

Once Again 741

Chapter 741

He had not been able to watch TV ever since he first shot something that would go on public TV. Watching his own face on the TV was unexpectedly very embarrassing. Even though he knew that he should be monitoring himself, he was overwhelmed with embarrassment when he stood in front of the TV, as though people were looking at him naked.

It took quite a lot of time for him to get adjusted to the embarrassment. His aim to fix his mistakes erased his embarrassments. Showing others that he was terrible at acting was something even more shameful than watching his own acts after all.

Maru calmly watched his own act. Erasing a person's nature when acting might look simple at first, but the lack of personality that Jayeon requested of him was a little special, making it a little tricky to act out. A person who's extremely normal yet also someone who one couldn't help but be attracted to - these were the words he heard from Jayeon during the shoot. To him, that sounded similar to 'a yellow apple', or a 'red banana', or 'chocolate that tastes like fish'.

After trial and error, he discussed the character with Jayeon and changed the abstract concept into a few keywords. As this was her first work, Jayeon wanted to fit in all the keywords she wanted, but she soon realized that it was a mistake on her part and focused on removing them. In that process, the character became a lot clearer.

-Yoon Jihae.

This was the first scene where he talked to the 'Yoon Jihae' that Yuna played. This cut took an abnormally large number of cuts because of Yuna's habit of smiling when she met eyes with him. As a last resort, they started the shoot after Yuna pinched herself on the thigh, and that managed to get an okay because her expression looked unexpectedly decent.

"It really hurt back then, you know?" Yuna said with a chuckle.

She could only laugh now because it was something that happened in the past, but back then, she kept sighing because she couldn't control her emotions properly.

-What?

Yuna replied with a cold gaze. Her character looked stable. Putting too much effort into acting would make it look off like they were wearing clothes that didn't suit them, but Yuna had none of that.

Yuna, who was watching TV from the other side, was half-dazed. Whether she felt curious about her own figure on the screen, or she was just recalling the events that happened back then, Maru did not know. However, her slightly curved lips expressed her excitement.

"You guys had it easy. If you shot in a classroom, there must have been a heater. I thought I was freezing to death because I kept shooting outside," Ganghwan grumbled, as his main stages were the cramped room and the pojang-macha.

The shoot started in October and lasted until early December when it started snowing. As Ganghwan appeared in most of the outside scenes, he always had hot packs with him. Even while saying that he was not in a good financial situation, he always bought enough hot packs for everyone to use.

“I think if we combined the money you spent on all those hot packs, we might have been able to put a couple more oil heaters in the scene.”

“Oh, those? I nagged the president for them. Where would I have the money?”

Maru imagined Junmin giving him the money with a bitter smile.

“How sweet.”

The two people on the screen looked at each other with the sunset through the windows as the background. Maru liked that scene. This scene, where two people who had nothing in common other than the fact that they were in the same class, was something that seemed plausible yet not that common; a fantasy, so to speak. Fantasy in the real world. Perhaps that was what Jayeon wanted.

“Honestly speaking, I didn’t have high hopes. But you two did really well,” Jayeon said as she looked at the TV.

“Man, that disappoints me. I think I tried pretty hard too.”

When Ganghwan said that in a small voice, Jayeon glanced at him before speaking,

“Because you’re supposed to do well. Had you not done well, I would have showered you with a barrage of cuss words.”

“Don’t call me to do a drama next time. Hey, I might as well put your number in my spam folder.”

“Go ahead. I’ll visit your company and call you out myself.”

Ganghwan said that was no good and put down his phone, saying that he didn’t want that. While the two exchanged jokes, the drama switched over to the kiss scene between Byungjae and Mira. Maru thought that it was a rather bold editing decision to switch over to a deep kiss scene between two lovers from a sweet romantic scene between students.

“I should have played that role,” Ganghwan said.

Yuna looked at Ganghwan, her mouth slightly agape. Her eyes had widened as well. Seeing her expression, Jayeon picked up the menu next to her and swung it at Ganghwan.

“You are such a perv! Don’t say that in front of our pure Yuna. Yuna, block your ears. You shouldn’t listen to words like that.”

“Is love something perverted? Is kissing perverted? I thought it was you who said that the Korean drama scene should be more liberal like the western ones.”

“I’m talking about work, while you are just full of indecency. This is why people should find a partner when they’re old enough so that they can gain some peace of mind. Hyung, you are going to become a flasher at this rate. Do you want me to introduce you to someone?”

“One of your friends? Oh please, I’m not going to put myself into hell. Also, I’m quite popular, you know? There are people who recognize me in Daehak-ro and ask for an autograph. Why are you looking down on me so much?”

“Like hell you do. Such a popular guy isn’t even dating and doesn’t have a partner for marriage?”

“I would get married soon if I had the financial leisure, but I don’t have any money saved up. There’s no way a woman would want to marry a poor actor, is there?”

Seeing the two quarrel, Maru drank some of his soda before quietly speaking,

“Since you’re at it, why don’t you two start going out? I’ve been watching you two, and it doesn’t look like you two have zero feelings for each other. You’re at ease with each other, get along well, and even look like friends. I think you two are perfect to marry each other.”

He said that as a joke, but their reactions weren’t what he expected. Jayeon, who had been shouting until now, had turned silent in an instant, while Ganghwan, who was exaggerating his actions, clasped his hands quietly.

It turned quiet in an instant. Maru looked at the two people alternately before scooping some food from the jjigae.

“If you two ever start a good relationship, buy me a suit.”

Hearing his words, the two people made stiff smiles. He thought he did enough; it looked like things would go awry if he went any further.

“I also think the two of you really suit each other.”

Yuna threw a bomb in a nonchalant manner. Being caught up in the explosion, the two people just poured some beer and started drinking. They looked like they wouldn’t speak a word until alcohol got the better of them.

“You are pretty strong at times, you know that?”

“What?”

“Nah, forget I said anything.”

The deep kiss scene was over. The lovers, who were drinking beer and eating dumplings in front of a convenience store, implied that they were an old couple to the audience. Maru rested his chin on his palms as he looked at Mira and Byungjae on the screen. He drank like that with Gaeul before they got married. When he had a deep pocket, he would buy frozen chicken and boiled pork with snacks or ramyun that was discounted. It was enjoyable to drink with her.

“Are they doing that kiss for real?” Yuna said those words after throwing a bomb at Ganghwan and Jayeon.

Maru put his lips on the glass and quietly looked at Yuna. Those words probably didn’t go through a filter in her brain. As proof, she was startled immediately after saying those words as though a block of ice touched her back.

“No, wait, I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Why are you so surprised? Also, you saw how it looked. It was shot up close. If that was fake, I have to say it’s a win for Korean CG.”

“R-right?”

“You know, you are quite perverted yourself.”

“Me? No, I’m not.”

“They say a strong rejection is an affirmation.”

“Seonbae!”

Yuna pouted when he teased her. Maru just laughed it over. He wanted to maintain a good colleague relationship with Yuna. Although the future was uncertain, he felt like Yuna would become well-known as an actress from how she was enthusiastic about everything she did, and from how she tried to fix her mistakes. What Maru wanted for her was to throw away the ‘once unrequited love’ title on him in her mind by herself.

“They’re all having good reactions.”

Maru looked over Yuna’s shoulders. The customers at the next table over were focusing on the drama. Other tables were the same. Ever since all three TVs started airing ‘Pojang-macha’, the customers would focus on the drama even after chatting for a while.

“I hope the viewing rates are good.”

“Me too.”

Anyone would want the work they appeared in to do well. He hoped that it would receive good reviews, and beyond that, influence him positively. Maru faintly smiled as he watched the drama.

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She untied the towel around her head. She wrapped her still-wet hair with the towel and squeezed it together. Ever since she heard that using a rough-textured towel to shake off the water from her hair would damage her hair, she started using this method. Once it dried a little, she would use an electric fan or the hairdryer in cold mode. The things she didn’t think about much before had turned into things she should be concerned about.

Gaeul took her hands off her hair and picked up the remote. She raised the volume and focused on the screen. The school field could be seen, followed by the figures of Maru and Yuna. This was the scene where they were walking towards the school gates with an awkward distance between the two.

Yuna was being chased by time, while Maru was following her footsteps, and they looked well-coordinated as though they had been practicing together for a long time. The scene also looked much more vivid as though a different camera was used for this scene.

Gaeul hugged her knees. The two of them looked so good together. She thought that the two of them suited each other. She also had the desire of ‘what if I was in that position instead?’

“Yuna’s pretty good.”

She looked different from when she was practicing at school. Yuna always lacked something despite trying her best in everything she did, but in the drama, she dissolved into the character so well that it was hard to find a flaw in her. There was no need to mention Maru. From a roaring psychopath murderer to a completely normal student, he showed a vast range of acting, yet he looked stable every time.

-You can also be like that.

Gaeul smiled when she heard the rabbit’s words from her heart. If it was before, she would think ‘could I really?’, but it was different now. She could feel that she was improving. Gyeonmi, who was always scolding her, was complimenting her instead, so there was no need to doubt that. She was steadily heading towards her goal.

“Thanks for the help. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.”

The rabbit didn’t reply, seeming embarrassed from hearing such words. Only after a long while, did she say ‘don’t thank me’ in a faint voice.

“Of course I should thank you.”

-There’s no need for that. Rather than that, why don’t you move around if you have the time for this? Flexibility decreases at a frightening rate with age, you know?

“Alright. After I watch this.”

-You can see Maru’s face later whenever you want. Let’s focus on work for now, yeah?

The Maru on the screen was mumbling in front of Yuna. He was even good at looking clumsy. Gaeul nodded once before turning off the TV.

-The two of them really suit each other, right?

“Yeah.”

-You know? Don’t you think they’re dating right now?

“What are you saying?”

-Nothing, just saying. That’s how love between kids goes.

Gaeul frowned. The rabbit no longer said anything after that. She looked at the TV screen that had been turned off. She remembered Maru, who was smiling as he looked at Yuna’s back figure.

Chapter 742

Choi Haesoo nervously nibbled on her pen. Teeth marks could be seen on the blunt end.

“You must be tired, right?” Park Hoon said, sitting on the other side.

“You must be even more tired since you just finished a shoot, producer. I’m fine. Rather than that, this ‘Park Gwangsoo’ character, I think we should make him a little more daring.”

“Park Gwangsoo, huh. Do you think that would be better?”

“It’s a romantic thriller. I think a supporting character can be a little more extreme.”

“For example?”

“This scene where he’s waiting for Chaeyeon in the alley. I think we should make him a little more gloomy. Park Gwangsoo is a dandy character, right? We should give him a little twist and show a little lunacy. For example, gifting a doll with a red thread around the neck or a pair of dolls connected with handcuffs.”

“So you’re saying that Park Gwangsoo will appear all of a sudden with a smile on his face and gift a strange doll, am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Sounds good.”

“Then I’ll try fixing that part up a little. What do you think of the other parts?”

After flipping through the pages, Park Hoon smiled, seemingly satisfied.

“It’s so good that it makes me wonder if this really is your first time writing a scenario for a drama. There’s nothing for me to say.”

“Stop putting me on a pedestal and tell me if you don’t like any of the parts. This is also my first attempt, so there are a lot of parts that I’m lacking. It really is different from a novel. There are the directions to consider, and I have to consider that it’s going to be adapted into a video.”

“That’s the hardest part. A writer I know of even decides how much time is allocated to each scene. She writes every single cut with a specific duration in mind. That’s no longer a script; it’s just an instruction manual.”

“I have a lot to learn.”

“You’re doing plenty well, so don’t worry too much. I’ll help you as much as possible.”

After saying those words, Park Hoon took out his phone.

“Please, give me a sec.”

His phone made a sound.

“What are you looking at?”

“The debut piece of a junior of mine is airing for the first time today. I wanted to watch it from the beginning, but this meeting is more important.”

“Is it a drama?”

“Yes, she’s the first female producer of the YBS drama department. She’s so strong-headed that even the seniors don’t want to go against her.”

"I'm not sure about the details, but I heard that it's really hard to see female producers in the drama department, am I right?"

"It is. Not to mention the work environment, there are many people among the staff who are rough around the edges, so it's hard to have everyone harmonize. But this girl is literally a female general, so people follow her well. Even I have to watch two episodes in advance to not get an earful from her."

Haesoo raised her head slightly. She was slightly concerned by the title of 'first female producer in the drama department'. Park Hoon put the phone in the middle.

"It's a late-night mini-series, and she used a pojang-macha as the subject. I'm not sure if that's a good idea or not, but she sounded pretty confident, so I should watch at least."

As she was looking at the phone, a familiar boy appeared. Haesoo said 'excuse me' and put her face closer to the screen. It was definitely Maru acting inside that small screen.

"What is it?"

"I just saw someone I know."

"Who?"

"Here, the one in a daze. He's called Han Maru and...."

Just as she said up to those words, she was reminded of the drama that Park Hoon was shooting.

"You know him, don't you?"

"Of course, I see him every week. But how do you know him?"

"He's on good terms with my daughter. That's how I know him."

"Really? That's a coincidence. Do you remember how I told you there was a person I want to use as a supporting character?"

She recalled the words Park Hoon said when they started fleshing out the drama. He told her that there was a boy that could perfectly act out the character that she was thinking of. Haesoo looked at Maru, who was acting inside the screen, and spoke,

"That was Maru?"

"Yes. There's no one better than him around his age. His skills are one thing, but he also has a really good atmosphere around him. He has good comprehension, and it's easy to get along with him when working with him. That was why I was planning to cast him for this one."

"I see. Were you planning on having him play the role of 'Lee Minsung'?"

"That was the plan. What do you think, writer? I was originally going to talk to you about the cast after we finished editing the scripts up to episode four, but since we're at it, I might as well ask."

"Lee Minsung, huh. Lee Minsung."

