

## Once Again 781

### Chapter 781. Sequence 5

After the wave of customers left and the store became less crowded, Daemyung and Jiyoong came in.

“You’re here right on time. If you came 30 minutes ago, you wouldn’t have been able to sit.”

“Really?”

Daemyung sat in front of him. Dojin, who peeked out from the kitchen, told them to wait, saying that he’d bring food soon. Iseul brought some drinks and ricecakes.

“Congratulations, unni. The location is good, and the food is delicious, so I’m sure it’ll go better than it did at Suwon. I’ll tell the people at my company as well.”

“Thanks even if it’s just words. Jiyoong, you are my saving grace. But hey, Park Daemyung, did you go traveling with her during the summer holidays or not? I keep hearing that you abandoned this gentle girl in her room during breaks.”

“Unni!”

Jiyoong quickly raised her hand and blocked Iseul’s mouth. Daemyung smiled awkwardly and apologized.

“This is not something you should be sorry about, oppa. I was busy with work, and you were busy with your part-time work and writing, weren’t you? We can always go traveling later, so don’t mind it.”

“No, let’s go to a mountain stream before it reaches August. Didn’t you say you wanted to go to one last time?”

“I’m really okay.”

“No, I should have put more thought into you, I’m sorry.”

“D-don’t say things like that. I’m really satisfied with meeting each other on the weekends. I already feel sorry for trying to see you on the weekends when you have a part-time job.”

“Wh-why would you feel sorry? There’s nothing to feel sorry about. If it’s about being sorry, I’m even more sorry. I can’t even pay for the date, and I can’t even meet you that often. I can’t even take you somewhere.”

“No. In fact...”

A soda bottle made a bumping noise as it was placed on the table. It was Dojin, who had brought some gukbap on a tray. The two, who were apologizing and trying to find out who was more sorry than the other, became silent.

“How could you two not have changed at all? If you’re in your 7th year of dating already, you should be chewing each other’s weaknesses out. Yet here you are going ‘I love you, no I love you more.’ Hey, have you two ever gotten into a fight?”

Maru flipped over the cups and placed them in front of the two people as he spoke,

“I bet my real estate that they never fought.”

“But you don’t have any real estate.”

“That’s why I can bet on it. Also, stop being jealous of the couple in eternal love, and get them some food.”

“Who’s jealous? We’re in love much more than them....”

Dojin, who looked at Iseul while putting down the gukbap, made an expression like an examinee student who was facing an incomprehensible math formula. He looked like he still didn’t know why she didn’t accept the proposal. Iseul seemed to have decided to just keep on frustrating him and replied with an ‘I don’t know anything’ look on her face.

Maru, who was aware of the circumstances, looked at the two couples alternately before pouring some soda into his glass. He needed soju right now, not this. When Dojin left, Iseul started talking about the proposal. Daemyung and Jiyoong desperately waved their hands in the air, trying to stop the conversation.

“Han Maru’s okay now. I think he’s shaken it off,” Iseul said.

Maru smiled bitterly as he looked at Daemyung and Jiyoong. The two’s eyes contained pity like they saw a drenched dog in the rain. He once again realized how tragic he must have looked for the past 5 years. He thought that he had put up a good pretense, but it seemed that his close friends had already found out everything. It was proof that he was broken to the point that he couldn’t even control his own mood. Escaping to the military was a splendid choice.

“Just as Iseul said, I’ve regained my clarity, so don’t look at me like that. You’re making me depressed.”

After that came Jiyoong’s ‘parade’ of worries. She talked about things like how he looked like a different person after she heard that he broke up, how she was worried because he looked worse and worse every time they met, then about how he was getting conscripted, about how she was worried when he came out for a vacation and when she saw him after he got discharged.

“Heck, you might as well be worried about me eating food.”

“You looked just that bad back then, seonbae. But still, I’m glad to hear that you’re okay now. Now that I hear you saying that, I truly feel relieved because you look like you’re relaxed.”

“From now on, don’t worry about me, and focus more on the boyfriend next to you. It’d be strange to worry about a man unrelated to you when your boyfriend is right next to you.”

“How can you say that you are unrelated to me? Actually, it was oppa who was more worried about you; it was to the point that I was even a little jealous. On days when he looked at your face, he kept talking about what he should do to help you, and honestly, I found him a little hateful back then. We were on a date too.”

Jiyoong looked at Daemyung with a cute glare.

“Let’s stop the display of affection there. Please be considerate of me, a single man, sitting between two couples, okay?”

After having finished the war known as lunchtime, Dojin and Iseul also took off their aprons that said 'Seonjeong Gukbap' on it and joined them. They were on their second dish of the large-sized boiled pork, their first bottle of soju, and their third bottle of rice wine. The fact that he drove here was incapable of blocking the bowls of rice wine that were offered to him. If you get drunk, you can just sleep here – he just clicked his tongue at Iseul's incredible solution and just drank. Jiyoong, who rarely drank usually, also grabbed a bowl as well, saying that she would drink a little. Jiyoong, who was drinking with the side dish of Daemyung's worried gaze, kept on drinking, saying that the rice wine was to her tastes. Forget unpleasant, she looked more and more lively the more she drank.

"I thought Jiyoong couldn't drink."

"I thought she couldn't drink because she doesn't drink that often."

Daemyung looked at her, saying that her drinking posture was adorable as well. This couple would probably find the other adorable even if the other was stealing money.

It was an hour later that Jiyoong suddenly collapsed after drinking like a whale. The accumulated alcohol seemed to have rushed her at once as her face turned pale for an instant before turning bright red. Iseul took her upstairs and had her lie down, but Jiyoong staggered back downstairs and stuck next to Daemyung. She rejected the offer to go and sleep. I'm going to stay here – she even turned her drunkenness into love.

"Jiyoong's asleep."

Such was the result of Daemyung babying her on his back.

"Bring her upstairs. I've laid out the blankets."

After Jiyoong left, the four of them tried to continue their drinking, but that wasn't going to happen.

"Oh, a new place?"

An army of people in neckties rushed in. The gukbap restaurant couple, who had been drinking sips from the get-go, welcomed the new customers and put on their aprons.

"Stop drinking and help us out a little."

I didn't even drink – Maru tried to deny their claims, but he ended up putting on an apron when Iseul acted like his injustice didn't even matter. It only took an instant to become a part-timer from a guest who came over to congratulate them.

The 2nd wave was much more intense than the 1st wave. There was an endless stream of salarymen who had come to eat dinner. That was probably the magic of 'special discount sale for opening'. Only after 7 could he escape the counter. He was busy to the point that he couldn't even remember how many times he slashed the card on the card reader, nor how many times he had to return change.

