

Once Again 871

Chapter 871. Sequence 13

"I never knew things would actually turn out like this," Heewon said.

His eyes moved quickly as they skimmed through the script.

"She wrote like she was in a daze and ended up creating a full-blown story alright."

Maru put down the script. The persistence of the master craftsman that would not tolerate her work being moderate as well as her pride as the trendsetter to go ahead of the flow of the trend was fully reflected in her writing. His domestic labor at Eunbin's house two days ago was repaid in the form of good writing. If the plot was like this, he would more than welcome it. He would have to see the viewers' responses to be sure, but the contents of the script were something that the viewers who enjoyed episodes 7 and 8 would definitely welcome. Maybe even the people who were swayed by Bigfoot's logic might be shaken. It may come off as an old-fashioned sermon from the older generation, but Eunbin's writing skills did wonders to change that.

"I think it'll be good as long as the acting can bring out the flavor. Try working things out with senior Hyunjin."

"I will. I don't want to kick away the food prepared for me."

The staff who were waiting on the set started moving. It seemed that Yoonseo, the tardy girl, had arrived. She flashed past in front of his eyes while wearing a fancy outfit.

"She's a real busy one alright. She's probably so busy that even two bodies wouldn't be enough."

Heewon dusted his knees and stood up.

"It's about time I get going too."

"Good luck."

"Thanks, I'll be needing it. I can smell all-nighters coming up. You saw that the director came wearing a hoodie, right? She always puts that on when she stays up at night."

Just as Heewon said, many people had to prepare to stay up the night on days when Jayeon came wearing a brown hoodie with the word 'Dream' printed on it. As the drama went past its midpoint, the shoot became more like a live event. This was the case even with a drama like 'Doctors' where the script had already been created beforehand. Edits in the script that reflected the current trends, as well as inserting scenes because of various advertisements, and schedule adjustments of various actors – all of these problems would pile up and would hasten everything towards the end.

"Looks like I'll also be going home late if things go wrong."

Maru checked the script once again. There were multiple different scenes in multiple locations. It seemed that they would have to move the shoot at least four times. His part might end up getting delayed, making him have to wait hours before shooting 30 minutes and then waiting hours again. After

all, the order of scenes was decided first by the schedule of the main actors, then by the location. The circumstances of a minor actor weren't even worth considering.

"Let's go home together while breathing some fresh night air."

Heewon left the place for makeup. While he said that Yoonseo was busy, Heewon was just as busy as well. Maru knew of three events that Heewon had to participate in just yesterday. He must have gone home in the middle of the night before waking up still in the middle of the night to come to the shoot. He could tell that the 'live' episodes had begun just by looking at the faces of the actors. Everyone seemed to have declared war against fatigue. Yoonseo, who disappeared into the waiting room, came back while repeatedly apologizing. From how she was wearing a fancy outfit when she came here, it seemed that she came here immediately after an event. It was probably one in the countryside as well. She probably came back to Seoul while sleeping in the van. When Heewon and Yoonseo finished preparing themselves, the actors who were waiting all gathered in one spot. Yoonseo kept bowing down towards a senior actor many years older than her. Thankfully, the senior actor was known to be rather gentle, so he consoled her instead. If it was a picky actor instead, the set might have been flipped upside down by now.

"Let's begin quickly. We'll need to speed up since we're late."

The shoot began after restricting access to the hospital's main entrance. Although they used manmade sets for the ER unit, they couldn't use a set for the huge entrance of the hospital. People started flocking when large cameras and shiny lights were installed. It was the staff who became busy. Despite knowing that there was a shoot, an elderly tried to cross in front of the camera and got into a quarrel with a staff member. Meanwhile, the actors calmly continued their act. The period of time between 'cut' and the next 'shoot' became shorter. They had less allowed time since the shoot started late, so the director was probably nervous as well.

"This has become a huge mess."

It was Hyunjin. She said those words as she looked at the man who was shouting while asking why they blocked the entrance.

"You're early. Wasn't your part after lunch today?"

"I didn't want to daze off at home, so I came. I also wanted to try going through the script with you too. But why's the atmosphere like this?"

"Miss Yoonseo was late. They should've started shooting at 7, but it's already 9. There are more visitors coming to the hospital as well. I think everyone's sensitive because there especially seems to be a lot of people in the audience with loud voices today."

As soon as he said those words, a motorbike came towards the hospital with loud engine noises. It passed right through before any of the staff could stop it. A man wearing a vest that said 'quick delivery' on it hurriedly entered the hospital. Hey! Do your work properly! – the assistant director shouted at the staff in charge of controlling vehicles.

"Looks like we won't be laughing if we create an NG today."

Hyunjin pointed at Jayeon who was sitting in front of the monitor. She took off her headphones in annoyance before standing up and calling for the assistant director with her finger. He could tell she was visibly angry even from a distance. Whenever Jayeon said something to the assistant director, Yoonseo's face became dark as well.

"Senior, do you think we should go through the script together in the back?"

They couldn't do anything to improve the shoot even if they watched. Practicing their scene and reducing their mistakes during the real run would be a more practical way of helping them out. They moved away from the people who were shooting videos with their phones above their heads.

"People are flocking."

"It must be all over social media right now."

Don't take photos, don't spread them around – despite the staff shouting until their voices became hoarse, news about the shoot was bound to spread through the internet.

A clearing next to the parking lot was rather empty. Maru sat on the bench. It was surprisingly quiet now that they were a little away from the set.

"Shall we begin right away?"

"Wait a bit. I'll read it one more time."

Hyunjin was someone who had the tendency to not look at the script during practice, while Maru was the opposite. Hyunjin read the script while moving her lips slightly and eventually said that she was ready.

"I'll read the directives. Let's go over everything once and then do it again without the directives. Let's take it calmly for the first run. Are you okay with that?"

"Good."

Maru fixed his eyes on the script. For the first read-through, he took things lightly. He read both the directives and the lines and inputted the detailed situation into his brain. Although many things would change once they actually started the shoot, having a clear picture would still allow him to react accordingly.

"Morning, in front of the hospital. Bigfoot sees Hyunjin while coming out of the entrance with a cup of coffee. His lips twitch in dissatisfaction after looking at her. He turns around. Hyunjin sees him. She calls out to Bigfoot, but Bigfoot keeps walking without stopping. Hyunjin follows him, feeling flabbergasted."

Hyunjin said her line.

"Am I the only one who saw the other? Also, I called out to you."

"I was too out of it because I'm so tired. What is it?"

"I thought about it and it just annoyed me. It's like I'm in the wrong here, right? Even though I didn't do anything wrong."

“Indeed. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why do you look like that? You look like you stepped on shit because of me.”

“I do? I’m just tired. Don’t misunderstand.”

“I’m saying it because it doesn’t look like a misunderstanding. Also, I’m here to correct what you said before.”

“What I said before?”

“I’m sure that in your eyes, I look like a flower raised in a greenhouse, who was raised without any deficiencies. And that’s why you asked me if I ever worked in order to study, and you told me that you could have studied when you worked. Yes, you’re right. I’ve never been unable to study because of monetary problems. In fact, I was sent to good cram schools and received luxurious tutoring. But so what? It has been annoying me ever since then. Why do I have to be looked at like that by you? I was definitely born in a better environment than you. So, shouldn’t I use that to my advantage? Or what, did I have to give up my own rights and study just like you because there are people like you who have to work in order to study?”

“I didn’t say it like that.”

“Yes, you did. Back then, you looked pitiful, and I looked like a really bad girl. But I thought about it. Did the fact that I was born as the child of a wealthy class ever cause you harm? Is it a sin that we started off differently?”

Maru looked at Hyunjin through the corner of his eyes. She was bringing out her emotions now. She seemed to have forgotten that they should calmly do the read-through for the first run. Her cheeks were twitching.

“Don’t act like a victim. You couldn’t say a word to the head doctor, but you could talk to me like that. And what? Both you and I tried hard? Don’t try to be the good guy. Don’t justify yourself. If you were wronged, then go against it. You hid your tail between your legs because you have to take hints from above? That sounds like the most pathetic excuse I’ve ever heard. If you had no choice but to do that because you are weak, then sure, live like that forever. Get looked down on, and get everything deprived from you. You just hate people like me to console yourself, saying that you had no choice.”

Hyunjin finished her line while moving her arm diagonally as though to shake off something. After saying a long line, she took a deep breath as though she had just done a full sprint.

“Did I go overboard?”

“No, I liked it. I also like the way you spoke like a high-class lady speaking in a scolding tone.”

“I just found myself getting absorbed while I was speaking. I liked Bigfoot’s lines, but saying Yoomin’s lines made it feel different.”

“That’s just how much you were absorbed.”

“You’re making me blush.”

“Let’s continue. Since we’re at it, let’s continue right to the end and come back to it afterwards.”

“That sounds good. I’m going to stand up.”

“I’ll stand up as well. Should we go over some motions as well?”

“Just a little.”

Maru stood up with the script.

“Bigfoot finishes the coffee in his hand in one go. He crushes the paper cup and throws it away in annoyance. Hyunjin snorts as she looks at the paper cup, as though she found it petty. Bigfoot stares at Hyunjin and goes up to her. Hyunjin stays there without falling back.”

He gave Hyunjin a signal through his eyes. She turned around with her arms crossed and spoke,

“What? You still have something to say? Or are you going to make excuses again? But hey, I don’t think that you’re pitiful anymore. I don’t care what you think about me. I will not stand any damage to me, even if it was given to me by someone above me.”

Chapter 873. Sequence 13

She got a text saying that her salary would be paid soon and that she shouldn’t worry. Seeing the vague word ‘soon’, she wanted to ask ‘when,’ but she did not have the courage to respond to a superior’s text. The employee group chat burst into an outrage. They all sent the text message they received and wrote all sorts of insults. If receiving swear words increased lifespan, then the president of Cheonho company would probably live until the day mankind went extinct. Eunhye was also about to chime in but stopped. She thought that the energy to even type was wasteful.

She turned off the notifications for the group chat. If she left them on, it was bound to be noisy throughout the whole night. She glanced at the chat that said that the president-swearing competition was going to be held at a bar on a certain date and that participation was mandatory before flipping the phone over. Drinking? She needed to save every last penny. She gathered her hair behind her and tied it with a rubber hair tie. She then took out a facial mask pack from the fridge and put it on her face. It was cold to the point that it made her shiver, but it soon became cool. It was a free facial pack from the cosmetics store in front of her house, which was holding a celebratory event for its opening. The most welcome word in this world was ‘free.’

Eunhye looked at the calendar on her table. There were only a few days left until the next payday. At this rate, it was likely that even her next paycheck was going to be tied to the company. The text message was proof of that. After all, they sent her a similar-sounding message last month when she didn’t get paid. Eunhye decided to help out at a store run by someone she knew on the weekend. It was fortunate for her that there was someone looking out for her. After all, it was hard to look for short-term part-time jobs on the weekend these days. 100,000 won for two days. The hourly wage was pretty decent too. The fact that she had to work all week was depressing, but it was much better than asking for help from her family. She did not want to call her mom and have ‘Mom, I’m sorry, but’ be the first thing she said after calling her.

She habitually clicked on her banking app and checked her balance. She knew that she would be notified through a text first if she ever got paid, but the meaningless hopes made her fingers move regardless.