Lee Minsung was a college student with a twisted view of romantic relationships. Haesoo thought about a prankster when she came up with Minsung. Someone who was very popular thanks to his talents but was incredibly sharp when it came to his views on love.

“Well, I actually wanted a more round image. So that the inner nature stands out when it’s revealed.”

“Maru might look cold at first glance, but he’s someone who can do gentle acts as long as you ask him to.”

“I know how well he does. I even wrote something after I watched Twilight Struggles. What I want though, is not some light violence like that of a street thug; I want something heavy - or even cruel - to the point that people who see him get stricken with fear and wouldn’t be able to even think about resisting.”

Park Hoon opened his laptop.

“Have you watched a drama called ‘The Witness’?”

“I’ve heard about it.”

“Maru is in that drama as well. That drama is the reason I set my eyes on him.”

Park Hoon turned the laptop to the side and pressed enter to play the video. After pressing some arrow keys to skip back and forth, he let go. A boy was sitting face to face with the popular actress Ahn Joohyun in a room that looked like an interrogation room.

It took around ten seconds for Haejoo to realize that the boy was Maru. He gave off such a different impression. It was hard to come up with a relation to Maru after seeing that sharp, nay, violent-looking, face. The Maru that showed her daughter a gentle smile overlapped with the Maru in the video. They really didn’t look alike at all.

A moment later, a violent act began. He began smashing his head against the metallic table to the point that it made her worry that he might get injured. Ahn Joohyun rushed to him and grabbed him by the hair. Maru screamed as his eyes rolled backwards, struggling for life. No, rather than ‘screaming’, ‘roaring’ seemed to suit him better. His eyes were bloodshot and were full of killing intent. It was such a cruel scene that it made her hold her breath.

“What do you think?”

“I knew he was good, but I never guessed he could give off such a feeling.”

“I think that he will be able to digest a nonchalant act all the way to a violent murderer. Just look at this drama. He looks nothing like the murderer I just showed you. He looks like nothing but a clumsy student. Yet, he doesn’t look awkward. I think that he’s a good actor whose image does not stick to him.”

Haesoo nodded. She just watched a tempting act. There was no reason to object.

“Looks like I should keep Maru in mind when I write the next episode. It’ll become much easier to flesh out the character.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“But you have to cast him, okay? It’ll be troublesome if he doesn’t end up joining us even though I wrote something with him in mind.”

“Of course, I was about to talk him into it anyway. We got the main scenario, and the script for the first two episodes, so it doesn’t matter even if we proceed with it now.”

“Since we’re at it, what are you planning to do about the other actors?”

“I wish to listen to your decisions as much as possible, but it’s quite difficult to use a top-tier actor for a new writer’s drama. We have to think about the budget as well as our circumstances. Well, if the scenario is good, you’d find actors who are willing to get lower pay but honestly speaking, that’s quite rare.”

That was something she was expecting, so she wasn’t that disappointed. This was her first-ever drama. It was the change of the novelist Choi Haejoo, who had been living off of novels, essays, and magazine articles, to the drama writer Choi Haejoo. It would instead be strange to expect a big investment in a little chickling like her. She was planning to do her best within the environment she was given.

“I actually don’t know any actors, so I’ll leave you to do the casting, producer.”

“But you should still see the main actors. The thing about dramas is that it feels different when it’s in script form and when it’s actually acted out.”

“Then please come up with a schedule and tell me about it later.”

“Yes. I’ll do that.”

Haejoo looked at the clock. It was 11:40. The meeting ended late at night once again. This café, which was open until 1 a.m., had now become something like her secret hideout.

“Thanks for your work today.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s you who’s doing the work, producer. It must be quite a hassle to lead a beginner like me, isn’t it?”

“You’re doing plenty well, so don’t think like that. Also, we have a reliable ally. If it comes down to it, we can always call for an SOS.”

A reliable ally. Haejoo thought about Lee Hanmi, who should be dazing out in front of a monitor right now. She, a veteran scenario writer, helped her out a lot with completing this scenario. She encountered much less hassle thanks to a junior who was famous.

“Then I’ll see you next time. Please keep up the good work until then,” Park Hoon said as he stood up.

“I’ll try my best.”

Haesoo also stood up with her bag.

* * *

She powered on her laptop as she listened to the drama's ending song. She opened an internet browser and entered a café that she usually visited. It was a café that mainly talked about ladies' fashion for people in their 20s. She moved the mouse cursor and clicked on the free bulletin board.

-Did anyone watch the late-night drama that just ended?

As for the content, she only put a single dot. Five minutes after she posted that, there were no comments to be seen. It seemed like no one had watched since late-night YBS dramas weren't that popular. She found it quite a pity. She wanted to chat about the drama because she found it quite decent, but the internet was tranquil.

She refreshed the page a few times before browsing through the funny stories section. She browsed for about 30 minutes and thought that she should go to sleep when she found a red dot on her status bar. It was a notification that a comment was added to her post. She quickly clicked on it. There was a comment at the bottom.

-I watched it too. I had nothing else to watch, and it turned out to be pretty decent.

She found a colleague. She quickly tapped away with her fingers. The vivid colors, the food that made her drool, as well as the ordinary love story that she felt like she could relate with. She added a comment that it was quite refreshing to see a drama that talked about something more relatable than the Cinderella stories that usually aired around this time.

The other person agreed with her. The two of them got along pretty well. She started adding comments while fidgeting with her toes. Then, she found another person commenting on her post. One person, then two, then three... more and more people joined the conversation.

Some of them asked if that drama was really interesting. The woman typed without hesitation: You must watch it.

The moment she noticed that other people were getting slow at posting their replies, she realized that this was over. Usually, posts like this burn up for an incredibly short time before cooling down. She clicked on the free bulletin board for one last time, thinking that she should turn it off.

"What the, there's quite a lot of people."

The entire bulletin board was filled with people talking about that drama. Half of them were talking about how they ordered some food while watching the drama, while the other half said that they chuckled as it reminded them of their first love. She looked at the clock. Although she had to sleep in order to go to work tomorrow, she found it a pity to close the laptop now. She remembered the high school boy that shyly confessed at the end of the first episode. A ticklish sensation made her want to talk about it even more.

She decided to open a chat room. It was 12:20. 27 ladies without sleep started chatting.

Chapter 743

"When does the holiday start?"

"The 29th."

“That’s still far away. This is so boring.”

“What can we do about it? There’s no choice.”

Bada looked at the calendar. The number 29 felt so distant. She wondered when she could escape this classroom where even her breath turned white from the cold. Although they did turn the heater on, that was only during class. The classroom in the morning was practically a refrigerator.

“Bada, what are you going to do over the winter holidays?”

“Go traveling with my boyfriend.”

“Really?”

“I’m definitely going to go this time.”

“To where?”

“We’ll go skiing. I saved the money that I was going to use to buy our oppas’ album for traveling. We’re going to decide on a date as soon as the holidays begin.”

“Good for you. I would go somewhere too if I had a boyfriend.”

Her friend sighed.

“Bada, Bada!”

Suddenly, another friend of hers opened the door and rushed over to her. A wave of cold air rushed towards her. Bada grabbed that girl’s hand, asking if it was cold. She was shaking slightly.

“What is it? Why are you in a rush?”

“Did you watch the drama yesterday?”

“Drama? What drama?”

“The one your brother appears in.”

“The one my brother appears in? New Semester is on Saturdays, isn’t it?”

“I’m not talking about that one. Didn’t you watch this one?”

Her friend opened her phone. Bada saw Maru, making a dazed expression inside that fuzzy photo.

“Oh? That is him.”

“Right? I almost forgot to do my homework because I was watching this. It was really fun.”

“Why didn’t I know about it?”

Bada took out her phone and texted her brother: Oppa, did you shoot a drama? A reply came back quickly since he was just fooling around at home: Y. She didn’t expect a lot from him, but wasn’t just a single letter ‘Y’ a little too simple?

“Then why didn’t you tell me about it, goddammit. What a funny guy.”

Bada imagined that Maru was yawning right now.

“Is it him?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Didn’t you know about it?”

“He doesn’t tell me stuff like this. He actually gets quite embarrassed. Anyway, how was it? Let’s set aside the drama since you said it was good. How was my brother’s acting?”

“Yesterday was the first episode, and he was just normal.”

Her friend looked around before pointing at a boy reading a comic book.

“He was just like that. You know, those ordinary people.”

“I guess that’s the kind of role he plays. Didn’t he look awkward?”

“Not at all. Also, there’s a girl he’s paired with, and she was a bit cute. I wanna pinch her cheeks.”

“A pair? A girl then?”

Bada tapped on her lips. She thought about how he made a strange expression on the bus during the day of the CSATs. She thought that he got into a fight with his girlfriend. She stood up and went over to the computer installed at the teacher’s seat. Her friends followed her.

“What’s the title?”

“Pojang-macha.”

She typed on the keyboard and searched the drama on the web. A short introduction of the drama came up along with a poster. The viewing rate was 2.4%. She clicked on the list of actors.

“It’s her, this one.”

Her friend pointed at the monitor. Kim Yuna; just as her friend said, the girl looked quite cute. This seemed to be her debut piece as the only thing that came up when she searched for her name was a politician with the same name.

“My brother appears as a couple with her in the drama?”

“Yeah. From the looks of it, I think he’s going to confess today and start going out with her. They said it was only 4 episodes long, so it shouldn’t take that long.”

Bada looked at Yuna’s face before shaking her head. She was probably overthinking when she thought that he fought with Gaeul-uni over this girl. She knew that her brother wasn’t such a prick.

“Give me the mouse for a sec.”

Her friend placed her hand on the hand that was holding the mouse. She scrolled down before clicking one of the search results which opened in a new window. There was a short review along with some pictures from the drama.

“The drama looks like it’ll do well.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because of this café^[1] I’m showing you. I use my sister’s account to browse it from time to time. I can look up places that sell cosmetics at a cheap price. You see that number up there? 400 thousand is the number of members here. The dramas that get posted here as interesting usually do well. The drama that aired on KBS last time didn’t do that well at first, but it spread around once someone here said that it was really fun.”

“Really?”

Bada told her friend to show some comments. She logged in before opening the comment section. There were about 100 comments, and they were all written during the night. They were posted less than 10 minutes after the drama ended.

“A drama that makes you hungry? What does that mean?” Bada asked.

“You’ll see if you watch it. I was going crazy too. You know how I don’t eat ramyun because I’m on a diet, right?”

“I know. You didn’t budge when we placed some ramyun in front of you as a test.”

“Yet I ended up cooking ramyun in the middle of the night yesterday.”

Bada became shocked and touched her friend on the cheeks. They definitely felt a little swollen.

“Really? I thought you were never going to eat it.”

“But watching that made me go crazy. You know that cooking program I always watch at six in the evening, right?”

“The thing you always watch on your phone before self-study classes after school?”

“Yeah. I can usually hold back even after watching that, but not this one. Just the color of it is different. It’s an evil drama. I can feel their intention to feed the viewers food.”

“What the, is this drama related to food? And cooking and stuff?”

“Well, no. For now... it’s a romance drama, I guess?”

“Your answer sounds kinda vague.”

“You’ll see when you watch. It’s kinda hard to explain in words.”

“Really?”

Bada said ‘hmm’ as she looked at the hundred-something comments.

* * *

“Senior, here, have some coffee.”

Park Hoon accepted the paper cup given to him by a junior producer.

“Did you watch Jayeon’s piece yesterday?”

“I joined halfway through. I had some work to do, so I didn’t watch it properly.”

“I’m sure she’ll ask you about it. Looks like you’re gonna get an earful today.”

“I was just wondering how to run away too.”

Just as he pressed the button for the elevator,

“The two of you! Wait!”

He saw Jayeon take off her ID card from her neck and run over. Park Hoon exchanged gazes with his junior and kept smashing the elevator button. 2...1... Along with a clear ring, the door opened.

“Seonbae!”

He waved at Jayeon, who was scanning her ID card at the entry barrier before pressing the ‘close’ button. He saw Jayeon panting as she approached them.

“She’s gonna get you anyway. If you’re gonna get beaten up, you might as well do it early.”

“I’m going to run away until lunch at least. If that doesn’t work, I’ll just hide in the president’s office.”

The elevator opened again. He turned around the corner as he sipped on the coffee he was holding. At that moment, the door to the emergency staircase opened and Jayeon ran out from it. She, with ragged hair, looked like she was out for blood.

“Senior, allow me to take my leave first.”

The junior ran away, telling him to pay back for the grace of the coffee. Park Hoon approached Jayeon with twitching lips.

“Looks like you’re looking after your health these days, Jayeon. You’re even taking the staircase. Stamina is definitely important in this work. Good job.”

“Stop the nonsense. Why did you run away from me?”

“Run away? Oh please. I pressed the ‘open’ button, but the doors closed by themselves. Do you think I wanted to run away? If I did, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course. Here, have some morning coffee. You should calm down a little as well.”

Jayeon narrowed her eyes and accepted the cup.

“You should watch your eyes. Oh, and also, the drama looked pretty decent. You got me enraptured throughout the whole thing.”

“Senior Park.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you even watch it? I can’t really believe you. I mean, you’re busy these days with something, aren’t you? You can be honest with me. You didn’t watch it, did you?”

He couldn’t let that smile fool him. That was a trap; a trap that would make him suffer for the rest of the day. He had to gloss over this to gain peace for the day.

“Of course I did! It’s your debut piece after all. I mean, everyone at the company must have watched it. Also, there are all those things I taught you. I have the duty to check them, don’t I? I watched everything from beginning to end, so stop suspecting me.”

He ignored the frosty eyes as much as possible as he kept walking. He had to be careful if he didn’t want to get bitten by the bulldog.

“How was the opening?”

“It was good.”

“What about the text font? I had a hard time choosing one.”

“That was good too.”

