

Once Again 731

Chapter 731

Yuna grabbed the end of the page with her fingertips and repeated her line as she flipped back and forth. She practiced several times, but she couldn't get the line to stick.

"I like things the way they are, I just like things the way they are."

She slightly modified the lines as she repeated them. Although the priority was to digest the lines on the script perfectly, she could edit them slightly if she felt her tongue not being able to cope with them. She couldn't change the lines outright, but she could change the minor details. Producer Jayeon said that the writer might have written words that aren't actually spoken even while consciously trying to write speech in written form.

"We're going to the next scene. Please move the camera."

The staff in front of the pojang-macha started moving. Yuna also grabbed the script in her hands and stood up. It was her turn now. Although she had become used to it, she still found it hard to breathe within the shooting set for some reason. She wondered when she would feel comfortable. After opening her mouth to take a deep breath in, she spat it out all at once, intending to bring out more energy. Her bangs waved when she breathed out. After touching up her hair, she walked over to the assistant director. Maru was standing next to him.

"I'll do the rehearsal. Go adjust the schedule for the background actors," Jayeon came over and said.

The assistant director turned on his phone and stepped aside.

"It feels quite different to shoot when the sun is still up, doesn't it?"

"Yes. It feels completely different from shooting at night," Yuna said as she looked around her.

Whether it was the busy staff, the people that came to watch, the cables strewn across the floor, or the heat from the lights, there was nothing different from night shoots, but she strangely found the set to be filled with vitality.

"This is why people need to work during the day and sleep at night. Everyone looks so much healthier when they work during the day. At night, they all act like zombies."

Jayeon clapped and gestured for her to come. Yuna glanced at Maru before standing in front of Jayeon.

"We're going to shoot you two running after turning that corner."

Yuna nodded. This was a scene that was in the script as well. This was the scene where Park Haejoon and Yoon Jihae ran towards the pojang-macha, which was like their secret little hideout, after they got a lot closer. Having arrived at the pojang-macha first, Jihae would tease Haejoon for it, and Haejoon would buy her udon because he lost the race.

She grinned for a while after reading that part of the script. This sweet scene was when the confession happened. They check their own feelings and tell each other they like the other at the same time. She became a little heated. It was like there was a sweet scent in the air. Although this was a shoot and the

confession was a part of the drama, she liked the feeling of being able to whisper love with Maru-seonbae.

“Yuna, did something good happen today?”

“Eh? N-no, not really.”

She straightened up her expression quickly, afraid that Jayeon might find out what she was thinking. She could feel the things that made her heart race sinking down below her consciousness. I must not show it in the shoot, especially in front of seonbae - work and personal lives had to be separate.

“If anything good happened to you, don’t just keep it to yourself and tell me about it. I’m busy editing these days, so I have no fun in life.”

After sighing, producer Jayeon walked to the end of the alleyway. The producer, who was hidden behind the corner, shouted at them to watch closely before running out. She ran past Yuna and arrived at the pojang-macha. Seeing her tap down on the stainless steel table, Yuna applauded. Producer Jayeon was fast enough for her to believe that she was a sprinter, and her running posture was really pretty.

“That’s how you run. You see those rails?”

“Yes.”

“The camera will follow and shoot you from the side. Yuna will be in front of the camera, while Maru will run behind you. I mean, Yuna has better looks than Maru does, right?”

Maru chuckled, saying that he was going to consider getting plastic surgery. Yuna waved her hand in the air and said that he looked okay.

“So I’m just okay, huh. Not cool or anything.”

“That’s....”

Maru, whose right eye was twitching as he said those words, soon loosened up his expression, saying that it was a joke. Yuna smiled and tried to grab his arm, but Maru pulled away right at the end, so she swiped empty air. Feeling embarrassed, Yuna retracted her arm as though nothing had happened.

“I’ll say this beforehand, but I scheduled the shoot early in the morning on purpose for this scene. You two are going to have to run to your deaths today.”

Jayeon made a suspicious smile. After the rails were installed, the camera was placed on them. One staff member repeatedly slid the camera across the rail to shoot.

“We’re ready.”

The assistant director’s signal came. Jayeon pushed her on the back, telling her good luck. Yuna re-tied her shoelaces tightly before turning the corner and standing in front of the wall. She put her wireless microphone on and got ready to run.

“Yuna will run out first, and then Maru after that. Watch out not to fall down, but don’t run too slowly.”

The assistant director said into the walkie-talkie that they were ready. Yuna turned her head around to see Maru.

“Are you confident at running?” Maru asked.

Yuna did not respond. Instead, she decided to show him. She liked using her body to the point that she would jump around in excitement on days when there were physical tests during gym class. She also had confidence in her running skills.

“Get ready.”

The assistant director pointed three fingers up. Seeing the fingers fold one by one, she stepped out quickly at the last one. She ran with the intention of leaving seonbae behind in the dust. The camera that slid across the rails entered her eyes. She ran like she was sprinting and touched down on the pojang-macha’s table. While it was a short distance, her breathing was haggard because she held her breath while running.

“You’re quite good.”

Yuna looked at Maru as she calmed down her breathing.

“Seonbae, you’re a good runner.”

“I’m pretty good when it comes to using my body.”

“I was planning to run really fast and surprise you, but I guess I failed.”

After pushing out the hot breath at the tip of her tongue, she stood upright. She dashed with the intention of finishing this shoot on the first take. As she ran with all her might, she expected the outcome to be pretty good.

“Let’s do that once again.”

Jayeon asked for a re-shoot without giving any feedback. Yuna thought that it was plausible and returned to her original spot.

“We might have to keep running like the director said, so control your stamina.”

“Yes.”

Yuna exercised her ankles. Maybe she didn’t like how she swung her arms, or maybe her expression was strange. She started imagining a scene where she and Maru would run playfully. A smile crept onto her face, and her body felt light. She felt that she should be able to get a good reaction if she dissolved that ticklish feeling into her act.

No! - Yuna pinched her waist. She vowed not to harbor personal feelings while working. No, it wasn’t just while working. As long as Maru-seonbae and Gaeul-seonbae were dating, she could not think about bad things. She kept imagining that dream-like scene that made her keep smiling, but it would be rude to the two seonbaes if she showed them that. Yuna did not want to become a bad girl that wanted to steal another’s love. Yes, she had to hide it for now.

She ran with all her might like she was running on the school track. When she arrived at the pojang-macha and straightened her waist, she heard the cut sound.

“Okay.”

Was it enough with just two shoots? While she was running out of breath, her skin was still soft and smooth without any sweat. She was slightly worried when Jayeon told her that they were going to run to their deaths, but from how the okay sign fell after just two runs, she seemed to have said it as a joke.

“Put away the rails!” Jayeon shouted.

Yuna touched her hair that drooped down in front of her and was about to prepare for the next scene.

“There’s no need to redo the setting. You’re going to run again. We just need to fix your makeup.”

“That wasn’t it?”

“We’re just starting.”

The shooting car, which had been waiting on one side, started to move. The car with the camera in the back stopped on the road she just ran on. Jayeon got on it.

“Actors! In your positions!”

Yuna breathed out faintly and returned to the corner.

“We got a side view last time, right? We’re going to get a front view this time. The side view doesn’t show a lot of the facial expression, but it’ll all be revealed when shot from the front, so you’re going to have to watch out,” said the assistant director.

“Also, you’re probably going to have to run quite a lot until we get a good cut since the director pulled the shooting schedule early saying that she wanted to put a lot of effort into the running scene. If you take it lightly because of the short distance, you’re going to have a hard time. Run with the intention to end it as soon as possible. It might feel easy at first because you’re full of energy, but it’ll affect your expression later if you start losing stamina.”

Yuna twisted her body as she listened to the assistant director’s words. She didn’t know that she was going to be shot from the front. Her hair would all go disheveled, and her expression would look weird. Yuna imagined how strange her expression would look.

“Get yourself together, and get ready to run,” Maru said, standing next to her.

Yuna pressed down on her disheveled hair slightly. Although it would soon become disheveled again, she wanted to look pretty even if it was for the first moment she appeared on the camera.

“Get ready! Three, two, one, cue!”

Jayeon’s voice could be heard. Yuna turned around the corner with a smile on her face. She saw the shooting car in front of her. Yuna ran with the intention of catching up to that car. Only after dashing about 50 meters in this commercial district was she able to come to a stop. This was her third sprint already. She was sweating down her back.

“One more time. Don’t look downwards unless you want to show the audience your head.”

“Yes.”

Having returned to their original position, Yuna drank a sip of water. She started to feel that she might actually not have enough energy.

“Are you okay, seonbae?”

“I’m doing okay. How about you?”

“I’m okay too.”

“It’s good to focus on the running and all, but be conscious of the fact that you need to act while running.”

“Yes.”

The shoot continued. Four times, five times, six times. After shouting cut cheerfully for some time, Jayeon started looking at the screen with suspicious eyes after a while.

“Let’s take a break. We still have an hour of leeway.”

Yuna sat down on the spot upon hearing the word ‘break’. She didn’t have the energy to walk towards the chair which was only a small distance away from her. The total distance she moved was about 600 meters. Even though the weather was pretty chilly, she was all sweaty. It was unexpectedly quite hard to run while smiling. She had to be conscious of the camera, of the distance between her and the shooting car, and she also couldn’t forget about interacting with Maru, who was following from the back. If running was all she did, she wouldn’t be this tired.

“An actress can’t sit on the floor like that. Here.”

“Thank you.”

She sat down on the chair that Maru brought her. Her knees trembled.

“You’re hardworking.”

“Eh? Ah, yes. I have to be.”

“But Yuna, working hard and working well are definitely different.”

Yuna sealed her lips and looked at Maru. While his voice was soft, he was scolding her. She wiped the sweat on her neck with the back of her hand and faintly smiled.

“I will do well.”

“How?”

“Eh?”

“I was wondering how you are going to do well.”

“That’s....”

She was at a loss for words. She couldn't think of anything to tell him when he asked for a concrete plan. Yuna was about to smile awkwardly but decided not to. From the way things looked, this wasn't the time to be smiling.

"You remember what the director said about how you should be conscious of what's beyond the camera? I understand that it's hard to act while running. Heck, I can't do it that well either. But when she doesn't give you any directions between each cut, it means that her directions haven't changed. The director chose you for a reason. You must prove to her that her eyes weren't wrong when choosing you."

Yuna slowly nodded. Today, seonbae's presence had changed quite a lot. It was quite a peculiar feeling to feel someone she knew feel unfamiliar to her. He wasn't waiting for her and being generous to her; he was telling her to see the problem with her eyes and solve it. While it was a reasonable reprimand, Yuna felt rather sad.

As she was thinking that, Yuna saw that Maru was quietly looking into her eyes. His deep eyes seemed to penetrate through her surface and read her mind. Maru took his eyes off her and sighed faintly.

"Give me your hand."

Yuna put her hand out obediently. Maru grabbed her hand gently.

"You aren't running forward by yourself. This feeling, the feeling of running together. We might be apart, but you still have to feel like you are leading me while grabbing my hand. The reason you're looking back from time to time is not because you are trying to discern if you're going to win or lose; it is to see if the one following you is still following closely. The reason you want to arrive first is not because you want to prove your superiority in physique. It must be to portray it as an advantage; as something to boast about to the person running behind you."

Seonbae let go of her hand. The words were engraved into her ears. The details of the feelings she had forgotten about momentarily because she was running seemed to all come back to her.

"I think I know what to do. I really do."

"Actors can only be true to their emotions. Lying will become obvious soon."

"What?"

"Use what you can for now. You should at least finish work."

Maru cut out all the details, but Yuna soon realized what Maru was talking about.

"Seonbae."

"Get ready."

There were things she wanted to ask him, but she nodded for now.

Chapter 732

"Good, cut! That was a good run."

Seventeen times. Only after she ran the distance of 50 meters seventeen times repeatedly did the cut finally end. She found it hard to even sit down and calm her breathing. She wanted to lie down.

“Good job.”

Maru handed her a bottle of water. She was going to say ‘you too’ back to him, but she couldn’t say it because someone from the staff approached her and covered her shoulders with a blanket.

“It’s pretty chilly today, so you have to watch out for your body temperature.”

“Yes, unni,” she said to the staff member with a smile.

At first, she found it awkward that someone was looking after her even though she didn’t ask for it, but she became used to it after experiencing it a couple of times.

“Kim Yuna, Han Maru.”

Producer Jayeon called out to them. Yuna stood in front of the monitor. The footage they shot just now came up on the screen. The way she smiled brightly while running didn’t look awkward at all. When she saw how she glanced back from time to time to look at Maru, she even felt a little proud.

“Both of you, remember this feeling and take it to the next act. If we want to show the change in the cold and indifferent Yoon Jihae and the rather insensitive Park Haejoon in a short time, we must not miss trivial details like this. I’m going to have to dissolve two couples and one man’s worth of story in four episodes, so we don’t have that much leeway, understand?”

“Yes.”

“Cool off and fix your makeup. We’re going to continue right away. We actually have a lot of time left because it ended earlier than I expected, but we can’t have you putting down those emotions.”

Yuna left her face up to the makeup director^[1]. She closed her eyes and when she opened them again, she saw that Maru was sitting next to her. The way he was reading his script while getting his makeup touched up made him look like a stereotypical pro. She thought about doing it herself and opened the script she placed next to her and lowered her gaze.

“Yuna, raise your head a little.”

She quickly said yes and took her eyes off the script. She tried to read the script, but she couldn’t stay still due to the makeup director. Can you open your eyes? Turn your head a little? Smile a little? She finished getting her makeup done after changing the position of her head as well as her expression according to the makeup director’s words.

“You go take care of that side. I’ll take care of this place.”

The person putting makeup on Maru grabbed their makeup tools and walked over to where the background actors were upon hearing the words of the makeup director. Yuna looked at Maru, who had been getting his makeup done while reading his script quietly for a while. He still had his eyes fixed on the script and muttered his lines from time to time. The makeup director took out some concealer. It seemed that she was going to cover up the blemishes on Maru’s chin.

Yuna thought that the makeup director would tell him to raise his head. After squeezing out the concealer from the tube onto her pinky, the makeup director kneeled down. She lowered her eye level and applied the concealer on his chin and cheeks before telling Maru that it was done.