"What would I have done without you two? We should look for a part-timer quickly."

"You're paying me for this right?"

"Extra large gukbap, large-sized boiled pork, and booze. Let's make do with that, okay?"

That was merciless. He finally returned to his seat and sat down again. The boiled pork had turned cold, and the rice wine had turned lukewarm.

“Thanks for the work.”

“You too.”

He poured a bowl full of rice wine and drank it in one go. He realized what adults meant when said they could do without rice but not without rice wine. The rice wine seeped into his fatigued body and made him feel pleasant. It was a sense of satisfaction he could not get from drinking soju.

“Oh, right. Do you have time over the weekend?”

“This weekend?”

“Yes. It doesn’t matter if it’s a Saturday or a Sunday. Maybe you’re busy with a shoot?”

“That’s okay. The shoot starts next Tuesday. Anyway, what happens over the weekend?”

“Apparently, we finally have a proper storyboard from our director Kang.”

“Oh, it’s that. Looks like she took a liking to the script you managed to finish, huh?”

“Maybe. That was why we were planning to shoot over the weekend. Maybe to Gapyeong.”

“You’ve already scouted a place out?”

“We’re hiring an expensive actor, so we should prepare whenever we can. We’re planning to fit your schedule.”

“How about the almighty director Kang’s schedule?”

“She says she can just apply for a leave if she can’t do it over the weekend, so she’s okay whenever.”

“She can apply for leave whenever she wants? That’s really amazing.”

“Who says she isn’t?”

“But if it’s Gapyeong, shouldn’t we do it over two days? I don’t think you can finish it in just one day.”

“Then can you free up both a Saturday and a Sunday?”

“I don’t dare reject. It’s something I promised to do a long time ago too. I wonder if she lost her senses while working.”

“She told me she’s still studying and watching films whenever she has time these days. Apparently, she’s also in a circle related to film.”

“She’s proactive alright. I thought that she lost interest in this when I heard she got employed.”

“She’s a realistic girl after all. She said that she should pursue her dreams after she sets up a way out. Foolishly pursuing dreams is a no go.”

“That’s definitely true. Give her a call. We should go during the weekend to shoot. Then is Koo Ando coming as well?”

“He’s our camera director, so of course he’s coming.”

“I haven’t seen him since I got discharged. If he’s been to the military, I guess he’s still in college now, huh?”

“Apparently, he took a semester off and is working because of tuition.”

“Anywhere you go, it’s about money, huh.”

“That’s what life is about. Oh yeah, should I call her here right now? She should be done with work now.”

“If she’s in Seoul, then sure. Also, call Ando here as well.”

“Gimme a sec.”

Daemyung put his phone against his ear. The conversation that started with ‘Hey, Sora’ ended in less than a minute.

“She’ll bring Ando here as well.”

“She keeps dragging him around huh. At this point, it wouldn’t be strange for the two to start dating.”

“True. She said she’ll be here in less than 30 minutes, so...”

Daemyung stopped midway and looked towards the entrance. Before the chime of the bell even stopped, he heard murmurs. There were even screams mixed in. Well, more like screeches of joy. Maru turned around, wondering what was happening. He saw ladies pressing the shutter button on their phone cameras while raising them above their heads. Sorry, excuse me, coming through – a voice that asked for their consideration broke through their screeches.

“What is it?”

Just who were they trying to shoot to the point that they were blocking the entrance to someone else’s restaurant? The wall of people split and a man entered the restaurant. His hair was disheveled as though someone was pulling on it, and the white t-shirt had been stretched to below his waist level. Although he looked like a beggar right now, even that look had a vintage vibe when it came to him – Yoo Sooil. Only after a woman let go of his pants could Sooil come into the store. It seemed that his manager wasn’t here with him.

Maru turned his head away. A star surrounded by obsessive fans. If he acted like he knew him, he would probably get into something troublesome.

“Isn’t that Yoo Sooil? This is the first time I’m seeing him, and gosh, he’s tall. I didn’t know that he was so tall when I saw him on TV.”

“Stop staring at that log, and don’t mind him.”

“But he’s coming over here.”

“What?”

Maru slightly turned around again. Sooil was coming over while waving his hands. Fans were rushing into the store like little ducklings following their mother duck.

“Maru.”

He waved at him to go away, but he was already too late. Sooil sat down and spoke,

“The president told me to raise your sales a little.”

The alarm for the 3rd tsunami alert started ringing inside his head.

## **Chapter 782. Sequence 5**

“Thank you, please come again.”

The business line got attached to his mouth. His motions as he accepted people’s credit cards became natural, and his eyes became quick at looking at the bills. His head had already come up with actions he had to take depending on the situation. This customer wanted a cash receipt, this customer wanted two copies of the receipt, this customer wanted the change in stashes of 1,000 won. When a middle-aged man said he’d come again while grabbing a handful of mint candy from the counter, he almost told him that he didn’t need to.

“Hey, did you get a job here, seonbae?”

Sora, who arrived ten minutes ago, said that like a scientist who just found an interesting sample. Her eyes were full of the passion to research and analyze this special case. Maru looked over the cocky junior’s shoulders towards the interior of the store. The store, which was full to the point he could barely get through between the tables, finally had an empty table. This was also the moment the human storm that Sooil brought had ended. He subconsciously groaned when he found the island where he could take a rest. After the last customer left, Dojin closed the restaurant. He said that he couldn’t sell any more as he ran out of ingredients.

“Uhm, can I take a photo with you? I’d like to hang it up on the wall.”

“Of course. You’re Maru’s friends. Do you need an autograph?”

“That sounds good. Since you’re signing an autograph, I’d love it if you could write that you’re a regular here.”

Iseul used her business mind. Sooil smiled with Dojin and Iseul on either side. Ando was the one who took the photo.

Maru printed the account from the POS machine and compared it to the paper orders written by hand. There were no mistaken orders or miscalculations. They had sold 900 bowls of gukbap today alone. Combining that with the sales of boiled pork, alcoholic drinks, and takeouts, the sales amounted to 11 million won. He didn’t know what the profit margin was, but it sure seemed like it was enough for the gukbap restaurant couple to laugh about it.

“Hey, you knew Yoo Sooil?” Dojin asked, coming over.

“I do know him since we belong to the same company.”

“You two look pretty close for someone you just know.”

“I guess we are close then. The sales is 11 million won. How much is my pay?”

“You shouldn’t talk about money between friends.”

“I can always stop being friends with you for a brief moment, get paid, and then be friends with you again.”

“I’ll provide you with unlimited gukbap in the future, okay?”

“Please take care of me in the future, owner.”

“This isn’t even my own store. Don’t call me owner.”