Under the apartment application deposit account was her paycheck account. 270,000 won. How much would she have left after paying her student loan and her phone bill? She even had two friends marry in November. One of them wasn't that close, so she felt like 50,000 won would do, but she had been friends with the other one since high school, so she couldn't afford to give just that. She wondered what people would say if she got a small loan just to give her friend some congratulatory money for marriage.

Eunhye took off her face mask and brought some puffed grain she placed on top of her microwave. She didn't hesitate to grab them when she heard that a body-sized bag of them only cost 5,000 won. Tomorrow was the company's founding day, so she wanted to play around, but considering her financial situation, playing around was a luxury. She put on the movie that she had downloaded beforehand and ate the puffed grain. She sometimes chewed on them vigorously and sometimes dissolved them in her saliva. Only after she ate enough to be fed up did she close the bag. She felt like her appetite was getting bigger and bigger the poorer she became. It wasn't like she liked eating snacks either.

She picked up her phone to chat with a friend. During college, she had the confidence to talk for hours and hours about the spaghetti she ate during the day, but these days, she would be at a loss for words after just asking how they were doing. She called a few friends, but that didn't even take one hour. The fact that she had nothing to say was one thing, but everyone was also busy as well, whether they were playing around, working, or fighting off their guilty conscience.

Maybe I should do a puzzle – she thought about the 500-piece puzzle that she didn't even look at after buying it. She overturned the box in the middle of her cramped living room. The moment she did, she felt stifled. When on Earth was she going to finish this? She was about to gather them all up and put them inside the box again but then decided to be patient. She turned on the TV and focused on the pieces. The sound from the TV eventually became faint. When she was absorbed in it, she actually found doing the puzzle rather fun. It had a charm that made her forget about her worries.

It was when the little mermaid's face and the witch's legs were starting to take shape that her hands suddenly stopped. She couldn't find the fitting piece. It seemed that she had run out of concentration. She could start hearing the sound from the TV again. Eunhye threw down the puzzle piece in her hand and sat on the sofa, thinking that she would probably never finish that 500-piece puzzle in her lifetime.

A drama was being played on TV. It was 'Doctor's Office.' Eunhye quickly changed the channel. She had been thinking about watching 'Doctors' since Monday, but she had totally forgotten about it. Lee Heewon was lying down on a hospital bed. The last scene from last week was him rushing into the middle of a traffic accident, and it seemed that he had gotten into an accident himself. Lee Heewon consoled Yoonseo, who was watching him worriedly before turning her away. Following that, Choi Hyunjin came in.

-I knew this would happen. I told you you would be hospitalized if you kept running rampant like that without discretion, didn't I?

Choi Hyunjin, who sat down with a condescending look, was carrying a basket full of fruits in her hand. When Lee Heewon asked if she was worried, Choi Hyunjin just snorted.

-I came here to tease the guy who doesn't even know his place. Why don't you stop now? How long are you going to play hero? Just bow down to my dad and become obedient. He says he will lead you, and you can only reject so many times.

-This is just how I am. I did that out of reflex.

-If you keep doing that, your life as a doctor might end as you know it. Right now, you only got small injuries, but luck will not always be on your side, will it? I'm sure you feel good about saving that child, but if the car was overturned, then both you and that kid would have died. If you die, then you can't act like a hero anymore either.

-It's fine. I'm still alive.

-The life in front of your eyes is important, yes, but haven't you ever thought that you utilizing your skills to the fullest would save not one, but dozens or even hundreds of lives? The one life in front of your eyes versus hundreds that you will save in the future. Which one do you think is more important?

-I am going to save that one and the hundreds that come after.

-Yeah, I knew you'd say that. What am I supposed to say to someone who doesn't listen to anyone? Good luck with that. I don't know how long you can keep up with playing hero though.

Hearing Choi Hyunjin's lines made her frustrated. Her logic was just like what her company claimed: If you endure your sacrifice right now, there shall be glory in the future. If there was one thing she realized on the day her paycheck had been delayed for two months, it was that the future was just the future. She didn't have any money to eat in the immediate present, so talking about the future was just grasping at clouds.

She leaned on her sofa and clicked on the salaryman café that she often visited. Starting last week, the community burned with talking about 'Doctors' around this hour, and it was no different this time. People started talking about how Choi Hyunjin's logic was nothing but theory. There were hundreds of likes on a post that said that her logic was like a politician that was not able to solve the immediate problem yet was giving promises about the future. Everyone seemed to feel the same in that they wanted a hero like Lee Heewon to help them.

There were some posts that stood on Choi Hyunjin's side from time to time, but the comments to that were all criticisms. Eunhye also wrote a reply after seeing that person's comment: It's just the logic of those who have things. There was an overwhelming number of dislikes on that comment. Although the original poster was trying hard to counterargue, Eunhye couldn't care less. She thought that there was nothing to stand up for when it came to Choi Hyunjin.

On a post that said 'why are you getting so angry when it's just a drama,' the replies to that were all just 'get a job.' It was something that people wrote to the posters who couldn't read the mood. Eunhye did the same as well. What were those people doing on the internet if they were going to live in reality? Even after that, there were many posts that broke the logic of 'Yoomin' that Choi Hyujin acted. It was hard to find any posts that stood up for her.

She took her eyes off the phone and looked at the TV again. Choi Hyunjin met with Bigfoot. Eunhye focused. Last week, when these two met, they created an episode that made her heart ache. She cheered for Bigfoot as she watched the plot. Meeting eyes with Choi Hyunjin at the entrance of the hospital, Bigfoot turned around to leave the place. Choi Hyunjin's eyes twitched before she followed.

Eunhye pouted. These two weren't going to start dating, right? If they did, then that would be the worst possible plot. If it was any other drama, she would think 'oh well', and just accept it, but she could not tolerate those two eventually forming a romantic relationship. He was a character that made her shed tears last week and a character that knew her pain. Wouldn't it feel rather vain if he managed to get married to the daughter of a director of a university hospital? She didn't want him to suddenly start acting like superman either like Lee Heewon.

When she took a glance at the community, everyone was writing similar things. Did they hit it off? Are they going to start going out? No way, if the writer has any brains, then it shouldn't be like that, etc

The conversation between the two continued on. The argument was more heated than before. Choi Hyunjin would give him a blow, and Bigfoot would counterattack afterwards. When Choi Hyunjin snapped at him, she felt frustrated, but when Bigfoot logically refuted every single word of hers, she ended up applauding.

When Bigfoot turned around after the argument, Eunhye felt refreshed but bitter at the same time. It would've been good if he scolded her more. However, on the other hand, she felt like that was the correct way. If he snapped back too hard, then he might get into disadvantageous situations after all. She suddenly recalled a dream she had one day. In the dream, she was going against general manager Choi's every word. Just that felt refreshing. It was a dream that made her small wish come true. In fact, the only kind of revenge she could take against general manager Choi was just that. Bigfoot probably did what he thought was his best method of revenge against Choi Hyunjin as well.

She had to live with her head lowered while not getting crushed. She was still squirming to struggle to live. Even a character in a drama was managing to struggle, too. Eunhye felt energetic for some reason. You can do it – she felt like she was encouraged, and it was not in a pressuring way. Not that she could actually go against general manager Choi though.

It was just then that a delightful noise came from her phone. It was the alarm that she had set. That sound only meant one thing. Eunhye quickly checked the message. It was a message from her bank, notifying her that money had been transferred into her account.

Ack! – she screeched before opening her banking app. Two months' worth of salary was in her account now. Getting money at this late hour? She didn't know how administration worked, but she couldn't care about that right now. The group chat was filled with emojis. Cute bears were dancing around with stashes of cash. Eunhye put on her jacket and bought some beer and snacks from the convenience store in front of her house. When she came back to her house after boldly paying for everything with her credit card, she felt like she had everything.

Just as she was watching TV in happiness, she thought about what Choi Hyunjin said: Don't act like a victim, be bold about it. It was strange. The words that she thought were absurd suddenly sounded rather persuasive. She went into the café again. She clicked on the post that stood up for Choi Hyunjin. They were still arguing. She calmly read the comments. Although she still felt incredibly frustrated, she understood her now. Thinking about it, Choi Hyunjin's words were reasonable. It might be extremely utilitarian, but just as she said, if Lee Heewon could focus on surgeries, he would definitely save a lot more people.

The scene where she kicked a trash can and picked up the trash again was rather cute. Eunhye frowned when she watched that scene because of what she said to Bigfoot, but thinking back, Choi Hyunjin hadn't directly harmed anyone. It was just that her opinion was stronger than others. If people were asked whose life they wanted to lead, then every single one would reply that they would want to live like Choi Hyujin. Eunhye was the same.

"Geez, I'm so fickle too."

She went back to watching the drama after smiling at herself for being so fickle because of a single number on her bank account. She also wrote 'Yoomin is actually pretty decent' as a comment.

Chapter 874. Sequence 14

She rummaged through the files on top of the desk in a hurry before finding a patient profile with red tape attached to the corner. The moment she checked the signature of the doctor in charge, she almost froze up. Despite knowing that there was no one in the storage room, she still looked up and around. They say it is darkest under the lampshade, but she did not know that it would be hidden so boldly like this. Placing documents that could not be shredded in a place where every office worker in the hospital could visit was a rather bold move. She recalled professor Park's mysterious gaze.

She laid out the documents on the floor and shone a flashlight down on them. These papers were undeniable evidence. With this, it would be possible to bring new wind to the doctor's office. It was when she was taking photos while coming up with plans for the future that she suddenly heard footsteps. There were only two kinds of people who would come to the storage room at 1 a.m. It was either a security guard or someone looking for something in secret, just like her. She turned off the flashlight and gathered the documents before putting them in her arms. There was no way it was a security guard. Mister Park was on duty tonight. He was a guy who would only start moving at around 2, so there was no way he already made a move. The footsteps stopped in front of the storage room. It was when she felt enveloped in a disgust-filled tension that was like hundreds of ants crawling on her body that,

"Very very, good. Yes, very good."

Gaeul blinked when she heard the voice that woke her up. The nervousness that stifled her body faded away. Her vision, which could only see documents and metal cabinets, became wider until she eventually saw the various lighting equipment and the faces of the staff. Right, she was in a shoot. She stood up. While she wiped her hands on her pants, the director came over.

"You're becoming better every episode. Are you going to run away to the film industry?"

"I'm getting ready to run away at a moment's notice. How was I? I don't think I was that bad."

"I told you you were very good. I can't even begin to imagine how I should start editing that. I might as well use the whole scene just like that. Well done."

"You tell me I'm good every single time, so I'm not sure if I'm actually doing well or not."

"I always tell you that you're good because you never did bad. You listened and did everything that I asked you to do. How am I supposed to have any complaints at all?"

The director turned around and told everyone that they should move. The lights were turned off and the staff started packing up the equipment.

“Good work, unni,” Mijoo said as she put a blanket on her.

She caught a cold while dazing out on the veranda because she heard that the night air in November was good. It wasn’t anything serious, and she only had a slight fever. Maybe she should’ve listened to Maru when he told her to come in. It made her worry that Maru, who stood next to her and lent her his shoulder, might have also caught a cold.

“How do you feel? Are you okay?”

“I don’t think you need to worry. The ginger tea you made for me seems to have helped me a lot.”

“I can make you ginger tea a hundred times if you wish, so just don’t get sick. Do you know how startled I was when I saw you coughing when going to the styling shop this morning? Well, I guess it was Chanwoo-oppa who was more surprised than me. I mean, he gets scolded if you get sick.”