“Thank you for your work.”

“I think we should leave the skin tone like this.”

“Yes, it’s not too catchy. I like it. Should we leave his hair like this?”

“It’s fine unless the director has something to say. It would instead be strange if it was too near after he supposedly ran with all his might in the scene right before. The character he’s playing doesn’t use any wax, so it’s fine to leave it slightly disheveled like that.”

“Okay.”

The two college students standing behind the makeup director tied the makeup tools. Yuna heard that they were here to gain experience. Yuna looked at the makeup director who explained her ways to the students behind her. Both Maru and herself were reading the script, so why was it that she didn’t say anything to seonbae? She met eyes with the makeup director, who was talking with a student. Yuna quickly lowered her head.

“You look like you’re dissatisfied.”

The makeup director approached her. Yuna quickly explained that it wasn’t like that.

“Then why were you looking at me like that? I’m a shy person, so I wouldn’t be able to get any sleep at night if someone looked at me like that.”

Yuna hesitated before starting to explain the reason,

“I was reading my script, yet you told me to lift my head, right?”

Hearing that, the makeup director seemed to have understood and nodded.

“So you felt it was unjust because I told you to move while I let Maru be?”

“No! It’s not like that. I was just curious about what was different between me and him.”

“I have one job. It is to put on makeup so that the actor’s charm is maximized. When I ask you to move your head, it is a justified request, right?”

“Yes.”

“This ahjumma, you know, I judge a person’s style after looking at them. There are people who will move if I tell them to, and there are people who won’t. It would be much easier to put makeup on someone who obediently follows my instructions, right?”

“Then did you think that seonbae won’t listen to your...?”

“That’s not it.”

The makeup director interjected and looked at Maru, who was sitting a good distance away.

“Just like how my job is to put makeup on people, an actor’s job is to act. While I’m doing makeup work, if we consider the importance, of course I believe that acting practice takes priority. There are many people who can put on makeup, but there’s only one actor who can do the act. That’s why I tend to respect actors when they are focusing. If it’s something I can do by just taking a step further, then I will gladly do that. That’s the attitude of a person who gets paid to put on makeup. It’s also the proper way to treat a pro.”

The proper way to treat a pro. Yuna closed her lips when she heard those words. She immediately understood what that meant.

“If I have to go through an overhaul, I would of course tell him to put his script down and lift his head, but if it’s just this much, I should not interrupt him if possible. Tell me if you don’t like my ways. I’ll fix it.”

“No, I’ll do better from now on.”

“Yes, you can also do that.”

She couldn’t retort at all.

Yuna faintly sighed before sitting next to Maru.

“Seonbae.”

“Yeah?” Maru replied without taking his eyes off the script.

Yuna found him slightly hateful for not budging.

“How can I become a pro?”

“You’re a pro even now. You’re getting money from someone else’s pocket. That should be enough to be called a pro.”

“But there are differences.”

“Differences?”

“I want to act like you, seonbae. You know you’re the reason I started taking interest in acting, right?”

“You told me about it last time.”

“How can you act like that, seonbae? If it was the others, they’ve practiced more than me and are older than me, so I can understand, but....”

“I’m actually much older than I look.”

Maru glanced at her before looking at his script again. Yuna felt the corner of her lips twitching. It was because she heard from the makeup director that she wasn’t like a pro, but more than that, the words she heard from Maru during the running scene became vivid again and made her tremble.

“Seonbae, are you uncomfortable with me?”

Use what you can - Maru told her these words just an hour ago. The moment she heard those words, Yuna understood the implied meaning behind them. Adding his actions of putting distance between them since morning, there was nothing more to think about. Maru probably wanted to tell her to get rid of unnecessary emotions.

"It's not that."

"You told me, didn't you? That people's emotions don't go away so easily and that you understand me. You also told me that I can treat you comfortably until I calm down my emotions."

Maru closed his script. The ice-clear eyes looked at her. Yuna swallowed a groan. He had the same eyes as her mother two years ago on the anniversary of her father's death. Back then, her mother hugged her and Bitna and said this: Mom will definitely protect both of you.

"Yuna, you can insult me for being inconsistent. The words I said that day was a mistake on my part. It's not that I didn't mean it. I just changed my mind."

"Then..."

"I'll say this clearly. It still doesn't matter whether you like me or not. I will not mind it in the future either. If you gain anything by harboring those emotions; if you can sublimate those emotions into something related to acting, it would be okay, but if you can't, I can tell you that you'd be better off if you put an end to those emotions as soon as possible."

"I know, I know it too. I know that I can't like you. But you know what? When you acted like nothing was wrong when you told me that you couldn't contact Gaeul-unni, I ended up misunderstanding. I thought that I may have a chance."

"It's my fault."

It was a clean apology. It felt like the counter employee quickly apologizing for a payment mistake. It sounded so detached. She felt dazed. For a brief moment, she even thought that she was hated. Perhaps he found her annoying for being so persistent.

The relationship between her and seonbae going wrong? She didn't even want to imagine it. Leaving aside not liking her, she didn't want to be hated. Yuna shook her head.

"No, I put that in a strange way."

When she glanced at Maru's face, she saw that it was frighteningly indifferent. She even got the feeling that talking to a wall might be a better idea. Did something happen to him over the past few days? It felt like someone completely different had taken the form of Han Maru and was standing in front of her.

At that moment, Maru lowered his frighteningly frosty gaze before lifting his gaze up again. A kind set of eyes had replaced it. It was the eyes of the seonbae who lent an ear and a shoulder to cry on to a person he met for the first time.

"Sorry for being so indecisive. Sorry for not acting like an adult. Sorry for not being clear to you."

"Stop apologizing to me. You did nothing wrong."

Yuna lowered her head with her fists clenched. It was the first time. Maru understood and accepted the worries that she couldn't even tell her mother about. She was touched by his words that soothed her wounds, and she gained the courage to face acting head on. The reason she got selected in this drama and could act in it was all thanks to Maru as well. Her mentor and her first love kept apologizing to her. Yuna felt a big sense of fear. She was afraid that they would separate for good just like this and that everything might come to an end between them. She felt like she wouldn't be able to hold back her tears if they became like friends who said hi to each other but no more.

The reason she held back from crying loudly and clinging to him was because of the word 'pro' that the makeup director mentioned. She couldn't inconvenience everyone here. She didn't want to make the foolish mistake of ruining everything because she was swayed by her personal emotions. She was determined to smile and say that she was okay, but her lips twitched endlessly and she couldn't do as she wanted to. Stop beating so hard heart - Yuna clenched her eyes shut.

She quietly breathed out. She had to show that she was okay.

"Uhm, seonbae."

When she opened her eyes, Maru was no longer in front of her. She found Maru looking at her from some distance away. Yuna blinked. She understood everything. This distance, this physical distance seemed to be representing the distance between their hearts.

She suddenly laughed. It was too easy. Even though she felt heart-shatteringly painful, even though she felt so agonized that her head was about to burst, she could control her emotions. Maru, who was watching her, gave her a nod before turning around without regrets.

Haa - Yuna sighed out. A tingling sensation climbed up from her toes. The moment the brain-shaking tremors died down, Yuna felt that her first love had come to a complete close.

"Seonbae, I'll be off to the bathroom for a bit," she said, her eyes clear.

Maru quietly took out some tissues for her. Yuna pouted but still accepted them. Her footsteps towards the bathroom became faster and faster. By the time she reached the building with the bathroom in it, she was almost running - Ah, today's a day filled with running. Yuna abruptly opened the door and slammed it shut. She turned on the tap to full power and sat on the toilet after putting the cover down. Then she cried. She thought while crying: what do I tell the makeup director?

"This is what being a pro is about, huh?"

Goddammit - she cried again after seeing the makeup on the tissue. A moment later, she laughed. She repeatedly switched between laughing and crying several times before standing in front of the mirror. Although her face didn't look terrible because the makeup was thin, there were definitely places that had to be fixed up.

"Let's do this, Kim Yuna. Tell'em who's boss."

She calmed down her expression before returning to the shooting location. It seemed that they were almost ready to shoot as some of the staff started restricting people from coming inside.

"You're here?" Maru said.

“Yes, I’m here.”

Yuna replied firmly, to the point that it even surprised her. Her heart felt heavy, yet refreshed.

“Can you do it?”

“Of course.”

“Then please take care of me from now on.”

Maru reached his hand out. Yuna stared at that hand for a while before making a scissor shape with her fingers.

Scissor and paper; after looking at the two hands for a while, Maru smiled and retracted his hand.

“Please take care of me, seonbae.”

Yuna said as she pulled her hand away.

[1] Here, the ‘director’ doesn’t mean that she’s related to the filming. She’s the director (or ‘headmistress’ in British English) of a makeup school that she runs.

Chapter 733

Wednesday, 23rd of November, 2005. Maru left his house while listening to the goodbye of the news presenter. The bag that would usually contain his script was filled with chocolates and yeot^[1]. In his hands were insulated water bottles that contained warm barley tea.

“Yeah, I’m on my way there.”

He got on the bus as he picked up the call he got from a junior. Although it was the same morning bus, the composition of the people inside was a little different today. There was a student muttering something while looking at the notes in his hands, a girl clasping her hands as though she was praying, as well as a student who was reading a textbook without holding the handle on the ceiling. The bus filled with students proceeded very slowly as though the driver had no intention of stepping on the brakes. The road leading to Suwon station, which would usually be crowded with cars during rush hour, was empty like the red light district during early dawn on a Tuesday.

Maru pressed the bell. The beep made some of the students flinch and look outside the window. On the day of the CSAT^[2], all students would become meerkats. They left the bus and walked towards their designated school. The weather was so cold that wearing a thick jacket wasn’t enough. He could hear the news presenter’s comment: today will be the coldest day of the year yet.

“Seonbae.”

Aram waved her hand. There wasn’t a flashy blow-up balloon in front of the newly opened restaurant. A parent, who was rolling a Buddhist rosary in her hands, looked at them for a moment before starting to pray again.

“Today’s really cold.”

“It’s the cold wave.”

Maru looked at a desk in front of the school gates. This was a desk that was used in the acting club. Behind was a flagpole that they used during a play, and on it, was a flag that when opened read 'Park Daemyung, Kang Dowook, Pass and get into Seoul University.' Around that line were small lines of encouragement. This was the work of the juniors at the acting club.

"Seonbae, you're here."

Jiyeon appeared with her nose bright red.

"You're really devoted."

Maru poured some of the barley tea for Jiyeon and Aram. Only after grabbing the warm paper cup in her hands did Jiyeon look better.

"Where's Bangjoo?"

"The convenience store. He went to buy some food."

"You guys didn't eat anything?"

"Yes. Somehow, things turned out like that," Aram said as she tapped on her stomach.

Maru put his bag down on the desk. On the other side of the gates were students wearing uniforms of another school, holding a basket. It seemed like they were also juniors who had come to cheer for their seniors.

"Why aren't you taking CSATs, seonbae?"

"Because I don't have to."

"But Dowook-seonbae is taking it."

"For him, you won't know what will happen in the future. Even if he succeeds his family business, it'll be better if he could go to a good college if possible."

Maru wiped under his nose. He felt like the weather had gotten colder even though the sun went up.

"Gah, it's so cold!"

Bangjoo appeared with a plastic bag in hand. Maru waved at him.

"Ah, right. I forgot yours, seonbae."

"I'm fine. You guys can eat. I had breakfast."

"We can't do that. Have half of mine."

Bangjoo split the hoppang^[3] in half and gave half to him. When Maru thanked him for it, he found Aram and Jiyeon each giving him a half as well. Maru smiled and told them to eat.

Bangjoo sat down next to him.

"You don't come to school after CSATs, right?"

"It'll be a month of employment experience^[4], so no."

“Can’t you come?”

“What kind of terrible thing are you talking about?”

“Come to school and practice with us.”

“Why don’t you let us go already?”

Maru looked at his watch. It was just past 7:30. It was around this time that cars and taxis started flocking in front of the school. Students who got off with their parents held each other’s hands until the front of the school before going inside.

“Good luck Irim High! Seonbae-nim, good luck on the tests and get great scores!”

The students outside started cheering loudly. The 3 years, no, 12 years of education^[5] will be evaluated on this single day. It was the peak of unreasonability, but there was no way to go against the sturdy system. Maru looked at the backs of all the students that went inside and prayed that they gained just as much as they had prepared. Not more, not less.

“Hey, tuna.”

Maru called out to a classmate of his that appeared in front of the school. This boy came alone and had a vague smile on his face. He took out some of the chocolate and yeot from his bag and gave it to him.

“Good luck.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Maru prayed again. He hoped that the god that gave him the big middle finger was kind to the people around him. He hoped that that boy got more than he prepared for the exam. Arms could only bend inwards, and it was the greed of humans to wish for those closest to them to do better than complete strangers. He handed out yeot, chocolate, and warm tea to everyone he knew.

“Seonbae-nim! Good luck!”

Bangjoo’s cheering was a freebie. He had a voice equivalent to ten people outside. Maru’s friends, who were encouraged by a junior they’d never seen before, seemed rather taken aback, but they all waved their hands above their head with smiles as though they found it a relief that someone was cheering for them.

“Do you think that helped?” Bangjoo asked.

“More than enough,” Maru replied.

It was 7:48, and the cheers and prayers became even louder. Just then, an unexpected person showed up.

“Why are you here, oppa?”

Bada appeared wearing a yellowish-brown scarf. The juniors sitting next to him all fell silent at the same time. Maru rested his chin on his hands and spoke,

“Why do you think I’m here?”

His sister had armed herself from top to bottom with fashionable clothing and makeup. It was to the point that Maru would have a hard time recognizing her if he came across her in a crowded place. Bada did not hold back her awkwardness. Maru saw a sense of embarrassment hiding behind her expression. He looked at the paper bag in her hands. Inside was a scarf and a hand-written letter. Of course, both yellowish-brown.

“Don’t look.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have the talent to unsee what I’ve seen.”

Bada’s lips twitched and she rolled her eyes at him before exclaiming out in surprise. She probably read the big banner of encouragement.

“Dowook will be here in a little bit so wait.”

Bada nodded obediently. Maru went over to his juniors and told them that she was his sister. Bada approached the three of them with a gentle smile on her face.