Even though he was saying that, Dojin’s lips were twitching uncontrollably. He was probably imagining the pink-colored future. Maru handed him the sales for the day and asked him to check.

“If every day was like today, I’ll be rich in no time.”

“If you keep receiving as many customers as you did today, you’ll die of overwork.”

“Overworking sounds better than not earning anything. But man, the celebrity effect is real alright. So many people rushed in and ordered takeouts. Though, most of them just watched without doing anything.”

“He did hold a handshake event with the customers who bought takeouts. As a fan, they wouldn’t be able to hold back. I saw a customer order 5 different portions separately.”

“Mr. Yoo Sooil brought fortune to my store. I hope he comes around from time to time. No wait, you should bring him over. And make sure you let everyone know when you’re coming.”

“If you’re going to hire a broker, you need to pay fees, right?”

“0.5 percent of the sales on the day Yoo Sooil comes, deal?”

“No deal. You’re blind for money. Do you not have confidence in the gukbap of your in-laws? You need Yoo Sooil’s reputation?”

“If you put it like that, then I guess it goes against my conscience. Right, a good restaurant must use its food to compete. But still, bring him around from time to time. Or better yet, bring other actors. You see that wall over there?”

Dojin pointed at the empty white wall between the air conditioner and the menu board.

“Wouldn’t it look like those stores on TVs if I fill that wall with celebrity autographs and photos? It’ll help with the sales, and we’ll become well known amongst the people around.”

“Man, time is scary alright. You were just a delinquent when you were young, but now you’re a money-seeking delinquent.”

“Because I have a family now. I should earn a lot while I’m young and get prepared for my later years. I don’t want to make Iseul suffer. That goes for my future children as well. If it’s suffering, I alone am enough.”

For a brief moment, Dojin’s eyes turned into those of a father of three. I don’t care what kind of hardships I have to go through, so don’t let my family starve – Maru could feel a sense of desperation from him. Although he immediately returned to his mischievous self, the breadwinner that took place within him was probably there without a doubt. So you too, are changing; from a youth into a husband and then to a father.

“Hey, think about those things after you get married. You even failed your proposal, so talking about the future sounds kinda pointless, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, why didn’t she accept my proposal?”

Dojin started pondering seriously again. If he told him that Iseul was preparing one herself, he would probably become all smiles and shake off his worries, but Maru decided to stay silent because he just got used as a part-timer despite being a friend. And just as Iseul said, it was kinda interesting to see him so anxious. Though, definitely not cute.

“You’re friends with Maru-seonbae?”

Sora’s finger pointed at Maru’s face. Whenever the finger moved up and down, Maru felt like an item on display. Maybe he should find it fortunate that she didn’t call him ‘that’.

“We’re close friends,” Sooil said.

“A business relationship,” Maru corrected him.

He took off the apron and put it on the table. Although his body wasn’t that fatigued thanks to the god-given stamina, he was mentally exhausted. He sat down on a chair and stretched his arms out. It had been hours since he last stretched his shoulders.

Iseul and Dojin went to the kitchen, saying that they should clean up, and the rest of the people gathered at one table. Jiyeon, who had fallen asleep, also returned with a tired-looking face. Having found Sooil, Jiyeon just blinked several times and asked if it was a dream.

“You said the president sent you here?”

“I came to the company because of a contract for a commercial and met the president. Things led to another and we ended up talking about this. He told me to go to the restaurant and increase their sales.”

“He’s quite considerate.”

“Everyone at the company knows that the president dotes on you.”

“He’s not doting on me. It’s a claim-obligation relationship. He sent you, the observer, to watch me, the slave, to make sure that I don’t fool around.”



After saying those words, Maru reached out for his cup of water. Only then did he realize that the people at the table were staring at him.

“What is it?”

“It just feels strange that you’re close to Mr. Sooil, seonbae. Maybe I should be saying that you two don’t suit each other at all,” Sora said with a disgruntled look.

“Sorry that I’m acquainted with a famous actor.”

“You don’t have to feel sorry. Anyway, you’re really handsome Mr. Sooil. There’s a halo around your face now that I am looking at your face in person.”

Sooil smiled awkwardly. Sora’s way of conversing, that is, not holding back, was probably enough to make an ascetic flustered.

“Why don’t we drink a round for now? When else would we get to drink with a famous actor? Here, I’m pouring it.”

Sora quickly poured as many glasses as there were heads at the table before raising a glass above her head.

“To the prosperity of the restaurant!”

“Cheers!”

“And also, may the movie I’m shooting this time go well enough so that I can quit my job!”

Maru stopped bringing his glass to his mouth and looked at Sora. Everyone froze up and looked at her, who was smiling. Sora emptied the glass in her mouth as though she didn’t care before slapping down the glass on the table.

“Mr. Sooil, you’re quite expensive, aren’t you?”

“Me?”

“Yes. You must be expensive, right? But you don’t receive any guarantees if you do things like friendship appearances right? You know, like cameos.”

“It differs according to the situation, but most of the time, I wouldn’t get paid.”

“Have you ever played a cameo?”

“A couple of times. I showed my face for a brief moment when a director I know did a piece.”

“Do you have any appointments this weekend? Or is it a secret?”

“I’ll be on break for a while. But why do you ask?”

“That’s perfect. This must be a god-sent opportunity.”

Sora took out a half-folded lump of paper from her bag. Maru knew what that paper was. It was the completed script that Daemyung showed him before.

“Won’t you shed some light on a salaryman and a student who are poor but have dreams?”

“It’s a script for a film?”

Sooil received the script.

“Yoo Sooil. That girl who sounds like she’s selling insurance is completely serious right now. If you take it as a joke and reply to her that you’ll think about it, she’ll lead you by the nose. Think carefully about what you’re going to say next,” Maru warned.

Sora, who sat next to Sooil, glared at him. Even Medusa would flinch back if glared at like that.

“I, Kang Sora, will be the one producing, and the script is created by Park Daemyung, who’s right here. The camera director is Koo Ando, who’s right here. The main character is Maru-seonbae for now, but if you wish, we can change it this instant.”

“That sounds tempting.”

“Right? I don’t think shooting an indie film like this is that bad for your career. Though, naturally, I wouldn’t be able to pay you anything. We’re all having a hard time getting by. Charity, volunteer work, or passion pay, or maybe, friendship, I hope you can make do with a combination of those four for your payment.”

Calling her words ‘evil’ would be a nice way of putting it. Maru signaled Sooil not to mind her when he saw that Sora’s shamelessness had reached the skies. However, Sooil looked more interested instead.

“If it’s a proper contract, there will be many problems with doing this, but if, like you say, I just do it for friendship, it shouldn’t matter that much.”