“So don’t you go around telling anyone that I’m sick. No one will know about it as long as you stay quiet. It’s not that obvious, is it?”

“You saw how delighted the director was. Who would think that you’re sick? Maybe it’s an actor thing that they all change personalities when they start acting even if they’re sick. I should nurture my concentration like that too.”

While they removed the walls of the set and moved them, Gaeul let Mijoo style her face. While neatening up her skin tone, Mijoo stopped and spoke,

“Unni, put your lips out a little.”

“I don’t think my lips need anything.”

“You got a sponsored product, so you should change it all the time. Also, you know you need to wear that knitted sweater right? The knit was in a braid and looked like it would suit you. Though, I’m sure anything would look good on you.”

“Sometimes, I feel like you’re having more fun than me.”

“Because you doing well is the same as me doing well. You give me pocket money whenever you shoot an advertisement, so don’t you think I should pray that you will do well?”

She checked the pink lipstick spread on her lips through the mirror. The lipstick suited the character’s personality, so she saw no need to change it. The knitted sweater was the same. The looks emphasized cuteness and loveliness, and coincidentally, it was light pink as well.

“You know that our new actress got sponsored accessories and clothes thanks to you, right? The team leader has such good skills. I showed her some clothes that we got sponsored and she was so delighted. She’s such a cute girl.”

“Help her so that she can appear pretty on screen.”

It was rare for even actors of the same agency to become close. They usually heard news about other actors through managers or stylists like this. Gaeul put her hand between her neck and her sweater and took out her hair. Thinking about it, it was rather curious that the people of JA were all so close to each other. She smiled as she thought back to the day they drank together until the sun rose at Maru's house.

"What are you thinking about? Is it about Maru-oppa?" Mijoo asked while tidying her messy hair.

She just replied that she remembered something interesting. It would be great if they could gather up like that and talk like that again.

"Unni."

Mijoo called out in a small voice near her ears. Her voice contained wariness. Gaeul looked at Kang Giwoo walking over to her. When they made eye contact, he waved his hand and approached her without hesitation.

"Are you unwell? You don't look that good."

"It's because of the lights."

Gaeul pointed at the lights shining in the distance. Giwoo looked at the lights. Meanwhile, Gaeul signaled Mijoo to leave this place as this was going to get uncomfortable for her.

"Unni, I'll go to the car for a bit. I have some clothes I forgot."

"Okay, go ahead."

Mijoo turned around at the entrance of the set. Gaeul smiled. Mijoo nodded slightly before leaving.

"I know it's November, but it's pretty chilly."

"I heard that winter is going to be cold this year."

Gaeul opened her script. It was something she usually did, so Giwoo would probably not be displeased with it either. He had been observing her like a wolf watching a herd of sheep until just a few weeks ago, but starting a while back, he talked to her whenever possible. To be precise, it was from the day after Maru said that the problem had been solved. He said that he followed Kang Giwoo, and after that, Giwoo approached her amicably like the first time they met and no longer raised his guard. She wondered what he was thinking. Kang Giwoo was someone who was pitch black down to his bones. At this point, she could not think of his smile as anything more than a method to enchant other people. Watching him smile right in front of her face was rather stressful too.

"A hot broth is the best on days like this."

"That, I agree."

"Then do you wanna go eat something together after the shoot?"

"As much as I want to, it looks like my shoot will end early today. You'll probably be stuck here for longer, you know?"

It wasn't necessary to express her displeasure when the opponent was acting amicably. Gaeul suitably mixed in jokes as she continued the conversation. Whether she liked it or not, they were destined to work together until the last episode of the drama. It wasn't like she could just leave the drama midway for personal reasons when she was getting paid for it. It would be a different story if Giwoo was making a total mess or something, but picking a fight with him while he walked around the set with his smiling face would be a very reckless thing to do.

Gaeul took out her phone and sent Bitna a text message saying that she was with Giwoo and that Bitna should not approach. Today was Bitna's last shoot, so she would no longer have to see Kang Giwoo after just a few hours. It was possible that they might meet at a different shoot in the future, but she wasn't that worried because Bitna would have become much more mature by then.

"What a pity."

"You can't help it."

"But there's something every time I try to invite you. It's rather disappointing."

"What can I do about it? Popular actor Mr. Kang Giwoo is always busy. Also, you don't have to eat with me, do you? You should find a good partner for yourself."

"I think you're a good partner too."

Gaeul tightened her grip on her phone. She turned around to look at Giwoo. What could possibly be behind that innocent-looking smile of his? When she looked at him without a word, he made an even more mysterious expression and changed the topic.

"I saw that Doctors is getting better reviews by the day. I'm watching it with interest these days too. Didn't you say you watch it as well, Gaeul?"

"I do. Just a little while I'm on the move though, as a form of study."

"The other actors are good as well, but Maru's character was really good. Last week's episode caused an uproar on the internet. The writer's good at writing and the actor managed to bring it out well."

"Really? I don't really pay attention to the internet that much."

She earnestly watched every single episode, but she did not show it. She had to act like she had broken up with him after all. She put a bit of jealousy, envy, and disappointment in her eyes and words. Having to act after the shoot was over made her really exhausted.

"You're a friend of his, so you should really look out for him. Someone with Maru's skills will climb up very quickly. I heard that there are many people on the lookout for him as well. I heard through the team leader at my agency that he was going to shoot a film soon too. I hope Maru does well. The world will be good only when those with skill receive acknowledgment. Don't you think so too?"

"That's true."

Was he probing her out at this point? Or was he convinced after hearing something from a certain someone and was just checking facts? She felt complex. Would she be able to fool a conman who fooled everyone with his smile? She always acted humble and said that she was ordinary no matter how much

the people around her praised her acting skills, but for today, she really wanted her own skills to be quite high. After looking at the script without a word for a while, Giwoo stood up.

“Gaeul.”

“What?”

“Please give me some time. Let’s eat out together.”

Gaeul frowned as he looked at Giwoo walking towards the director. Was it a mistake? Just now, Giwoo’s eyes weren’t those directed at a colleague at work. Her woman’s intuition alarmed her. A man who was this obsessed with her clearly had other intentions. The problem was that she couldn’t tell if his intentions were genuine, or if they were just one of the ‘pranks and jokes’ that Maru talked about. Though, regardless of which one it was, it didn’t change the fact that it was unpleasant. Actually, it might be better if he realized that he was being played with and was trying to scheme against her instead. If he was actually feeling attracted to her as a member of the opposite sex....

Gaeul covered her mouth and nose with her palm. She was reminded of an alleyway with food waste littered everywhere.

“Unni, did something happen?” Mijoo asked worriedly after returning.

Gaeul said that it was nothing to relieve Mijoo. There was no need to spread the unease.

Chapter 875. Sequence 14

Giwoo stood in the middle of the set. He exchanged gazes with the surrounding staff, and he was like a total human air freshener. People who flocked to his side all had relaxed expressions as though they smelled something fragrant. Even people who were working in a hurry gained leisure when they talked to him. Some even said that just talking to Giwoo made things work out. There were many people asking him for a handshake to get some of that ‘good energy’ as well. One of the local folklore superstitions had formed on the set because of him.

Gaeul rested her chin on her hands and watched Giwoo. The better his reputation became, the more he smiled and the more the shooting set felt like a thorny vinefield. It would be great if he was someone she could outright disdain. It would be better if he just acted like Lee Miyoon and gnarled at her. She thought about how to get along with the wolf in grandma’s pajamas that was walking around the set. Just then, she made eye contact with him. He smiled pleasantly. This was the third time already. At this point, it couldn’t be anything but that he was intentionally doing this. It wasn’t that she was mistaken, and it wasn’t that she was being too proud either. That guy definitely had an interest in her.

She had a headache. Her patience was not as deep as those department store service employees that could keep upholding their smiles. At times like these, she envied Maru’s indifferent expression. Someone like Maru would gladly hang his arm around his archenemy and play around in a theme park together. Maru was a Swiss army knife, while she was a kitchen knife. Maru knew how to fold his blade, but she had no choice but to let her blade out all the time. She might be able to endure to a certain extent, but she would eventually burst out, just like the time with Lee Miyoon.

She barely managed to smile and turned around. She had to put the nail in the coffin before things turned strange. If he tried to do anything strange, then she would just give him a shoulder throw, and if

he tried to talk to her about it, she would just say that she had no room for relationships right now. Giwoo, who probably thought that she and Maru had broken up, would try to console her, but that was absolutely not happening.

Giwoo and Bitna's acting began. Gaeul watched nervously. During the scene where Giwoo grabbed Bitna's hands and started praying, Bitna kept causing NGs. As she usually didn't make many mistakes, the director even had to carefully ask her what was wrong.

"Sorry, I'll do it again."

"Let's take a ten-minute break. Bitna, you should take a breather as well. You don't usually get nervous, but now that you are, you're making me nervous as well. Is it something technically hard?"

"No, director, I'll get myself together and do it properly."

"I'm not trying to scold you, so don't be so stiff. You've done well until now, so it should be fine as long as you can calm down a little before coming back to the shoot. I was like that before too. It was back when I first sat down in front of the monitor, and I suddenly dazed out after shooting so well. I couldn't think about how to angle the shot, how to set the direction of the acting, nor what kind of things I should put on the screen. But after some much-needed rest, I could think about all of those things again. So don't worry about it too much, Bitna. If you're stuck on something, there are a lot of good seniors here, so you can ask around."

Gaeul waited for the director's words to end before approaching Bitna. The director was probably thinking that the air on the set had frozen her up. He probably had no idea even in his dreams that the one who made the young actress stiffen up was the actor smiling brightly right in front of her face.

"Do you want to go get some air with me?"

She left the set with Bitna after telling the director about it. She could feel Giwoo's gaze hitting the back of her head, but she did not turn around. When she opened the door, the night air hit her face. Bitna heaved out a breath as though she had been holding it in this whole time. Gaeul waited for her to catch her breath. Bitna heaved heavy breaths, as though she was going to breathe in all the air around her small body, before raising her heels and putting them down again.

"Bitna, are you okay?"

"I'm okay."

"I feel like you're saying that you're okay out of habit. Are you really okay? I saw that you were having a hard time shooting with Giwoo."

"I might be having a hard time, but I can't help it. I tried not to think about it, but I still kept causing NGs. The fact that I'm causing delays in the shoot makes it even harder for me."

"Anyone causes NGs. Even the great seniors sometimes laugh for dozens of minutes once they burst out laughing. It's incredible that a middle schooler continued to shoot without a single mistake until now. No one will blame you. Just take it slow."

"I will."

“Right. If you just finish the shoot today, you will never have to see Kang Giwoo again unless your schedule overlaps again, so just hold on for a little more. Rather than that, I’m sorry I can’t help you with anything besides cheering you on. I really wish I could take that guy away from you, but I can’t.”

Bitna covered her mouth and laughed.

“Unni, you can’t do that. You’ll get in trouble.”

“Right?”

“Yes. Acting is my thing, so I’ll try my best. I feel better thanks to you.”

“When things don’t work out, going outside and taking a breather does help out a lot. Just like what the director said, there are many good people around, so you can ask to your heart’s content. I’m sure people will be delighted if you ask them for help, Bitna.”

Gaeul placed her hands on Bitna’s shoulders and massaged them. The shoot must be fatiguing for her. After all, she had to act with someone filled with malice. No matter how mature she was as a child, the mental pressure must be taxing on her.

“Should we go see Woofie after the shoot today?”