“Hello there. I’m his sister.”

“Dowook’s gf, by the way,” Maru added.

He got hit on the back of his head as the price for that. He rubbed his aching head and looked at Bada before turning to look at the juniors. Their faces were colored with shock.

“What?”

“So there is a person who can hit you on the back of the head,” Aram said.

Jiyeon quickly nodded. Bangjoo looked at Bada in displeasure but turned his head away when they met eyes.

“She is your sister alright. Her eyes are just....”

Maru smacked Bangjoo on the neck with a hand-knife gesture.

“It’s cold. Drink some of this.”

He gave her some barley tea. Bada accepted it without a fuss and drank it. During that opportunity, he looked inside the paper bag once more. Next to the rolled up scarf was a small insulated lunchbox.

“I was wondering what you were up to in the kitchen last night.”

“Mind your own business.”

“I’ve never got something like that even though we live under the same roof, yet Dowook gets one, huh.”

He expected Bada to grumble, but unexpectedly, she just hesitated and didn’t say anything. She seemed rather embarrassed. Maru had the urge to tease her more, but he decided not to since his sister might use the insulated lunchbox as a weapon if she lost her reason.

“Uhm.”

Bangjoo raised his finger. A blue 1t truck was approaching. It was the vehicle that helped them out during the national acting competition. The truck stopped in front of them. The first one to get off was Daemyung. Following him, Kang Soojin and Kang Dowook both got off the truck.

“You’re having a hard time thanks to these two,” Maru said.

Soojin shook her head with a smile.

“Oh! It’s that unni I saw at the hospital. Am I right? Do you remember me?”

“Ah, you were Maru’s sister, right?”

“Yes.”

“It’s nice to see you here. Your name was Bada, was it? I’m not sure if I remember properly. It was two years ago.”

“You’re right, I am Bada.”

Bada smiled as she looked at Soojin. During the winter of his first year, when he got crushed under the burning set, Soojin came over to visit him in the hospital and Bada happened to be there. Bada had a really good memory if she could remember a brief meeting that happened 2 years ago.

After exchanging greetings with Soojin, Bada smiled at Dowook standing behind her. Maru felt chills run down his spine the moment he saw that. That was beyond hypocrisy. The epitome of acting lay here.

“But why are you here?”

“He’s my brother. But you two look like you know each other?”

Soojin pushed Dowook’s shoulders and brought him in front of her. Bada widened her eyes in a fluster.

“Ah, uhm the thing is....”

Just as Bada was about to start talking in an alien tongue, Dowook, who stood in front of her, grabbed her hand.

“She’s my girlfriend.”

Maru resented his hands for not taking out his phone quickly enough. The expressions the three people made were masterpieces that he had to send down to the later generations as an heirloom. Soojin became even more flustered than Bada.

Maru called out to Daemyung, who was dazing out next to them.

“And here’s the person who’s going to take care of you.”

Having discovered Jiyeon, Daemyung walked over stiffly. Even though they’d been dating for more than a year now, the two still became shy in front of other people. Maru looked at the two couples in front of him before turning his eyes to Aram and Bangjoo.

“Why don’t you two start dating as well?”

“With Bangjoo? I’d rather live with a bear.”

“Seonbae-nim, you crossed the line there.”

The two juniors seemed triggered. Maru poured some barley tea and handed it out to everyone.

“Alright, you can whisper your love when you feel down after taking the tests. I can’t bear to keep watching.”

Dowook smirked and downed the barley tea in one gulp.

“I’m going to guess all the answers and then sleep^[6].”

“Since you’re taking it anyway, you should solve them seriously. This is why people from wealthy households are no good.”

Maru slapped Dowook’s back and wished him good luck. Dowook crossed the gates after taking the bag that Bada handed him. Daemyung also stood in front of the gates with the gifts that Jiyeon prepared for him.

“Now, you, though, need to do really well on the tests.”

“That puts a lot of pressure on me.”

“Don’t feel pressured by just that. CSATs are nothing compared to learning what production is like. Just take it slow and think of it as stepping through a door. You should do well so that you can take some money out of our president’s pockets.”

Daemyung smiled, saying ‘yes’. Maru massaged his shoulders.

“Good luck.”

“Yeah.”

The juniors, who were waiting at the back, waved the banners they wrote.

“Good luck!”

Dowook, who was waiting inside, took Daemyung and walked inside the building. Maru stood in front of the gates and looked at the two.

“This is how a parent must feel, huh.”

“It’s not like you had any kids,” Bada said.

Maru faintly smiled.

“Oh, I guess you didn’t know, but I had a cute daughter.”

“What are you on about now?”

Bada waved at Dowook, who walked inside the building. Even Dowook, who was awkward when it came to expressing his feelings, couldn’t ignore her, so he created a heart with his arms above his head.

“What the.”

This time, he wasn't late. On his phone screen was Dowook in that terrible posture, but it was a smiling Dowook.

"Are you okay, oppa?" Bada asked suddenly.

"With what?"

"With not taking the tests."

"I don't need to."

"You're really okay, right?"

"I have my hands full as it is. I don't have any time to take tests."

"Well, if it's like that, then I guess it's good. I was slightly worried that you might be depressed, but I guess I did that for nothing."

"You just worry about yourself. There are only two years left."

"I know that too, you know?"

After grumbling, Bada spoke in a small voice,

"But still, you worked hard."

Maru turned around to look at Bada. She shrugged before walking over to Soojin. There was a gentle smile on her face as though she was interacting with her mother-in-law.

"Seonbae, let's go get breakfast!" Bangjoo said while rubbing under his nose.

Maru faintly smiled and said, 'let's go.'

[1] Traditional Korean candy. Wikipedia for more details.

[2] Every year, the day of the CSAT (College Scholastic Ability Test: basically college entrance exams) is considered a holiday, well, except for the examinees. People don't work, or the work hours start late; students don't go to school on this day; and heck, even planes don't fly at certain hours. Also, this day becomes magically cold every single time. It's like a whole 5 degrees centigrade colder than the day before. Examinees are assigned to go to a different high school, not their own schools to prevent cheating, to take their tests. This is why the next line mentions 'designated high schools'.

Also, on this day, you'd see news like 'a policeman took an examinee to their exam venue' and stuff like that. EVERYONE looks out for examinees on this day.

[3] White bun with hot bean paste inside. Wikipedia for more details

[4] Not entirely sure what this is, but since Woosung High is an engineering-focused high school, it's likely that there's a school program where students can experience what the field is like. It should be something similar to an internship.

[5] 6 years of elementary school + 3 years of middle school + 3 years of high school

[6] CSAT questions are multiple-choice questions because it makes it a lot easier, and fairer to check the answers for more than 500 thousand people that took the tests this (2005) year. That is why there's mention of 'guessing'.

There are also people who don't take the exams seriously, even though it costs money to participate (like Dowook here) because: 1. They do so in order to set a lower average for others by getting a low score (the results are relatively graded). People that do this usually do so because they already have a secure future, or have guaranteed entrance into a college already; 2. There were various perks(?) that you could get if you visited some businesses with your exam card after the tests. For example, a gym or a swimming pool might have a discount for examinees; 3. They just live without thinking (I've personally seen people like this). Though, for number 2, it's my personal experience (I took the test in 2014), so I can't say whether or not the same things existed back in 2005.

Chapter 734

"Don't get nervous. If you get stuck, apparently, it's better to move on to the next question and come back to it later. Don't mismark the answers when you finish the questions. Don't leave the marking until the end of each exam and remember to do it from time to time."

"Seonbae, you look more serious than we do."

The colleagues of the acting club giggled in front of the school gates. It was 7:50. It was about time to go inside.

Gaeul grabbed the hands of the graduates that came to cheer her on. It wasn't just the seniors that graduated last year. Those that graduated two years ago could be seen in front of the school gates as well.

"Good luck with your exams. I'm sure you'll do well."

Gaeul nodded as she listened to last year's club president's words. Although the weather was cold, her palms were sweaty. This exam would change her whole future. She hoped and prayed that the friends that she had spent the last three years with do well on the tests.

"Seonbae-nim, we'll go in now."

"CSATs are nothing, so don't be too nervous. Honestly speaking, it's easier than doing a play. If you take the test with that mindset, I'm sure you'll get the grades you want."

Leaving behind the encouragement of the seniors, she walked inside. Even though she only took a single step inwards, it felt like the air had changed. The stifling and heavy air filled the school campus.

"I'm going to go drinking right after this."

One of her friends, who had brought beer to the school field trip, fired herself up saying that she was going to go to a bar right after the tests. The joke that came just as she was about to feel nervous relaxed her tension.

"Yeah, let's try going, whether we get caught or not."

"Since we're going, we should be celebrating."

Gaeul calmed down her breathing and walked down the corridor. She was assigned to a different classroom from her friends. Before she entered class 3, she had a hug with the friends that went to class 2. Good luck; you too - they each wished other luck, then she entered the classroom and sat down. The cold sensation of the wooden chair pierced through her body. Her mind cleared up in an instant and it finally felt real that she was taking the CSATs.

She calmed her breathing and took out her revision notes. The department of theater at Chung-a university, which she was aiming for, decided their entrants by basing 50% on the CSATs and 50% on a practical exam in the A sector^[1]. No matter how high her practical exam results were, she would not be able to pass if her CSAT results were bad. Considering that the department of theater did not accept any pre-enroll students, it was likely that the CSAT results would decide everything. She practiced acting at the agency while studying Korean, social studies, and English during her free time^[2]. As for math, she planned to just answer the questions she could and forget about answering the difficult ones.

The scores of the students that enrolled last year were: 98 points for Korean, 67 for math, 60 for social studies^[3], and 73 for English. During her mock exams, she got higher than the criteria scores for last year. As long as she did just as well as that, she wouldn't have a problem with the CSATs.

It was 8:10. The entry time for the examinees was up. Students wearing earbuds started studying with their revision notes. There were 30 minutes until the start. Feeling the tension in the air through her skin, she started studying when her phone started vibrating. She had forgotten to turn it to silent. Gaeul quickly opened her phone.

-I know you told me not to contact you, but forgive me since today's an important day. Good luck. I'm sure you'll get in.

She stared at the screen for a whole minute in a daze. She could practically hear Maru's voice. She had to look at her revision notes beneath the phone, but she couldn't move her eyes away. She hesitated a little before putting her fingers on the keypad.

-Is that what's important right now? You can send a text any time. But to take that test that will happen in 30 minutes, you'll have to wait 1 whole year. You never know what will happen to you in that year.

The rabbit had spoken. Gaeul settled her mind. She was about to turn it on silent, but she instead turned it completely off.

Maru had given up on going to college. Although he was the one who said that they should enroll at Chung-a university together, the situation had changed. He started walking down the path of an actor properly. The field was calling him, so college was nothing. Gaeul was surprised at Maru's unstoppable progress. Even without a college background, he would definitely be able to succeed as an actor.

She was still far from being a match for him. Gaeul looked at herself. She did not have the courage to give up on college. Although she managed to smoothly sign a contract with an agency, she had no work yet. It was natural. It was a reckless decision to use an actual high school girl to play a high school girl in a field where people in their mid-twenties or even their early thirties, played such roles.

Gaeul also tried to give up on enrolling in a college and tried to take various auditions, but she changed her mind after hearing Gyeonmi's advice. The connections tied to the major college theater

departments couldn't be looked down upon. As she wasn't confident in her skills, Gaeul decided to look at the future.

She also dreamed of going to the same college as Maru, becoming a campus couple, and enjoying college life while taking the same lectures as him, but that was already out of reach. Maru had skipped college and stepped into society. Although Maru was always ahead of her, he felt even more distant now.

-That's why you need to work even harder. How long are you going to keep feeling unconfident? You must pass the tests, hone your skills, and become acknowledged by those around you. You can meet Maru at that time. You didn't cut contact with Maru with a half-assed mindset, did you? You have to do it when you have to. If you adhere to a strong resolve, there is bound to be a reward for it.

The rabbit was entirely right. Gaeul decided to forget about immediate happiness for the distant future. If she met Maru and spent time with him right now, she might feel happy, but she would definitely regret it if she watched as the gap between them widened. She did not want to feel the regret of not having been able to try harder.

Yes, this was for both of their sakes. Gaeul pushed her phone deep into the depths of the desk drawer.

* * *

"Seonbae, we'll be off now. You're coming to school tomorrow, right?"

"Tomorrow, yeah."

"Then see you tomorrow. Bada, you too!"

Aram and Bangjoo got on the bus. Maru took Bada, who was whining about the cold, to the bus stop that was across the road.

"DNA is amazing. Soojin-unni and Dowook-oppa are both pretty and handsome."

"That's a pity. The Han family is kinda far off from beauty."

"Of course not. It's fine because I take after mom. It's just you who has a scary look."

"Father will feel disappointed to hear that."

The bus arrived. The empty bus once again made him realize that today was the day of the CSATs.

"Did you two fight?"

He heard that voice behind him. Maru turned his head around. Bada was talking to him while looking outside the window.

"I said, did you two fight?"

Maru did not answer. He immediately realized what she was talking about, but he did not know what to tell her. Did they fight? Or were they fine? Maru was unable to find out the truth behind this small farewell.

"Did you do something wrong?"

“No.”

“Then did unni make a mistake?”

“No.”

“Then what is it? Isn’t Gaeul-unni taking her CSATs today?”

“She is. She’s probably staring at the test papers real intensely right now.”

Maru opened his phone again. It was 9:30, yet he hadn’t gotten a text yet. Did she not read it? Or could she not read it? While he was wondering about the possibility of ‘could’ vs ‘did’, he folded his phone and his thoughts completely stopped.

“Should we order Jjajang-myeon for lunch?”

“Why are you talking about something else? What’s really going on? Is it serious?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You aren’t acting like yourself. What’s up with you? You don’t know the reason, and you sound like you don’t want to know about it either.”

Maru faintly smiled. He knew the reason, and he going crazy because he was dying to find out, but he wasn’t in a situation where he could approach the matter so carelessly. His life, which had repeated for perhaps dozens, and maybe even hundreds of times, had always gone past the point of ‘marriage with Gaeul’. The result always ended in destruction. In order to several that ring of life that ended and began anew every time he died, he had to do something about this situation that even the masked man had no clue about.