“There’s nothing else you want to say to me?”

“I could feel Yoo Jayeon’s sense of aesthetics. It was pretty good, you know?”

Jayeon crumpled the paper cup in her hand. Park Hoon felt like the crushed cup was his own body. It became even harder now to tell her that he only started watching halfway through. As Jayeon’s eyes became sharper and sharper, a savior appeared.

“Chief!”

He waved his hand at the chief producer in delight and approached him. He finally found a good excuse to escape from Jayeon’s clutches.

“Ah, yes. Hoon! Good morning.”

“Chief!”

“I said good morning!”

Park Hoon clearly saw that the chief producer’s eyes fell on Jayeon for a moment before looking away. The chief producer was also running away from her.

“Senior Park.”

“Yeah?”

“How was the story?”

He couldn’t breathe anymore. Last night, his brain had mostly given up on working after talking with writer Choi Haesoo. He only watched the drama intermittently while talking about Maru, so there was no way the story remained inside his head. Uhm, err, the thing is - he stalled for time while saying those words.

Just then, he saw the newest member running over with the viewing rate sheet. The daily workflow of the drama department started with checking the viewing rate sheet in front of the president's room. Park Hoon hurriedly lifted his finger.

"Oh, your viewing rate sheet is out. You should check yours now."

"Ah, right. I too now have concrete evidence."

Jayeon clasped her hands and walked over to the sheet. Park Hoon sighed in relief. Jayeon, who was checking the viewing rate sheet, quickly waved at him to come.

"What is it?"

"It's 2.4%. This isn't wrong, is it?"

"What? It's 2.4%?"

Park Hoon exclaimed before taking a look at it himself. The viewing rate was on par with when the YBS late-night series was a fixed show.

"That's pretty good."

"I was expecting more like 0.7%. Man, how many times more is that?"

"Wow, Yoo Jayeon. You're on a roll."

The producers of the department all came around and gave a word or two. Jayeon took out her phone and took a photo.

"See? I told you I'd do it."

Jayeon cheered. 2.4%. The producers of the dramas that aired during the golden hours might snort at this number, but it was more than decent for a late-night drama, especially one that had been halted for a long time and was only used as a filler.

"Watch today. I'll make it past 3%."

"Hey, hey. 3% is taking it a little too far. RBS, with their bigshot casts, can only manage 4%."

"They've fallen for mannerisms, haven't they? People don't like mini-series without a sense of refreshingness. Just watch, I'll prove that to you tonight."

Jayeon seemed pretty confident. Park Hoon retreated after telling her that it was going to do well. He was almost bitten by a fighting dog, but thankfully, luck was with him today. As he was about to go to his seat in relief, Jayeon caught up to him.

"But seonbae, wasn't the jump shot a little too long?"

"Hm?"

"I mean the jump shot in the latter half. I put about 15 seconds of it with some background music, but now that I think about it, that might have been a little boring. It might even be a little too abrupt. What did you think of it?"

Park Hoon sighed as he looked at Jayeon's stubborn eyes. It seems like it was going to be a painful day today.

[1] Basically an internet community/forum.

Chapter 744

"Do you think 2.4% is a good result?"

Maru poured some of the broth into a paper cup and put it down in front of Daemyung.

"It's lower than the programs airing on the other channels in the same time slot. I don't think it's something to be joyous about."

"That's such a pity. I enjoyed it a lot. Though, mom said she didn't like it that much."

"What did she say?"

"She said it was too bland. She likes provocative stories. Can I eat another one?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Daemyung grabbed another skewer in joy.

The first episode aired without a hitch. The people at the bar yesterday all applauded when they heard the drama's ending song. Jayeon sighed in relief, perhaps because she was nervous as the person in charge of the drama. After the drama ended, Jayeon and Ganghwan, who originally looked like they were going to drink until they passed out, finished their Friday with just two more bottles of beer. Jayeon had to go to work, and Ganghwan had practice.

"What are you up to these days?"

Having received a question, Daemyung started chewing quickly. A fishcake skewer disappeared into his stomach.

"I'm commuting to the library."

"The library?"

"I'm going to study basic production skills. There were too many things I don't know yet. Also, I have to write a script as well, so I think I'm wracking my brain even more than when I was at school."

"You kept writing that."

"Of course. We decided to shoot it in the Winter. There's not long left. I think I can finish it by next week at the earliest. I'll show it to you once I'm done."

"You sound confident."

Daemyung rubbed under his nose and smiled.

"You bet."

“Now that makes me nervous since you sound so confident. You didn’t write down something I can’t do, did you? It has to be doable in real life, okay? Think about the costs too.”

“Don’t worry about that. All I need is a single room. Maru, did you watch Shining?”

“You mean the film? I did when I was studying acting. Is the one you’re writing similar to that?”

Daemyung nodded energetically.

“I said it before, but you played that murderer in The Witness, didn’t you? Both Sora and I think that a psychopath’s image suits you a lot.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment for now.”

“It is a compliment. When Sora first said that we should write a script together, we already had a genre in mind. Horror, mystery. Not the kind of horror like ghosts; it’s the cruelty of humankind, as well as their violence. I wanted to create something along those lines.”

“If it’s possible, I’d like you to add erotica into the genre.”

“E-erotica?”

Daemyung’s eyes looked up before coming down again.

“Sh-should I try?”

Maru pulled out another fish cake skewer and gave it to Daemyung.

“Forget it, just eat.”

“Maru, what are you up to these days? Is there an audition you’re getting ready for?”

“Nah. I only go out on weekends to shoot New Semester, and I’m mostly at home otherwise. I’m running out of time watching the dramas and films I have to watch for studying. Gosh, why are there so many things to watch?”

An actor’s way of studying was ultimately related to the trend of the era. After going through all the so-called ‘classics’, they would have to watch the things that reflected the current era. While learning the trends and the skills that were popular in the current era, the actors would have to go back to the classics to add depth to their acts. An actor was a kind of profession where one could not improve if they stayed in one era.

“Being an actor isn’t easy, huh.”

“I mean, what is?”

“Right?”

The lady gave them a bowl full of soondae. It was quite a lot considering it was supposed to be 1 person’s portion. Maybe she took a liking to Daemyung since he ate so happily.

“When do the CSAT results come out?”

Daemyung flinched as he skewered a piece of steamed pig lung with a toothpick.

“On December 7th, so the day after tomorrow.”

“Didn’t you tell me that you did well? Why do you look so awful?”

“I think I will only barely make it since I compare my scores[1] to the results.”

“Even though it’s philosophy?”

“It was unexpectedly quite high.”

“What are you going to do if you don’t make it?”

Daemyung became gloomy in an instant. This feeble fella shook his head as though he didn’t even want to imagine what life would be like if he didn’t make the cut, but he still stuffed his mouth with food. If his obsession with food would only apply to other areas as well, Daemyung would probably be able to return from the middle of a jungle even if he didn’t have anything with him.

“I’m definitely not going to study for another year,” Daemyung said.

He was filled with resolve. If not for the bits of food around his mouth, he would have looked pretty serious.

“You’re not going to go to college?”

“It’d be good if I can go, but I don’t want to waste a year.”

“Think about it carefully. It might be a year now, but that year may decide the next five or ten years. People don’t sell their cows to send their children to college for nothing. There are definitely cases where going to the ivory tower will change people’s lives. I mean, college students have an especially large number of opportunities they can take. There are things their departments provide them with, and you will form connections with professors as well. There are many people among writers and producers who have degrees in philosophy, so it will be much easier to talk to them if you have one of your own.”

“You’re making me scared here. I was determined not to go if I didn’t make it.”

“I’m just telling you to think about it. It’d be great if you get admitted into the college of your choice, but didn’t you just tell me that it was quite close? You should think about it beforehand. Have you thought about lowering your goals?”

“Philosophy in Hanho university. That’s probably the lowest my parents would allow.”

“Well, they gave you permission to go to such a department, so your parents will be devastated if they found out that you were aiming for a lower college.”

Daemyung blew some wind over the broth to cool it.

“Maru, do you think college is absolutely necessary?”

“If you can go, you might as well do it. While the times treat college degrees more and more like scrap paper, there are times when that scrap paper is something required. Well, there are many people who say they are fine without a degree, but many companies don’t even accept anyone who didn’t go to a 4-

year curriculum university. If you just look at the successful cases, anyone would be able to become Bill Gates. Normally though, people have a higher chance of failing than succeeding, don't you think?"

"Then why did you give up?"

"Because I can go anytime I want, and it doesn't really matter even if I don't go. If I was unsure, I would also have prepared for CSATs. But now, I feel pretty confident. I've given up on it after calculating the benefits and losses, so I don't have a problem. If you are giving up on your own accord, it should be fine, but if you're saying that you want to go, but you just don't want to waste another year, that sounds like you're running away from reality."

"This reminds me of a career consultation session I had with a teacher."

Daemyung's shoulders drooped down.

"I want to go too, but there's the affordability to think about. If I pass now, president Lee Junmin will support me with tuition, but if I have to wait another year, that would no longer be the case. My parents only allowed me to major in philosophy because the tuition was free. If that doesn't happen, getting admitted next year won't do any good either. Honestly, I know myself the most. I don't have the confidence to study hard while earning money for tuition. I don't have that great of a concentration skill."

"So you want to go, right?"

"Of course I do. How many people don't want to go to college? But I can't be a kid forever, can I? It's not like the thing I'm trying to do is going to earn me money immediately. That's why I thought about it. If I don't get admitted into the college of my choice this time, I'm planning to work. I'll save up for about three years and do the things I want to do then. Oh, wait. I have to do my military service too. I guess it'll be better for me to work for two years and then go to the military?"

Daemyung laughed in vain. He put down the toothpick in his hand. The soondae cooled down.

"Anyway, I had a great three years with you, so I have no regrets. Above all, I'm glad that I met you, Maru. Without you, I would have sat in the corner of the classroom like I did in middle school, right?"

"You were bound to change. Even without me, you would have done fine by yourself. I just became a trigger of sorts."

"That trigger is very important, though. Now that the CSATs are over, I feel like 3 years passed by in a flash. During our first year, it felt like time was never passing when we stayed at school until 11 to practice, yet here we are, just before graduation. Everyone is bound to go through the same process at one point, but I feel rather awkward. I feel like it would've been better if I went to school for another year."

"Once you go to college and go to mixers, you will never think like that again."

"How can I go to mixers when I have Jiyeon?"

"Usually, those who open their eyes to love late are usually the scariest. Just like you."

"Not me."

Maru smiled faintly as he looked at Daemyung, who tensed his eyes. He had seen a few couples that started dating in high school and went all the way to marriage. Those people broke up 9 out of 10 times, but the ones that continued to have a good relationship until the end usually had a happy marriage. Although they would have fewer expectations for marriage because they would have seen everything about each other already, there would be just as little disappointment, making it possible to have a stable married life.

“Yeah, get married, alright. Get married and have a child that looks just like you.”

“I hope that happens.”

“I’m scared that you aren’t denying it.”

Maru dipped some soondae in some salt and then put it in his mouth.

“Even if you don’t make it, you should study and take the tests in a year if you have any intentions of going to college. I’ll pay for your tuition. Usually, trying to save up to do something later in life doesn’t do any good. Do you think people don’t want to do that? People think ‘I’ll do this after working for a few years’ all the time, but they end up becoming managers in their companies. Usually, once you start postponing your dreams, you’re bound to keep postponing them. Dreams are the most insignificant things after all. Your priorities will be delayed without end.”

Daemyung coughed dryly while eating.

“Y-you’re saying you’ll pay for my tuition? What do you mean?”

“It’s just as I said. I want to invest in you. If you get admitted this time, you get the president to pay for it, and if you don’t make it, you should study a year or two more and go to the college you want. I’ll pay for everything. But if you go to college and get a scholarship, half of it is mine.”

“I can’t do that. How could I possibly do that?”

“Why not? I’m willing.”

“College isn’t cheap.”

“I said it’s an investment. I personally think that the brand of Park Daemyung has a bright future. Even if I consider the opportunity costs and the money I would end up investing, I don’t think it’s a loss for me.”

“Are you serious?”

“Do you want me to write official documents for you?”

Maru put down the toothpick and shook his hand.

“Try. I thought you wanted to go to college. I thought you have something you want to do. Try them all out. Don’t worry about the money. If necessary, I’ll go meet your parents and explain everything.”

Maru took out some money from his wallet and handed it to the owner lady.

“If you’re done eating, let’s go. Dowook and Dojin are waiting in the PC-bang.”

He left the pojang-macha first and started walking. Daemyung followed suit.

“This entire conversation is pointless if you get admitted, so don’t think too deeply.”

“I’m a little dazed right now. There’s no way you’re saying that as a joke, but that means that you’re serious, so it makes me wonder why you are going so far.”

“I’m not saying that I’m going to take responsibility for your life. It’s just college. I can take care of that much with the money I have.”

“What if I fail the next year’s exams? You’d just be wasting money.”

“So are you going to fail?”

“No!”

“Then I don’t see a problem.”

Maru shrugged. A few dozen million won. It was definitely not a small amount of money. Heck, it might decide the life and death of someone. If Daemyung was someone who was all talk and did not put in the effort, he would not have proposed such a thing. He had the will to study and had a high probability of success. That was why he reached out to him. When he said that he believed in the brand of Park Daemyung, he wasn’t lying. Maru had a premonition when he read the novel that Daemyung wrote. This fellow had the talent to write good stories. Although he said he wanted to be a producer, even if he didn’t go down that specific route, he looked like he had the potential to become a good novelist or a drama writer. That was obvious from the fact that writer Lee Hanmi, who everyone from the TV stations wanted to take, looked out so much for him. There were writers Ahn Pilhyun, Bae Chulho, and Gwak Joon as well. They all talked about how Daemyung had talent.