“Really?”

Bitna became infinitely bright in front of Woofie. Whenever she talked about dogs, her eyes that saw through what adults were thinking would disappear and be replaced by innocent ones. Yuna even told her that they were going to start raising a puppy soon. She also added that it was still a secret from Bitna. Perhaps she might even cry from happiness if she sees the small guest at her house.

They came back from the quiet outside to the set filled with various noises. Bitna’s expression became indifferent again. Did she calm down now? Or was even that a facade to hide her nervousness? Gaeul made eye contact with Bitna, who was under the lights. Bitna winked at her as though saying that there was no need to worry at all.

The shoot resumed. As though to prove that the wink was not a bluff, Bitna digested all the following scenes without a single NG. She did not get afraid even as she faced Giwoo. Gaeul thought that she should really learn a lesson from the young actress. She could endure it so smoothly, so Gaeul herself couldn’t just run out of patience and start going against Giwoo.

“Bitna’s really good,” Giwoo came over and said to her after his act.

“She is. She’ll probably be even more popular than us once she grows up.”

“I guess I should try to look good in front of her now.”

Giwoo drank some water from a plastic bottle as he sat down next to her. They were changing the position of the camera right now. Gaeul pulled up some webtoons on her phone. While she didn’t read them that often, she needed an excuse to avoid talking to him right now.

“Look at this. It’s an article about Maru that I haven’t seen before. There are quite a lot of them too,” Giwoo said as he pointed at his phone.

Gaeul just indifferently replied, "I see."

"Have a look. A friend of ours is doing well, so you should cheer for him."

"Not interested."

She had already read all of those articles yesterday morning. She even shook Maru awake to tell him to take a look even though Maru said there was no need. Maru just chuckled, saying that she was even more elated than the person in question.

"Did you two get into a fight? You're always in a bad mood whenever I talk about Maru."

"I just want to focus on work while I'm at work. Also, he's someone who'd do well by himself, so there's no need to look out for him either."

Giwoo put his phone inside his pocket. Every single action of his felt like the action of a hunter setting up a trap. He currently believed that she had broken up with Maru, but he would definitely suspect something if he found anything strange. She had to watch what she had to say.

"Uhm, about the thing I talked to you about before."

"What thing?" Gaeul replied as she crossed her legs.

While she was pretending to not take any interest, every single one of her senses of perception with the exception of her vision was focusing on Giwoo's actions.

"That puts me in a tight spot. Did I do anything wrong? Why do I feel like I'm being hated?"

"What is it now? Just tell me if you have anything to say."

"Then I'll tell you again. Let's eat out together sometime, just the two of us. I have kept talking about it for a while, yet we never found the time, have we? Let's just decide on a date and time today to meet up on a day when we're both free and have time."

Gaeul took her eyes off her phone. Her intuition turned into conviction. Giwoo was not hiding his emotions. This was a man inviting a woman out.

"That's confusing me. I don't think you're just inviting me out to a meal."

"We aren't kids. I wouldn't have even brought it up if we were going to go our ways after eating. So when is good for you?"

"Sorry, but do you think I'll eat out with you?"

"Honestly, I don't feel that confident, but I do know that you won't just coldly refuse right off the bat."

While he acted embarrassed, his eyes contained the resolve of a dictator. He was the type of man to commit tyranny if he did not get the answer he wanted, secretly and discreetly. Gaeul looked straight into Giwoo's eyes and spoke,

"No."

It might have been better to be roundabout. She could have held back her words just as they were about to leave her mouth. But she was born as a fighter woman. What could she do about that? The daughter of the writer Choi Haesoo graduated from pretending to be kind when she graduated from her high school. She realized through Yuna that acting coy when talking to someone was nothing more than making a fool out of the opponent. If she told Maru about it, he would probably tell her that she should have been much more flexible about it, but he would then tell her that she did well.

Giwoo did not say anything. He kept blinking as though he never thought that he would get a 'no' straight in the face. Gaeul saw a crack appearing on the smiling prince. What wriggled under that thick surface layer was a disgusting selfish rage that she couldn't even bear to look at. However, Giwoo was a pro as well. The crack disappeared in an instant and he returned to being a human air freshener. He became cheerful, warm, and delightful.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you didn't. I just don't want to. I want to focus on the drama, and a romantic relationship is something much too distant for me."

"If you think that, then I guess I can't help it."

The 'I guess I can't help it' came as a warning. Gaeul smiled and turned around. She had been going against Lee Miyoona for too long to feel anything from this amount of pressure.

"See you around."

Giwoo left those words before hurriedly leaving the place. This was rather uncommon. He was someone who always waited for other people's responses before moving after all. From how he practically ran away, it seemed that he was really fuming inside.

"Kang Giwoo, I would say no even if I die," Gaeul said in a small voice to Giwoo's back as he headed towards the lights.

Chapter 876. Sequence 14

As soon as she finished the shoot, she said goodbye to the director and the staff before leaving the set. Giwoo only stared at her and did not call out to her.

"Good work. You two can go home first. I'll go back by myself."

Chanwoo left in the van saying that he would go back to the company, while Mijoo went home in a taxi. It was 7 p.m. She went to the cafe at the TV station where Bitna was waiting for her. She saw Bitna drinking juice in the corner. She carefully approached her and tapped on her back. Startled, Bitna turned around.

"You've waited for a long time, haven't you?"

"No, not at all. Did you wrap up the shoot well?"

"I thought you'd be waiting, so I quickly finished things off and ran here. I was so focused that I only caused two NGs before finishing everything off. You're hungry, aren't you?"

"A little."

"Let's go. I'm sure Maru and Yuna are waiting."

She called a taxi and went to a place near Maru's apartment. The taxi driver glanced at her through the rearview mirror and, when she paid for the fare, he told her that he felt like he had seen her. He asked if she appeared on TV. When she replied that she did a little acting, he widened his eyes, asking if she was Han Gaeul from Doctor's Office.

"Can I have an autograph? I really like that drama."

Gaeul gave him an autograph on the memo pad that he held out. The taxi driver became happy, saying that he would put it up for display and boast about it.

"Good luck!"

The taxi driver opened the window and waved his hand outside the window. Hearing the energetic encouragement, Bitna, who was next to her, laughed out loud. Gaeul inwardly thanked the driver as the taxi became distant. After all, thanks to him, Bitna got a good laugh. After her last shoot, she barely managed to smile when she said goodbye to Giwoo, it was as though she was a child who was incredibly sick. To other people, it may have looked like that she was apologetic for causing so many NGs or that she was disappointed that it was the last shoot already, but to Gaeul, she looked like she was trying her best to hold back her fears.

"You've gone through so much."

Gaeul hooked arms with Bitna as they walked.

"Next time, I hope I can look at him straight in the face. I wish I could become that strong."

"I'm sure you will. You overcame him today too, didn't you? Next time, you'll be able to scoff at him, so don't worry about it."

"It'd be great if it comes to that. But isn't it a problem if the first thing I do after meeting him is scoff at him?"

"It's fine, he's a bad guy after all."

They took the elevator up and stood in front of the entrance. The door was slightly open. A savory smell wafted out from the gap. Gaeul looked at Bitna's face. Her eyes were filled with expectation. Rather than the food, it seemed that Woofie's footsteps excited her more. Gaeul opened the door and went inside. Woofie, who was playing around with a ball, raised her head before walking over to Bitna, moving her uncomfortable leg in a cheerful fashion.

While Bitna hugged the dog at the entrance, Gaeul took off her shoes and headed to the kitchen.

"You're here?"

"Unni, you're here?"

Maru and Yuna both spoke at the same time. There were various foods on the table. Not to mention her favorite seafood stew, there was the fried chicken that Yuna liked, as well as sandwiches that Bitna ate all the time.

"I wanted to make them myself, but I didn't have much time, so I had most of them delivered or used pre-cooked ones."

"Other people eat like that."

"But the combination is a little strange, isn't it? I tried to prepare everyone's favorites, but it turned out like this."

"They'll all be the same once they go in the stomach. We can just eat the seafood stew with the rice as a meal and eat the rest later as drinking snacks."

Maru said that he would bring a table so they could eat together in the living room and headed to the veranda. Gaeul took off her jacket and stood next to Yuna, who was putting food onto the plates.

"You were surprised when we asked if you could come over so suddenly, weren't you?"

"A little. Fortunately, my shift ended early today, so I could come."

"Isn't it hard to do a part-time job alongside college?"

"I'm doing it because I want to. Mom said she would support me whenever I have it hard, but I don't want to rely on her as much as possible. I want to make acting my main source of income, but I have a long way to go."

"Didn't you say you passed round two of an audition last time? Once you show your face on a screen, people will notice your charm soon enough and reach out to you. Once that happens, you'll become so busy and will be more tired than you are now, you know?"

"Like you, unni?"

Gaeul jutted her chin out and said, 'maybe.' Yuna laughed. Like all aspiring actors, Yuna was experiencing a series of challenges and failures. If she was someone with a weak ego, she would have felt excruciating when she saw her younger sister progressing without much of a slump, but Yuna instead used Bitna as her objective and was putting in the effort. She had a strong desire for achievement and knew how to use trials as motivations, so she would eventually become a good actress. She only needed a little luck. If it was possible, Gaeul herself wanted to become that very 'luck.'

She chopped up the sandwiches into bite-size pieces and put them on a rectangular plate. In the living room, Maru was wiping the table that he brought from the veranda. Bitna was standing next to him, and it looked like she was asking if there was anything she could do to help. Maru shook his head and pointed at the kitchen. Bitna, hugging the dog in her arms, walked over to the kitchen, saying that she would help.

"Then can you take Woofie out for a walk? Just ten minutes. Food is almost done."

Thinking about what Bitna might like, she thought about going on a walk. Just as she had expected, Bitna immediately looked for a leash, some tissue, and a plastic bag.

"I'll be back in 10 minutes! I'm off."

Bitna left the house with Woofie.

"How was Bitna at the shoot today? She seemed to be having difficulties when she was leaving the house in the morning," Yuna said.

From how she asked as soon as Bitna left, it seemed that she was inwardly very worried. Gaeul explained everything so that Yuna could be at ease; about how Bitna boldly endured even after seeing Giwoo, and how she had finished up her scenes splendidly. She did not talk about how Bitna made a lot of mistakes in the scene where Giwoo grabbed her hands to pray. Yuna would be worried if she heard about it.

"Did you decide to tell your mother about it?"

"No, Bitna said she was okay. If she was being stubborn, I was going to tell her on my own, but I talked it over with Bitna and thought that we didn't need to say it for the time being."

"She's not someone who would act strong. If she's okay with it, then I'm sure she's really okay."

"If I think about it, telling mom about it is a little risky too. Mom dotes on Bitna a terrible lot. If she finds out about this, she will use all the methods at her disposal to get to the bottom of this matter. That would turn her relationship with many people quite awkward, so I feel like staying quiet is better for now."

"I don't think it's a bad idea to talk about it when Bitna can take responsibility for herself. Though, she does look like she can take care of herself even now."

They moved the plates to the table placed in the living room. When Gaeul checked the time, she realized that it had been twenty minutes since Bitna left. Bitna had never been late to a shoot because of her strict time management, so it seemed that taking Woofie out to walk was something so enjoyable that she lost track of time.

"Should I give her a call?" Yuna asked as she took out her phone.

"Wait a little more. We can always warm up the seafood stew later," Maru stopped her.