“That’s what I’m saying. The trend these days is for actors at the peak of their popularity to shoot low-budget films with directors who are known for their workmanship, right? You’ll be like that as well. Of course, I may lack the skills to get acknowledged for my work, but I can proudly say for sure that the script you’re looking at right now is an exceptional one. Though, it’s pretty weird for me to be proud of it when I’m not the one who wrote it.”

“You said you wrote this, Mr. Daemyung?”

Daemyung, who was quietly eating soondae opposite him, hurriedly nodded.

“If I appear in this piece, what role are you going to give me?”

“Eh? I-if you want, I’ll give you the main ch... no wait, I don’t think I can do that.”

“Don’t think about it too seriously; just tell me what you think. A script of this length should last about 15 minutes. There shouldn’t be that many characters, so I was wondering if I can even be in it.”

“There are only two people who are set in stone when it comes to roles. One is Maru, and the other is a fellow named Bangjoo. We were planning on getting people we know to play the remaining roles according to Maru’s schedule. You know, people from college or circles.”

“Really?”

“Right now, we’re doing this half as a hobby without any funds, so we can’t hire proper actors. If we want to recruit actors, we won’t be able to cope with the funds, and we don’t want that. That’s why we were just going to shoot for now with people who have time and with people who get along with us.”

“With people who get along. I like things like that. It’s just I can’t find many people who can get along with me.”

Sooil shrugged.

“I’m sure there must be tons of people who are willing to get along with you.”

“I’m always thankful towards those who unconditionally like me. But in human relationships, you’re bound to be attracted to people you can trust, right? In that sense, I wish to participate in this work as long as you two, the writer and the director, permit me. That fellow is one of the very few friends I can trust, so I’d like to help him. No, rather than helping him out, I’d like to do something with him.”

Everyone’s gazes flew towards Maru like sharp arrows. Maru looked at Sora and Daemyung’s faces alternately. Quickly tell him that you want him to join – both of them sent him silent gazes.

“Aren’t you busy?”

“I told you, I’m not.”

“Check your schedule just in case.”

“Don’t worry. Even if there is something, I can just adjust it.”

“You’re not getting a single penny, you know?”

“Sometimes, voluntary slave work can be fun.”

“Working with you puts too much pressure on us. You’re going to attract people again, aren’t you?”

“I just have to cover myself up and take it off during the shoot.”

“So you’re determined to do this, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Then do whatever you want. Kang Sora, Park Daemyung, make sure you squeeze every last inch out of him. Tell him what passion pay is.”

As soon as he gave them permission, Sora cheered. Daemyung and Jiyeon did the same. Ando was already taking a photo of Sooil’s face with his phone.

“Well then! Raise your glasses! To commemorate Mr. Sooil’s participation, cheers!”

Sora shouted delightfully.

### **Chapter 783. Sequence 5**

He shook off Dojin, who was clinging to him and telling him to stay behind, and stood up. All of these people were severe alcoholics, so there didn’t seem to be any signs of it ending. Sooil, who started off by putting on a gentle face, had long since joined them and was dancing together. Dojin and Iseul, who

had joined them after cleaning up the kitchen, said that they should drink until tomorrow morning as though they were planning on consuming all the alcohol in the store. Ever since Daemyung, who could drink just as much as him, started drinking, it became an occasion of who-can-drink-more.

He went outside and had a look at his watch. It was just past 10 p.m. He blew away the sweet scent of rice wine with a breath of air.

“You guys are going to have to clean up a corpse if I stayed in there. Gosh, I’m dying.”

“I can’t exactly stop them when they’re planning on drinking as much as they sold today.”

“True,” Ando said, following him out.

He put a cigarette in his mouth and looked for a lighter.

“I don’t have one on me.”

“Ah, right. You don’t smoke, do you?”

“When did you start smoking?”

“I learned to in the military. This is the only thing my direct senior taught me.”

“That’s a dang nice thing you were taught. You should quit if possible.”

“I will, once I finish this one.”

“That’s what all smokers say. ‘This is my last one.’”

After staring at the cigarette for a while, Ando snapped it in half and threw it on the ground.

“Well thought.”

“The first thing you’re giving me is a scolding after not having met in a long time. You haven’t changed.”

“I can give a scolding alright. I heard from Daemyung that you took a break from college and started doing a part-time job.”

“I was planning on getting employed as soon as possible and then start paying back my student loans, but that’s easy to say, not to do. I can easily graduate as long as I get enough credits, but removing the college student tag from me is a problem in itself. I want to work as an intern to get work experience, but the competition there is huge. While I’m a college student, I don’t have to worry about student loans, and I have various benefits, so I took a break to look for work while I do some part-time jobs, but I can’t seem to find any. It’s strange. There are definitely people who got jobs too.”

“You’re working hard.”

“Everyone around me is living like that, so I don’t usually feel anything, but coming to places like this does make me feel a little pathetic.”

Ando looked inside the door.

“I’m envious.”

“Of who?”

“Everyone. I’m envious of Sora and Jiyeon, who got themselves a job, and I’m envious of Daemyung, who doesn’t have to worry about student loans. I’m also envious of Dojin and Iseul, who have a store to run. I don’t even have to mention Sooil.”

“Am I on that list?”

“You are.”

“What an honor. Since you’re grumbling, tell me more about it. I can listen to you for free.”

“I don’t have anymore. That was it. I’m just envious. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Ando stared at the cigarette that he threw on the ground.

“You’re regretting that you threw it away, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m really regretting it. That was my last one too. If I think about it now, smoking isn’t that bad. It’s a cheap psychologist. You know, you can relieve stress.”

“That’s the second most used excuse for people to not quit smoking.”

“Fine, I’ll quit. I’ll quit, alright.”

Maru took Ando to the convenience store nearby and bought some cold coffee. He sat down on a chair under the parasol and opened the coffee as he asked,

“Is it hard?”

“Nah. I don’t think that I’m living a pitiful life. Just like I said before, I’m just envious. Those famous people say that you should think positively and look up, but how can people live just by doing that? It’s stifling. Honestly, don’t you gain way more energy by looking at people doing worse than you?”

Maru nodded. Perhaps the motivation that the ant had while working towards a better tomorrow was the grasshopper. The vague hope and expectations that it would be able to live a better winter were probably what made it last the summer.

“If there’s one thing I’m worried about, it’s that I’m having a hard time taking care of myself yet someone likes me?”

“You mean Sora?”

“Yeah. At first, I was wondering where a girl like that popped out from when she joined the club, but things happened and here we are.”

“If you’ve been through that much together, I guess you would get close whether you want to or not. It’s not like you don’t have any feelings for her, right?”