Since this was the turning point of his life - well, several lives - he could not act carelessly. When he thought about how meeting Gaeul and asking her why she put some distance between them might trigger his life to return ‘back on track’, he couldn’t decide so easily even if he wanted to ask her everything.

Perhaps this was the first time they walked their own separate paths in their numerous lifetimes. If they kept walking down the path set in front of them, he would have enrolled in Chung-a university and their relationship would deepen until their eventual marriage. He might have arrived at a crossroads because he chose a different option during the process of losing and regaining his memories or while his personality underwent a change.

To sum up the current situation with the help of Occam’s razor, the conclusion was that he wanted two things: One was to end these goddamned reincarnations, and the other was to get connected to Gaeul.

He also thought about giving up on Gaeul. There was a huge urge within him since there might be a different ending awaiting him if he turned his heart away from her now that she was putting some distance from him. However, it was impossible to give up. Despite the fact that he realized that he was trapped in this endless, horrific cycle, his heart deeply longed for her. Whether it was due to the feeling of love that stemmed from one lifetime’s love or deep emotions that resulted from an endless number of lives, he did not know, but he felt like he wouldn’t be able to stop the human Han Maru from being attracted to her as long as he was alive.

If she truly told him that she did not like him, he might be able to give up at that time. A corner of his heart wanted such an end.

"Anyway, don't break up half-assedly and resolve it properly. I like Gaeul-unni quite a lot."

"Yeah, alright."

"Don't just answer me. Well, I'm sure you'll take care of it on your own."

Maru looked outside as he uttered a slow breath. The pale streets looked especially chilly today.

* * *

"How was it?"

"I think I did Korean well. How about you guys?"

"I found it hard."

"Me too."

Gaeul briefly talked to her friends before preparing for the next test. She had a good feeling about Korean, the first subject. She did not get stuck reading any of the text, and she solved the questions with confidence. She didn't get stuck on any of the questions, so she could probably look forward to a good score.

She felt nervous because she was studying alongside her acting practice, but Gaeul was confident that she could make it. She was revising using her notes when she remembered the phone that she handed in before the start of the test. Phones and other electronic devices were collected for the purpose of preventing cheating.

Would he perhaps feel sad that she didn't reply? Gaeul wrote down the name 'Han Maru' in the corner of her notes. She felt really apologetic since it was her who told him that she wanted to have some distance, and now, she didn't even reply to his encouraging text. It was likely that Maru felt disappointed.

-There you go, getting distracted again. I told you this is not the time for that. You can meet a man anytime you want. But right now, you're at the crossroad of your life. Romantic relationships are good and all, but are they more important than your life? Are you going to marry Maru? You're not, are you? There's no guarantee that he will protect you for life. Of course, he might have told you that he wanted to get married to you, but do you think he thought that for real? You should remember that Maru loved to joke around with you.

The rabbit always popped out whenever she thought about Maru.

"Recently, I feel like you don't like Maru that much."

-Me?

"You don't?"

The rabbit didn't say anything. Gaeul waited for the rabbit to speak before shaking her head. Just as the rabbit said, this wasn't the time to be doing this. She had to revise for one more minute to increase her math scores. Although she had half-given up, it would be great if she got one extra point.

-He's not the only man in this world. It's just you who feels like he's special because it's your first romantic relationship. With more experience, you should be able to find out that there are many more men who are better than him out there.

"What do you know? Who are you really? I get that you're giving me all this advice for my sake, but why are you really doing this?"

-I'm not important. What's important is you right now. You live your life. Don't do things that you might regret later.

"Yeah, I shouldn't."

Gaeul gripped her pen. Time was ticking. It would be no use to regret later. People only lived once after all.

-Yes, now, there is only one life.

The rabbit quietly spoke.

[1] College applications are divided into two major methods. One is the 'official enroll' (?? Jeong-si), and the other is the 'pre-enroll' (?? Soo-si), those who have gained an entrance in the pre-enroll are not eligible to apply for the official enroll (people who have passed are also those that flunk their tests on purpose). The official enroll is further divided into three 'sectors', A, B and C. An applicant can apply for two universities in each sector. The criteria that these universities put out on each sector might be different. The general rule of thumb is to be 'conservative' on the A and B sectors, and 'just go for it' in the C sector (the C sector tends to have a big reserve list)

[2] CSAT is largely divided into five subjects: Korean (this includes literature, non-literature and grammar), Mathematics, English (these are worth 100 points each), and two 'research' subjects, worth 50 points each, for a combined total of 400 points. The two 'research' subjects are social/humanities subjects if your high school major is humanities, and science subjects if your high school major is sciences, and job knowledge subject if you're someone like Maru and is from an employment-focused high school. From 2017 onwards though, Korean history became mandatory for both majors, bringing the total to 450 points. After the five (six from 2017) major subjects, they could then choose to take extra subjects for their specific enrollment requirements like a 2nd foreign language/hanja.

[3] Combined scores for both social/humanities subjects.

Chapter 735

"Seonbae, do you think I should have stretched my line a little more?"

"It was okay. The director didn't say anything about it, so I think it should be okay."

"But what did you think about it?"

"I think it would have been better if you paused a little. It suits your character more."

Yuna nodded. Today was November 28th, and the mini-series drama shooting was nearing its end. Without any additional shoots, the 30th would be the final day of the shoot. From what she heard, everything up to episode three had been edited and was ready to be aired.

“We’ll do that again after shooting from this angle.”

Maru looked at Jayeon, who stood alongside the camera director. Her hair, which draped down beneath the beanie, had lost its vitality, and the duck-fur coat that she had been wearing since the last shoot had been worn out to the point that it looked better-suited to be in the trash. The closer December 4th, the day the first episode aired, came, the more haggard the producer became.

“I wonder if the director is going to sleep in the editing room again today.”

“The producer’s stuff is already in the 3rd editing room. She’ll probably keep editing until the day of the first episode. Park-noon from the editing room will die of exhaustion.”

He overheard the assistant director and the staff talking.

“The director must have it hard.”

“This is the first drama under her name after all. She probably wants everything to be perfect. Her personality also plays a role in that.”

Maru put his script down and walked over to the window. Today was the last scene he shot with Yuna. The background actors filled the empty seats one by one. People who were waiting while staring at their phones in school uniforms got into a proper posture upon hearing the assistant director’s shout.

“Let’s finish it well. This is the last rehearsal with the two of you.”

Jayeon started the rehearsal. She told them the emotions, movements, and expressions that she wanted. It had been two months since they started working together. Maru could predict what style Jayeon wanted even without her saying anything.

The first one to shoot was Yuna. She, who was sitting in a daze amidst the students that were leaving class after school, quietly walked over to the window. Maru nodded when he saw her fidget with the 2,000-won couple ring.

The positive effect of Yuna’s change of heart was that her thoughts became deep. She still maintained her method of exploding out with her emotions, but she was beginning to gain control over that. Ever since he regained his memories, Maru planned on not accepting Yuna’s coquettish way of acting, but Yuna herself was already trying to fix that. He couldn’t just ignore a girl who was trying, so Maru also gave her advice from time to time. Of course, he never mentioned anything deep that would touch on the depths of her acting. He only gave her small directions.

“Cut. That felt good.”

Yuna muttered her lines while the camera switched places. The camera director stood where the window could be seen. After the director gave the signal, Yuna started acting.

The student couple that was attracted to each other due to their unique charms, would say their goodbyes today. Yoon Jihae, who loved Park Haejoon’s ordinariness, believed that she too could

become ordinary and would strive towards it, while Park Haejoon, who liked her for her strong attitude, tried to become like her. They tried their best because they liked each other but that same attitude made them end up getting bored of each other.

After touching the couple ring, Yuna slowly took off the ring from her finger.

“Yuna, you’re on a roll today. Let’s get a shot of your hand and go straight to the next one. Your condition is really good, so continue just like that.”

Jayeon rejoiced like a little child. It seemed that she felt happy because she got a good picture and more time to edit.

They shot Yuna taking off the ring four times. As Yoon Jihae’s feelings had to be transmitted through her fingers, Jayeon’s request was very picky. They only shot four times since Yuna was good. Maru watched through the director’s monitor during the shoot, and the shaking of her hand, which was neither too excessive nor too weak, was worthy of praise.

“Yuna’s emotions are in a good state, so let’s get Maru’s shoulder in the scene.”

Maru stood in front of Yuna. She smiled faintly after redoing her top button.

“The director is complimenting you a lot.”

“I thought I’d get an earful throughout the whole shoot but there comes a day like this.”

“Since you’re doing so well, you should do so until the end and send her home early.”

“I’ll try my best.”

Along with a clap, the standby sign fell. Maru quietly looked at Yuna. Although he would say his lines, it was Yuna’s face that was on camera right now. His role was to lead her act so that she did not get stuck midway or make a mistake.

“I’m very confident in expressing my loss.”

“There’s a bone in your words.”

“Yes, I’m telling you about it.”

“I feel like I’m the bad one, but I guess it doesn’t matter for today, huh.”

At the same time he said those words, the cue sign rang out in the classroom. Yuna controlled her emotions perfectly to the point that Maru could not feel a trace of the smile that was there just now. From the day he told her to quit chasing him, Yuna’s acting skills became visibly better and a lot more stable. He was inwardly worried that she might not be able to control her emotions, but thankfully, he was worried for nothing. Perhaps he was thinking that she was a crybaby who could not hide her emotions and needed his help for everything. Yuna was a child who could stand up by herself.

“Here.”

Yuna handed him the ring. Maru made a bitter smile.

“What’s this?”

“You know what it is.”

“What is it?”

“I’m saying we should stop. Let’s... let’s be friends. I think that will be for the better.”

“Why so sudden... it’s not sudden, is it?”

“You know it too.”

Maru grabbed the ring. Park Haejoon hated himself for being ordinary. The cold and proud Yoon Jihae, who appeared in front of him, was more than just a role model. The feelings of admiration developed into romantic feelings, but since it was her personality, not her person, that he admired, the changes in emotions happened just as easily.

Maru quietly looked down at the ring in his hands before turning around.

“Okay! Uhm, you should bring some tissue,” Jayeon said.

Maru turned his head around when he heard the word ‘tissue’. Yuna was wiping her tears off while laughing. Maru did not say anything. Whether she became emotional due to her acting, or whether she cried because she projected herself into the character’s breakup, he did not know. He neither had the reason nor the audacity to ask.

He pulled out some tissues and gave them to Yuna.

“I suddenly felt like crying. Wait a moment.”

She turned around while breathing out in a flustered manner before regaining her smile in about a minute. Producer Jayeon approached her saying that it was okay, and that other actors were like this from time to time as well.

“I’m sorry.”

Yuna bowed towards the staff around her in apology. There was absolutely no one who looked at her in a bad manner.

“Okay, we’ll flip around.”

The camera switched places. Now, it was Yuna’s shoulders on the screen.

“I startled you, didn’t I?”

“No, I wasn’t that surprised.”

“Really? Well, I guess you’d be like that, seonbae.”

Maru faintly smiled.

“Don’t you want to know why I’m crying?”

“Do you want me to?”

After thinking for a while, Yuna quietly shook her head.

“Ah, I think there’s not a shred of regret in me now. I feel refreshed.”

She raised her hands to her eye level and quietly shouted ‘fighting’. Maru wondered who that was directed at.

“I’ll buy you something nice once we finish.”

“What got into you?”

“It’s just a cowardly tactic of trying to pay back the sense of guilt.”

Yuan tapped on her lips and spoke,

“Then I don’t want it. You need to suffer a little.”

“You’re playing the villainess role now?”

“I wish.”

A sigh mixed with thick regret could be heard.

“Get ready. Three, two, one!”

A time that was an act for one, and a time to clear feelings for the other, flowed by.

* * *

“Thank you for your work.”

“You too.”

Maru picked up his bag. The staff put away the equipment and got ready to move. They had a night shoot at the pojang-macha again today. Today was the day when ‘Choi Jihoon’, played by Byungjae, and ‘Kang Haeyeon’, played by Mira, were connected again. One side broke up, while the other got connected. Between them was the writer character, Ganghwan, who couldn’t sell any of his work.

“Get some good rest and see you early morning tomorrow. The remaining days will be on a tight schedule, so don’t catch a cold, you two. Be careful on your way back.”

Maru and Yuna left the school while being seen out by Jayeon.

“I guess that marks the end of the scenes with you now, seonbae.”

“We’ll be done if we don’t have any additional shoots.”

“How do you feel, seonbae? You feel refreshed now that you don’t have to act with this pain-in-the-ass junior, don’t you?”

“If you said that in order to make me feel bad, then I have to say that it’s pretty effective.”

“That was exactly my intention, so I’m satisfied.”

Yuna walked right next to him.

“Your mother didn’t come today?”

“Bitna has a shoot. You don’t know that she was cast in a morning drama, do you?”

“Is that true?”

“Yes. She’s also the daughter of the main character. Apparently, she shows up a lot. I’m wondering if she might become the child actor of the country.”

“If it’s Bitna, she might actually become one.”

“I think so too. Bitna is good after all.”

They stopped in front of a traffic light that was red. On the other side of the road was the staircase down to the train station.

“Seonbae.”

“Yeah?”

“What is it that you like about Gaeul-seonbae?”

He turned around and looked at Yuna straight in the face before speaking,

“Literally everything.”

“So my unrequited love was hopeless from the beginning, huh.”

The signal changed. Yuna stepped on just the white lines, saying that stepping on the black ones will make her die. Maru stepped only on the black ones.

“Do you still not contact her these days?”

“Yeah, I’m don’t.”

Yuna looked at the ground. Maru knew that Yuna was a bright kid, but he did not have a cheerful personality. She had to be feeling tired from trying to liven up the mood both back at the shooting set and now.

“It’s not because of you, so you don’t need to worry about it.”

“Was it written on my face?”

“You’re quite easy to read.”

They walked down the stairs. Until they arrived at the train platform, Yuna did not say a word.

Maru could hear the train break the silence and come into the station. He saw the train push out the air along with vibrations.

“Should I go tell her about it?”

She looked like a frightened hamster. Maru could imagine just how worried she must have been before uttering that sentence.