Gaeul also thought that it was better to let her be. If taking a dog out to walk could relieve all her stress from the shoot, she was willing to wait as long as she needed. When another ten minutes passed, Yuna stood up with her phone in hand, smiling awkwardly.

"We can't have her come back too late, so I'll call her now. It's almost 8."

Yuna went out to the veranda. Gaeul spoke, her eyes fixed on Yuna who was making a call,

"I hope it's a misunderstanding, but I think Giwoo has other feelings for me."

She thought about hiding it but felt that it was better to talk about this beforehand when it comes to things like this. There was no need to become a female protagonist of a drama who suffered by herself.

"Giwoo, that guy, definitely has good eyes."

"Right?" Gaeul responded with a smile.

It was an unpleasant thing for sure, but talking about it with Maru felt like it was nothing much. She even felt pathetic for being so worried during the shoot.

"He asked me out to eat together, just the two of us. He has been asking me out for a while, but I haven't given him a reply. Today, though, he asked as though he was determined to make it happen."

"Do you want me to guess what you said back to him?"

"Go on. What did I say to him?"

"I'm sure you outright told him no, even while knowing that you shouldn't answer like that."

Gaeul's lips twitched. She didn't like the fact that there was nothing wrong with that response. Sometimes, it made her wonder if the man in front of her could read minds.

"You should've accepted him, saying that you would if there's an opportunity while smiling gently."

"Do you really want me to do that?"

"No, I was happy to hear that you rejected him outright. Also, Han Gaeul is someone who does that. You aren't the type to drag things out, are you?"

This man knew her too well after all. Gaeul told her Giwoo's every action without leaving a single thing out: the way he kept staring at her without rest, as well as trying to read her thoughts while talking about Han Maru.

"He's a cautious guy. He was probing you out by talking like that."

"That's just how he lived his whole life. The same goes with his smile, which is like a callus at this point. But it looks like it was quite shocking to be rejected right in the face. For a moment, he couldn't keep up his calm expression. It was for a brief instant, but I managed to see what was inside. The first thing that came to me was pity for Bitna who must have seen such a thing from up close. It was hideous. He didn't feel like a human."

"If he's a proper human, he would not have called other people to harm others."

"I hope this piece ends quickly. It's pressuring me that I keep having to see his face."

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Maru asked seriously.

Gaeul placed her hand where she could feel his slightly bearded chin and his cheek.

"You're asking even though you know that I have to be the one to endure this."

Maru nodded and placed his hand on top of hers. The prickly sensation of his beard tickled her palm. Just as she just thought that his lips looked rather thick, she heard the door to the veranda open. It stopped midway.

Gaeul took her hand off Maru's face and looked at the veranda. Yuna was rolling her eyes around before slowly turning around. There was an awkward silence.

"Bitna said she's coming, but do you want me to have her come later?" Yuna asked, looking incredibly intrigued.

Chapter 877. Sequence 14

"Next time, I'll make some food. I can't have you treat me all the time. I'm not that good, but it should taste decent if I try my best."

"Alright, Yuna. I'll look forward to it. Go back home safely, Bitna."

Bitna hugged the dog and said goodbye. They decided to let Bitna take care of Woofie for two days. Last time, Woofie stayed there without any signs of unease. It seemed that she had taken a liking to Bitna's house. After seeing the elevator close, they returned to the house. Thanks to Yuna, who said that she would clean up before going home, the living room and the kitchen were clean.

"Should we open another can of beer?"

"Sounds good," Gaeul said as she sat down on the sofa.

Maru took out two cans of beer from the fridge. That single bottle of beer they drank while eating sandwiches was a little lacking. He also took out a handful of almonds and put them on a plate. Nuts were the best beer snack to eat after a meal.

"I would not be having this trouble if I could just reveal everything," Gaeul said as she opened the can of beer.

She smiled when she heard the fizz coming out as she opened the can.

"Every job that lives off of popularity is like that. Even if you do want to reveal everything, you're bound by a contract, so you can't do that either, and even if you could, it will still be a problem. Depending on your fans, there will be all sorts of unspeakable comments. I'm sure there will be many people cheering you on, but those kinds of comments are less eye-catching."

"Should we just announce our marriage at this point?"

"I'm sure it'll be quite interesting if the parents of both households get notified of their children's wedding through the news first."

"If you say it like that, it makes me really want to do it."

Gaeul's eyes became playful. Maru wanted to go along with that prank as well; they should just reveal everything without caring about the future.

"You know better than me that you can't do that."

Yet, his mouth stopped everything. Starting from when she was cast as one of the main characters in Flaming Lady, she hit yet another home run with her role as one of the main cast in Doctor's Office. She was practically driving on a highway. What she needed to look out for were small extrusions. Even the most trivial things that look like they wouldn't be a problem might cause a huge accident for a person who was charging forward after all.

“Don’t you want to become more successful as an actor? The Han Gaeul I know isn’t someone who would want to rest midway.”

“At times like this, you should just say ‘if you want to, then I’ll do as you say.’”

“It’s obvious that you won’t like it if I do, so why would I?”

“How do you know without doing it?”

“Fine, then if you want to do it, then go ahead. I’ll call the journalists.”

“I planned to until about just 3 seconds ago, but I changed my mind.”

“See? You toyed with my loyalty.”

Maru held out the canned beer. She lightly toasted him.

“Your next shoot is early morning on the day after tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m going to be next to Kang Giwoo the whole day. It’s making me exhausted just by thinking about it.”

He wrapped his arm around her as she leaned against his shoulder. There was no one who could help her right now. It was a war where she could not reveal any of her weapons and could only let her wits do the fighting. It would be great if she could make allies who could fight with her, but Kang Giwoo was incredible at making the people around him his ally. Even if she exposed Giwoo’s identity, no one would probably believe it.

“I can’t do anything but cheer you on.”

“That’s enough.”

“Considering Giwoo’s personality, he won’t talk to you so easily. He was rejected outright after all. But he won’t give up. He’ll look for an opportunity and call out to you if he finds it right. He has a strong desire to handle people as he wishes to.”

“What if I keep rejecting him?”

“If he’s a man with common sense, he should give up and fall back, but that guy said goodbye to common sense when he was young. The scope of ‘common sense’ in his mind should be very different from ours. If you keep not listening to him, he’ll definitely do something. But, he won’t do something openly. He’s actually quite a coward and is afraid of being exposed. He hysterically despises making mistakes too. It’s probably his grandfather’s influence.”

“Grandfather? Did you hear something from him?”

Not hear, I snuck a peek – Maru erased those words in his mouth with a smile and sipped on the beer. What stood behind Kang Giwoo was the thick shadow of YM Group’s chairman. That guy used his grandfather as his standard for everything, and he probably set his grandfather as the ideal perfection that he should strive to achieve. Maru could tell what kind of man his grandfather was without even looking. Erasing the immature side of Kang Giwoo and making him more vicious would probably make

him a lot like the head of the YM Group. Though, the more accurate title would be the ex-chairman, since he supposedly retired.

"You should watch out for him when he's staying still. It's proof that he's trying to pull some strings behind your back."

"I hate those things the most. I just want him to come at me straight. At least I can fight back openly."

"Don't just try to fight him, and try to listen to him to an extent, even if you don't fully listen. Be more generous."

"I'll try my best."

Seeing her smile while saying those words, Maru once again realized that she had zero intentions of reacting flexibly. She was someone who never relented. He was worried about that side of her, but also adored her for it.

"We should stop talking about Kang Giwoo. It's not like we'll get an answer even if we think about it, and he might avoid me first, right? If he does, I'll be able to relax easily."

She seemed to have finished her beer already as she put down the can. When he asked if she wanted another one, she thought about it before waving her hand in dismissal.

"How do you feel, being in the center of attention these days?"

"That's a quick change in topic."

"I've been asking since morning, but you kept changing the subject all the time. So don't change it now and tell me about it. There have been several articles, and the internet is in an uproar about it."

"It's not me that they're in an uproar for, it is for the content of the drama. Anyone else acting the same character would have brought about the same reaction."

"Have you heard that being too humble is worse than being arrogant? Do I have to recite to you the comments I read to you in the morning?"

Gaeul took out her phone. Maru quickly snatched her phone away. Being haunted about it in the morning was more than enough.

"I'm insanely happy that I've received attention. I would have no regrets if I could become a popular actor through this incident. All good?"

"You're good at putting on a thick face, but you are strangely embarrassed when it comes to receiving compliments about yourself."

"It's just because I'm not used to it."

"Then you should get used to it at this opportunity. I found this really memorable comment in the morning. Actor Han Maru's acting skills are not ordinary. Maybe he'll become a blue chip in the film industry in a little while? His acting was short, yet intense. He had something that shook the emotions of people. This is what acting is supposed to be. The actor known as Han Maru has...."

Maru was reminded of a cat, one that was staring at a ceramic plate placed on the edge of the table. The little demons who clearly enjoyed their owners flinching while tapping on such plates and Gaeul who uttered those embarrassing comments seemed structurally identical. When he tried to stand up from the sofa, Gaeul pulled him back down. She even began whispering the comments into his ear. Maru felt like all his hairs stood on end. When it came to other people's compliments about him, he could not get used to it at all.

"This is so fun."

Just when did she memorize all those comments? While looking at her smile in satisfaction, Gaeul sighed.

"There are many people looking forward to it. Do your best."

"Unfortunately, my shoot ended as of yesterday."

"Why? The responses were so good."

"Actually, it was supposed to end last week, but as you said, the responses were good, so the writer wrote an extra episode. Ending it here is just right. It's good to receive good responses by using a character that reflects the current times, but if all the attention goes that way, we'll be putting our priorities in the wrong places. Although not mainstream yet, there are already opinions that we're wasting time doing useless stuff. The writer is pretty smart too, and she knows when to take her hands off it."

"I guess it is a good idea to end it while it's still unique. But still, what a pity. I always wanted to see my boyfriend doing well."

Maru drank the rest of the beer and looked at Gaeul.

"I got a call for an entertainment program."

Gaeul suddenly sat up.

"From where?"

"From 'Chatterbox.'"

"The one that airs on Friday night?"

"Yes. My manager told me today. He said I should prepare for it because I'm going on it whether I like it or not."

"Of course you have to go. That program has decent viewing rates, you know? I've also watched it quite a lot whenever there were good guests. But what's the theme this time? If it's Chatterbox you're talking about, then the guests all have something in common, don't they?"

"People who suddenly became popular, or so I heard. I don't think I'm that popular though."

"It seems like you don't get it since you're at home all the time, but if you go out to the streets right now, the soundtrack from Doctors can be heard frequently, and many people are talking about Bigfoot. That's what's stressing our director as well. I mean, the viewing rates are on par now."

Gaeul tapped him with her fists, saying that it was a little sad that Doctors caught up in terms of viewing rate. Doctors had been losing in terms of viewing rate compared to Doctor's Office, but this week, they both hit 14% and became equal. Not to mention Jayeon, even Eunbin rejoiced, saying that she could get some good sleep now. The fact that the piece he participated in was doing well was something to rejoice about, but considering that the achievements of his partner were going down, he couldn't just be outright happy about it. Gaeul probably felt the same.

"Everyone's talking about how the score will be reversed next week, but I don't really know whether I should be happy or be sad about it. Should I be happy since my boyfriend's work is doing well? Or should I be crying because my own piece is doing bad?"

"That's why you should've done your best."

"You're picking a fight with me because I teased you, aren't you?"