He wanted to make a bet. He was willing to gamble on the stock known as Park Daemyung.

“If you become successful, write something and give it to me. You know, right? This is all for my sake.”

“Maru....”

“Well, think about it when the results are out first. This is all meaningless if you get admitted.”

Maru slapped Daemyung’s back.

[1] The CSAT results are announced at a certain time, but examinees are allowed to take a ‘card’ with them after the exam where they put their answers on. (Remember, it’s multiple choice, so it’s not that hard to mark) The answer sheets are usually posted on the internet hours after the tests, so they can check their scores early.

Chapter 745

“Thank you for the interview. I had an easy time because you were so good at talking.”

“No, the interview was easy thanks to your fluent words, journalist Kim.”

“I’m glad that’s was the case. Oh, I heard that you’re starting another film soon.”

“I just signed the contract two days ago. News sure does travel fast.”

“Well, I come across a lot of gossip. Someone of your caliber, actor Choi, will always be on my radar. Who knows? Maybe you’re going to be a character in a 10 million seller again.”

“I’m only a support character; how much influence could I possibly have? It’s thanks to the other actors that it was possible.”

“But I still hear rumors in Chungmuro that casting you guarantees at least 5 million views. You’re a guaranteed check in the support actor industry, apparently. Anyway, I hope you do well in this one too.”

“Will I be able to meet you again if I do well?”

“For me, I’ll go wherever and whenever you call me, so call me when you have time.”

Kim Dongwook asked for a handshake first. Actor Choi slightly shook his hands before standing up. See you next time - actor Choi left after leaving those words.

Dongwook sat down and organized the contents of the interview. He played back the voice recorder and transcribed it into his notes. There were many actors who refused interviews with voice recorders these days, but this middle-aged actor accepted it with a smile. He seemed pretty confident, as expected of an actor known for his good deeds.

“I guess that’s about done.”

After clearing up his interview notes, he opened his laptop. Due to the nature of interviews, the impression he had during the interview would often become faint with time, so he wrote up the interview article on the spot if it was possible. He would probably go home and fix a few mistakes, but the majority would be completed here.

He ordered another cup of coffee. As the cup of coffee started to show its bottom and his fingers started feeling heavy, Dongwook took his hands off the laptop. He looked at the title ‘The Hidden Guarantee’ before nodding. This was enough. He could finish it up at home.

He rotated his right wrist round and round because it was sore as he took out his phone from his pocket with his left hand. After seeing that there were no texts, he checked the schedule. It was time to write that.

Dongwook opened up a document file. It was an article that was uploaded on the internet not too long ago. It was rather bland as an article, so it had a low view count and wasn’t even monetized. Usually, he wouldn’t give a second glance at such an article. Young film-people who have made the Seoul Youth Film Festival shine - that was the title.

He put his hand on his trackpad and opened up a new document to the side. He also opened up some email attachments he got in the morning. It was the data about the mini-series drama on YBS, ‘Pojang-macha’, as well as community reactions.

“It has an especially good review from people in their 20s.”

People in their twenties, especially the ladies, had a big reaction. The fact that it was ladies in their 20s and 30s, who were loved by advertisers, was great news. Dongwook also watched Pojang-macha. He watched it in a comfortable position on the sofa after taking a shower, but he could only remember the opening and the ending. He ended up dozing off midway.

The large communities where men made up the majority didn't mention the drama that much. The cafés where young people were active sometimes mentioned the drama along with the word 'fresh', but it didn't become much of a topic in the upper age group communities, like car clubs and hiking clubs. Although it was mentioned from time to time, the majority of the opinion was negative, like boring or ordinary.

If he wrote down what he felt in his article, it would probably be something along the lines of 'extremely ordinary pojang-macha', but since he was being paid to write, there was a need for him to add some spices.

Dongwook's eyes moved. He scanned his materials and old articles before fixing his eyes on the new document. He clenched his fist hard enough that he could hear a cracking sound before putting his hands on the keyboard.

"Pojang-macha, the drama that stimulated the hearts of women."

President Lee Junmin told him to watch out for some things while writing articles. One, a provoking, stimulating title was no good. Two, write based on facts. These 'facts' that the president spoke of were usually materials sent to him by the company. The community response data was also included. Dongwook knew that there was a shady truth behind these 'facts'. The Youth Film Festival article he wrote before also had a truth that could not be revealed to the public. The revealed fact was that the judges agreed to give Maru and his school the prize, and the truth that three of the six judges were related to JA was something that could not be revealed. The president asked him to write facts that would hide the truth, and Dongwook accepted that. The compensation was an office-tel and a much higher salary. His cheap journalism was sold at an expensive price.

He wrote about half of the article and started putting line breaks. He read it out loud in a small voice before reading it in a small voice again. He checked if it was fluid when reading from the first sentence to the last before stretching his arms out.

"Well, that should do."

He wrote some things about Maru while introducing the drama. The paragraph that began with 'the boy that won the Youth Film Festival that occurred last month', would now be read by people who have searched the word 'pojang-macha'.

As he was a young actor who had to build up his foundation, the president looked like he was in no hurry. He was probably aiming for a steady build up of image rather than a strong punch from the beginning. As for the article about Yang Ganghwan, he had already finished it and sent it to the company. Once the president read through it and gave it the okay, it would be distributed through various channels, and the internet news agencies that received money from JA would copy the article and edit it a little before redistributing the article. In two days, an article of unknown origins about an actor would be scattered throughout the various corners of the internet.

Just as he turned off his laptop and was about to stand up, his phone started ringing. The ringtone was the same for every one of his contacts, but that bell sounded ominous to him for some reason. Dongwook narrowed one eye and opened the phone. Choi Miyeon, Sharon. That was a call he didn't

want to pick up. He knew what this foolish junior was going to say without having to think about it. Journalism, which he had sold for cheap, was something she still possessed.

After he kept staring at it for a long time, the bell stopped. Did she tire herself out? - he wondered as he stood up with a sigh.

“You should pick up your call, shouldn’t you?”

Choi Miyeon was right in front of him. Dongwook flinched. He almost dropped his expensive laptop.

“Why are you here?”

“This is a famous café isn’t it? It’s where a lot of interviews happen.”

“Huh? I didn’t know that.”

“That’s not what’s important. What is, is Lee Hyuk.”

“I’m having none of this.”

Dongwook blocked his ears. For the past year, he had helped Miyeon out. He pitied the junior who wanted to walk into a pit of lava covered in fuel, so he reached out to her, but that only lasted until October.

“Why don’t you give up now? If you can’t find out after all that effort, it’s heaven’s decree telling you not to dig further into it. Or maybe, it never happened in the first place. You were chasing nothing.”

“How can you say it’s nothing after seeing all that evidence?”

“Let’s be straight here. It’s not ‘all that evidence’, it’s very little. You should be ashamed.”

Dongwook tried to stand up with his laptop in hand.

“I see a tail now.”

“Miyeon.”

“I mean it.”

“Choi Miyeon. That tail is in the end, a lizard’s tail. If you grab it, it’ll fall off. You should start looking into articles that suit your magazine. It’s been a year, no wait, it’s been two years already, hasn’t it? You did enough. Unless you want the Journalist Award or something, you should stop here. You need to make a living, don’t you? Aren’t you past 30? You should think about marriage.”

He wondered how he should convince this stubborn junior. Miyeon’s persistence was incredible. Ever since she became a blind believer of Capaism, this junior kept digging into Lee Miyeon without resting like she was something like a perpetual motion machine. What started it off was an actress’ unjust framing. Miyeon felt sympathy for that person and kept chasing down the culprits in secret in order to find out the truth. She spent the past 2 years like that. Dongwook did not know whether what moved her was a sense of justice, the public good, or journalism. How she was able to give up her reality for the sake of her dogma was beyond his comprehension.

"I did it for 2 years, so I might as well do another. Middle school lasts 3 years and high school also lasts 3 years, don't they?"

"What kind of nonsensical logic is that?"

"We're not in a field where logic plays a role, you know?"

Dongwook clutched his hair.

"So what? What did Lee Hyuk do? Before that, we are talking about the actor Lee Hyuk, right?"

"Yes, the actor Lee Hyuk."

"Weren't you digging Lee Miyoon?"

"She leaks absolutely nothing. There are only rumors about her and nothing concrete. I think she's been cautious ever since The Five became an issue. I tailed her for about a week three months ago, but I got nothing from her."

"You tailed her? Why don't you switch your job to a private detective instead? You know, those people who take photos of husbands who are cheating on their wives."

"I actually looked into that, but there's the possibility of backlash there, so I stopped."

"You, girl, stop at nothing, don't you? Did you not contact me for a while because you were doing those things?"

"If I want to catch people who mock the law, I should avoid the law too. I didn't break any laws though, I promise."

"Good for you. I should have stopped you back then in that pojang-macha. My deepest regret in life is agreeing to help you. Gosh, I was crazy back then."

"You can't take back what you already started. Anyway, back to Lee Hyuk."

"Fine, let's hear it. What about him?"

"I was digging into Lee Miyoon, and I found out something interesting."

"What is it?"

"Rich young masters partying with ladies."

"That's really something for the social department to handle. Since you quit the TV station and entered a magazine company, you should learn how to take care."

"Have you ever seen public TV attacking chaebols? It's the ones that decide to attack them that leave."

"That for political journalists, while you're a women's magazine journalist."

"Still, I'm a journalist."

He couldn't get through to this junior of his. Dongwook took out a cigarette from his pocket and put it in his mouth before frowning when he was reminded of the fact that they were inside a café. He snapped the cigarette in half and wrapped it in some napkins.

"So what? Rich young masters are partying. How's that a problem? Did they do drugs or something?"

"Who knows? They might have."

"That sounds like the most useless thing I've heard. So, what did you actually find out? Did Lee Hyuk play with the ladies along with those rich young masters? And that's somehow related to Lee Miyoong?"

"No, there was nothing like that. From what I've looked into until now, Lee Miyoong and Lee Hyuk don't have any relations. There might be a connection, though, and it might be that I just don't know anything about it."

"Then what? Where does Lee Hyuk appear in all this?"

"Where does Lee Hyuk belong to now?"

"Soul, of course."

"Do you remember that Soul's president, Hong Janghae, had a behind-the-curtains deal with Lee Miyoong when he brought The Five?"

"That's just an assumption though. Do you have any evidence? You don't, do you? Then that's just gossip."

"But it's true, circumstantially."

"You should know that circumstantial evidence means nothing."

"Alright. Then I'll only talk about the facts now. Lee Hyuk entered Soul, who might or might not have done a shady deal. Although he was kinda part of nowhere since his contract with JA didn't go through, he wasn't someone who would enter a new company, especially not under Hong Janghae, who never worked in the entertainment industry before."

"Maybe the contract terms were good."

"You know who Soul's parent company is, right?"

"Who doesn't? It's YM, isn't it?"

"Do you know who the grandson of the leader of YM is?"

"Why would I? I don't see the need to know since I'm not related to such a person."

"Kang Giwoo."

"Kang Giwoo?"

"You know that there's a big disaster movie that's starting soon, right?"

Dongwook probed his memories.

“Ah, right. Kang Giwoo. I finally remember him. You’re talking about the kid who plays the lead male in New Semester, right?”

“Yes.”

“He’s the grandson of YM’s chairman?”

“That’s right. Also, that boy’s relationship with Lee Hyuk is kinda interesting.”

“What is it?”

“Master-slave relationship.”

“What?”

“What I discovered is not the relationship between Lee Miyeon and Lee Hyuk; I discovered the relationship between Lee Hyuk and Kang Giwoo. Furthermore, one of the women partying with Kang Giwoo is related to Lee Miyeon.”

“So you’re basing things on gossip again.”

“I can be sure of my source.”

“Your source is a rotten one.”

“If I dig into Kang Giwoo and Lee Hyuk and get in touch with that woman, who’s the source of the money, I might be able to grab Lee Miyeon’s tail. That would explain the reason why she can sweep something as big as sexual service under the rug.”

“So YM is behind all this? The chairman’s grandson and perhaps Lee Miyeon herself is mixed in this?”

“Hong Janghae might be the core. You’ve seen what he’s like. He’s like a snake.”

Dongwook smiled and put his laptop inside his bag. He then took out a 10,000 won note from his wallet and handed it to Miyeon.

“Seonbae?”

“Okay, that’s enough. I’ll pretend I never heard it. I’m already not sure about digging into Lee Miyeon the individual, but now you’re also bringing YM into this? I have enough money to buy a house now. Life is long. I don’t want to suck on my thumb for my entire life.”

“But you should bring justice!”

“Give it to a dog for all I care.”

“Where’s your journalism?”

“Outside Earth’s atmosphere.”

“What about the things you said in the pojang-macha that day?”

“I’ve long since sold my soul.”

“Senior!”

“Stop calling me. I’m really not going to do it this time. Absolutely not.”

Dongwook shook his head and left.

Chapter 746

“Look here and here. There are a lot of articles, aren’t there?”

Bada was boasting as though it was her own achievement. Maru took the mouse from her. He moved around the cursor and clicked on the next page. More than half of the café articles related to the search term ‘pojang-macha’ were related to the drama. There was a mix of compliments and disappointments, but what was important was that the drama was being talked about. Negative interest was still better than no interest. It was the viewing rate of the drama that decided a drama’s value after all. If it becomes an issue, the number of people watching it would increase, resulting in an increase in viewing rates. Whether the drama was artistically worth any value was something that was going to be evaluated later.

“Did a lot of your friends watch the second episode?”

“Well, my close friends have watched it at least. Do you know how much I talked about it? If you had just told me about it beforehand, the first episode would have gotten a higher viewing rate too.”

“Fine, I’ll tell you from now on. So then, most of your class has watched it?”