“I do. It’s overflowing. I mean, Sora is not lacking anywhere, is she? She’s pretty, has a refreshing personality, and her actions are cute too.”

"I admit that she's pretty, but I can't accept that she has a refreshing personality. I think something got the better of you after being dragged around by her a lot, but that's not 'refreshing' it's ill-tempered. Also, cute? I'm sure the heat got the better of you and you miss-said 'brute' right? Or maybe you've been to Stockholm recently?"

"She looks good to me."

"I can't exactly say anything to that. So what?"

Ando put down the empty bottle. As he stared at the empty bottle, a couple passed by behind them. They asked each other what they should bring home as they entered the convenience store. Water, beer, instant rice, and cup ramyun.

"You know that Sora's household is well-off, right?"

Ando has spoken again when the door closed.

"I do. We went to her house for our first film. If she still lives in that apartment, I guess the house prices must have risen by 200 million at least."

"Her father works for a large company and her mother is a teacher."

"You're quite knowledgeable."

"Sora told me about it last time. She told me everything that happened since her birth as though she wanted me to know who she was."

"It was a confession."

"Right?"

"What did you say?"

"I just said, I see. I also talked about myself a little. About how we barely got out of a semi-basement apartment, but we're still living on a monthly rent; about how my father worked for a company but retired at an early age and is now frying chickens with my mother's help. You know, a common story."

"What did Sora say?"

"She said my parents must be splendid to raise me into who I am."

Ando threw the empty bottle into the trash.

"Even the most dim-witted person would know what was happening, right? Sora naturally seemed to be waiting for something, and I didn't have the courage to tell her what she wanted. Time passed and here we are, talking about it."

"Did Sora not say anything about it after that?"

"No, but she does stare at me more blatantly from time to time."

"Considering her personality, if she's not saying anything, she must have realized that you're getting ready to run away to a far place."

“Probably.”

“Why don’t you tell it to her straight then? That you don’t have the leisure to date her. That your pride will make you suffer even if you dated her. That she should stop taking interest in a guy like you and look for someone better.”

Maru yawned. Ando’s mouth twitched just like a dog before it was about to bite, before just laughing it off.

“Maybe this is why I’m talking to you about this. So that I can hear something refreshing from you.”

“It’s your choice to do what you want, so I don’t plan on intervening, but if I am to give you a tip based on experience, it’s that the longer you delay your decision, the more pathetic it will become.”

“What would you do?”

“Don’t ask. I’m pathetic myself. If I was great enough to tell you something, I wouldn’t have run away in the first place either. I’ll instead talk about something I overheard. The situation isn’t entirely the same, but someone who had similar worries as you got this answer from an elder. That person was wondering if he should pursue his dreams or choose reality in order to take responsibility for his woman.”

“Is this about you?”

“It’s about a friend of mine. Anyway, the elder who heard that question gave him this answer: don’t look at the world as scenery; look at it as a reality. Is that woman so powerless and incompetent to the point that she won’t be able to cope if you don’t take responsibility for her? He realized this: Oh, I was being too arrogant, I was mistaken. Just as the elder said, he gave his girl a call. He asked her what she was going to do if he wasn’t able to take care of her financially. The woman’s answer was simple: I’ll earn the money, so you do the chores.”

Ando laughed out loud.

“You decide what you want to do with Sora. It’ll be fine as long as you don’t regret it. But hey, why are you worried about marriage when you aren’t even dating yet? I think it’s too early to start comparing households.”

“That’s just the kind of guy I am, I’m just worried. I’m worried about things in front of me, and I’m worried about things far away from me. Sora will snap out at me a lot if she dates someone like me, right?”

“She probed you out fully knowing that. If it’s her, she probably did all the calculations beforehand and judged that it’s doable.”

“Would I be trash if I keep feigning ignorance?”

“Usually whether you’re trash or not is decided by other people. What, does it pain you to think that Sora will treat you like trash?”

“No, in fact, I even think that will be better. If we were just friends, I wouldn’t have to think about my current position or student loans or things like that. If I meet her, I would just smile, knowing that she’s doing well, and if we lose touch, I’ll just start thinking, ‘oh there was a girl like her’ and sigh in relief.”

“And ultimately, you’ll weep in your own little room?”

“I wish I had a room under my name that I could weep in.”

“That’s true. Even if I cry, I would at least feel at ease if I do it in a house under my own name.”

“I dunno man. A romantic relationship suddenly feels like some freaky monster or something. Would I have told her to date me if I was in a better position?”

“What’s your definition of a better position?”

“A good job and a house under my own name?”

“In Korea, if you have your own house when you’re twenty-five, you’re one of two things: your parents are super rich or you’re Einstein. Oh, there’s one more case: Winning the lottery.”

“I know it’s just an excuse. Like you said, I’m doing this due to my inferiority complex. But the problem is, I know too well. I keep thinking about what comes next. I can clearly see that things will not go well once we start dating, so I feel like not starting at all is a better idea.”

“If you think that way, then I guess that’s for the better.”

“Just like you said, I should just tell her that I’m a celibate before I start looking pathetic.”

“There’s nothing more romantic than a self-made celibate, and nothing more depressing than celibacy forced on you. If you feel like you’re going to get depressed after telling her, you can make a call.”

“What, are you going to buy me booze or something?”

“No. I was saying you can call other people, not me.”

“What a prick.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

He tapped on Ando’s shoulder and stood up. He wanted to go home like this when he thought about the mess that the store would have become, but there was no way those guys would forgive him if he did that, so he had to return obediently. Maru looked at Ando, who was walking next to him. It was sad that he had to look into the future at his age. The reason he could not tell him to just go for it was that there were youths who could do that as well as those that couldn’t afford to. Ando was definitely the latter. Who could insult him for being passive and afraid? If they wanted to, they would have to chuck him a hundred million won to say that to him.

“As someone who ran away before you, I can tell you that running away is futile in front of a person who’s chasing you. You know Sora better than me, so think about it carefully. Think about whether she’s a girl who would stop just because you told her to stop, or whether she’ll tell you to shut up and keep chasing you.”

“Would there be someone that would come to me even if I say no?”

“There is. At least one that I know of. Someone who’s reckless to the bone; someone who’s just that lovely and painful.”



“Hey, are you dating someone? Did you ever start dating after that? Or is it her ag...”

Maru smacked Ando’s flank as he was about to ask.

“Don’t think about me, and just worry about yourself. Over there, the problem of your life is waiting for you.”

Sora was waiting in front of the restaurant. She was standing crookedly with a crooked mouth, looking like a bomb that had complaints about this world; one that was at the end of its fuse and was about to blow up.