"Was it obvious?"

Gaeul, who glared at him, suddenly stood up and went inside the bedroom as though she recalled something. When he asked what she was up to, she told him to wait for a little. A moment later, Gaeul came back out again with two tall bottles of lotion.

"Here."

"What's this for?"

"You're going to an entertainment show. You should practice."

"They don't use microphones like this. It's all wireless."

"It's just to get into the mood. Quickly."

He grabbed it since she was so adamant about it. This was why he tried not to talk about it. He could clearly picture her getting more excited than he was for it and urging him to prepare.

"Popular actor Han Maru has come to our studio today. Please welcome him with a round of applause."

Her commentary was smooth. He looked up previous episodes of Chatterbox when he heard that he was cast, and the main host introduced the guests in such a way.

"You're good."

"I told you. I watch that program. Chatterbox is merciless when it comes to editing, and they cut out everything if they don't find it fun. You should get yourself together and react to everything and talk interestingly. Otherwise, you'll be staring at the camera for hours before leaving."

"But still, there's no need to go this far to practice...."

"You don't get that entertainment shows and dramas are completely different. If you heard about how I got traumatized during my first entertainment show appearance two years ago, you'll want to practice right away, you know?"

"Oh, back when you went on 'Happy Day' and the only thing that showed up was your smiling face?"

“You saw that?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“How am I supposed to answer that? It’s just because I wanted to watch.”

“So why? That’s a dark history of mine. My agency told me that I should never go to entertainment programs after that. That was also the first time my president sighed while looking at me. Thinking about it still makes me dejected even now.”

“It’s that bad?”

“It’s no joke. Don’t think about entertainment shows too lightly. Some people have bad habits too. They would treat famous actors with respect, but if they aren’t, most people become sacrificial lambs by the mouths of the comedians. You need to get yourself together. Otherwise, you’ll become like me.”

Seeing her sigh in regret, it seemed that the wound she received back then still remained. Maru patted her shoulder. Entertainment shows and dramas were definitely two separate realms.

“But I do have some confidence though. I don’t really lose to anyone when it comes to letting my mouth do the work.”

“Fine, you’re awesome.”

“It’s just the truth.”

“I hope you just smile when you’re on and get edited out.”

Gaeul flailed her arms and legs like a grumpy child. Maru grabbed her arm.

“Do your best. You know that all of this is an opportunity for you. Since you started late, you should grab onto it properly.”

“I’m not that old.”

“You could’ve started ages ago, but you didn’t do it, so you are late. I feel like it’ll be my fault if you don’t do well, so you have to, okay?”

Seeing her worry about it seriously, Maru couldn’t help but nod at her. When he did, Gaeul spoke as though she had been waiting for him to do just that,

“Then we’ll practice okay?”

It seemed that he had been fooled after all.

Chapter 878. Sequence 14

The breath he inhaled was cold. Maru opened his eyes and looked for his phone with his hand. It was 8 a.m. He had turned off the alarm that was set to ring at 6 every morning. Gaeul had very sensitive ears, so she tended to open her eyes after a single beep. She was always stubborn about following him out to jog even if she was tired. She said that she liked running with him. While breathing the fresh early

morning air while exercising together was definitely tempting, what she needed today was not getting her heart rate up and sweating, but sleeping without a care in the world. Today was one of the rare days when she could sleep in after all.

He slowly put down the duvet so that Gaeul didn't wake up. When he sat up, he saw that she had flung away the duvet and was lying on her side. It was one of her sleeping habits. Even during the winter, she would often leave half of her body out in the open and end up sniffing in the morning. He grabbed the duvet and covered her. She seemed to like the warmth of the duvet as she curled up and buried her face in the duvet.

He pulled the blind curtains tight to block off all the light before leaving the room. He opened the refrigerator and drank a sip of cold green tea before opening the cupboard to take out the dog food he had portioned out into a plastic bowl. Only then did he realize that the girl who would usually be hopping around at his feet wanting food was not here this morning. He put the dog food back in the cupboard. Habits were scary things.

He turned on the heater and sat in the living room to watch last week's episode of 'Chatterbox.' There were five fixed people in the cast, and the guests would change every week. Just like its name, the program was mainly a talk show. The order of progression began with talking about the guests' latest news, then the stories that the guests prepared, then followed by the questions from the viewers. Sometimes, there would be a simple game or a display of skills.

-Save Love for the Farewell, sung by Yoo Chaejin.

Last week, the guests were sports stars. A young athlete who won the gold medal in fencing sang a song with a shaky voice. She wasn't that good, but it was good to see her do her best. The responses from the internet were good as well, saying that she was cute for having a flaw to her. She wasn't that good at talking either, so the conversation would cut off awkwardly whenever one of the hosts asked her a question, but her answers were genuine and the program didn't feel like it was too loose.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the fencing athlete, the archery athlete had good skills to show off and was good at talking, but he didn't have that much screen time. The excessive interruptions and his way of speaking that undermined others made it so that his portions were mostly edited out. The comments under most of the clips of that episode that went online mostly talked about his bad way of speaking as well.

Dongwook once said that the internet masses were like a cheap buffet, and there was nothing to eat when looked at from up close. He also added that eating something was better than starving to death. The internet opinion couldn't be entirely trusted, but nor could it be entirely ignored. If the masses were criticizing someone, there would be a reason to have a close look at it.

Keeping in mind the difference between the fencing athlete and the archery athlete, Maru played the episode before that. He skipped past the opening commentary and the display of skills at 4x speed, and he focused mainly on the stories that the guests had prepared. In particular, what kind of talk would get a response from the main hosts and would make the story section longer.

He also had a close look at the subtitles when people spoke. Subtitles had long since become a device to portray the minds of the producer and the program writer. Before, a member of the staff appearing on

TV would be a production accident, but now, even they were treated like a part of the program. There were cases where some producers, directors, and writers were more famous than most celebrities. The era had changed from one where the staff members would meticulously hide themselves and put subtitles that explained the situation on the screen, to one where they actively expressed their own opinions, so observing the subtitles closely was equivalent to reading the mind of the one behind the program.

The phone he placed on the sofa started vibrating. When he picked up, he heard Byungchan's voice.

-You up?

"Yes, hyung. But what made you call me so early in the morning?"

-I totally forgot to tell you about something last night. Check your email. There should be a list of questions the writer of Chatterbox sent to you beforehand. Have a look at it and send it over to me. I had a look first, and there were no strong questions. I think it'll be okay to allow them to ask everything.

"They don't know anything about me, so they can't ask strong questions. I've never gotten into trouble either. I'll check on it and give you a message. Also, are you driving right now?"

-Yes. I'm driving Sooil to his shoot. It's tiring to grab the wheel after all this time.

"What happened for you to be driving yourself?"

-I can't help it. Our company is composed of a small group of elites, including the managers. There's Taeho hyung-nim, Geunsoo-hyung, Ganghwan-hyung, Miss Suyeon, and Sooil. All the people below me have things to do, so I've gone back to being road manager for now.

"If you feel tired, you can have Sooil drive for you."

-I'll pass on that since my life will be doomed if something happens. Oh wait, Sooil wants to talk to you.

He heard a rustling sound. Maru looked at the TV screen and changed it to 4x speed. The greetings of the hosts went by in a flash.

-Did you practice?

Sooil had spoken all of a sudden. Gaeul's excited voice last night overlapped with his.

"Did you two set this up or what?"

-What are you talking about?

"Nothing. Even if you didn't mention that, I'm watching the previous episodes and getting ready for it. I do have some confidence in talking, but talking interestingly is something different."

-Don't get pressured by other people and do your best, not that you're the type to receive pressure from others. But you might end up dazing out if you sit in front of the camera for hours.

"I heard that all night yesterday from Gaeul: I have to get myself together, I can't zone out, I have to smile if I don't have anything to say, et cetera. I can still feel her words echoing in my ears."

-I guess there's nothing to worry about with your queen beside you. If you feel like it's not going well during the shoot, you can use my name. I pick up my phone quite a lot.

"You know I will if you tell me to, right?"

-Do it. I'll pick up as long as I'm not in a shoot. But I'd like to remind you that I might stand out if you do and you might get pushed to the back.

"Sure, sure. You're hugely popular. Is your shoot in the countryside?"

-Countryside... I guess you can call it that.

"Where?"

-Germany. It's for a photo shoot, a commercial, and a drama. I've got tons of work in front of me right now.

"That explains why the team leader is driving you. Bring back presents when you come back. You know, stuff like schweinshaxe or salami."

-Those things can't be imported, so just make do with chocolate. Also, schweinshaxe is similar to Korean jokbal, so you can get that instead.

"What are friends for? You should smuggle some in for me."

-I don't want to be an actor who gets into controversy while trying to smuggle pig's foot. Oh, I'm at the airport now. Good luck with the shoot, and call me if the atmosphere turns frosty. Also, the indie film we shot last time is on the cover of a movie magazine. If you don't have anything to talk about, talk about that or something. It might not be interesting, but you have to do something.

"It's me who's supposed to be going on the show, but it's everyone else who's worried. I'll do fine by myself, so just focus on going to Germany."

The phone switched over to Byungchan again, and he told him to send a message after checking the email before hanging up. Maru checked his email on his phone. Just as Byungchan said, there weren't any questions he would have a hard time answering. Since the theme was people who 'suddenly became popular', the writers of the program probably didn't have enough time to research. There was a request to write things that the guests wanted the hosts to bring up, but Maru left it blank before writing up the replies. He could just come up with things on the spot depending on the atmosphere of the set.

The door to the bedroom opened. Gaeul walked out while yawning. Her bangs were draping down like octopus tentacles. When he picked up the teacup in front of him, Gaeul nodded. They didn't need to talk to each other in the morning to communicate. Gaeul sat down where he used to sit. Maru boiled some water in the kitchen and brewed some barley tea for her. She sipped the tea with the teacup bowled in her hands.

"Did you study hard?"

"Enough not to stutter."

“When did you say the shoot was?”

“Next wednesday.”

“So I’ll only be able to see it in December. Do well so that you don’t get edited out.”

“I think I heard that a dozen times yesterday.”

“Listen anyway.”

Maru shrugged and resumed the video that he had paused.

* * *

Choi Younghoon sighed the moment he heard of the theme for the episode. ‘Chatterbox’ was a program that was heavily dependent on the guests. It was a fundamental problem that couldn’t be fixed due to its nature as a talk show. If it was a show that was shot outside, they could have ordinary citizens participate in the show or expect laughs from unexpected environmental variables, but entertainment shows that happened indoors were solely dependent on the skills of the hosts and the guests for laughs. For the main hosts, there had been no changes in members for the past four years, so the only thing they could say at this point was the number of spoons they had at home. Thus, they had to rely on the guests to do the talking. The problem was that the theme this time was ‘people who suddenly became popular.’

What an unstable-sounding theme was that? He could already picture the guests staring holes at the camera and answering with single words due to turning stiff. This was something that he had experienced before. When the program underwent a change, a new producer who came to Chatterbox ambitiously scouted an ordinary citizen who became popular through a user created video. That producer then left the entertainment department for the documentary department.

The air time was an hour and 10 minutes. As for the shooting time, that mostly depended on the guests, but the average was about 5 hours. For five hours, about 9 people would have to sit in a set with three sides walled off, facing dozens of staff members, several cameras, as well as writers who would give instructions without rest. They would have to talk in front of such people for five whole hours to create a one-hour episode. Even the most veteran entertainers would find it hard to control their pace and end up just nodding towards the end of the shoot without saying anything, much less rookies who just started receiving attention.