“No, most of the girls did, but a lot of the boys didn’t watch it saying that the first episode was boring. The ones who enjoyed the first episode watched the second episode. The boys in my class lack too much emotion to understand the emotions of the drama. That’s probably why they didn’t watch it.”

“You even know whether they lack emotion or not?”

“I mean, seeing them is enough. I had a look at the comic books they were reading, and they were terrible. They fight during a soccer match, they fight at school, they fight everywhere. Even though they can’t fight, they really like fighting comics.”

Bada, whose nose was twitching, placed her hands on her keyboard as though she remembered something. The search term was short: Han Maru. She pressed enter and the website listed a bunch of cafés.

“Look at this.”

Bada’s finger pointed at the monitor. At the end of her finger was a link that led to ‘Han Maru fan café’. Maru chuckled.

“Did you make it?”

“Are you crazy? I don’t have time for stuff like this. Anyway, yo, Han Maru, you even got a fan café now, huh? Maybe you’re going to become a star at this rate.”

Maru clicked on the café. There were photos on the main banner of the front page. It was a couple of screenshots from ‘The Witness’ and ‘Pojang-macha’ put next to each other. It was just two pictures of

different resolutions stuck side to side. Overlapping in the middle were the words 'Han Maru Fan Café' written in yellow.

"Heck, I can do better than this. They should have created it better. It looks like an elementary schooler did it," Bada said as she looked at the screen.

"I appreciate the effort. But hey, this feels rather interesting. There are people who recognize me, huh."

"Look at how many members there are."

"There's five."

"One of them is me, so that makes 4."

"You signed up for it?"

"I did. I was curious what they had in mind when creating something like this. But there wasn't anything much. I think it was just created."

"So it's a café that's bound to be abandoned soon."

"Why don't you write a greeting since you're here? It's your fan café."

"There's no one to see it though."

"Still, you should do it."

"Nah, it's a bother."

"Hey, Han Maru. Don't you have to communicate with your fans if you're an actor? It might be crude, but they still made you a fan café. These four must be your fans."

Bada urged him to write. Maru turned around to look at Bada's expression. If he looked into her eyes, he might be able to read what she was thinking, but Maru just sighed and looked at the screen. It was a power he gained as compensation for his cursed life. He didn't know what would happen if he used it on other people recklessly. He might end up falling into the repeated cycles of life again. He decided to look into the minds of those that were worth it.

"I'll post a greeting at least."

Maru logged in before trying to post something on the café. When he clicked the 'new post' button, he was greeted by a message that said he didn't have access.

"You should sign up for the café."

"So I have to sign up for Han Maru's fan café despite being Han Maru, huh."

"Stop whining and just write it already."

He clicked on the 'sign up' button. As for his nickname in the café, he went with Han Maru. Unlike the crude-looking main page, the sign-up process was very picky. He had to write the titles of the dramas the two photos on the main banner were from, and he had to write the name of the character he played in New Semester.

“How can people sign up like this?”

“If they’re Han Maru’s fans, they should put in the effort of looking them up.”

After signing up, he left behind a post on the main page: Hello, I’m Han Maru. He put that as the title before saying ‘thank you’ in the content.

“That’s it?” Bada said, seemingly dissatisfied.

Maru took his hands off the keyboard and looked at Bada. From the way she was speaking, it looked like she wasn’t completely uninvolved in the making.

“Do you know the person who made this café?”

“No.”

Bada’s eyes looked at 1 o’clock before coming down again. Her upper lip twitched. This was a habit Bada had when she lied. Though, she herself didn’t seem to realize it.

“Anyway, put some more effort into it. They’re your fans.”

“I get it, so go thank the creator of the café for me.”

“I said I don’t know her.”

“Her? So it’s someone close? Maybe someone from your class?”

As soon as he probed her out, Bada sealed her lips and left the room. Maru wondered when she was going to fix her personality of escaping when she couldn’t say anything. She would probably slap Dowook in the face with a ‘You don’t know anything about me, oppa!’ before coming back home. Maru sent a text to Dowook.

-You have it hard.

As expected of a new café, the posts weren’t categorized besides the announcement that was at the top. He clicked on it and had a look at it.

-This is a café to cheer for the actor Han Maru. Please get along.

He laughed. It looked just like an announcement for a café that was made on a whim. He wondered how long this would last. He thought that lasting a month would be considered a long time.

“But still, I’m thankful that people are recognizing me now.”

There was something that was heard frequently during interviews with actors: It’s all thanks to the encouragement from the fans. It might be something that they habitually talked about, but even to such actors, the first meeting with their fans must have been filled with excitement. It was a miracle to see people unconditionally like someone after all.

Just as he was about to close the window, Maru put a comment under the main announcement. Although large-scale cafés blocked normal users from putting comments in the announcements, the owner of this café clearly seemed inexperienced and forgot to do such a thing. He also clicked the

announcement noticeboard just in case, and it turned out that normal members could write on it as well.

-Thank you. I will do my best in the future as well. Also, I don't think it's a good idea to leave the announcement noticeboard open. If you see this, please lock it.

He left that comment before closing the window. He turned off the PC before lying down on his bed with a book. It was an ordinary weekday afternoon, and he didn't have a shoot. It was the perfect time to read a book.

* * *

"Did you see that? He left a post. Yes, I told him about it. But you're quite weird. What do you like so much about Han Maru that you even created a café for him? Do you want me to let you meet him? I think it should be fine if it's just a greeting. What? You don't? Why?"

Bada hung up after listening to her classmate's words until the end.

"Being too close would decrease that mystery. I guess she's right."

Her friend said that there was a lot to enjoy precisely because there was a sense of distance. She said that meeting him would be best left for later since becoming close to him would increase the familiarity and decrease the interest. When Bada asked when she wanted to meet him, she said the official fan meetup. An official fan meetup. Bada wondered if such a day would even come. No matter how she thought about it, she couldn't imagine it. Han Maru, an official fan meetup?

Bada buried her face in a pillow and laughed. When she imagined it, she couldn't help but laugh. If there ever came a day he did a fan meetup, she decided to laugh at him from the front lines.

After laughing for a while, she thought about what her friend said. The things she said before they hung up were things that Bada sympathized with: I like the feeling that he's an actor only I know of. Bada also liked TTO when they just made their debut and weren't that popular. She felt like she was hogging a jewel to herself, and when her friends first found out about TTO, she even felt proud. She felt a little disappointed and dissatisfied seeing girls crying out 'oppa' when they were all looking down on them before, but she also felt happy that a star she liked was gaining popularity.

Bada imagined getting to know TTO in person. Indeed, she would definitely be extremely happy at first, but she would soon realize that a star on TV was definitely different in their private lives. Perhaps her friend's attitude of appreciating a star from a distance was the right attitude for a fan.

She threw her pillow to the side and turned on the PC. She quickly browsed around and entered the café that her friend created. Her brother also left behind a comment under the main announcement.

"It's really crudely made. Well, it's not that surprising since she doesn't know anything about running cafés."

After staring at the monitor for a while, Bada pressed the 'new post' button. Since there was a café and all, she felt like her friend would be disappointed if all there was was a greeting from her brother. She looked for some photos of her brother in a play on her PC and uploaded them. They were photos that Gaeul-uni had sent her before.

-Actor Han Maru is a great playactor too.

After writing that, she felt like it was a title that gave her the shivers, but she clenched her teeth and put her cursor on the main content. Just as she was about to write the first letter, she got a call from Dowook.

* * *

Kang Dowook put down his phone and laughed.

“There are a lot of crazy people in the world. A Han Maru fan club?”

He had a headache as soon as he saw the two photos crudely joined together and the words ‘Han Maru fan café’ in the middle. So Maru had also seen this, huh. From what he knew of Maru, he probably wanted to ignore it but was then nagged by Bada to write something. Just as he had expected, he saw a post from Maru as well. He had written a greeting that looked like it was from an official document or something.

“You should be acting cute at a time like this.”

He clicked his tongue. Just as he was about to close the window, the rather empty-looking noticeboard caught his eyes. Dowook sighed and clicked on the ‘new post’ button. Maru might be a cold-minded guy, but he might be disappointed if there wasn’t a single post in his own fan café. Or maybe even embarrassed.

Just as he was browsing through the photos on his computer, he heard a knock on his door. There was only one person in his house that knocked on his door.

“Noona? What is it?”

“I was going to tell you to eat some fruits. What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

Soojin entered with a bowl of fruit. Dowook smiled awkwardly. While the misunderstanding he had towards her had dissolved completely, he still didn’t know what to say to her when they met face to face.

Just as she was about to leave after putting down the bowl, she looked at the monitor.

“Han Maru fan café?”

“It’s nothing.”

He tried to close the window in a hurry, but his sister prevented him.

“Maru had a fan café?”

“It was just made, apparently.”

“Really?”

“There’s nothing in it. It’s not like that guy’s even famous. That was why I was going to post something on it, no wait, that’s not it.”

“You’re kind, Dowook. You know how to look out for your friends.”

Dowook was about to deny it, but he shut his mouth seeing his sister smile faintly.

“What’s the URL for this place?”

“You just have to type Han Maru in the search bar.”

“Looks like I must join as well.”

“Don’t bother. I think it’s going to disappear soon.”

“You never know. Also, there’s something I want to write down as well. Oh, I should tell this to my daycare kids.”

“Daycare?”

“The place Maru went with me to do doll plays when he was in his first year. He still comes around from time to time these days. I’m sure they’ll love it if I tell them about it. They really like Maru after all.”

“That dude was still doing that?”

“Maru is the type to take responsibility until the end.”

His sister pushed the fruit bowl over to his side to urge him to eat before leaving. Dowook looked at the fork that had a cute cat character on it and chuckled.

* * *

“A Han Maru fan café?”

Dojin laughed. Iseul, who was next to him, looked at him in wonder.

“Alright, I’ll go have a look when I go home. But still, who made something like that? Alright, see you over the weekend. Bye.”

“Who was it?” Iseul asked as she let go of the straw.

“Dowook.”

“What’s this about Han Maru’s fan café?”

“Just what it sounds like. It’s a fan café for Han Maru. Apparently, there’s one on the internet.”

“Really? I guess Maru is famous now.”

“Apparently, there’s only a single-digit number of members.”

“Then I should sign up and increase that count.”

“I’m going to post a funny photo of him as soon as I sign up. I have some on my phone.”

“You’re such a bad guy.”

“That’s what being friends is about.”

“There was a PC-bang right nearby. Should we go now?”

Dojin nodded and stood up. Iseul finished up the rest of her coffee in one go.

Chapter 747

“There really is one.”

Aram giggled and clicked on the ‘sign up’ button. Just as she had found out from the text message she received from Jiyeon ten minutes ago, she indeed found a Han Maru fan café. There were a whopping 40 members here. When she had a look at the date it was made, she saw that it was made just yesterday. Forty people had found this café and signed up for it in just one day.

Unlike the looks of the café, which looked very crude, the entry questions made her puzzled. She only managed to sign up after looking up the answers on the internet before she could sign up. While she was signing up, the number of members increased by 10. While 50 people might look like a small number, it felt like a lot to her when she thought of a classroom full of students.

There were three noticeboards: Announcements, greetings, and a free bulletin board. When she entered the greetings section, she saw a whole page filled with greetings. The first post was posted by an account with the ID ‘Han Maru’, which was kinda funny. Was Han Maru the creator of this café?

She clicked on it and read what it was about.

“Wait, this seems like the real Maru-seonbae.”

He didn’t make it right? She tried imagining Maru being the one to create this café and writing the first post. She laughed exactly one second later. That was impossible.

She rested her chin on her hands and had a look at the greetings. Although their IDs were all different, there were some posts where she could guess who wrote them. Jiyeon said she heard about it from Daemyung, so the entirety of the acting club probably knew about it. The people other than them who had also heard about this café should have joined as well. It was a Han Maru fan café after all. Aram looked forward to what kind of face Maru would make when she talked to him about it tomorrow. The people who joined this café must probably feel the same. While he looked like someone who would stay calm even if he fell into a pit of snakes, he was someone who got embarrassed easily when it came to things about himself.

Aram also left a simple greeting post. She filled half of her post with ‘lol’s and ‘lmao’s. She wanted to call Maru to check his reaction immediately, but she decided to hold back since it would be funnier to talk to him about it in person.

There were also about 30 posts on the free bulletin board. She clicked on the first post. There was a photo of him from the acting competition. Was it someone from the acting club? She clicked on the post and read it.

“Wow, who’s this?”

The contents of the post made her feel embarrassed when it wasn't even about herself. 'Handsome actor', 'Great actor', 'Charisma of the play', etc. A queasy feeling like one she would get if she had bitten a chunk of raw butter spread around to her bones. This was clearly aimed as a prank on Maru. Aram decided that this person was not someone from the acting club. Even Dowook-seonbae had never played a serious prank on Maru-seonbae. She wondered who had the guts to post something like this.

She had a look at the ID. It was 'TTO Love Bada'. Bada; only after she said the name with her mouth did she realize the identity of the poster. It was his sister. Aram thought about Maru's sister who she saw on the day of the CSAT. She was a prankster girl, similar to herself.

Perhaps thanks to the influence of the first post, the following posts were all things that would make Maru embarrassed. Photos that were taken when he was on stage, photos taken during shoots, and even ones that were taken during personal occasions.

A competitive spirit surged within Aram. Although she found Maru scary when he got seriously angry, she couldn't miss this opportunity. She scrolled through all the photos she took of the acting club that was saved on her blog and picked some photos where Maru had a funny look. She picked a photo after much effort as though she was picking clothes. It was a photo of him curled up into a ball under a blanket in the corner of the hall.

"Our cute Han Maru seonbae-nim. No, wait, that will make it obvious that I'm a junior, so...."

Aram tried to calm down her curling lips as she typed.

* * *

"It's cold. Come in quickly."