“Where are you going around at a time like this!”

Her voice was loud.

### **Chapter 784. Sequence 5**

“Watch out on your way home. Remember to bring Jiyoong home safely.”

Daemyung and Jiyoong grabbed a taxi. He felt a little guilty for making the girl drink when she had work tomorrow, but after thinking about how they were the ones who rejected his dissuasion, he decided to stop feeling apologetic. As waking up with a hangover and then going to work with it was one of the core qualities of a person in society, Jiyoong should receive a lesson.

“Seonbae.”

Sora tapped on his flank and signaled that they should have a talk between just the two of them. They walked under a lamp post.

“What did you tell our shy guy?”

“Shy guy?”

Sora pointed at Ando, who had a cigarette in his mouth, with her chin. He said he was going to quit, but it seemed that he ended up buying a pack while he wasn’t looking.

“What could I have possibly told him? I just listened to what he had to say.”

“What did he say?”

“I have a duty to keep secrets, so I can’t tell you even if I want to.”

“You said something strange to him, didn’t you? Before we came here, he did look stiff, but it didn’t look like he was avoiding me, yet he’s blatantly avoiding my gaze now. Look at him. He’s giving glances over here from time to time, but he flounders like an uneasy dog when I meet eyes with him.”

“Hey, you can’t just compare someone to a dog...”

Sora’s eyes became sharp. Maru swallowed his words. There was no need to make this worse than it is now.

“Seonbae.”

“What?”

“Help me out a little.”

“With what?”

“You should have heard everything, right? Try persuading that shy guy to bring up some courage. Heck, there’s no need for that, just persuade him to say yes.”

“Why are you telling that to me? It’s very rude to bring a problem that you two have to solve to a third person.”

“Do you want me to show you what rude is?”

Sora glared at him and took a step closer. Maru immediately took a step back just in case that forehead of hers flew straight towards his chin.

“What the heck is up with my luck today? Did I do something that bad?” Maru said as he looked up at the sky.

Are you giving me a trial because I keep getting distracted from the path you set for me?

“Who are you saying that to?”

“Someone terrible who’s up there.”

“You’re Christian, seonbae?”

“Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam, Voodooism. I serve all gods.”

“Seonbae. You looked awful ever since you broke up with Gaeul-unni. You haven’t just lost it, right? Like maybe you’re going to mental counseling even though you might look okay on the surface.”

“Did you just realize that you’re asking for help from someone who should be in the mental ward? And about romantic problems on top of that?”

“Forget it and cooperate with me. Ever since he had a talk with you, the shy guy turned into a super shy guy. Get some of that kryptonite or whatever and erase that shy power of his or something.”

“If you know everything, then try being direct. I don’t think it’s something my intervention can solve.”

“Don’t you see that face on him? If I tell him now, he’ll cut all contact and run away.”

Ando, who was nervously looking over from the entrance of the store, looked like a debtor who had made up his mind to run away overnight. He looked like a simple ‘excuse me’ would startle him and make him start to run away. After all that talk about declaring celibacy, it seemed that he was either not ready yet or had his regrets. He was observing from a set distance.

“Koo Ando, he’s a decent guy. He’s moderately earnest and moderately kind. He also doesn’t have the guts to betray someone, but he has a useless amount of responsibility, so he’ll try to keep whatever promise he blurts out.”

“Try fanning him so he puts down that useless sense of responsibility. I’m not telling him to take responsibility for my life or anything, but he’s already worried about the distant future. I just want to date him. All I want is to be a little closer.”

“That’s just the kind of guy he is. You can’t call that bad. I mean, I have a similar personality to him if you think about it. Our thought processes are similar.”

“That’s why you should help him out. Honestly speaking, I want to get confessed to just like other people. It’s kinda funny to talk about what a man should do and what a woman should do, but there are things called commonly accepted practices. I grew up hearing stories like that too. I would smile, and he would approach me, tell me he loves me, and then grab my hand. But that oppa never did such a thing even once.”

Maru scratched his eyebrows and spoke,

“Why didn’t you try whining? That you’re a girl and want princess treatment.”

“Because I have a character. I did all the things I did until now, so it’d be strange to act cute after scrapping all of that, and even if I do, I can’t be sure he’ll look at me in a good light. I’m worried that acting feminine at this point might make him lose interest in me.”

“You’re good with words. Try saying that in front of him. There are times when a husband and a wife can’t get through to each other with a gaze even after living together for decades, so there’s no way a couple of rookies will get anywhere by venting their frustration on someone unrelated instead of actually talking to each other, is there?”

“What if I do that and Ando-oppa puts even more distance? He’s already acting like a frightened dog and is putting his distance from me even now, so what if my change in attitude actually triggers him to change his mind and actually leave? What if he starts thinking that a whiny girl is a nuisance.... I would hate that. I wouldn’t be able to endure it.”

“Now I get why there was no progress between you two for the past few years. He’s one thing, but you’re a problem yourself.”

“How?”

“I’m saying that you’re scared as well.”

“Me? No way.”

“You can’t deny it.”

Sora pouted disgruntledly, but she didn’t say anything. She sighed and stomped on the floor. It was only when a bus drove off after honking that she loosened up her frustrated expression. Maru wanted to call Ando over. It was sort of a pity to watch Sora, who looked like a little girl who had made a mess of her mother’s makeup tools, by himself.

“Help me out, seonbae. I really don’t know what I should do.”

“Hey, you can make expressions like that too, huh.”

“Seonbae, please!”

The people who were chatting in front of the restaurant asked them what they were up to. Sora told them to wait in a loud voice and glared at Maru. She looked like she was about to kick him in the chin if he didn't answer right now.

"Are you going to help?"

"There's nothing I can help you with."

"Is this how you're gonna be?"

"I'm saying there's nothing I can help you with since there is nothing I can do."

"Then what do I do? Should I keep waiting for his answer like this? While acting like a total tomboy?"

"If you want to change the situation, then you should change your tactics. You were the one who pushed yourself onto him until now, so try taking a step back now."

"Seonbae, did you not hear what I just said? That shy guy will distance himself from me if I try to approach him like this. What do you think would happen if I actually put some distance? We'll truly become just friends."

"Have you tried?"

"What?"

"I'm asking if you've tried that awkward pushing and pulling."

"How am I supposed to when I clearly know the result?"

"In your opinion, do you think Ando likes you?"

"It's somewhat weird for me to say this, but one hundred percent. He's only putting his distance because of his goddamn worries."

"That's why you should try taking a step away from him. Showing your weak side is a good option too. Don't force a frightened guy to take action, and give him some room to decide. Give him enough distance so that he can make a choice for himself."

"What if he disappears for real then?"