The job of the hosts was to make the guests keep talking so that the atmosphere didn’t become loose. Younghoon prayed that the guests this time weren’t Buddha statues. There was nothing more terrifying than people who did nothing but smile on talk shows.

“Hyung-nim, looks like you’ll be trying hard today.”

A junior who hosted Chatterbox with him entered the waiting room. This guy was someone who used to be an athlete before becoming famous as an entertainer. He knew what questions to ask the guests at appropriate times, so hosting the show with him made things a lot easier.

“Looks like you’ll be having a hard time as well.”

"I just hope they don't freak out. As long as they don't freak out, we can cover the rest. I saw that all of them were actors, so thankfully, they won't mumble."

"You never know. Don't you remember that actress from before? The audio engineer asked if the microphone was broken half way through the shoot. Her voice was so small."

"Right, there was that woman."

"If we get someone like her, forget the shoot becoming longer, we might not be able to salvage much from it. We're already losing a lot of views because of what YBS started recently."

"The trend is to do away with static talk shows now. These days, singing is the trend. I heard that this program is getting axed during the restructuring, and they will be starting an audition show or something."

"Every single one of them is about singing. This is the problem with South Korea. If someone does well, everyone else follows suit. Since we're at it, let me tell you now that singing auditions will become a boom but then soon die down. There will be another trend to take over."

"But still, you have somewhere to go, hyung-nim. Tell me honestly, you got an offer already, haven't you?"

Younghoon tapped on his junior's shoulder and told him that he would bring him if he did go to another program.

"Looks like our guests are here today. I'll go have a look at them."

The junior stood up.

Chapter 879. Sequence 14

"There's no job more genuine than acting. No amount of trickery will allow you to hide your skills. So you have to keep putting in an effort. I'm sure you've heard this many times before, but that's the only way you can grow as an actor. What's unfortunate is that actors who put in just as much effort don't get their fair share of opportunities. It is a heartbreaking thing that good actors suffer from hardships in life."

Park Hamin always thought of these words whenever she felt chaotic. She also thought about the face of the man who said those words to her whenever she reminded herself of those words; the face of Kang Giwoo who said each and every word with emphasis without looking away from her. She started off as an idol but failed without being able to have a proper debut, and so 'Soul Entertainment' was no different from her savior. They helped her lessen her guilty conscience and supported her so that she could proceed as an actress. She also got to meet Giwoo. Right now, she was even feeling glad that she had not become successful as an idol.

"Stay here before the shoot begins," said a staff member while opening the door to the waiting room.

There were three people aside from her in the waiting room. One woman and two men. Hamin looked at the man sitting opposite her in detail. That man was Han Maru.

"This feels awkward," said a man sitting by the door.

They introduced themselves briefly when they first gathered in the waiting room, but she had forgotten his name. She only remembered that his surname was Yoo. The woman sitting next to the mirror was surnamed Choi. She had heard that both of them had received attention for the film or dramas that they did. She and Han Maru were the same.

“That’s true. I never knew there would come a day when I would get to appear in an entertainment show. I really didn’t expect much.”

It was Miss Choi who had spoken. She had come wearing a one-piece dress with a deep v-neck. Hamin recalled the black blouse that her stylist showed her. She thought that maybe that would’ve been better since her collarbone would be shown if she undid the top button. She felt like she was losing in terms of outfit. Although actors spoke through skill and not body figures, today, it was not a drama but an entertainment show. She saw Mr. Yoo’s gaze land on Miss Choi’s cleavage before moving away. From his sly smile, it seemed that he wasn’t a man that she should associate herself with. Miss Choi was a problem as well. She could do her top button, but she did not, so she was practically asking for attention.

However, there was a man who was much worse than Mr. Yoo who peeked at other people’s breasts. Hamin looked at Han Maru.

-Maru was a good friend. We’ve been in the acting world together since we were young. But it looks like he doesn’t think of me as a friend. I really wasn’t going to tell this to anyone, but the fact that Maru received attention in Doctors is because I talked about him with the writer of Doctors. I told her to have a close look at Han Maru because he’s really good. There is nothing better than a friend doing well, so I even went so far while risking being seen as rude, and yet...

Giwoo stopped talking there, apologizing while saying that he shouldn’t have said anything. That was the first time Hamin had seen Giwoo smile so bitterly. She could instantly tell how much Giwoo cherished Maru as a friend.

She locked eyes with Maru. Hamin was inwardly startled, but she didn’t show it and looked away. He looked just like the type to disappoint the kind and generous Giwoo. Even his eyes were far from ordinary. Giwoo must’ve been hurt since he was a man who had such malicious-looking eyes. Giwoo didn’t say the specifics, but she could deduce everything through his speech and expression. Giwoo was betrayed by the man sitting in front of her. How hurt must he have been when he was backstabbed by a person he trusted? The fact that he hurriedly walked away after telling her all that might have been to hide his tears. Thinking about how Giwoo would be silently suffering, she began fuming inside. In order for good people, for people who put in the effort to receive good treatment, men like him must fix their attitude first.

“Do you have something to say to me?” Maru called out to her.

“No.”

She shook like a fool. When she thought that he was a man with a pitch-black nature, her lips trembled subconsciously. She inwardly counted numbers to calm herself down. She couldn’t step down here. She had two objectives for coming to this talk show today. One was to express her charm as Park Hamin that she wasn’t able to fully express in ‘Doctor’s Office’, and the other was to deal a blow to Maru, who was

surely one of the most evil men in the world. She would take revenge for Giwoo fairly and squarely through her skills in this talk show. If Giwoo found out that she was having such thoughts, he would tell her to stop and that she must not do such a thing, but she wasn't as kind as Giwoo. Giwoo was the type to accept a man even if he was struck a blow, but for her, she had to pay back her debts.

"It's quite awkward here after all. You're all nervous, aren't you?"

Jay entered as he opened the door. Hamin smiled and greeted him. Whenever she was having a hard time because she failed to debut as an idol, she could smile again when watching the programs with Jay in them. He was an athlete, but he quit due to an accident and returned to the TV as an entertainer and became hugely successful. Looking at his life allowed her to gain some energy.

"Have you talked to each other? It'll be really hard to speak if you go into the studio in a stiff atmosphere."

He was a proficient TV personality indeed. When Jay talked to Miss Choi and Mr. Yoo, the silent waiting room became lively in an instant.

"I've observed you a lot when I watched Doctor's Office, Miss Park Hamin. Your acting is one thing, but you also have a great smile. Looking at you makes me feel energetic."

"Really? I've never heard anyone say that to me before."

"You'll hear it a lot in the future. If you'd allow me to boast a little, you know that there are many actors who've gained momentum after appearing in Chatterbox, right? That might be you, Miss Park Hamin. Of course, the same goes for the rest of you as well."

Mr. Yoo and Miss Choi waved their hands in dismissal, saying that it was too early for them. Hamin looked at Han Maru's reaction. He was listening indifferently like he was listening to a lecture in college. People should react to other people if they try to liven up the mood, so she thought that he was a self-centered person to the bone from his lack of reaction. He might even be selfish.

"You are Mr. Han Maru, right?"

"Yes, I am."

"I might be hated by Miss Hamin who's competing with you on the same time slot, but honestly, I was deeply impressed by the latest episode of Doctors. I really don't use the word 'impressed' a lot, but I couldn't find a better word to describe this episode. I experienced those kinds of things when I was still an athlete. The lineup was decided on seniority, not skill. I thought about those days while watching the drama, and it made me angry, so I applauded at the end when you got a bit of revenge. The character you played was Bigfoot, right? I could feel your experience when you talked to the director's daughter in Thursday's episode. You're so amazing despite being so young."

"I was just lucky. The writer was good at writing. Also, if it's about being amazing, you're even more amazing. You received the greatest prizes at both RBS and YBS last year as a male host. Receiving two such prizes at the same time is more amazing than someone like me. Thanks to you, I've been enjoying Chatterbox as well."

Jay took interest in Maru's words.

“We haven’t started the show yet, so let’s be honest. Have you really watched Chatterbox that much? You can be honest while we’re still here.”

“I can’t say I’m an avid watcher, but I’ve seen a fair amount.”

“If you put it like that, I will have to check on you. May I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Since you said you watched a fair amount, you must have seen last month’s episodes, right?”

“That I did. Starting from the first week, the themes were big eaters, big drinkers, sisters, and then peculiar hobbies, right?”

Maru said the order of the shows without even being asked to. Since Jay was just about to ask, he applauded instead.

“Well, it looks like there’s no need to check at all. Even I get the order of episodes mixed up at times, but if you can remember all that, you can be considered an avid watcher.”

“The episode where you came out wearing a bow tie and blew out a candle by blowing through your nose was so interesting that it made me look up the previous episodes and watch them as well.”

“That happened quite early on. I remember that candle incident. I remember burning a few of my nose hairs.”

“I thought that would be the case.”

The two of them got along as though they were long-time friends. The person who didn’t speak a word when he came to the waiting room moved his mouth like a machine when in front of the host. It was suspicious that he was actually an avid watcher of Chatterbox, and that pretentious-looking smile was even more suspicious. She only found it pitiful that Jay, an entertainer she liked, was being fooled by Maru’s tongue.

“Are there any other watchers of Chatterbox?”

Mr. Yoo and Miss Choi replied with dry smiles. Hamin also stayed quiet. He had seen other programs that Jay appeared in, but she had not watched Chatterbox. She had come across it while switching channels, but she found talk shows boring and soon lost interest.

“Looks like I should try harder. But since you’re here, please do watch the episode you are all in. If you have a people meter at home, then that’s all the more reason to watch it. Please raise our views a little.”

It wouldn’t be strange if the situation became awkward, but thanks to Jay’s fluent talking skills, the mood became lively again.

“You just have to do this during the show as well. Also, Mr. Maru, once we’re in the shoot, can I ask you the same question as well? That kind of memorization skill can be interesting from time to time.”

“Anytime you want.”

“Then I’ll ask you. Get some rest for now. We’ll begin soon.”

Jay left and closed the door. Mr. Yoo and Miss Choi took out their phones at the same time. Although she couldn't see their screens, they seemed to be investigating Chatterbox. Hamin's fingers itched, but she held back. Shows were supposed to be done honestly. Investigating lightly wouldn't make them cool at all. Maru also took out his phone. Hamin stood up and checked his phone while pretending to look in the mirror. The texts that quickly scrolled up were all about Chatterbox. Looking at the text that looked like exam revision materials, she felt absurd and angry at the same time. It was a lie that he was an avid watcher after all. He was full of pretense.

"I believe that TV shows should be candid."

She found him so spiteful that she ended up blurting what was on her mind. Miss Choi and Mr. Yoo all stared at her. Hamin curled up her toes. It must have looked very strange. She felt so embarrassed that she couldn't look them in the face.

"I was just talking to myself. Sorry."

She apologized before she got misunderstood. Mr. Yoo looked at her before shaking his head and going back to his phone. He must be thinking that she was a peculiar woman. Miss Choi definitely seemed to think that she was but an immature girl. She was a minor character in a drama, but she came here to be a main character, but it seemed that she had screwed up from the beginning. There was a need to reorganize herself. She would be able to receive acknowledgement as long as she did what she did properly without minding what kind of cheating other people did. Both her agency and Giwoo said that to her after all.