Ahn Joohyun turned on the heater as soon as she entered the room. As expected of December, it was getting cold by the day. The weather forecast said that it was going to snow tonight, so she shivered just thinking about how she had to do a shoot outside.

"I'll get dinner ready. You can get washed first."

Her brother, Bangjoo, stood in front of the sink. Joohyun sat in a chair, with the backrest in front of her.

"Are you not going to wash up? You must be tired."

"I'll just look around for a while before washing."

"There's nothing to look around at. Should we go with kimchi-jjigae or doenjang-jjigae?"

"We got some ham a while back. How about budae-jjigae?"

"Alright."

Bangjoo opened the cabinet above the sink and took out some ham. Joohyun opened the refrigerator and brought Bangjoo some sausages that they bought a few days ago. Bangjoo washed the cutting board and started chopping up the ham. Joohyun watched him from behind.

"I think being a cook suits you better than an actor."

"I don't find cooking that fun."

"Don't say that and try learning. I'm sure it's much more rewarding than being an actor."

"Do you think that will work on me when you're an actress yourself? If you're gonna say nonsense, then just go get washed up and lie down for a bit. I'll call you once it's ready."

Joohyun pretended to zip up her lips. While her little brother looked like a reckless kid who was unstoppable, she knew that he had a delicate side to him. Once, she mistook him for an adult and was unable to look after him. If not for Maru's help, Joohyun would have only looked at his mature side and would not have been able to discover his hidden wounds.

"Should I help you?"

"You don't even know how to handle a knife. Just keep watching."

"This noona needs to learn cooking to marry someone, you know?"

"You? Get married? I feel bad for the man."

"Hey, Ahn Bangjoo. It seems like you forgot who your sister is; I'm titled the goddess on the streets, you know? You saw back at the mall, right? Girls your age all rushed towards me screaming 'unni, you're so pretty'."

"A goddess can have such a foul mouth? Also, that's because they don't know the true you. I still don't get what people like about such a weird freak."

"Just know that my popularity will never decline no matter what you do."

Bangjoo chopped up the sausages into large chunks and put them into some boiling water before asking,

"So, you have a boyfriend?"

"What if I do?"

"So you don't."

"My little brother. What makes you think that your sister doesn't have a man? It's all because I'm busy looking after you. Do you now understand my feelings a little?"

"Stop spouting nonsense and get some rest. I thought you were leaving early in the morning again."

Bangjoo looked at her worriedly. Joohyun smiled and nodded. The reason that their mother, who was on Jeju island, stayed there without too much worry was probably thanks to this reliable son. If her tomboy daughter said that she wanted to live alone at such an age, she would probably have stopped her at all costs.

Just as she was about to stand up, Bangjoo's phone vibrated.

"I think you got a text."

"You can have a look. My hands are covered in oil right now."

Joohyun opened his phone. It was a text from a person called Aram. After reading it, she brought a laptop to the table.

“I told you to get some sleep. Why did you bring a laptop?”

“Apparently, there’s a Han Maru fan café.”

“Fan café?”

Joohyun searched for Han Maru. There were quite a lot of news articles. After scanning the article titles and the internet news agencies that posted them, Joohyun immediately realized that this was the work of president Lee Junmin. So this boy was getting his name known little by little. It seemed that JA was planning to put wings on Maru. If Junmin started working on it, Maru would definitely get his name known, slowly but steadily. Among the actors affiliated with JA, there weren’t any stars who became big in an instant. They were all people who rose up the ranks little by little. This was especially the case with Hong Geunsoo and Yang Ganghwan, who she presumed would become his masterpieces. Now, she could hear their names quite frequently in the industry. Joohyun believed that their reputations would spread out across the whole country quite soon.

She clicked on the ‘cafés’ tab. Indeed, there was a Han Maru fan café. There were 100 members. Joohyun thought back to the day when she first got her fan club. It was back when PC to PC communication was done through landlines, so the only thing they could do was chat with people in a private chat room, but that was quite fun. Things like fan cafés only started forming after the 2000s. She distanced herself from the internet for a long time as she took a break from work after ‘Spring Calendar’, and she found out that a fan café had formed. She thought that there wouldn’t be that many members just like the landline communication days, so when she realized that there were nearly 5,000 members, she was given a lot of encouragement. Right now, there were about 40,000 people.

“Should I post?”

“What post?”

Bangjoo approached after washing his hands.

“For now, I can be considered a fan of Maru, so it’s fine if I leave behind a post. Bangjoo, do you have that photo you took when you played a minor actor in a film?”

“Yes, it’s in my room.”

“Bring one where we took a photo together with Maru.”

After scanning the café once, Bangjoo left and brought a photo without saying much. Joohyun put her face next to the photo.

“Come here.”

“Me too?”

“He’s your senior, so you should cheer for him.”

“That’s true.”

Bangjoo listened quite well when it came to matters related to Maru. It probably meant that he trusted and relied on him that much. After taking a photo with her phone, she transferred it over to the laptop. Joohyun posted the photo immediately and wrote a post.

“He’s a junior I cherish. Please look after him and cheer for him a lot.”

She read what she wrote out loud and put a period at the end before clicking on the ‘post’ button. A moment later, a new post was posted in the café.

* * *

Dongwook deleted 10 text messages without even reading them. They were all from Miyeon. Although he had vowed not to help her, he kept feeling uneasy. He could easily picture himself giving up in the face of this persistence and digging into the huge company that was YM.

“Absolutely not.”

He couldn’t kick away his stable livelihood. Dongwook threw his phone away from him. Only after moving away the item that gave him the witch’s whisper could he sigh in relief.

He made a cup of stick coffee and sat at the desk he put next to the window. The sunset, which he could never see in that damp, cramped semi-basement room could be seen. A stable life was much more important than journalism.

He opened the laptop and opened the messenger. As soon as he opened it, he got a text from Miyeon. He immediately changed his status to ‘away’. It was scary how quick she was to send a message.

-Hyung-nim, this is pretty interesting.

He got a message from a junior he had known for quite a long time. This guy worked for an internet news agency. The message that the junior sent had a website url. He copied the URL and pasted it into his address bar.

He was greeted by an internet news website riddle with popup ads. He mechanically clicked on the ‘x’ button in the corner to close them all. Only after removing the popup that blocked the news article could he see the content.

“What’s this?”

He saw some familiar faces. There was a photo of Han Maru and a photo of Ahn Joohyun holding a photo of Han Maru. There was someone else next to Joohyun, but they were blurred out. The content of the article was quite simple. Ahn Joohyun, cheering for the new actor Han Maru - that was it. It was a crudely written article with all sorts of clickbait words, just like the platform it was written on.

-Isn’t he the guy you said would do well in the future?

Dongwook stroked his chin as he looked at the message from his junior. It was one of the thousands of trashy articles that only wasted internet traffic, but he found it a waste to let go of this source.

“I think it’ll have quite a good reaction if I go about it on the side of humor.”

Dongwook immediately pulled up Lee Junmin's chat in the messenger. He always needed permission from the president when writing something about an actor belonging to JA. Lee Junmin's direction to create an undefeated myth probably included managing little articles like these. He wrote a basic outline and sent it to the president.

A moment later, he got a reply,

-Try it out.

Dongwook notified his junior that he would buy him food tomorrow.

Chapter 748

There was a time when the media was a symbol of resistance. In an era where all text written in ink was censored, there were people who wrote articles while putting their hearts on display. The stories of the journalists who wrote the word 'independence' with the souls of their people were always passed down like myths. Follow their example. Do not forget their achievements.

The times had changed. The legends were now forgotten. While the media regained its free speech, it soon restrained itself. Once, by rulership, now by money. There were still many who walked towards the truth while staking their livelihood. The problem was that those who departed never returned. If the National Security Agency once snapped their pens with force, the journalists who tried to approach now had their pens snapped by money. An era where spiderwebs would form in their throats.

Either starve to death while trying to speak the truth, or live a plentiful life while trying to write just the visible truth. Dongwook chose the latter and had no regrets.

"Get yourself together, Choi Miyeon."

He sent Miyeon a text telling her to sleep before looking at his laptop.

After reviewing his own article about Ahn Joohyun and Han Maru, he put the last period before shaking his hands. The rest was up to the netizens. The internet was full of people looking for fun and funny things. Dongwook personally called them 'freeloading laborers'.

These freeloading laborers sometimes posted stuff that wasn't related to them. On the day a celebrity's controversy appeared, their value would shine. Despite the fact that no one told them to do such a thing nor did they earn anything from doing so, these freeloading laborers got themselves excited over issues and carried the news to various community sites. Some of them even used their own free time to spread the word. The things they went crazy for weren't just controversial issues. It was whatever that interested them. If there was something they could spend their free time on, they would appear whenever and wherever.

Not too long ago, there was an incident where a photo became a big issue on a humor website. The photo was spread out to various other communities thanks to the free labor of these freeloading laborers, and as a result, the person in the photo ended up shooting a commercial for a famous burger franchise. How much money would it cost to hire professionals to add issues to such a photo? Probably an enormous sum.

Moving their interest towards fun. This was what normal journalists minded about the most these days. Dongwook sent his junior a message. He asked him to write a post about the related content in the community he was active in.

-That's not too difficult. But hyung-nim, I want to do an interview with Miss Kim Suyeon. Can't you make it work? Let me borrow the power of a JA journalist.

So it turns out treating him to food wasn't enough. Dongwook replied that he would think about it after seeing the results.

* * *

It seemed as though the word 'chilly' shouldn't be used for a while. Gaeul shrank her shoulders. She could feel cold air seeping into her scarf. The evening in Seoul during a frost wave was nose-tingling cold.

Gaeul put a footprint in the snow piled up on the side of the pedestrian road. The snow that had piled up for two days seemed like it didn't want to melt anytime soon. She was reminded of the news that winter service vehicles were short in supply.

"Is that the place?"

She saw a barbecue restaurant in the distance. She peeked inside from the front of the store before opening the door. There were people sitting inside.

"Do you have company?" asked a lady who approached her.

"Uhm, I heard there was a get-together here."

"So you're a reserved customer. Go on up to the 2nd floor."

She walked towards the direction the lady pointed at. She climbed the wooden stairs. The second floor had a magnificent view thanks to the large windows.

"Gaeul-seonbae, over here!"

"Gaeul, over here!"

Gaeul walked over while undoing her scarf. This was the last get-together she was attending as a member of the acting club. Although there would be another get-together after the national acting competition is over, there were many people who wouldn't be able to attend because of personal circumstances, so today was practically the last day the members of the acting club could get together as a whole.

"It's freezing outside, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's really cold."

Choi Seol, who set down her position as the president as of yesterday, quickly offered Gaeul a seat next to her. Gaeul took off her coat and sat down.

"Well then! Actress Han Gaeul is here, so let's have a toast!" Choi Seol shouted while lifting her cup.

Gaeul also raised her empty cup above her head. Although they looked like they were drinking, it was all just soda.

“Thanks a lot for following this shitty president. Especially you 2nd years. I know you guys hated me a lot because I swore and got annoyed at you.”

Choi Seol’s face looked serious, but her lips curled into a curve.

“You’re the ones in 3rd year now, aren’t you? You should know what it’s like to be here. Only now would you know why I said all the things I did. Especially you, Youngsoo! Why did you say you’ll be the president? It’s disgustingly difficult, you know?”

The members of the acting club all laughed. Youngsoo, who succeeded the position of the president, laughed awkwardly. Gaeul laughed from the bottom of her heart; she hadn’t done that in a long time.

“I was just joking. Now, we only have one stage left. Do that well. I am going to enjoy a fancy college life! I’m going to get a boyfriend during the orientation, so just you wait.”

As soon as she said those words, people started denying her everywhere.

“I don’t think you’ll ever get a boyfriend though, Choi-seonbae.”

“I bet my hand that Choi-seonbae will never get a boyfriend.”

“I think the apocalypse is more likely.”

The juniors would never be able to go against the usual Choi Seol, but they were able to do so now thanks to the fact that this was their last get-together. Choi Seol also laughed and returned their words.

“Anyway, you worked hard, two years for the 2nd years, and one year for the 1st years. We got a card from school today, so let’s eat and drink to our heart’s content!”

Choi Seol took out a white credit card. It was the omnipotent card that only appeared during get-together occasions. Bells started ringing at various tables as though they had been waiting for it. The waiter, who came up with the order cards, busily accepted orders from them.

“Gaeul, when are you going to start shooting the film?”

“February 24th is what is on the schedule, but I can’t be sure. I’m only a minor character, so I have to go when they call for me.”

“I know you entered an agency, but you are shooting a film after all, huh. I’ve known you since my first year. I knew you were going to succeed.”

“We weren’t that close during our first year, were we?” Gaeul said while pouting.

Choi Seol made a sad face. Her other friend, who sat opposite them, spoke,

“I’ve seen the info on the internet, but I heard that Lee Hyuk and Ahn Joohyun are in it, right?”

“Seriously?”

Choi Seol’s eyes widened. Their gazes were focused on Gaeul.

“Yes, those two are in this film.”

“I guess you will meet them during the shoot, right?”

“I don’t think I’ll meet them. I didn’t look at the full script, so I can’t be sure of this, but it’s likely that I only have one scene. If the actors don’t come during that scene, I guess I won’t see them.”

“If you do, please get me their autographs. Especially Ahn Joohyun. Lee Hyuk is actually meh.”

“Me too, me too!”

Gaeul replied ‘if I can’. Just then, the food came up from the first floor. The moment the side dishes and the pork ribs came up, the second floor became quiet. The meat was distributed across the tables before red-hot charcoal was placed on each table.

“Eat to your hearts’ content. I’ve given you a lot.”

Hearing the lady’s words, Choi Seol placed some meat on the grill. Along with a sizzling sound, the second floor became bustling with noise in an instant. I’ll grill it, that’s not how you do it, hey it’s getting burnt; all sorts of cheerful noises could be heard.