“You don’t have to. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why....”

“It’s me. I’m the one hesitating.”

The door to the train opened. Maru waved at the dazed Yuna to get on.

“There are times when things just don’t go the way you expect them to, right? That’s what’s happening to me right now.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I’m sorry, but you probably won’t be able to help with anything. I’m not saying this because I find you unreliable. It’s just that the problem I have is a little peculiar.”

Maru scratched his eyebrows.

“If you want to help, then treat Gaeul well. She still comes to school, right?”

“Yes. She’s been coming to the club ever since the CSATs ended. She teaches us more passionately than ever before, and she is preparing for her act as well.”

“If she’s doing well, that’s fine.”

“That’s good enough then.”

“That’s enough? What about you?”

“I’m living without any problems like this, so that’s that.”

“Are you really okay?”

“Looks like I really don’t look good huh, making you worried like this.”

Maru tapped on Yuna’s shoulder before looking forward. Having entered a tunnel, the train quickly rushed through the darkness. The light inside the tunnels flashed through the windows before disappearing. Maru thought that that was just like the current situation he was in. He was rushing through the darkness with only a few clues. He couldn’t even predict where the next stop would be.

“Uhm, seonbae.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not sure what it is, but I’m sure it will go well. I mean it.”

“Yeah, thanks. I hope it goes well too. Whether it’s the drama, my relationship, or....”

...My life.

Maru closed his eyes as he thought about Gaeul’s humming song.

Chapter 736

His hands moved before his eyes opened. He grabbed the phone by his head and took two breaths. Ring - the alarm rang. He probed out for the button on his phone due to his blurry vision. Today was the last day of November. The early morning air was cold even indoors.

He washed his face lightly and put on his jersey.

“You leaving?”

“Yes, father.”

“It’s cold outside. You should wear warm clothes.”

“I am. You’re going down today again, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Look after your mother and your sister while I’m gone.”

“I’ll try to look after my sister, but I don’t think I need to look out for Mrs. Lee. She’s very reliable.”

“That’s true.”

“There’s medicinal tonic in the vegetable compartment in the fridge. You should have one and take some for when you go down.”

Maru put on his trainers and left the house. The outside air seeped into his clothes. The air was frosty. He felt like he could produce a crispy sound if he breathed in deeply and bit the air.

He exercised before walking down the stairs. He walked along the hiking course up the mountain before doing some vocal exercises. He took it slow so that the muscles in his neck and his vocal cords had plenty of time to warm up. He did some more exercises until he started sweating before returning to his house. His father had left, and his sister was eating breakfast.

“Good for you, not going to school.”

“You also won’t be going to school once you do your CSATs, so don’t feel jealous.”

Bada, who saw the time, stuffed the rest of the food in her mouth and quickly left the house. She wouldn’t have to worry if she woke up just 10 minutes earlier, but if she could do that, she wouldn’t be Han Bada.

Maru took a shower and sat at the table.

“I put some money for living expenses in your account,” he said as he scooped some doenjang soup.

“I told you you should save it for yourself.”

“I’m saving up plenty for myself, so don’t worry. If you don’t need it, then you should save up for when Bada gets married.”

“There’s a long time left until Bada gets married.”

“Who knows? She might end up getting married early.”

He finished eating and put the bowls in the sink. His mother, who was washing the dishes, suddenly spoke out to him,

“I’m thinking of working again.”

“Is your wrist and waist fully healed?”

“They healed ages ago. I’ve had enough of playing around as well. I don’t have anywhere to go now, so I should look for a side job. Your mom is still pretty young to be playing around, don’t you think?”

“As long as you’re okay, I have no qualms about it. But don’t do anything dangerous. Not being injured is the same as saving money.”

His mother shook off the water from the bowls and laughed.

“Do you know?”

“Know what?”

“You’ve been using formal speech for a while.”

“It’s about time I reached that age. Do you find it awkward?”

His mother shook her head.

Maru brewed some coffee and sat on the sofa. As he went to an employment-focused high school, he had to start looking for a job during the month after the CSATs, but there were rarely any students who actually started working at factories or looking for employment. Most of them just got proof of work through their acquaintances or family members and handed that to the school. Thanks to that, there was practically a long holiday until the graduation ceremony in February.

His mother left the house, saying that she was going to visit the neighbors. Maru watched the news for a while before picking up his script. He lowered the TV volume and put a voice recorder on the table. He checked to see that the record button was pressed before coughing slightly.

“Did I do something wrong? Do you think I should have said something else back then?”

He spoke without putting any emotions in. He checked to see if there were any awkward parts when speaking and kept reading the parts he had to memorize today.

After saying the last line, he stopped the recorder and played it back. He focused his attention on the voice that was flowing out. Since the voice didn’t contain any emotional ups and downs, the transmittance was key. He checked for any pronunciation errors and checked the lines on the script. Maru focused on his tongue movements when he pronounced a silent t and recorded it again from the beginning.

The human body was made up of muscles that people could voluntarily move and those that moved involuntarily. The muscles that worked outside of his consciousness for homeostasis like his heart could be strengthened through exercise but could not be controlled. Actors had to do their best to use every single muscle other than those that worked to keep sustaining life.

Among them, the mouth and the neck were two parts that could not be left alone. Just like how a stewardess would try to smile while biting a pen to create a charming smile, actors had to hone their muscles endlessly in order to create various facial expressions.

Maru read the lines again while being conscious of the structure of his mouth. The sound changed according to how his breath scratched the ceiling of his mouth. The recorder that was recording his voice was a useful tool that allowed him to judge his practice objectively. Listening to his voice directly

and listening to it through a voice recorder were completely different. Actors had to place more importance on their voices that could be heard through a machine.

Click.

He pressed the stop button. The emotions he could feel from the recorded line were satisfactory.

He looked at the clock. It was 3 p.m. It was about time for him to leave. He put the script he placed on the table inside his bag before leaving the house. He got on a bus to Suwon station and then got onto a train headed for Seoul. As Byungchan was busy looking after Sooil, who had recently started a historical drama in the countryside, he wasn't able to get a ride for the time being.

Inside the train, he read a book. Since his occupation was one where he consumed his emotions, a time to recharge those spent emotions was an important process as well. He was reading Gwak Joon's latest work until he arrived at his destination. He left the station and grabbed a taxi.

"Yoo-un market, please."

The taxi driver glanced at him before asking if he took the CSAT exams.

"No, I didn't take mine."

"Why?"

"Because I don't plan to go to college."

"I see you must have your circumstances."

The taxi driver clicked his tongue and said that he didn't need the extra 300 won change before giving Maru back the note. Maru smiled and closed the door.

"I wonder if it's going to start snowing soon."

He looked up at the sky, and it looked pretty dim. The sky was filled with dark clouds and seemed like it was about to start snowing at any moment. He also saw on the news that there was a high chance of snow in the capital region.

"I hope the first snow falls."

That was the first thing he heard when he arrived at the shooting set. Producer Jayeon was the one who said those words while looking up at the sky.

"The first snow already fell in Daegwan-ryeong."

"A snow that falls in another place is unrelated to me. The snow that falls on my head is the first snow."

He learned something new today. Maru squinted and looked up at the sky. He felt like something white like snow had just fallen.

"Don't forget to wrap up the camera and watch out for the cables. We don't want any wire stripping in this weather."

The camera team seemed rather busy. They were putting on protective clothing in preparation for the cold and the snow. The lights team was also tuning their equipment in preparation for the potential snow.

"It would definitely look good if it snows," Ganghwan said, approaching him.

Maru nodded. Since this was a scene where the two characters held a quiet conversation in the pojang-macha, it would look great with some snow. The white steam from the food would also look much better.

"I heard that you decided not to go to college," Ganghwan said while offering him a hot pack.

It was one of those that warmed up the more you shook it. He accepted the pack and replied,

"I'll see what happens and then go to one if they invite me."

"Don't you have to become famous for that?"

"You sure do."

"You sure are getting ahead of yourself."

"They say being ambitious is good."

"Boys be ambitious?"

Ganghwan made a suspicious smile and closed his mouth. Just then, Maru saw a piece of white fur falling in front of his eyes. He reflexively reached his hand out. The fur that fell on his palm melted into nothing. It was snow, not fur.

"It's snowing! Watch out so that it doesn't get into any of the equipment."

"Get the clothes! Put all the leather ones back into the car!"

"Get out the oil heaters."

Voices could be heard from everywhere. Amidst the chaos, Jayeon reached out to the sky and shouted 'yes' in an excited voice. Some of the staff glared at her before going back to their work while sighing.

"There there, get to standby quickly! Let's get the snow in the background!"

Snow started falling. It wasn't the kind that would pile up. It was the light kind that people would feel fine with getting hit with; the kind that could be expressed as elegant.

"The director is overjoyed."

"She sure is."

He took off his coat and changed into the school uniform behind the car. When he returned with the hot pack - the one that Ganghwan gave him - in his pocket, they were ready to shoot. The speed of the veteran staff made him click his tongue.

"It's your last shoot today, Maru, isn't it?"

“Yes.”

Jayeon patted his shoulders.

“Since you did well until now, let’s finish off on a good note too. Same to you, actor Yang.”

“I get it. Get going with the rehearsal already.”

Jayeon pointed at the camera and spoke,

“We’re going to move the camera as little as possible, and we won’t separate the scene into many cuts either. We’re just going to shoot you two like a picture in a gallery, so do your best acting. This angle entirely depends on the actors.”

“That puts a lot of pressure on me.”

Maru smiled faintly.

“That’s what I want you to feel. I know what kind of synergy you two can bring, that’s why I did it. The camera director also said that this picture would look the best.”

“Yeah, if the director wants you to do it, then you just have to do it.”

Ganghwan brushed up his hair once. Steam started rising from the pot of fish cakes. Ganghwan crouched and adjusted the valve. The broth that boiled like boiling magma calmed down and seemed like the tranquil sea. There was enough steam to make the pojang-macha look moody.

Jayeon looked around the pojang-macha once and nodded before walking away in satisfaction.

“It’s been a while since we did anything with the two of us.”

“Yeah. Yuna isn’t here either.”

“It’s snowing too. Looks like today’s gonna be good. Let’s get something satisfactory for our director, yeah?”

“I just follow your lead, hyung-nim. Please lead me well. I’ll follow you.”

Ganghwan smiled nonchalantly before stretching his arms out. When he lowered his arm with a groan, he was no longer Yang Ganghwan; he had become the affectionate owner of the pojang-macha, Lee Jaewoo, who was also a writer who had hit a block. Maru exclaimed every time he saw Ganghwan’s method acting that switched his character in an instant.

Maru also lightly shook his head and calmed down his emotions. The more absorbed in acting he was, the clearer his mind became, which made his calculations quicker as well. It was impossible to become the character in this state. The only thing he could do was to meticulously analyze the character and cover that analysis with the skin of Han Maru.

“If you’re ready, let’s start!” Jayeon shouted.

Following that, the familiar cue sign fell from the director.

“You’re alone today,” Ganghwan said indifferently as he shook the moisture off the noodles.

No, he was 'Lee Jaewoo'. Maru picked up an egg from the basket in front of him. The character he played, Park Haejoon, was not someone who reached out for other people's items so easily. Ordinary politeness and a bit of introvertedness was his identity, but he had changed after meeting Yoon Jihae. The audience would feel a discrepancy if he showed a drastic change, so he had to keep reaching out to the audience with trivial actions like these.

"It just so happened."

He thought about Yuna, Yoon Jihae's face. He lined up the emotions that rushed up within him and observed them. It was time to see which one suited this situation the most, as well as which one he could use to match Ganghwan's acting.

"Did you two get into a fight?"

"No. We didn't fight, we decided to be just friends."

"Just friends, you say."

"Ahjussi."

"What?"

"Do you have a lover as well?"

"I did."

"How about now?"

"I don't have one."

"Why did you break up?"

"Because my future looked uncertain."

"That's a clear answer."

"As you get older, you start despising things that are vague. Do you want some fishcakes?"

"I only have 1,000 won."

"It's a freebie."

"Then I'll gladly take it."

Silence fell as agreed upon beforehand. Maru rolled the egg on the table before taking out a ring from his pocket.

"Couple ring?"

"How did you know?"

"I saw you two wearing one together. Did she give it to you?"

"Yes, she did."

"I see."

"Uhm, ahjussi."

"What?"

"Do you think I did something wrong?"

As he fidgeted with the ring, the udon bowl was placed in front of him.

"If you don't know, then I'm sure you did something wrong."

Maru picked up his chopsticks and put some udon in his mouth. There was one emotion that popped out from the line. He judged that it was the right one, so he let that emotion take over. The moment the noodles touched his lips, his chin shook. He lowered his head as he swallowed the noodles. He could see the camera lens flash at the perimeter of his vision. He felt conscious about it but did not get hung up on it. This was the basics of camera acting.

Chapter 737

Jayeon looked at the monitor while covering her mouth. This was the last cut, and it needed tears in the act. She was blessed with luck as there was snow, so she wouldn't ask for anything else if the act was good.

The two actors were captured in the angle. The faint steam that rose up from the bowl was tickling Maru's face, and Ganghwan, who was indifferently cleaning his cooking tools, was showing his affectionate side by giving Maru glances from time to time.

Although there was not a single well-known actor or even a beautiful spectacle for that matter, Jayeon had confidence in this drama. This drama would definitely be the talk of the people. The basis of her confidence was the two people acting right now. Ha Byungjae, Choi Mira, Kim Yuna. While these three showed their skills to their fullest extent, they paled in comparison to the two people in front of her. Ganghwan's act had reached a state of perfection when he was still a college student, and now it had reached a stage of maturity and was just before establishing his own brand. As for Maru, he didn't lose out to any of the adult actors despite his young age, and he even stood out from time to time.

A good man who himself was an unfortunate writer with an uncertain future, but also someone who could not ignore other people's pains; and a student who changed his personality in pursuit of the girl he liked, but resultantly ended up crossing paths with her. The characters that had formed over the course of four episodes were now rushing towards their own endings.

Maru lowered his head as though he was about to stick his nose into the udon bowl. What Jayeon had in mind was to do a master shot with everyone and everything in it first before getting a close-up of Maru's sad face. She judged that it would be hard to capture the details of his emotions with the side angle that they were shooting now.