"You're right, TV shows should be candid," Maru said just as she was about to sit back down.

To her, that sounded like mockery. It also seemed like he was picking a fight with her. Hamin resolved that she would show her true value during the real deal. The stories she had prepared were interesting and fun without having to exaggerate or use petty tricks. It would be hard to receive attention by just reciting some info related to the show.

Chapter 880. Sequence 14

"Hyung-nim, they look slightly nervous, but they didn't freeze up. I think it'll be fine as long as we can set them up well once the shoot begins. Also, the fellow named Han Maru knows the theme of some of our previous episodes, so if we give him that question, we should be able to get some decent footage."

The junior had returned after scouting out the waiting room. Younghoon was grateful for Jay, who prepared for the shoot every time. His earnestness from his athlete days still remained.

"Who do you think has the best mouth?"

"I can't be entirely sure since I've only said hello, but I think the one named Yoo Jihyuk will do well as long as we give him a slight push. There was energy in his eyes. He was the one who proactively asked questions after exchanging greetings with me. As for the girl named Choi Jeonghee, I'm not entirely sure. Even if I talk to her, she just smiles back at me. As for Park Hamin, she's very positive, so I think she'll liven up the show."

"What about the kid who you said knows about the program?"

“He’s the type to react. He won’t say anything first, but he’ll react well once others talk about things. But this is all just a first impression, so I’m probably wrong about every one of them.”

“How long do you think I’ve been working with you? I’m asking you because your intuition tends to be spot on. Let’s have some hope for that Yoo kid for now. We’re already running low on views, so producer Kang is getting wrinkles. We should make him hold a get-together in happiness.”

“I wish that could happen. The others aren’t here yet, are they?”

“They called me just now and told me that they’re on the way. Leaving aside Taeksoo since he’s coming from another job, I think Hyuktae, that kid, slept in after drinking late into the night.”

“He did just barely get one day to rest after going on a tour in Japan.”

“If he was going to rest, then he should’ve just slept obediently.”

“He lived a busy life when he was supposed to be playing around, so I’m sure he’s just doing all that now. TTO isn’t TTO for nothing. They’ve been a top-tier idol group for ten years now, so I’m sure he wants to play around freely whenever he has the chance.”

“You have such a good nature, being considerate of things like that. No wonder everyone comes to you to whine.”

“Hyungnim, you lead everyone strictly like the father, while I softly support everyone from the back like a mother. Isn’t that how our duo works? Oh, I got some pear concentrate that my wife made for me. Would you like some?”

“Why bother asking? Give some to me.”

The pear concentrate that had been boiled with honey was fulfilling from just a sip. Jay brought this pear concentrate on the first day they shot together. After seeing that he didn’t act that stiff in front of him, who was known to have a terrible personality in the industry, he thought that Jay would become successful. If he had to pick one thing he did well in the past ten-plus years in the TV industry, it was to snatch Jay and put him by his side. Thanks to that, he had become a lot more flexible that it was to the point that a new writer could talk to him.

“I’m so damn tired.”

Producer Kang opened the door to the waiting room, and Jay poured some pear concentrate and gave it to him.

“Thanks for the drink.”

“You came here to get that, producer Kang, didn’t you?” Younghoon nagged.

“You’re always out to nag me whenever you see me, hyung.”

“Hey, I’m saying that for you to laugh. You always frown like something’s going to go bad which makes me all worried.”

“It’s because the higher-ups all come to me to nag. I thought I was going to get past the fall restructuring without trouble, but YBS stole all our views thanks to a new program. It’s driving me crazy. Whenever I

hold a meeting with the writers, they always ask me if I have more budget or if there are any big figures we can invite, so it's driving me nuts."

"Like hell they'll assign a lot of budget to a program that's nothing but talking inside a studio."

"My words exactly. Should we quit using the set and start running outside? How about a running talk show where you have a talk show while running?"

"The day you do it is the day I quit. Think about my belly fat and my age."

"Why? Someone in KBS is running around all over the country even when he's nearing his fifties. And in RBS, an elderly is sleeping in tents outside."

"That hyung can do that because he was born with strong bones, but I have a feeble heart despite how I look."

"Feeble? After all that roasting of our new recruits in your early years? Man, our bro Younghoon has gotten soft."

"I am talking to you like this because I've become soft like a lamb. So? Why are you here anyway?"

"I just had something to talk to you two alone about."

Producer Kang took off his glasses and started wiping them. It was a habit of his to wipe his glasses before announcing good news.

"It might be just a brief sparkle, but we should be able to get some decent viewing rates this time. We got a call scheduled with Lee Hyuk and Kwon Dayoon. They'll be backing Park Hamin up."

Lee Hyuk and Kwon Dayoon were two actors who were notorious for not showing up in variety shows. Kwon Dayoon appeared in various shows during her idol days, but she hardly showed up on TV ever since she switched careers to being an actress, and Lee Hyuk also no longer did any TV activities after becoming hugely popular through 'Those Guys.' They were both cards that they could play to attract interest from viewers.

"This must be the first time those two are appearing at the same time after Those Guys. Now that I think about it, both of them gained popularity after that movie, didn't they?" Jay said.

"Director Park Joongjin is an amazing guy. He used that single movie a few years back to make them both into icons of the era. Lee Hyuk also overcame his slump after that movie, while Kwon Dayoon escaped her terrible acting. But why are those two backing up Park Hamin?"

"Because the three of them - Park Hamin, Lee Hyuk, and Kwon Dayoon - are all from Soul," replied producer Kang.

Younghoon had also heard about Soul being the single biggest influential company in the music industry. They were large to the point that getting on their bad side would make it hard for anyone to become popular through acting. He knew that they did acting management on the side but did not know that they possessed bigshots like Lee Hyuk and Kwon Dayoon.

“Aren’t you a little too much in the dark after living in this industry for so many years? Dongha, Kim Soomin, Ahn Chaejeong, Koo Gwangseop and Kang Giwoo all belong to Soul. Moreover, Soul’s parent company is YM. It’s known as the company that has the full support of a big conglomerate.”

“I know that much. But to me, that sounds like Park Hamin is quite a promising talent, huh? The agency is giving her so much support.”

The fact that two bigshot actors who rarely showed up in the media were appearing to support a new actor meant quite a lot.

“From how she’s in Doctor’s Office alongside Kang Giwoo, I’m pretty sure that she’s definitely a rookie who has the support of her company. Honestly, she wasn’t on the list when I first looked for people, but Soul gave us a call first. They wanted us to take Park Hamin and said that Lee Hyuk and Kwon Dayoon can appear if it’s through a call.”

“So Park Hamin is just a sidekick so that we can hear those two’s voices?”

“Don’t call her a sidekick. I’m sure Miss Park Hamin has a charm of her own.”

“I know you, producer Kang, and I’m pretty sure you would never have accepted that Park Hamin kid if not for Lee Hyuk and Kwon Dayoon.”

“There you go again, making me the bad guy. Anyway, I’m just telling the two of you. We’ll get some footage if we can capture Park Hamin being startled. If you get the call through, drag it on as much as possible and get whatever you can out of them. They are actors who the public has great interest in, so if we create a teaser based on that and release articles, we’ll be able to grab viewing rates.”

“Looks like Park Hamin’s face will be everywhere in this episode. You’re going to edit centered around her, aren’t you?”

“I’m not that much of a money grubber. Though, I might add her smiling face from time to time.”

“Tell me honestly. You received money from Soul, didn’t you?”

“Geez, there’s nothing you just won’t say, is there? Even if I did, I’m not so disloyal that I would just keep it all to myself. I’ll make sure to get enough for you and our dear Jay over here, so don’t worry.”

“You know I have an iron rule of not receiving shady money, right?”

Jay also smiled, saying that he’d only receive money that can be put in the bank.

“Don’t say that and accept what you’re given.”

The producer left. Although he said all that, he wasn’t someone who would actually get paid money behind their backs. It was precisely because he knew that that he could joke about it.

“I’m here.”

The waiting room opened suddenly. Hyuktae, who had his hair dyed in an emerald-green color, sighed and sat down on the sofa.

“Go easy on the door. How many times do I have to tell you this?”

“Sorry, hyung-nim. But I don’t think I can fix this. I’m actually quite well-known for slamming open doors.”

“That’s one weird perk to get well-known for. So, you sober now?”

“No matter how much I look down on shoots, I do everything seriously. I’m completely fine.”

“That’s good, I guess. Jay, give this guy some pear concentrate too. He needs something to get past the hangover.”

Jay disliked being called by his real name even in private places. He even said that he was seriously considering changing his name. Hyuktae received a cup politely with both of his hands. He may act immaturely despite nearing his thirties, but etiquette was buried in him. There was a reason why he managed to maintain peak popularity after all these years.

“Miss Hamin was real cute,” Hyuktae said as he wiped his mouth.

It seemed that he had been to the guest’s waiting room.

“She’ll be our main guest for today, so pay attention.”

“Why is she the main? Is something going on?”

“You’ll see once the shoot begins.”

Not long later, Taeksoo arrived as well. Younghoon told both of them off for being late, but neither of them even pretended to listen. Younghoon also didn’t nag them because he seriously wanted them to reflect on it. It was just that when the four of them gathered together like this, they would each have their own role, and his role was to be picky about everything others said and did. He couldn’t just laugh and smile together with them for five years if it was for the sole sake of money. All three of them were his precious juniors and little brothers.

“I was on my way in, and it looks like there’s a shoot. There are loads of people, including some famous actors.”

“You didn’t see their face?”

“I would cause an uproar if I do go there. Hyung-nim, don’t you know how popular I am?”

He kicked towards Hyuktae, who was being all sneaky. He was careful to not actually hit him.

“I heard that you sold out all tickets to all performances, right? Isn’t Tokyo Dome a huge place?” Jay said.

Hyuktae created a big semi-circle with both of his arms.

“It’s ridiculously large. When I first went there, I wondered if I was actually performing in such a place. Though, I’m quite used to it by now.”

“A global kid surely is different, huh.”

As they were listening to Hyuktae's story, the main writer of the program intruded and said that the preparations were done. There were bags under her eyes, and it seemed that she too was receiving a lot of stress just like producer Kang, because of the viewing rates.

"Let's do our best today. We should give producer Kang something to boast about."

Younghoon patted other people's backs as he left the waiting room. When he arrived at the studio and sat down, the guests followed in. Younghoon stood up from the spot and greeted each and every one of them. Just as Jay said, Yoo Jihyuk was a person to note. Choi Jeonghee would make a perfect pretty decoration.

"I'm Park Hamin. Please take care of me."

"Alright. Let's do our best today."

He had a close look at Hamin as well. The success and failure of this episode relied on this fellow. It would be great if she was close to Lee Hyuk or Kwon Dayoon, or even better, both of them. He shook hands with her and looked at the next person. It was Han Maru, who apparently knew the previous episodes.

"I'm Han Maru."

"Let's do our best together."

"Please take care of me."

Younghoon looked at the four people walking out of the studio again. Putting the show aside, the one he liked the most was Han Maru. While the other three were busy looking around the studio, he alone was looking at the people. The moment he made eye contact with him, he felt that today's shoot would go well. Usually, his intuition was quite accurate.

"Please get ready."

Younghoon sat down in the center seat of the semi-circular table. It was his seat that he had maintained for years. He drank a bit of the drink that came in as a PPL ad and closed his eyes. The shoot was about to begin.