"Let's clear things up a little. Do you want Koo Ando to like you, or do you like Koo Ando? If you have a clear answer to that, it doesn't matter how Ando acts. If he approaches you, it's a good thing, and if he tries to run away, you can just chase him. That's what you specialize in, isn't it? Dragging him around. If he gets frightened and starts running away, chase him down and get him."

Sora looked down. She seemed to be in thought. After looking left and right, she lifted her head a little.

"Chase him down if he runs away, huh."

"I know it's a little late to ask, but what do you like about him?"

"Just like you said, he's moderately earnest and moderately kind. Also, because he accepts my nature."

“That’s true. That alone is enough for him to be respected. I mean, your personality isn’t exactly ordinary, is it?”

“I know that I’m not ordinary. But a girl is pushing herself onto him like this. A man with a dick should throw everything away and embrace her at least once, don’t you think?”

“What you said just now is sexual harassment.”

“What else should I call a dick but a dick? Should I call it cock then?”

Maru raised his hands and blocked his ears. A middle-aged man, who was passing by, looked at them with shocked eyes before hurrying away.

“Well, talking to you did clear things up a little. I was too unlike myself and worried too much. I should try everything out, and if that still doesn’t work, I just should cling onto him until the end of time.”

“I’ve been telling you since the beginning that there’s nothing I can help you out with, haven’t I? It’s something that you two need to resolve between yourselves.”

“Thanks anyway. I’ll treat you to some food if things go well.”

“I hope that’s the case. There aren’t many men who can handle someone like you. But hey, why did both of you come to me about your worries? You’re putting me in a tight spot.”

“Well, that’s because you’ve changed a lot.”

“Me?”

“Didn’t you notice? I could tell the moment I saw you today. During high school, I thought that talking to you would not result in anything good, but it wasn’t like that today. How should I put this, even your eyes looked gentle? I mean, you listened to everything I had to say. That means that you’ve become that gentle.”

“I kinda feel like people around me notice the changes in me better than I do.”

“But of course. People can never truly see their own faces, right? A reflection in the mirror is, like the word, mirrored. The only one who can see their true face is the person next to them.”

Sora let out a breath upwards. Her bangs fluttered.

“I’ll settle things today and try doing that taking a step back thing.”

“Don’t devour him. It’s a crime for a wolf to assault a sheep.”

“Who’s the wolf and who’s the sheep?”

“People who know the answer to that are always the ones asking that question.”

Sora chuckled and stepped back.

“See you on the weekend. Make sure you prepare yourself. You know how picky I am when it comes to directing, right?”

“Sure I do.”

Sora turned around and shouted 'Koo Ando'. Ando flinched and looked at her. Maru shook his head as he watched Ando being dragged away. He gave his condolences.

"Yoo Sooil, let's go."

Maru dragged the swaying Sooil and grabbed a taxi.

### **Chapter 785. Sequence 5**

"Why do you want to sleep here when you have a perfectly fine house?"

"This is what friends are for, isn't it? Let me sleep over for the night."

Sooil lay on the sofa, looking like he had no intentions of getting up. Maru barely woke him up by kicking him on the flank before sending him into the bathroom.

"It's fine to not wash up for a day."

"Not in my house you can't."

Maru could hear sighs from the bathroom. He seemed to be praying against the toilet as there was no sound of water.

"If you're going to throw up, do it in the toilet."

"Okay. But hey, were you always this naggy?"

"If you don't want that, then you should grab a taxi now and go home. Stop smelling like booze too. I knew things would go like this ever since I saw you accept every drink that you got."

"I didn't know everyone would be good drinkers. Your friends are pretty amazing."

"You're amazing too for being sane amongst them."

"Hey, do I need to get washed? It's such a bother."

"If you come out without getting washed, I'll throw you out the door, so think carefully."

"Yes, Mr. Cleanliness-Maruu."

While Sooil was getting washed, he put a t-shirt and a pair of shorts he prepared for guests in front of the bathroom door. These were something he had no choice but to prepare because of Ganghwan and Geunsoo barging in all the time. Whenever they drank outside, they always barged into his house saying that the 3rd round had to be done in Han Maru's house, and when he acted like he wasn't there, the two of them would go on a riot outside his door, so he had no choice. Such was the fate of a life of living in someone else's house. Even when he changed the passcode for the door, the magical password 'The president said' made him rush towards the door.

"I'll give you food, so don't be in such a hurry."

He went to the kitchen with a shiba-inu wagging its tail by his foot. This was a docile dog that he took in after the five conqueror dogs left the house. This one had a bad leg muscle from birth which gave it a problem walking, but it still ran around everywhere as though it didn't matter. When the president

asked him if he wanted to raise one, Maru responded 'yes' with too much ease. The moment he looked at those pitch-black eyes that had no doubt that he would take it away, he wasn't able to refuse.

"Let's live a good life together since we're both wounded."

He had not thought of the dog's name yet. He would have to name it at some point, but he couldn't think of a name he liked, so he just went with whatever. Hey, you, over there, and damn dog when it pissed under the table.

"Damn dog, you pissed here again. Why don't you change even if I educate you? You should have understood if I taught you three times. It's not here, your poop pad is over there, okay?"

It seemed to have noticed that it was being scolded as it lifted its head from the food bowl and made glimpes at him. It was practically human.

"If you're lonely, then you should be dating."

Maru turned his head around to face the bathroom. Sooil, who came out after washing, was looking at him like he was pathetic.

"And don't get mad at a dog."

"Hey, go bite him. If you bite him, I'll forgive you even if you poop on the bed."

He tapped on the shiba-inu's buttocks. It ran over to Sooil, sat down, and tilted its head before rolling onto its back and panting. It was a symbol of submission and an act of cuteness.

"Hey, this guy seems to have taken a liking to me."

"Then take that dog away. I don't want a dog who doesn't even recognize its master."

He sent the dog to bite, yet it was acting cute instead. When the ancestors said that raising your children is of no use, they were probably basing it on their own experiences. With the dog in hand, Sooil went to the sofa in the living room. Seeing him play around with the dog as he would a baby, Maru could remember events of the distant past.

When he lifted up his chubby infant daughter, she would giggle but then start tearing up because of her dislike for the stubble beard. He would repeat that several times because he found her smiling and tearful expression cute, and his wife would scold him with a slap. He would then watch as his wife snatched their daughter away from him while saying 'you're so childish for being an adult', and then proceed to hug both his wife and his daughter at the same time with a smile. When he did, his wife would grumble, saying that she was suffocating, but she would still stay still. The breath of his daughter and the breath of his wife would become a calm wave within his heart and take everything over. It was the most cozy place in the world. It was the most peaceful place in the world.