"I think this might be better," she said in a small voice.

Although she couldn't clearly make out Maru's facial features because the camera shot from far away, it was surprisingly incredibly clear that Maru was crying in sadness. The two hands that clutched the udon bowl; the trainers that stuck to the ground before being lifted off slightly; the shrunk shoulders; the

breath that was mixed with the steam from the udon; and last but not least, the intermittent crying noises. The crying noise was not that big. In fact, it was barely audible to the point that it might as well be have been drowned out by the other sounds. The crying sound was mixed with the wind, which would disappear during the post-processing. It was the cry of a boy who could not cry out loud.

Ganghwan, who was sitting on the other side, opened the steamer. This wasn't in the script. Jayeon kept watching. When actors got into the flow of acting, they started doing things that were above and beyond what the script could tell.

He took out some soondae from the steamer and put it in a bowl. He put it down next to Maru, who was crying silently, and started chopping up radishes to put into the fish cake container. It was the consolation method of a man who was awkward at expressing his emotions. The pojang-macha he started in order to avoid the problems of reality ironically ended up being a place for him to console other people. It befitted the character 'Lee Jaewoo' that Ganghwan interpreted, who felt more pain when it came to other people's pain than his own hardships.

Jayeon looked at Maru again. Until now, the emotions followed through quite well. She wondered how he was going to react to the improvisation of the soondae. Jayeon would feel satisfied even if he burst out laughing due to the absurdity of the situation. After all, everything just looked too good until now.

She got ready to shout cut. Now that she got her hands on some good footage, it was a good idea to cut off their emotions now and consult with the actors about changing the next part. The word 'cut' climbed up to the back of her tongue.

After staying silent for a while, Maru started moving. He swallowed the noodles that were about to fall through his teeth. It seemed that the two actors still had something they wanted to do.

He stared at the soondae for a while before raising his head. His face, which couldn't be seen clearly until now as he was looking down, was revealed. Above the neck that had veins all over it from trying to hold back his voice, was a face filled with complex emotions. He sniffed before wiping his tears with his sleeve. He spat out a deep breath and Jayeon could feel a heart-thumping something from his actions.

"I only have 1,000 won."

He repeated what he said before, but his expression looked different. He forced himself to smile. The boy who felt embarrassed about crying in front of a man who was much older than him looked young and immature at most, even if he wanted to look like nothing had happened. He looked like he was about to return to the times before he tried to change himself to imitate the girl he liked.

Although the bitter breakup was still there, it didn't hurt. Jayeon started contemplating as she watched the act of the two that went one step beyond the breakup of youths that she wanted to picture originally. If she decided to keep the improvised bit at the end, the story between the student couple would turn from a cup of black coffee into bittersweet dark chocolate.

"Cut!" Jayeon shouted loudly before walking over to the two people.

"Let me ask you something, hyung. What do you think love is?"

"What the hell is this about all of a sudden?"

“Just tell me. Do you think love is closer to a cup of black coffee or a bar of dark chocolate?”

“I’m not sure what this is about, but I’ll go with dark chocolate. I could never bring myself to like coffee.”

“What about you, Maru?”

Jayeon looked at Maru. Maru faintly smiled, his eyes still red.

“I also don’t like things that are only bitter.”

“Good. That’s fine.”

“Should I get ready for the next cut?”

“No, you’re done.”

“Eh?”

“I said you’re done. There’s no more shoot for you.”

Maru stood up in a daze.

“Hyung. Boil some more water and make another bowl of udon. Also, chop up some more soondae. We need to get a close-up shot of those. No wait, both of you, just follow me. I’ll show you what we got just now. Tell me if you don’t like any of it. Hey, little one! Boil some water and set up the bowls, will you?”

Jayeon felt agitated. She came up with everything for the drama, including the plot and the script, and the drama followed along until the last moment, but there was now a scene that didn’t go according to her intentions. A cut that was not of her intentions, that was what excited her. Perhaps it was the creator’s duality to want the world they built to be sturdy yet also want something or someone to go beyond their expectations.

While she worked as an assistant director in the drama department, she got to know that different producers had different traits in the way they produced. There were directors who minimized their communications with the actors and perfectly implemented the world they wanted, while other people would proactively reach out to the actors in an attempt to create a better picture. What Jayeon ultimately aimed to become someone who directed everything so perfectly that no one would be able to give suggestions to her, but that was clearly impossible right now. Her understanding of videography was shallower than the camera director, and she couldn’t say that she had a deeper understanding of acting than the actors. Her world was still incomplete. That was why, when someone stepped out of her picture, Jayeon chose to ask a question.

The camera director approached her as well when she gestured to him. After checking that their eyes were fixed on the monitor, she played back the footage. No one said anything until the end.

“Director Yoo, didn’t I do a good job?” said the camera director with a smile.

Jayeon raised her thumbs up in response. She then turned around to look at the two actors.

“If you don’t like it, I’ll just shoot again. If you like it, then we should just go with that,” Maru said.

“Are you going to air that completely? I think that was more than a minute. Can you air that much in a drama without changing cuts? I’m asking because I don’t know,” Ganghwan asked.

Jayeon just replied ‘it’s a mini-series’.

“Then there we have the answer. If you like it, director, then you should just push on with it. It’s not me who gets in trouble if it does bad.”

Ganghwan walked over to the pojang-macha with a refreshing laugh. Maru also shrugged before following suit. Jayeon’s lips curved. Those answers helped her make up her mind.

“Senior, get the surrounding scenery. Can you do it while it’s still snowing? I need everything with that lamp post at the center.”

“I can do that. I just need to change the lens.”

“Please take care of that. Also, I need a shot from a bird’s-eye view. Please take an overview shot from the roof of that building.”

“I heard you called for a jimmy jib in the afternoon, though?”

“That’s for a zoom-out shot from the top of the pojang-macha.”

“So you did end up using it. I was wondering when you were going to use it since you were saving up so much of the budget.”

“I should save up when I can. It’s all outsourced after all. Or would you like to do it instead?”

“I don’t have a jimmy jib. You can borrow it from the entertainment program side. I heard they have one there.”

“Sure, if they are willing to lend it to us.”

Jayeon clapped and shouted.

“Let’s eat for now!”

* * *

The end of the shoot came much earlier than he expected. Maru opened the lunchbox in a daze. The scene he thought would take several cuts ended with just one. Although going home early was a present that was always welcome, it was way too early today.

“If you don’t have anything to do, you should just cheer from the sidelines,” Ganghwan said as he sat next to him.

“I’m rather puzzled because it ended so early.”

“You’re blessed.”

“You’re going back to the studio after shooting here, right?”

"I think I'm going to have to shoot until early tomorrow. This goes against the contract. I liked it when I got paid by the day, but going past midnight happens way too frequently. When I'm rehearsing for a play, I would start packing up once the sun falls, but there's nothing like that here."

"That's why they say TV work is hard. The actors can go home once they're done with the shoot, but those people have to clean up afterwards."

"You're right. They work even harder than us."

He stuffed the cold food in his mouth. It was warm when he got it, but it cooled down quickly because of the snowy weather.

"You were good."

"What?"

"I mean your acting. There's nothing more pleasing than someone accepting my act like that, and you were really good too."

"I did wonder a little when I saw that soondae next to me. Should I eat it? Should I leave it? Should I continue even though it wasn't in the script? Should I stop?"

"You did pretty well."

"Please tell me next time. I still lack the skill to keep up with spontaneous changes like that."

"You did plenty well though. Anyway, it was worth teaching you."

"Yes, it was worth learning."

Slurp~

He drank the miso soup from the plastic container. It was still warm.

"You're still managing your throat well, right?"

"I never ceased to."

"That's good then. If you keep up with the basics, I'm happy with that."

Well done - Ganghwan patted his shoulder before standing up. He finished his lunch box in that short time period.

"Don't go home first. This hyung-nim is gonna have a hard time, so it's not right for the little brother to rest easy."

"Now that makes me want to go home even more."

"What a mean guy. I hope you fall over while going home."

"So you're saying it doesn't matter what happens to me now that the shoot is over?"

"Of course. Divine retribution will fall on a guy who ditches the actor that he worked with."

"If it's divine retribution, I'm receiving one right now."

“How?”

“I’m going home early.”

“Why don’t you give that retribution to me?”

Ganghwan waved his hand and walked away. Maru finished his food before standing up. The character he went to many lengths to analyze would close his eyes today. He wondered how he would show up on TV, as well as what kind of reactions the people would have.

“Thanks for your work.”

Maru thanked the actors and the staff who were getting ready to shoot again for one last time.

Chapter 738

“General manager Park, it’s been a while.”

“Director Kim, you look good these days.”

“Not at all. I’m tired to death.”

“Aren’t you going to start shooting a film soon?”

“It’s usually harder before the shoot. You know it too, don’t you? It’s a pain in the ass to flesh out the project.”

Director Kim Chiho sat down after shaking hands with general manager Park.

“It’s cold outside, isn’t it?”

“Don’t even start. I drove my car here, and it was so damn slippery. The snow that fell yesterday froze up. You should be careful when you drive too.”

“It’s not me who should be careful; it’s the chauffeur. Here, have some of this. It’ll warm you up.”

It was sake contained in a white ceramic pot. General manager Park put a sake glass in a square box made of hinoki wood^[1] and poured the sake so that it overflowed from the glass. Kim Chiho picked up the glass along with the box and brought it in front of him.

“First, drink from the glass and then you should drink what has pooled up in the wooden frame. It tastes great when there’s a scent of cypress in it.”

Chiho lifted up the glass, that was wet on the surface due to the alcohol, and gulped it down at once. The smell of the heated alcohol as well as the heat from drinking it rushed down his throat. It was sweet, but his throat hurt as the alcohol content was pretty high.

“When are you starting the shoot?”

“I already rented a set of buildings in Gapyeong, and I’m going to start as soon as the renovations are done. Even if I use computer graphics for the building collapsing scene, I can’t use CG for all of the explosion scenes as well. Actually doing it is much better. That’s why I’m putting a lot of effort into safety so that we don’t get any injuries. Safety is important after all.”

“Of course it is. You’ll be in big trouble if people get injured. The young master will be there too after all.”

Chiho nodded.

“How was he? I heard you did an audition.”

“I did it out of formality, but he was unexpectedly good. I thought he would be a complete newbie, so it put me at ease knowing that he’s actually pretty good.”

“The chairman will disown his own family if they’re incompetent. He’s exerting some of his power because the young master is pretty decent.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s the case.”

General manager Park took out a box from his bag.

“Also, take this.”

“What’s this?”

“It’s a gift for you, from the chairman himself. Do you remember how he said that your arm looked a little desolate last time?”

Chiho recalled his meeting with the chairman two months ago. Actually, it wasn’t much of a ‘meeting’ since the only thing he did was enter his office, greet him, and leave. The chairman, who was drinking quietly, waved at him to leave as though he was done seeing his face, so Chiho lowered his gaze as he walked backwards. He did hear the chairman mention something about how his hand looked rather empty.

“Take it. My arm is starting to hurt.”

“There’s no need to go this far....”

“Hey, fella, you should take it when you’re given the chance. Even without this, the budget for the film is mostly from us, the YM group, isn’t it? It’s the chairman’s money anyway, so giving you an extra gift doesn’t change things in the grand scheme of things.”

Now that he heard that, he felt like it was true. Chiho carefully accepted the box.

“What are you doing? Open it, I want to have a look at it as well.”

“Shall I?”

Although he felt rather iffy before he received it, he was excited now that it was actually in his hands. It was a gift from YM’s chairman himself, so there would be little chance of him getting into trouble for this. Now that he was confident that he could take the gift safely, he felt bliss rising up from his fingers as he opened the package.

“Whew, director Kim. Are you sure you can go around wearing that?” general manager Park said while clapping in exclamation.

Chiho picked up the watch that was placed on the blackish-brown velvet pad. On the face of the watch was a simple logo that started with P. He gulped subconsciously.

“Put it on.”

“I’m afraid that I might get it dirty.”

Although he said those words, his hands were already reaching out for the watch strap. He took off the crappy electronic watch he was wearing and put on the new watch. Even though the only thing that changed about him was the watch, he felt like his class had risen by several levels.

“Director Kim, it looks good on you, eh?”

“I wonder if it’s okay to walk around wearing this...”

“The chairman gave it to you. You should wear it. If you’re so hesitant about it, then you should make the film a great hit and then wear it proudly.”

“I should do that. I would feel much better if I put it on after putting all of my efforts into the film.”

He took off the watch and put it back in the box. As for the old electronic watch that protected his wrist for many years, he put it in his pocket. He felt iffy now that he thought about putting it on again.

“I’m not telling you to support him openly. The chairman doesn’t want that either. It’ll be fine as long as you become a foothold for him to rise up. You understand?”

“Of course. I gave Mr. Kang Giwoo a good character and good scenes so that he will become successful in the future, so don’t worry about it.”

“Yes. I guess I should leave it to you. Oh, you should drink the pooled sake. Since you opened the gift and all, let’s toast in hopes of a great hit.”

He raised the hinoki cup. They toasted lightly before he emptied the contents in his mouth. Even as he drank, his eyes were fixed on the watch box placed on the table. The sensation of the leather that wrapped around his wrist for a brief time was still vivid to him.

“You seemed to have taken quite a liking to it, huh?”

“Eh? Ah, yes. I mean, when would I get to wear a watch like this? I can’t help but be drawn to it.”

“I’ve never received such a gift either. I guess it means that the chairman just has that much hope for you.”

“I’m touched.”

“Who knows? He might bestow you another gift if you are successful with this movie and the young master receives more attention from the people.”

He waved his hand in denial, saying that he didn’t think that it would go that far, but inside, he was high up on the moon.

He thought back to when he first met general manager Park. Chiho just laughed when he asked him if he had any intentions of doing a film that was on a bigger scale. In this industry, scale meant money, and he

was not a director that was well-known enough to receive such a big investment. Although he did have a scenario for a disaster film that he made before, it had long been locked up inside a drawer somewhere because of financial problems.

“Let’s just cast one good child actor. If you do that, the investment problem will be fixed.”

