the junior's faces.

"Do your best, first-years. You are the main characters for this year," said her colleague.

This year, the audition to join the club and the audition to select the actors were extremely fierce, and due to that, a lot of hopes were placed on the 1st year students who managed to pass all that. Hearing

the 1st year students reply in loud voices, Gaeul smiled faintly. At that moment, she saw a certain junior get on the coach with a script in her hand. Gaeul met eyes with her, who looked around looking for a seat, and that junior smiled and approached her.

“Seonbae, can I sit next to you?”

“Yea, I left this seat for you.”

“Thanks.”

Gaeul looked at Yuna who sat down next to her. She was originally going to play the main character, but she changed to playing a side character because of the reasons that she found herself lacking as well as the schedule for her drama shoot.

“Seonbae, what do I do? I feel so nervous.”

“It’s fine, it’s nothing much so don’t worry about it.”

Gaeul grabbed Yuna’s hand. Since she was a junior that Gaeul cherished, she hoped for her to bring out the best of her skills on stage.

Just as she was going to smile back at Yuna who was smiling at her, a memory that she had consciously been putting aside poked through her surface consciousness. She could picture Maru’s face next to Yuna’s.

Gaeul shook her head. That matter shouldn’t be talked about right now.

“Seonbae?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“You must be tired, right? Looking after all of us.”

“I said it’s not like that. I have great stamina, you know? Rather than that, you memorized the script perfectly, right?”

“Of course! I woke up early in the morning and read it over and over again. I don’t want to make a mistake.”

“Nice to see you all fired up.”

Yuna smiled.

“It’s all thanks to you, you know?”

“Me?”

“Yes, Gaeul-seonbae. You were the.... Ah, sorry. That name is stuck to my tongue now.”

“It’s okay. Everyone calls me Han Gaeul now, so I even wonder what my real name is sometimes. Actually, it’s better to call me that. My agency’s president told me that being called by my stage name will bring me more luck.”

“Then I’ll keep calling you Gaeul-seonbae in the future so that you get more and more luck.”

“Thanks. But what did you mean when you said it’s thanks to me?”

Yuna spoke while folding the script in half,

“Do you remember back then?”

“Back then?”

“When you bought me strawberry milk at the convenience store in front of the school.”

“I do. I also remember what we talked about back then.”

Yuna nodded.

“Actually, I was having a bit of a hard time back then. No, I didn’t even know that I was having a hard time. I just practiced every day before going home, and I thought that acting was something fun but never truly enjoyed it. Back then, I never was truly acting. You noticed that first and talked to me about it. The strawberry milk I had back then was the most delicious one I ever had.”

“It’s just strawberry milk you can find anywhere.”

“No. It was a special one that you bought for me. You don’t know that I became a fan of strawberry milk after that, do you?”

“Really?”

“Yes!”

Gaeul covered her mouth and chuckled. The term ‘strawberry milk friends’ suddenly popped up in her head. While it might sound strange, she quite liked that term. However, the more she enjoyed her conversation with Yuna, the thicker the steam of unease that arose from the depths of her consciousness became. It was an emotion that she couldn’t fully grasp.

“The words you told me back then helped me out a lot.”

“...I see.”

“Yes. And thanks to you, I got to know Maru-seonbae as well.”

Gaeul turned her head away. She didn’t know what kind of face she had on right now. Would her lips be twitching? Or would she be expressionless? She had heard everything from Yuna already; that she had confessed to Maru. At first, she just found it funny. She thought that it was a cute mistake by a cute junior. Things wrapped up well, and Yuna told her that she didn’t have any feelings for Maru anymore and that she would be careful in the future. Gaeul even told her that it was okay.

She thought that she took it smoothly without any negative thoughts about it. Had she not seen Yuna’s expression a few nights ago, she would still be feeling at ease.

Gaeul calmed her expression and looked at Yuna. Yuna was looking at her, curious as to why she turned her face away so suddenly.

“The weather’s really good.”

“Yes, it really is. Perhaps thanks to that, my body feels really light today. I feel like I’ll do great on today’s stage.”

“I hope so.”

It must be a mistake - she tried consoling herself, but whenever she saw Yuna’s face, she couldn’t help but be reminded of what happened back then. Maru didn’t look affected. In fact, he even looked annoyed somewhat. However, Yuna was different. Her eyes contained feelings that she could notice from miles away. It was a gaze that she could understand clearly because she was a girl as well.

Gaeul tried to understand it in her head. She consoled herself by thinking that she liked him as an admirable seonbae. It must be a relationship between a senior and junior instead of a man and a woman.

Just then, her phone started ringing in her bag. Gaeul picked up the call without even checking who the caller was. Her eyes were fixed on Yuna’s face, so she didn’t even have the room to check.

-That was quick.

It was Maru. Yuna had turned her eyes to her script just as she picked up the phone. Gaeul looked at the side of Yuna’s face before speaking,

“Yeah, Maru.”

She felt her eyes tense as she said those words. It felt like her optic nerves were on edge in order to capture something. She was disappointed in herself for suspecting a junior, but on one hand, she wanted concrete evidence that would put her at ease. It was her heart that ordered her to say Maru’s name out loud before her head could decide otherwise. And the following events made Gaeul’s eyes hurt.

Yuna looked her way. If she was just looking, she wouldn’t have felt anything. Yuna had the eyes of a startled rabbit. It looked like she was caught while doing something wrong. Yuna’s following gaze was that of probing and even a hint of guilt. It was for a brief moment, but Gaeul was able to read all that. Just as she was about to deny that, she heard a voice.

-Is it really not? In my eyes, I think that girl still likes Maru. No wait, loves Maru, maybe?

Gaeul turned her head around to the window. She could feel a vibration from the seat next to her. Yuna was definitely shaking. She probably read something from Gaeul’s eyes as well.

Gaeul shouted at the one inside her heart,

There’s no way that’s the case.

-No, you know better than that.

No, Yuna is a junior I cherish.

-There’s no reason why the junior you cherish can’t be the one that likes Han Maru, is there? Can your juniors not like Maru?

That’s not what I’m talking about.

-How is it not? You know, you're a bad girl. Is Han Maru yours or something?

Shut up.

-Greedy girl.

I'm not.

-I think you are. If you aren't, then look at Yuna right now. Look at her and tell her properly. If you don't feel afraid that is.

Gaeul clenched her teeth as she listened to the voice of the one in her heart.

-That's why you're no good. You were always like that. You tried to have everything. Every little thing.

What do you know about me?

-Oh, I do know you. I know you really well. But I'll stop here for now. We are partners after all, aren't we? Without my help, your acting will never be complete.

Her voice became faint.

"U-uhm, seonbae."

"Yeah?"

Gaeul smiled and turned her head around.

She turned off the phone without being able to greet back.