“Oh yeah, everyone got their scores, right? Did you check?” Gaeul asked as she placed a piece of meat on her plate.

Today was the 10th of December, the day the results were announced. Choi Seol, who was eating a big piece of wrap, as well as her colleagues who took the exams all fell silent. Gaeul made a puzzled expression. When they went through their tests together on the night they took the CSATs, they all said that they got the scores they wanted.

“Gaeul, how did you do?”

“Me? I got the same scores as my grading.”

“Then you’re in the clear?”

“Probably.”

“Really? That’s good.”

Their serious expressions did not disappear. Gaeul started becoming worried. Did one of them mark the answers wrong or something?

“Hey, did something not go right?” she asked cautiously.

Was it a mistake on her part to think that they did decently after hearing that they said they got the scores they wanted when they graded themselves?

Choi Seol, who had a sad expression on her face, shook some lettuce to get rid of the water and put a piece of meat on it. She put some stir-fried beansprouts, pickled radish, and sliced garlic before putting the big wrap in her mouth. The others also ate expressionlessly.

Gaeul quietly watched them for a while before sighing.

“What the, are you toying with me?”

After maintaining an expressionless face for a while, they all laughed out loud.

“Hey, did you see Gaeul panic?”

“We all got the scores we were expecting. Seol got 10 points above what she expected, so she’s in the safe.”

“Although we didn’t all get to go to Seoul University, I think we should be able to get into the places we were aiming for,” Choi Seol said as she wiped her lips.

“You were aiming for the department of theater at Choong-a university, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s 100% official enroll, so you should be able to get in, right?”

“I’ll have to see what the actual requirements are like, but I don’t think I have to worry according to the grade table that my cram school put out.”

“That’s good. Then you’ll be a campus couple for sure, right?” Choi Seol said while poking her on the side.

For a moment, Gaeul was unable to maintain her expression.

“What is it? Did something happen with your boyfriend? I heard you two were going to go to Choong-a university together.”

Perhaps because they had been friends for three years, Choi Seol and the others noticed what was on her mind immediately and asked.

“He didn’t take the CSATs.”

“Did he pass the pre-enroll?”

“No, he decided not to go to college. He’s probably busy with work right now. He can always go to college later, but the things he’s doing right now are things he will never be able to do if he doesn’t do them now.”

“But isn’t life as an actor pretty hard if you don’t major in theater?”

“He should be fine. He has the skills after all. He’s already playing a main character in a drama. He’s completely different from me. There’s a huge chasm between us.”

“Really? I thought that you two would go to the same college for sure and have a sweet life together.”

Gaeul smiled.

“I should practice a little more. I should practice more and chase him. If I do, then we should be able to meet in the field, not at college. I’m planning to focus on work until then. I think that’ll be better for both of us.”

"Looks like you thought quite seriously about this. Well, if you've made up your mind, I guess it should be fine. It's not like you're going to be far away."

"We don't have any time to play around right now. There are classes I need to take, and I have to do the shoots too."

"Han Gaeul, you're an adult now, huh? Is that what it means to earn money?"

Choi Seol put down her chopsticks. She looked at the grill in a daze for a while before speaking,

"Since we're on the topic of dating, I heard you broke up, Youngmi."

Gaeul looked at Youngmi. She remembered how Youngmi said that they would hit 1,000 days soon.

"You broke up?" Gaeul asked again.

Youngmi put some meat on her plate with an indifferent expression.

"Yeah, we broke up."

"Why? You were good together."

"We met for too long."

"Did something bad happen?"

"It's not like that. We just became good friends. I've spent three years with him, so we just saw that we weren't fit for each other in some parts. It was fun to play together, but it became somewhat boring to keep being lovers. We just met up on a weekend, watched a movie together, and talked about breaking up. We're going to different colleges as well."

"Are you okay?"

Gaeul pulled out some napkins, worried that Youngmi might cry, since she cried quite often.

"I thought I would cry a lot, you know? But in fact, I feel refreshed. It might have been frustrating if we broke up in a bad way, but we talked to each other about it. Honestly, if you graduate high school, you graduate from your relationships as well. Heecheol, Jooyoung, Jinho, and Haemi all broke up."

"All of them?"

"We're going to college, aren't we? We're going to be apart anyway. There are some who are saying that they didn't break up, but I've seen them with other people," Youngmi said as she put some meat in her mouth.

"I'm saying this because it's just us girls here; Gaeul, did you sleep with him?"

"N-no."

"Then I guess you guys will get fed up soon too. We slept and we're still breaking up."

"You guys slept?"

"Yeah, at the beginning of this year. Things just happened."

Gaeul looked at Choi Seol. Choi Seol looked like her soul had left her. Youngmi, who was known for being naive, turned out to be the quickest among them.

"Gaeul, honestly speaking, I think you should break up right now. Your boyfriend is a celebrity, isn't he? I'm not sure about now, but if he becomes popular, you'll have less and less time to meet with him. Do you meet him these days?"

"No, I haven't been contacting him."

"Did he ever call you? Ever since you cut contact with him?"

"No."

"Well, I guess his feelings left you too. I'm not saying this to hurt you; that's just how love goes between people our age, right?"

Youngmi looked around, seemingly asking for agreement. However, everyone was shocked by the fact that Youngmi had slept with her boyfriend.

"You really slept?" Choi Seol asked again.

"Why are you asking that again? It's embarrassing. Just eat."

"Talk about it in detail. I want to hear about it."

"Me too."

The table heated up with a hot story. Gaeul fidgeted with her phone as she looked at her friends who lowered their voices.

Chapter 749

-In the end, that's all you amount to.

Her fingers, digging into the fold of her phone, came to a sudden halt. Gaeul felt a faint heat rising from her heart. The emotions of the rabbit were coming through to her.

-If you weren't by his side, you would have called Maru a long time ago. You would have spent meaningless time with him over the phone in order to earn just a tiny bit of consolation; to tragically confirm that you are still the one next to him. Is that all your resolve amounts to? Or what is it? Are you saying that you're in the clear because you managed to win a minor role in a film? Is that all your self-confidence amounts to? If that's how you're going to do things, you might as well stop. Just meet Maru comfortably again. You might end up comparing yourself to him and become dejected again, but what can you do about it? That's just the girl you are. Hey, why don't you give your body to him at this opportunity? Just tie the knot. If you think that you can't be acknowledged as an actress, as a human being, just buy him with your body. I mean, it's not like it's bad?

"You're going too far there," Gaeul said.

The rabbit always cherished her like a real big sister, but she was always quite a vicious talker when it came to matters related to Maru. It was good that she reminded her of her resolve whenever she waned, but today, she clearly went too far.

-I'm telling you to do things properly if you don't want to listen to stuff like this from me.

Her words were pretty sharp. Gaeul sighed and took her hands off her phone.

-But it is quite strange. You did tell him not to contact you, but I'm surprised that you're not suspicious since he hasn't given you a single call.

"Suspicious of what?"

-I mean, isn't that how it is? For you, you can hold yourself back because I'm next to you and holding you back whenever you have the urge, but that's not the case for Maru, is it? If he really likes you and wants to see you, I'm sure he would have gone against the promise and given you a call.

"I'm sure Maru understands how I feel."

-Really? If it was me, I would have gone to that person's house and asked for the reason if someone I love told me not to contact them. That is what love is after all.

No - she wasn't able to retort properly. In a corner of her heart, a part of her was agreeing with the rabbit's words. While acting, there were times when she felt frustrated because things didn't go the way she wanted to. It would've been better if I stretched my arms a little further; it would have been better if I loosened my shoulders a little; it would've been better if my eyebrows shook a little more clearly. It wasn't just her body that didn't move according to her will. There were times when her heart expressed emotions regardless of her thoughts. Right now, it was the same. It was 'her heart', yet she couldn't follow as 'her heart' wished. Maybe the heart was even harder to control than the body. Gaeul bit her lips.

"Let's have a candid talk^[1]!"

Those words could be heard from a table where the juniors were. Gaeul blew away her bitter thoughts. She didn't want to ruin this occasion to joyously wrap up the year because of her personal matters. She exercised her facial muscles on purpose and put on a smile so that everyone else could continue having an enjoyable time.

"We don't want to do it though."

"But you guys did it when you were in second-year seonbaes. We're now in second year, so we're doing one too."

"That's right! Even if you leave, you have to leave after getting an earful from us."

Choi Seol made a troubled expression. It was her who had led the 2nd year students harshly for the past year. If they had a candid talk, the 2nd years, who should have grinded their swords until now, would rush her. As a sinner, Choi Seol tried to make them do another game, but the 2nd year students did not relent.

"First-year students, don't you want to do it too?"

"Yes! We'd love to."

"It's our last get-together anyway, so let's finish it off with a blast, shall we? Please? Choi Seol seonbae-nim. The people are on our side. Stop struggling and just allow it."

The 2nd-year students asked for a candid talk with the 1st-year students' support. Gaeul thought about this time last year. Before the winter holidays started, they also had a candid talk with the then 3rd-year students. What they liked, what they regretted, and what they did not want to forget. It was time to talk about those.

"Fine then! Let's do it. But instead, we're doing it in reverse, okay? Us third years are the youngest, the second years are in the middle, and the first years are the seonbaes, okay?"

"Of course. Hey, hey. You first-years, you don't have to hold back, okay?"

The candid talk began with permission from former president Choi Seol and the current president Youngsoo. They could commit a rebellion right now, but the juniors weren't able to speak properly. The first one to speak was Youngsoo.

"Choi Seol!" Youngsoo stood up abruptly.

Choi Seol's lips twitched but still spoke,

"Yes, seonbae."

"Don't you act like that when you go to college. You're too rough for being a girl."

"Of course, I'm going to do well when I go to college."

"Also, don't hit others as a joke. You might take it as a joke, but it really hurts for me, you know? You're really strong. Keep that in mind."

"Yes, I'm a little strong. And my arms are thick too."

Gaeul chuckled while covering her mouth. She would probably get to see veins popping out on Choi Seol's neck.

"Lastly, Choi Seol. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No."

Youngsoo, who had been acting boldly until now, suddenly looked shy. The 2nd year boys sitting around him tapped him and told him to go for it. Feeling the serious atmosphere, everyone stopped laughing and looked at him.

"Choi Seol! I liked you, did you know that?"

A moment later, applause could be heard. Amidst the loud cheers was a shout telling them to kiss.

Choi Seol raised her hand to stop them and spoke,

"Seonbae-nim, I'm sorry to tell you this, but you aren't my type. Also, you're in your third year now, so just study hard."

When Choi Seol rejected him so firmly while crossing her arms, Youngsoo sat down with a gloomy expression. The 2nd year boys burst out into laughter.

“Why did you do that? It’s not that bad to date a high school student as a college girl,” said the friend sitting next to Choi Seol.

Choi Seol shook her head.

“With him? No way. I don’t feel like he’s a man at all. He’s just a cute brother.”

Her friends nodded, saying that it was understandable.

“The second-year students went first, so next should be someone from the first year.”

Among the tense first-year students, one of them, who was known to be bold, abruptly stood up from his seat.

“Hey, isn’t practicing until 12 a little too long? Let’s reduce it a little. Especially you, Youngsoo. You don’t have any right to tell Seol anything. At least she looks after us. All you can do is nag.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll do my best to serve.”

“Hey, you sound defiant? You aren’t going to tell me something after this ends, are you? I’ll have faith that you aren’t so petty, Youngsoo.”

“Of course. I don’t dare say anything to the 1st year seniors. I’ll try to reduce practice in the future. Let’s do it until 11:59.”

The 1st-year student sat down, looking like he was doomed. Following that, other 1st-year students grabbed their spoons (that acted as a microphone) and spoke out what was on their minds. The majority of their complaints were directed towards the 2nd-year students rather than the 3rd-year students, and it was probably because they had more interaction with each other as consecutive grades. Gaeul watched everyone as she ate some vegetable wraps. She had her blast last year, but now that she was in her 3rd-year, she had nothing to say.

The noisy candid talk eventually arrived near the end.

“Han Gaeul!”

Gaeul, who was picking up a slice of garlic with her chopsticks, raised her hand when she heard the voice. Yuna, who had tied her hair up into a bun above her head, was holding a spoon upside down.

“First, congrats on getting good results on the CSATs!”

Gaeul put down her chopsticks and spoke,

“Thank you.”

“Also, when you bought me strawberry milk and consoled me that time, thank you a lot.”

The 1st-year students booed her, telling her to stop the good stories. Gaeul faintly smiled and looked at Yuna. Ever since Yuna confessed what was on her mind, she thought about maintaining a good relationship with her as a senior and a junior, but when she came to, they had become quite distant.

There were times when they talked to each other and talked about acting, but even during those times, Gaeul felt a wall when talking to her. That wall wasn't something put up by Yuna; it was something by herself. The wall that she thought would break soon, became taller and sturdier. Now, the wall had become so tall that she couldn't see Yuna's expression truthfully even if she tip-toed. She found herself pathetic for putting a distance between them when it was her who told her that she understood and that it was something that could happen. The more pathetic she felt about herself, the more distant they became.

"Not at all," Gaeul said.

After taking a deep breath. Yuna looked around.

"That's it for Han Gaeul. From now on, I have something personal to tell everyone in the acting club. There was a boy I really liked."

The 1st-year juniors suddenly cheered at the sudden confession. Gaeul clutched her aching heart and looked at Yuna.

"There are probably a lot of people who like Yuna among the first years."

"It's not just the first years. I'm pretty sure many people from the second- and third-years got rejected by her too."

Her friends started speaking among themselves. Just as they said, Yuna was quite popular. She gave off a docile impression and had a cute face. Not only that, she had experience working as a main character in a drama, so it was natural for her to be a target of adoration.