That led to the current situation. At first, he felt like he accepted an unjust deal, and he couldn’t sleep at night because he felt like he had sold his soul as a man of film, but that only lasted a week. After the promised support and investment became a reality, he became so busy that sleeping was no longer a concern. He was introduced to a famous camera outsourcing team that was known for being hard to get into contact with, and he managed to form a team with a sound director who was known for being incredibly good at picking up ambient sounds.

After he formed what he thought to be a team of his dreams, he was then introduced to actors who he always wanted to work with. He liked Lee Hyuk from Soul Entertainment, who regained the spotlight last year as an actor, but above all, he couldn’t help but clap when he heard that Ahn Joo Hyun was the main heroine. When he heard that she accepted because she found the scenario good, Chiho felt like he had the world to himself. Proud actors and actresses didn’t move based on money after all. It was entirely up to the scenario to move such people.

“Good luck.”

General manager Park’s words woke him up from his thoughts.

“I will do well. This is the opportunity of a lifetime after all.”

“I like that attitude of yours. Also, did you finish casting the actors? I did hear that you finished casting the main ones.”

“The important roles are all settled. We already adjusted the schedule, and as I told you before, we’ll crank in once the building gets renovated.”

“There won’t be a problem with any of the actors right? I saw on the news before that a film became controversial after one of the actors got caught while illegally gambling. And it was a supporting character too. This work concerns our young master, so both you and I will get into trouble if something goes wrong. You have to watch out.”

“I’ve asked reliable people to do the casting, so you don’t need to worry.”

Chiho remembered the many actors that he saw during the audition. There was a girl that caught his eyes among the mediocre bunch. The moment he saw her act, he felt that Choi Gyeonmi’s eyes were still as sharp as ever. He admired her for managing to find such good talents every single time.

“Something interesting?” general manager Park asked after seeing him smile.

“I found a really good one during the audition.”

“Is it an important role?”

“It’s going to be a minor one, but I guess you could call it important since it will ignite the mood before the main scene.”

“Looks like luck is with you. You have all the support you want, and you even like the actors who came for the audition.”

“I can’t deny that.”

“Is it a man? Or a woman?”

“It’s a girl, she’s in high school.”

“She must be cute then.”

“Well, she does look cute, but you wouldn’t think that once you watch her act. She plays a character that gets squashed under the debris, but her eyes and screams. Man, she wasn’t ordinary.”

“The extras have to do well for our young master to shine.”

“Of course. The film would look less complete if there’s a hole in it. Only after the foundational work is done properly can the main actors play on top of it.”

Han Gaeul, was it? Chiho thought about the girl who heaved out a heavy breath after finishing her act. She would become big as long as she found the right opportunity.

“Well then, I think we’re done with talking about work, so let’s eat comfortably.”

“Oh, please go ahead,” Chiho said as he picked up his chopsticks.

* * *

“Oh, seonbae.”

Maru gave a plastic bag to Aram, who looked at him in puzzlement.

“What is this?”

“Some food for everyone. How’s practice?”

“We’re just about to start. Watch us while you’re here.”

“What about Daemyung?”

“He’s fallen ill. That seonbae, he’s big, but he’s actually pretty weak.”

“It’s you who’s way too healthy.”

Maru looked at Aram, who was wearing a half-sleeve shirt. It was December too.

“It’s fine since I’ll be sweating once I start running.”

“If I was your junior, I would’ve quit the acting club already. I can imagine the pains they would have to go through.”

He opened the door and went inside. He saw first-year students strewn across the floor, panting heavily. They were probably practicing in preparation for the national competition in winter.

“What brings you here?” Miso asked from the chair.

She was covering her lower body with a blanket.

“I had nothing to do.”

“Did you finish your shoot?”

“That finished last week. I did leave my house because I felt itchy staying at home all the time, but I didn’t find anywhere suitable to go. So I ended up coming to school.”

“Don’t you think that sounds way too tragic for someone of your age?”

“True. Anyway, is your body okay?”

“Apparently, nothing really changes much just because I’m pregnant. Maybe it’s because I’m only a month in,” Miso said, stroking her stomach.

“Be careful now. They say prenatal education is very important. You should use good words and refrain from getting angry.”

“Now that you said those words, I think I’m starting to get pissed.”

“I told you, it’s not good for prenatal education.”

Maru sat next to Miso. As soon as Aram returned, the members of the acting club started stretching again while groaning. Aram trained them even more harshly than Miso did.

“You guys picked a great club president.”

“She’s a devil too.”

“I wonder what you meant by ‘too’. It feels like I’m one of them.”

“Of course not. You’re just imagining it. Oh, what did you go with for the prenatal name?”

“Snowball^[2].”

Miso chuckled after saying those words.

“It’s the dad’s work. My naming sense isn’t like that.”

“Why? I quite like Snowball. Snowball, I hope you grow up a lot and become a good person like teacher Taesik, okay?”

“Oho, so I’m not a good person?”

“The baby’s listening.”

Maru opened the bag and took out a gift packaged in wrapping paper.

“What’s this?”

“I came here to give you this. It’s shoes for a baby. It’s a color that suits both boys and girls.”

After accepting the gift, Miso patted Maru on the head.

“Thanks. I’ll use it well.”

“Please tell him or her that it’s a gift from Maru-ahjussi and that he’s expecting a gift in return.”

Maru picked up his bag and stood up.

“Then I’ll leave now.”

“You should watch the practice while you’re here.”

“Actually, I have somewhere I need to go. I only came here since it was on the way.”

Maru said a word of encouragement to the others before leaving the hall.

[1] Japanese cypress.

[2] I have no idea how to translate this. ??? is a written movement description (like onomatopoeia but not quite), for growing up.

Chapter 739

“The first episode airs today, didn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“How do you think it’ll do?”

“The late-night drama that airs at the same time on another channel is quite popular, so I don’t expect much. Of course, it’d be great if it does well.”

Maru crumpled the empty paper cup and stood up.

“I heard about the prenatal name. Snowball, huh. Pretty good, I must say.”

“My wife didn’t seem to like it though.”

“I’m sure she’s just not showing it even though she likes it. Thanks for the hot chocolate. Please bring me out to drink next time. I can legally drink now.”

“Yes, let’s do that.”

Maru said goodbye to Taesik before walking over to the container behind the school. He felt like it was yesterday when he wrote ‘Acting club warehouse’ with white paint, yet he could already see that it had yellowed and was beginning to scratch off. He tried pulling on the firmly locked padlock. He could hear a heavy metal sound. While it was very rusty, there didn’t seem to be a problem with its function.

“It’s still pretty useful.”

Thinking that he would probably never see it again, Maru tapped on the outer wall of the container before leaving the school. When he looked back at the school after crossing the road, he saw that it was shrouded in darkness. The only places where the lights were on were the gym on the left, the 1st floor where the faculty office was, and the 5th-floor hall. He felt like he could hear the faint sounds of the acting club practicing their lines.

He took out a scarf from his bag and put it around his neck. The wind was fierce. It was cold enough for there to be a warning from the government. He stomped his legs at the bus stop as he waited for the bus.

“Honey, it’s cold, put this on.”

“I’m fine though.”

“Put it on anyway. You catch colds often. You should watch out when you can.”

A man who seemed to be in college was putting a scarf around a woman. The man’s nose had turned red, but he was smiling as though it was nothing. Marriage, child, and couple. Maru smiled bitterly. What was he supposed to wish for in a world where what’s natural was no longer so?

The bus arrived. He got in and stood in front of the back door.

“Yes, hun. I’m going back.”

“Darling, listen to me. I had a really hard time today.”

“Alright, watch out on your way back. I’ll be going back first with Jisoo.”

He heard the usual sounds of people telling their lovers what happened during the day, venting their frustration, and just talking about trivial stuff. Maru took out his phone and put it down many times. Ever since he got a reply text from when it was the CSAT exams, she hadn’t contacted him once. I’ll do well - that was the last text she sent him.

“Are you still unable to speak?”

Maru called out to the masked man living within him. Ever since he regained his memories, the masked man stopped speaking. The silence of his only ally dramatically increased his fatigue. When he was acting, he could interact with the masked man, but it was impossible to converse like before. Maru thought that the day the masked man broke his silence would be the day of his death. It was just an assumption, but he was probably correct.

When he got off the bus, he got a text message. It was from Yuna. He messaged her that he was departing right now. He got onto the train headed for Sindorim. It would only take 50 minutes for him to get there, so he had plenty of time. He stood so that he wouldn’t easily lose balance and opened a novel. This was the only time his brain got to rest due to all the problems of the real world that he could not solve. It was a thriller novel that was written from the perspective of a person captured by a bunch of delusional patients, but he did not feel any agitation at all. Perhaps it was because he was in an even more fantasy-like situation.

When he read about half, he arrived at Sindorim station. He stepped onto the platform amidst the crowd. He watched the people struggling to get on^[1] before stepping onto the stairs.

“Uhm, I’ve arrived at Sindorim station, where should I go now?”

-Once you leave through the 5th exit, you should find a convenience store across the road. There’s a bank to its right, and if you follow that road, you should be able to see the sign of the restaurant.

“Okay, got it.”

He hung up the call with Ganghwan and started walking. He looked at the buildings lined up along the road until he found the restaurant. He pushed the glass door and went inside. His ears, which had frozen stiff under the weather, melted instantly.

He took the elevator to the 7th floor. He walked past a couple of drunk people, went inside, and saw a bronze statue of an elderly man covered in red. He wondered what the chicken colonel was doing here, covered in red. The people walking by also seemed to have found it interesting and some of them even took photos.

He opened the door to the restaurant and went inside. The first thing that caught his eyes was the u-shaped bar. The people sitting at the bar seemed to be in their early 30s on average. Above the bar were large TVs on each side. Each of them had a different program showing. Although it looked like some jazz would suit the scene, the sound that filled the restaurant was people’s chatter mixed with the TV noises.

Maru looked around. There were tables blocked by screens on each side of the u-shaped bar, and he saw Ganghwan sitting by the window to the right.

“You’re here.”

The first one to welcome him was Jayeon. Maru took off his bag and sat down.

“Are Byungjae-hyung and Mira-noona not here yet?”

“They can’t come because of work or something. I don’t know those guys anymore. Those guys, I told them we should watch the first episode together, and they just ignored me. The shoot is over for them, so we don’t have any business together, huh? They don’t need me anymore, huh?”

Jayeon sighed while resting her chin on her hands.

“I think you’re drunk already.”

“I’m drunk on the indifference of other people. Isn’t it romantic for the producer and the actor to watch the first episode together?”

“I think they’re avoiding you because you bullied them during the afterparty.”

He thought back to Jayeon, who had held on to Mira and Byungjae throughout the whole afterparty. She kept making them drink saying that she was exhausted, and those two probably didn’t attend today because they pushed themselves too far that day.

“We’re really going to go until the end today. Today’s Fire Friday, so don’t think about pulling out. I don’t have any work tomorrow either. But where’s Yuna? Why don’t I see her?”

Just as Jayeon took out her phone, Maru saw Yuna hurry over from the entrance of the restaurant.

“I was almost disappointed in you thinking that you weren’t coming. Yuna, come next to unni and sit down.”

Jayeon opened her arms wide to welcome Yuna. If Maru had to pick two people that had gotten really close during the two months of shooting, he would choose Jayeon and Yuna.

"I actually got lost on my way here. Was I late by a lot?"

"No. You're forgiven for coming. Yuna, you're incomparably better than kids like Byungjae and Mira."

Jayeon giggled as she hugged Yuna. Maru quietly asked Ganghwan, who sat next to him.

"I don't see any empty bottles, where were you guys drinking?"

"We already emptied 2 bottles in the pojang-macha right in front of this place."

"Aren't you going in the wrong order? From a pojang-macha to a bar...."

"Don't ask me that. I'm just a casualty too. Looks like she really did receive a lot of stress. She started acting like an unrestrained pony after the editing finished, and it made even me tired."

"Making you tired huh, that speaks a lot. I think I should run if I want to survive."

"One of us will have to take the gun. You be sick, I'll take you home."

"No. Why don't you suddenly fall down saying that you have acute appendicitis? I'll carry you to the hospital."

Maru turned his head around at the tapping noise. It was the sound of Jayeon slapping down on a table.

"What are you two on about?"

"We were just discussing what to eat," Maru quickly came up with an excuse.

One wrong step and Jayeon would feed him drinks immediately.

"Let's fill ourselves for now, shall we?"

They each ordered what they wanted to eat.

"Also, bring us beer and two sodas."

After the waiter walked away, Jayeon stretched her arms out and spoke,

"I wish I could have Maru drink, but the year hasn't passed yet, so I guess it's not happening."

"Phew."

"Instead, you can drink mixes."

"What?"

"I'm telling you to mix it with your soda so that people won't find out."

"I thought it was you who went on about not allowing minors to drink...."

"That's when I was shooting. Now that everything's over, I have nothing to hold back. Of course, Yuna's still a baby, so let's not drink alcohol, okay?"

She sounded like a drunk old man. It would be fortunate if she did not suddenly go over to the next table and started ranting.

“Anyway, I’m fortunate that it ended safely,” Yuna said.

Maru nodded. The shoot ended without any big accidents. They even had the luck of snow during the last shoot. It would be great if that luck continued and influenced the viewing rates.

“Enjoy your food.”

Various drinking snacks and food were placed on the table. They talked about various episodes that happened during the shoot. As most of them were practically drunk during the afterparty, they didn’t have any time to talk properly.

“I actually felt rather uneasy when we first started off, but now that I think about it, I don’t think anyone else would’ve worked.”

“You’re just sounding weak at this point. You said you had to make it work when you started shooting.”

“Hyung, the ship is bound to capsize if the captain is uneasy. Even if I feel uneasy, I have to rein it in and take command. Isn’t that right?”

Maru agreed, saying ‘that’s right’.

“Anyways, you two, weren’t you two going out?” Jayeon asked as she hung her arm around Yuna.

Yuna, who was eating some omurice, froze on the spot.

“You two looked to be on pretty good terms.”

“We decided to be good friends,” Maru said.

Yuna quickly nodded in agreement.

“What the? Looks like Maru rejected you.”

“No way.”

“Really? Am I wrong then? I definitely thought that you were dating.”

“Maru-seonbae has a girlfriend already,” Yuna said with a straight back.