Gaeul felt her throat burning. She sipped some water and watched the silent Yuna. They made eye contact as though she had been waiting for it.

"But I was rejected cleanly. I really liked him, but I can't even think about him anymore. That was how thorough it was."

The boys went into an uproar.

"Who was it? Who rejected Yuna?"

"Let's be honest here, everyone. Who was it? Who rejected Yuna?"

They naturally thought that the person Yuna liked was someone in the acting club. Only Gaeul knew that Yuna was talking about Maru. She wondered what Yuna wanted to say.

After gulping down some cold water, Yuna continued to speak in a shaky voice,

"So you two can meet. I want you two to meet. I might have interrupted you, but I was nothing. I'm someone who you don't even need to be concerned about, so don't worry about anything. He only looks at you. Okay? Hey! Thanks, sorry, and I admire you. You can hate me, but I want to maintain a good relationship with you, can I?"

After saying those words, Yuna sat down. Gaeul saw her wiping the corner of her eyes with the back of her hand. Gaeul sighed shakily.

“What was that? What did Yuna just say?”

“Don’t you get it? There’s a love triangle in the acting club. Yuna liked a boy, but that boy had a girlfriend already. That’s why she’s apologizing in public.”

“Is that how it is? What’s up with that. Yuna looks so docile. That was unexpected.”

“I’m pretty sure she didn’t know he had a girlfriend. That’s why she cried so much while apologizing. The girl in question might not believe it if they talked about it personally, so that’s why she might have said it here. Anyway, she’s really brave alright. I would be too embarrassed to say something like that in public,” Youngmi said while shaking her head.

Choi Seol agreed with her and stood up.

“There there! I’m not sure who it is that Yuna feels sorry, is thankful to, and admires, but I hope you two can talk it out later. It doesn’t look like Yuna was pretending. Also, Im Yuna!”

“Y-yes!” Yuna replied while sobbing.

“This is supposed to be a candid talk, not a confession!”

“I’m sorry!”

“As punishment, you have to sing a song.”

“What?”

“I’m saying that you have to sing a song. You brought the whole mood down. Doesn’t everyone agree? But, I’ll sing with you. No wait, all third years, stand up! Let’s be Yuna’s back dancers.”

Choi Seol stepped in to liven up the mood. The 3rd year students clapped and brought Yuna away from the table. Yuna’s eyes had turned red, but she soon smiled and put a spoon inside a glass soda bottle.

“Hey, Han Gaeul. Come on up,” Choi Seol called Gaeul. Gaeul sat down and looked at Yuna. Yuna was waiting silently.

Gaeul took a deep breath before standing up. Although she felt complex and dizzy, she didn’t want to be the bad girl when her junior had the courage to confess.

“I can’t let my junior do that alone. I’ll sing first.”

Gaeul grabbed the soda bottle that Yuna was holding.

“As expected of Han Gaeul. So? What are you going to sing?” Choi Seol asked while opening her phone.

Gaeul snorted before speaking,

“Cho PD^[2]’s Friend.”

[1] This is ‘Yaja time(?? ??)’ in Korean, where basically, the senior/junior relationship is switched around.

[2] Referring to the Korean singer, Cho Yong-pil. Here’s the song on youtube

Chapter 750

“Those of you who want to go to the noraebang in separate groups, don’t get in trouble, those of you going home, watch out on your way home.”

“Yes!”

“There’s still one more competition, so don’t be too loose. We’re only going to play around today and then start practicing tomorrow. There’s not even a month left until January.”

Choi Seol clapped above her head once.

“Well, then. Let’s do one last fighting and then break up. Myunghwa high acting club, fighting!”

“Fighting!”

A hundred or so people shouted at the same time. The passersby glanced at them before walking past. People who had formed separate groups went to nearby noraebangs and PC bangs.

“Gaeul, we’re going to go to a board game café; do you want to come?”

“Sorry, I’m a little tired today.”

Choi Seol, who would usually pull on her arms to get her to go together with her, nodded her head obediently today.

“Alright, then go home and get some rest. You didn’t look good back there. I’m not sure what it’s about, but if you have anything you’re worried about, you can always call me up and talk to me about it. This unni has a lot of time. If it’s about your boyfriend though, don’t call me. I don’t have much experience when it comes to dating.”

“Don’t have much? You mean none at all. Gaeul, if it’s about love problems, call me. I’m better than Seol when it comes to that.”

Choi Seol approached her and locked her fingers around Gaeul’s before shaking them. Her other friends also approached, grabbed her hands and shook them up and down, and left after telling her to give them a call. The group of students in front of the restaurant scattered in an instant.

Gaeul uttered out a short breath. Her breath turned white and disappeared with a white trail. Just as she was about to put her scarf on, she saw Yuna about 10 meters away from her. Yuna said goodbye to her friends and left the group. She seemed to be going home. Gaeul clutched the scarf and walked over to Yuna. On her way, she made eye contact with her. Yuna flinched and took a step back but did not run away. For some reason, she felt grateful that Yuna waited for her.

“You aren’t going with your friends?”

“Yes. I felt a little tired.”

“Really? Me too. Which direction are you going?”

“I’m going this way. What about you, seonbae?”

“I’m going that way too. Uh, hey, wanna walk for a bit?”

Yuna nodded after a bit of hesitation. Gaeul was reminded of what her friend said; that it was incredible of Yuna to confess such a thing. From how frightened she looked right now, Gaeul could hardly imagine that she was the same bold girl during the candid talk. It must have been that difficult to say those words.

“You must be cold.”

Gaeul undid her scarf and stood in front of Yuna. Yuna said she was okay, but Gaeul quietly put the scarf around her.

“It’s warm, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Apparently, it’s going to get colder tomorrow. You should be prepared when you come to school.”

“Yes.”

Gaeul stepped back first. She had a mountain load of things to say, but she couldn’t speak so easily. She tried rolling the words that wanted to escape inside her mouth. They walked silently for a while until they stopped due to a traffic light. A truck loaded with logs passed in front of them with a heavy sound. Her ears became numb momentarily, and her head became empty. The piles of words disappeared, and what remained behind was just one sentence.

“It’s not because of you that I’m not meeting Maru.”

She saw Yuna’s small body stiffen up. Gaeul turned around halfway to face Yuna. She saw confusion in her two eyes. The junior she had to console in the distant past was standing right there. Yuna had placed her two hands in front of her stomach. Gaeul grabbed those hands. Yuna’s hands were shaking and sweaty. It was extremely chilly. Gaeul faintly smiled after seeing the stiff Yuna.

“I mean it. It’s not because of you.”

The lights changed. People started crossing the road. After glancing at the people passing by, she looked at Yuna. Yuna seemed to be organizing her thoughts and she spoke after a while,

“Then why aren’t you meeting?”

“Because of my intentions. I’m not seeing him right now because I don’t want to see him.”

“You?”

“Yes. Didn’t you hear from Maru?”

“I did hear a little bit about it, but I didn’t think that would actually be the reason.”

Yuna sniffed. Whether it was because of the cold or because she was crying, Gaeul did not know. Gaeul took out some tissues from her bag and wiped below Yuna’s nose. Yuna, who had been frozen stiff, soon came to herself and took the tissues, saying that she would wipe herself.

“How was Maru during the shoot?”

“Maru-seonbae?”

“Yes. Was he good?”

Yuna gave her glances intermittently. It seemed like she didn't know how to answer this question.

“I just want you to give it to me straight. Tell me what you felt.”

“Maru-seonbae was... really great. He sometimes explained to me in kind if I got stuck on something. Gently and in detail. Oh, he changed recently, so he's no longer kind towards me, but I definitely got the feeling that he was guiding me. I felt like... he was helping me just as much as I put in the effort.”

“That sounds like him. He doesn't make that many mistakes, does he?”

“He doesn't. There are rarely any NG scenes when it comes to his shots. Even if they do another shoot, it's because the director wants to do the shoot repeatedly for a better cut.”

Yuna's expression eased up a little. It seemed that her nervousness had subsided.

“His acting is one thing, but there's no one that looks after the other cast as much as him. Especially when it comes to the background actors. We only shot with them one day, but he looked like he became close to them and even contacts them from time to time. The staff really likes Maru too. The camera director especially takes good care of him and....”

Yuna, who was talking without stop, suddenly widened her eyes and became silent.

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. You're making me feel sorry instead. Anyway, Maru is doing well during the shoots without making mistakes, right?”

“Yes. He's incredible. I always end up making mistakes because of nervousness, but he always finishes things in one go. I sometimes feel envious of him, and I sometimes find him curious. We aren't that far apart in age, but the difference in experience is too clear. Even if I resolve to do better, I sometimes feel uneasy when looking at him because the gap between us is too big.”

Unease. Gaeul deeply sympathized with this word. It was the word that summed up the reason she couldn't meet Maru.

“Me too. I always feel that Maru is amazing when I keep watching him.”

The lights changed once again. Gaeul grabbed Yuna's hand and crossed the road.

“Two years ago, Maru and I studied under teacher Ganghwan. You know who teacher Yang Ganghwan is, right? You shot the drama with him this time.”

“Senior Ganghwan? Yes, I do.”

“He's good, isn't he?”

“Don't even start. Maru-seonbae is good, but I can only say that senior Ganghwan is on a completely different level. I can only exclaim when I watch him. He always says that he's embarrassed because he's not good at acting in front of a camera, but if that's how it is, I might as well be disqualified.”

“Right. His acts are really amazing. It’s especially the case when you see his vivid acts on stage. We- that is, Maru and I- studied under such a teacher. There were many people. People who were considered good at acting from various schools were in that place. Even there, Maru stood out above others. He was the only one who got extra teachings from the teacher after all. At first, everyone misunderstood. They thought that the teacher was biased towards him. But after time passed, everyone knew. It wasn’t that the teacher was biased, it was that the level of acting that Maru was on was a different level from us.”

Gaeul scraped the snow on the bonnet of a car and squashed it into a ball. Then, she pretended to throw it at Yuna and hit the tree next to her. Yuna flinched and glanced at her before making a snowball herself.

“Are you going to throw that?”

“N-no.”

Yuna became startled and dusted her hands. Gaeul thought this for a long time: Yuna was a really good girl. She was honest with her emotions and had the courage to speak in uncomfortable situations.

Gaeul suddenly wondered what kind of person she was to Maru. Considering how he could act indifferent to a girl like that, did it mean that he liked Gaeul a lot? Or did he not place that much meaning in romantic relationships? She remembered how Maru habitually talked about marriage sometimes as a joke and sometimes seriously. She wondered how serious he was when he said those words as well as how much of it was just a joke.

“Since you were honest with me, I’ll be honest with you as well. I said that I was okay in front of you, but I actually felt jealous. I was scared. I even had the thought that I was being a nuisance to you two.”

“No, absolutely not. Maru-seonbae thinks about you a lot to the point that he asks me how you’re doing.”

“Really?”

Gaeul sighed. Maru had faith in her. He was waiting. Even though she was wavering, he kept the promise they made.

“Now that I heard that from you, I think I really have the conviction now.”

“Then are you going to meet again?”

“No, I’m not going to see him after all. As selfish as I might sound, I think that might be better for me.”

“Why? Why do you have to do that?”

“Because I’m the bad one. Because I’m insufficient. Because I lack self-confidence. If I meet him now, I will definitely find it enjoyable, and I will also be happy. But I have the dream to stand on the same stage as Maru one day. Honestly speaking, I don’t think I’m good enough as I am now. Like what you said, Maru keeps making progress. I want to lash out at myself. I was always consoled by Maru until now, so I think I got complacent and got used to that kind of lifestyle. I want to stand in front of Maru more boldly. I want to embrace him, who actually has more tears than you think, but I don’t think I can do that as I am now.”

Gaeul heaved out a deep breath. Yuna looked at her, at a loss on what to do.

“If you still like Maru, you can flirt with him.”

“What?”

“That’s what Maru told me before. He told me it was fine to date other people. He said that he wasn’t worried because he’s the most charming person and has the confidence to make me fall for him again. I’m going to do the same thing. If I have that kind of confidence, I don’t think I need to be worried like this in the first place.”

Yuna looked dazed. Gaeul laughed out loud when she saw her expression.

“Seonbae, you’re okay, right?”

“Do I look strange?”

“N-no, it’s not like that, but....”

“Anyway, sorry for making you suffer. I’m also sorry for making you say the things that I had to say. Also, thanks for bringing up the courage to speak about it to me.”

Gaeul grabbed Yuna’s hand again.

“It’s cold, let’s go.”

Yuna didn’t say anything for a while as though she felt complex. Yuna only spoke again when they arrived at the bus stop,

“Seonbae, are you really not going to meet Maru-seonbae?”

“Yep. Until I can accept myself.”

“I’ll be cheering for you.”

“No, don’t. Rather than that, did you really give up on Maru?”

“Eh? Ah, yes. Maru-seonbae said it clearly to me.”

“But that’s what Maru thinks.”

“Seonbae.”

Just then, the bus that Yuna was going to ride arrived. Yuna undid the scarf and spoke,

“Honestly, I can’t understand a word you’re saying now.”

“I’m not surprised. I don’t understand how I feel either.”

“Uhm, seonbae. If you say things like that, I might end up liking him again.”

“You can. Just bear in mind that it’s highly probable that I’ll snatch him back later.”

“Are you serious?”

“Let me just call it Han Maru’s dating method. I’m not sure if it’s going to work or not though.”

The bus opened and Yuna got on. Before the door closed, Yuna hurriedly asked.

“I can keep calling you in the future, right?”

“Anytime. I’ll even pick up during the middle of the night.”

Yuna smiled at the last moment, though, she still looked puzzled.

Gaeul looked up at the sky.

The snow was falling again.

“For a while....”

The figure of Maru smiling briefly appeared in her head before disappearing.

Gaeul put on her scarf.

The wind was no longer chilly.