She gave off the feeling of knowing what was going on and was clearly stating that she did not want to talk about this anymore. Jayeon glanced at Yuna for a while before changing the topic. She wasn’t someone who would pry into what people did not want to talk about. While she was easy-going, she definitely kept her manners.

“If I think about how that dog kept delaying the shoot, it still makes me angry.”

Jayeon kept the conversation going. Yuna also joined the conversation as though she wanted to shake off what they were talking about before. While the two women excitedly chatted, Maru quietly poured some soda into his cup and drank.

“Oh, it’s about to start.”

Just as everyone was laughing about the time they got an NG due to a laugh, Jayeon had looked at her watch and then spoke. Maru also checked the time. It was 10:58.

“I’ll go tell them to change the channel.”

Maru stood up and walked over to the counter. He had the TV facing them change the channel to YBS. The documentary that aired at 10 on Friday was still on.

“I wonder if we got a lot of ads,” Maru said as he sat down.

“Don’t ask,” Jayeon said indifferently. Businesses who could put ads into a mini-series either had money left over or were those that had little to no money.

Yuna, who was sitting on the other side, started tapping on her phone.

“What are you doing?” Maru asked.

Yuna stopped and chuckled.

“I’m texting my friends to watch it since it’s going to start soon. It might affect the viewing rate.”

He probably didn’t need to tell the innocent girl that the viewing rates were investigated a different way. Maru put his spoon in his mouth and looked at the TV. The documentary finished, the and ads started.

“I’m nervous,” Jayeon said.

Ganghwan also looked at the screen with a serious face since this was the first work he did outside of the theater.

“There won’t be any hiccups, right?”

“If there is, it’s your fault now, Han Maru.”

Maru just shrugged.

[1] Sindorim station is one of the most busiest stations in Seoul

Chapter 740

From some moment onwards, everyone’s eyes were fixed on the TV. The hands that kept moving the forks and glasses now stayed on top of tables and knees neatly. Maru understood why Jayeon chose this place. It was a bar, yet it was not noisy. He could hear the sounds of the TV clearly. Although the sounds of conversations interfered, it wasn’t bad to the point that it bothered him. It was like a jazz bar, but the TV replaced the jazz.

“It’s starting,” Jayeon said.

Starting - this was a magical word. Maru felt that the sounds around him were blocked off completely in one moment. His ears became a precise machine and just accepted the sounds from the TV speaker. After the last ad ended, the program logo in the top right corner of the screen disappeared. Then, the YBS program song came out alongside a notice that this was rated R15 before it disappeared.

Maru turned around to the TV. He crossed his legs and picked up the glass full of soda.

A dark night; a plane flew past the crescent moon sky. The camera chased the plane which was blinking its crash-prevention lights before slowly moving down to the bottom. It portrayed the back of a man who was walking up a hill. In the man's left hand was a black plastic bag.

"It's on, it's on," Jayeon said as she tapped on Ganghwan.

Ganghwan told her to calm down a little and quietly looked at the screen.

Ganghwan, who was singing 'Sanoramyeon' by Deul-gukhwa^[1] as he climbed the hill, suddenly braced himself against the wall on his right and started retching. Usually, dramas would only play the sound or shoot from afar, but Ganghwan's cringing face was zoomed in on. From how he looked like he was going to vomit at any moment and how his saliva dropped out from the corner of his mouth, he looked so vivid that people might misunderstand him and think that he had heavily drunk some booze before the shoot.

"Ah, what the hell."

"Urgh, it's getting me too."

The people at their neighboring tables started grumbling.

"Director Yoo, see that? I told you it was way too graphic."

"It's not me, it's every other drama that's been too clean these days. Hyung, I told you that it's about time for the paradigm to shift. How long do you think they can keep up the pretty act? We should wrap things up and start to follow America and England. Look at their dramas. They portray life as it is. Sex, murder, surgery - they don't even blur it out like we do...."

"Fine. What am I supposed to say to you...."

Maru put out his hand holding the glass. Ganghwan sighed before toasting with him.

Ganghwan entered a worn-out room and leaned against the wall before falling down. The camera showed the mumbling Ganghwan for a while before showing the prizes hung up on the wall. Various literature prizes with the name 'Lee Jaewoo' could be seen on screen.

The camera slowly fell back and eventually shot Ganghwan, who sat still in the room. The scene started to turn dark, and subtitles floated up on the screen with the effect of a submerged object emerging from the water; Pojang-macha.

"That's a good start."

"Of course it is. The start is the drama's face. I felt like my head was cracking because I couldn't think of a suitable song, but then I thought of Deul-gukhwa's songs. Their lyrics^[2] suit the drama as well. I thought there was nothing better."

"You're right, it suits the drama perfectly."

The quiet background music as well as the faint sigh showed clearly the nature of this drama. The people sitting on the other side of the screens started watching the TV one by one. What is it? What's going on? - it wasn't that they were interested; it was more that they were just watching it since it was on.

The title disappeared and the screen switched. This was the scene where Ganghwan was eating by himself late in the morning. He took out some eggs from the refrigerator and cooked some bean sprout soup.

“Look at his movements. You can see the finesse from having lived alone for a long time. I’m sure the old ladies watching this must be thinking that he must have been single for a long time,” Jayeon said.

Hearing that, Yuna chuckled.

“I hope I can use that skills for a fair lady as soon as possible,” Ganghwan complained.

“Hyung, you’re destined to be single for life. Or you can marry acting.”

“It feels terrible hearing that from you.”

The four of them laughed before looking at the screen again.

After finishing his meal, Ganghwan sat at his desk. Tick, tock, tick, tock - the sound of the second hand of the clock started becoming louder, and the number of Ganghwan’s sighs increased in correspondence. He placed his hand on the keyboard erasing everything, then he typed something before he deleted everything again - this happened for quite a while until Ganghwan’s wide-open eyes entered the scene.

-I’m gonna die at this rate for sure.

Behind Ganghwan, who stood up from his chair in a slow fashion, the dark sky could be seen. He, who had been sitting down in front of a computer for an entire day without even getting washed, finally washed his hair and face before changing his clothes. He left his house with a coolbox in each hand and headed to an old market in his car.

“That looks much more gloomy than I thought it would.”

There was a scene where the outside scenery was shot from inside the car, and the buildings in the marketplace were so spooky that they might as well be straight out of a horror movie.

“We intentionally turned all the lights off and made it look as dark as possible so that only the contours could be seen. Finding that place was the core of this drama. Without that, this whole thing wouldn’t feel right,” Jayeon said.

The car, which was driving past a narrow alleyway relying on its headlights, eventually came to a stop. The lights that shone on the gloomy streets were turned off, and Ganghwan started walking in the darkness with the coolboxes in hand. Slosh, slosh - just as the sounds of stepping on wet asphalt were quietly spread out, a dot of light appeared on the screen.

The moment he saw that single street lamp that shone in the darkness, Maru subconsciously smiled. Ganghwan started building the pojang-macha under the street lamp which was the alpha and the omega of this drama. He unfolded the various parts and put up the vinyl roofing. He finished building the exterior of the pojang-macha in a short time before starting to prepare his food. Sounds that felt like it should be coming from the kitchen could be heard in the middle of the dark street. Yuna stood up slightly and looked around. Her eyes were filled with joy.

“Everyone’s looking at the TV.”

Hearing her words, Jayeon also stood up slightly. She made an embarrassed yet proud expression and poured some beer into her glass until it was full.

“Usually, there’s bound to be a reaction as long as there’s sympathy.”

As Jayeon said those words with a sip of her beer, a middle-aged man appeared on the TV. He was a middle-aged veteran actor who agreed to do a cameo appearance, and he was well-known in morning dramas. Usually, he appeared as the chairman or an executive of a super company, but today, he had become a tired salaryman, whining in this pojang-macha.

-Gosh, I should quit that company while I still can.^[3]

-Don’t say that and drink some of this. Today’s broth turned out really good.

-You should know that I’m not handing in my letter of resignation only because I can come here. You know that, right? So you have to keep working for a long time. If this place disappears, it means the end for me as well.

The middle-aged actor got a bowl of udon and ate some of it with his chopsticks. The slurping of noodles - the sound that provoked appetite - blatantly spread out through the speakers.

“Do you know what kind of pain I went through to get this sound effect from the sound director?” Jayeon said with pride.

The middle-aged actor’s refreshing act of eating combined with the stomach-provoking sound gave the drama a charm that enchanted the viewers to watch it in a daze.

“Let’s order some noodles,” Maru said.

He had more appetite now. The nerves inside his brain that were handling primitive desires were screaming at him to put some noodles in his mouth. He called a waiter and ordered some budae-jjigae and some additional ramyun noodles.

“Excuse me.”

Someone from the next table over called out to the waiter just as he turned around. Maru poked his head out slightly.

“Are there any noodles among the drinking snacks?”

“There are some jjigae on the menu, and you can add ramyun noodles. You can also order some udon noodles in oden soup.”

“Then please give us some oden soup and udon noodles.”

Yuna was also watching that scene, and she nodded with a satisfactory smile. She looked like she had succeeded at winning a big contract.

The orders didn’t stop there. The customers that were watching the TV started ordering noodles in many different forms. Just like how yawns were contagious, it seemed people’s desire for noodles was also very infectious. It could be called a miracle caused by the middle-aged actor finishing a bowl of udon with crude movements.

The waiter disappeared with the order papers. A moment later, all the TVs installed in the restaurant had their channels switched to YBS. The one holding the remotes was the owner of this place, standing behind the counter. It seemed like he had intuitively realized that this was his opportunity to get some sales.

People called out for waiters from everywhere. Sounds of noodles slurping could be heard from three directions.

“There’s a comic called ‘Gourmet’, by the artist Heo Youngman, you know? Don’t you think that would do really well if it got a drama adaptation?” Ganghwan said faintly.

“Hyung, that’s not how it works. The technique I used in that part is food porn. It’s the effect of using sharp colors and stimulating sounds. I know that my drama can look dry at times. That’s why I chose food to make people’s eyes stay. I mean, who in the world hates eating? Eating scenes with different foods will appear in every episode. Eating, life, and love. I was worried at first, but I think people will talk about it if I look at their reactions. The start might be food, but at the end, it’ll be remembered for the story. Just you watch.”

Jayeon sat upright. Maru looked at the waiters and waitresses busily walking around handing food. Was this the power of the media as well? It was rather interesting that a drama could make people cook some ramyun late at night.

The udon-eating scene ended quite a while ago, but the noodle-slurping sounds could still be heard inside the restaurant. People focused on the TVs while drinking and eating the food they just ordered, Maru being one of them. There were similarities between the spicy jjigae and the drama protagonist, who hit a wall in life. Spiciness was something that was hard to get used to at first, but there would be a new world waiting after that hurdle was passed. As Maru knew what kind of happy ending was waiting for the protagonist, he could enjoy the drama while eating the food.

“Hey, it’s you two now.”

The pojang-macha scene ended, and the scene switched to a school.

Yuna watched the screen nervously with her hands clasped.

“Are you nervous?” Jayeon asked.

“Yes. What if I look strange?”

“If you look strange, that’s my fault for not editing properly, so don’t worry about it.”

After scanning the corridor, the camera showed the entirety of the classroom. Amidst the students going home after school ended was Yuna, who had a stiff expression on her face. The sunlight hit her cheeks and cast a long shadow on the desk. Her face, submerged in the shadow, contained anguish that didn’t look like it belonged to a high school student.

“Man, you made a lot of NGs when you did this.”

“I’m really sorry for what happened back then,” Yuna apologized to Jayeon.

That scene took them about 3 hours to shoot. The shoot unexpectedly dragged out because the acting was hard: she had to dissolve her stifled mind into her dim eyes and expression.

“I wasn’t there back then, but I heard that director Yoo was really harsh.”

Ganghwan pointed at the TV with his chin.

“Yuna even cried once,” Maru said as he recalled Yuna sniffing by herself by the window in the corridor.

Jayeon’s will was that there was no compromising since this was her first appearance, and Yuna became nervous due to the repeated shoots until she eventually ended up crying.

“Yuna, you can swear at me. This unni was really greedy back then.”

“Not at all. In fact, I’m glad that it looks good as a result.”

The cold image that covered the cute face of Kim Yuna showed that she was definitely not a half-assed actress. This had to be the result of Jayeon’s determination.

“Oh, it’s seonbae,” Yuna said.

Unlike the deep impression that Yuna left behind, the ‘Park Haejoon’ that Maru played had so little presence that he might be thought of as an extra if he wasn’t in the center of the scene.

“Look at him dazing out. He’s so good at acting,” Jayeon said with a smile.

That day, the director only wanted one thing out of each actor. She wanted Yuna to be as strong as possible, while Maru, had to be as faint as possible. Maru listened to her requests fully. He opened his eyes faintly in order to hide his eyes that might give off the impression of sharpness, and he even changed his lips somewhat to make him look like a clumsy person.

“It’s very different from when you played that murderer. Your acting is really amazing, seonbae.”

Hearing Yuna’s words, Maru scratched his eyebrows. Being told that in the face really was rather embarrassing.

[1] This is a protest song, written in the 1960s, and became popular in the 1980s. ‘Sanoramyeon’ is a modified way/dialect of saying ‘salda-bomyeon’, meaning ‘In life’. Meanwhile ‘Deul-gukhwa’, the band that sang a version in the 80s, means ‘wild chrysanthemum flower’.

[2] Here’s a translation of the song. There are various versions of this song, and this one is the version mentioned in the novel. (/ indicates phrase break)

V1. In life, you will eventually see a bright day / Even on gloomy days, does the sun not rise when the night passes? / Being a blue youth is an advantage, so / (chorus translated below)

V2. Even if you sleep in a leaking, cramped room / Is it not joyous with a fair lover? / As long as there are nights you can whisper / (chorus translated below)

V3. (same as V1)

Chorus. Don’t act petty and open your chest wide / For the sun will rise tomorrow, the sun will rise tomorrow.

[3] This was when, in Korea, having one job usually meant that you'd work for that business until you retire (or the company goes out of business.). Nowadays, that kind of awareness has mostly fallen apart, especially among the newer generations. This was why 'quitting a company' usually meant bad news back then.