"Han Maru."

He blinked when Sooil called out to him. The image of a warm family, that faintly appeared in front of his eyes like a layer of frost, disappeared, and he saw Sooil who was giving the dog back to him.

"It looks like the dog likes you more than me. It keeps reaching out to you."

“Maybe it realized who’s giving it food.”

He took out some energy drinks from the fridge and tossed one to Sooil. Maru also got one for himself and sat on the sofa.

“Are you really going to come over the weekend?”

“I did promise.”

“If you did that because you were swept up by the mood, you can cancel it now. I’ll tell the others about it.”

“I made my decision after much thinking. The fact that I don’t have anything scheduled played a role too. Above all, though, I wanted to know what it feels like to shoot a low-budget film.”

“We only have one camera, a clumsy reflector, and a cheap microphone that’s attached to the camera. The rest is solved through manpower.”

“Sounds romantic. Do you eat cup ramyun for food as well?”

“Well, food is a different story. They find local specialty foods like it is nothing.”

“That sounds even better.”

“Are you sure you don’t need to consult the president about this through your manager? Even if it’s an appearance without a guarantee, you should be bound to several contracts.”

“I went through them all while drinking. They told me it’s fine if it’s a cameo thing. I also got that it’s fine to do whatever I want as long as it doesn’t interfere with my regular schedule.”

“Looks like they got lucky. They get to use a super expensive actor for free. You should be prepared. Kang Sora, that girl, she’s damn good at squeezing every last inch out of a person.”

“She did look quite strong-headed. Are the people I met today all your friends from high school?”

“Yeah. Somehow, things lead to another, and the friendship keeps going strong.”

Burying himself in the sofa, Sooil took out a phone and fidgeted with it. His eyes were half-closed as he looked into the screen.

“Sleep if you’re tired. I’m going to wake you up when I wake up early in the morning.”

“You have work tomorrow?”

“No, going out to exercise in the morning became a habit of mine. Though, the unemployed lifestyle will end next week.”

“What exercise?”

“Nothing much. It’s just a lap around the neighborhood and climbing the mountain to the top to do some vocal exercises and loosening up facial muscles.”

“Bring me with you. I want to do that after a long time too.”



“Can you even wake up in time?”

“Kick me if I don’t wake up.”

“If I shake you once and you don’t wake up, I’m gonna go alone. I don’t want the hassle of waking up a man in the morning.”

“I said this before, but when I look at you, you look like you’re lacking affection. Should I introduce you to someone?”

“Then what about you? Are you dating someone?”

“I did, until three months ago. Choi Injoo.”

“That Choi Injoo doesn’t happen to be the actress Choi Injoo, right?”

“That’s her.”

“That’s amazing, Mr. Yoo Sooi. Stars meeting stars, huh.”

“Working together can sprout emotions and then you start dating lightly.”

“So you were trying to boast. You’re making me jealous, so get to sleep already. Also, have the dog sleep next to you.”

“Get me a blanket.”

“Sure. The great actor Yoo Sooil wants a blanket. I dare not refuse.”

He brought out a thin blanket from his room and tossed it over.

“I’m turning off the lights. So just sleep.”

“Alright, good night.”

After setting the air conditioner to go off in two hours, he went inside his room.

Just then,

“Maru.”

“What?”

“I am your friend, right?”

“You still drunk? Why are you being so cheesy?”

“I was just curious. When I talked to your friends today, I felt really good. They are all honest and say whatever’s on their mind. Being able to talk like that is a good thing.”

“You probably thought that because you wanted to see it that way. The people you met today, they’re all people who are worried that what they’re thinking might be found out by other people. Sometimes they lie, and sometimes they feign ignorance. They aren’t that amazing, but they aren’t bad either. They’re just ordinary people.”

“Really? Then why do I like that sort of thing?”

“If you feel like whining, then do it to that whining creature next to you. That one is a god at listening.”

“How merciless. Your friend is depressed here. How can you go to sleep knowing that?”

“The world is only fun if there’s a friend like that, don’t you think?”

“True, you’re right. Having someone like you should spice up my boring life. The alcohol got the better of me and I called my father, but the first thing he told me was, ‘Did you finally get yourself together and think about returning to the company?’ I had nothing to tell him. Looks like the vice-chairman of a super company thinks that what I achieved is insignificant. I didn’t want his acknowledgement, but I wanted to hear him at least say I did well.”

After sighing, Sooil dragged his blanket over the top of his head before waving his hand.

“Go to sleep. I’m going to sleep as well. Turn off the lights for me.”

Maru turned off the lights in the living room.

“I’m saying this just in case, but if you’re going to cry, don’t cry into the pillow. I just finished washing that recently.”

“I’ll make sure I’ll drool on it too.”

Just as he was about to go inside, Maru sighed a little before speaking,

“You’re doing plenty well. Honestly, if it was me, I would actually succeed the owner position of SC or just live a comfortable life with the money given to me. I wouldn’t have thought about challenging myself like you did. From what I see, I feel like the place you found yourself is much better than the chairman position that you didn’t even work for.”

Sooil didn’t reply. Maru told him to sleep before entering his room and covering himself with the blanket. Not long after he closed his eyes, he heard his door opening.

“Maru.”

“What?”

“Can I sleep on the floor next to your bed? We should talk a little too.”

He lifted his head up to look at Sooil. He had a grin on his face as he was peeping inside the door. Maru threw a novel he placed by his head. Sooil dodged the book by closing the door before speaking in a laughing voice,

“I’m so glad that you’re my friend.”

Maru shook his head. His drunk habits just didn’t get fixed.

“Just go sleep!”

“Fine, I’ll sleep”

Even after that, Sooil knocked on his door at 10 minute intervals. Maru ripped his hair out and thought that he might as well abandon the Han surname if he let that guy in his house again.

“Han Maru, I’m bored. You asleep?”

This guy was persistent.

### **Chapter 786. Sequence 6**

“Then let’s meet up there, I’m just setting off. Alright, be careful with the equipment.”

Maru hung up and checked the time. It was about the time that Hyungseok would arrive.

“Watch the house well.”

He waved at the shiba-inu that wagged its tail and left the house. He drove his car to Banpo-daero. He found Hyunseok walking around in front of the café they promised to meet at and had him get in the passenger seat.

“I told you I’d treat you to something good.”

“Instead of buying me food, do some work for me for one day instead. You don’t have anything to do on Sunday right? We’re going to be sleeping over.”

“I emptied everything until Tuesday. It’s my first drama shoot in my life, so I should watch out for my condition. Although I’ll be standing still most of the time, who knows? The producer might take a liking to me and keep using me. Anyway, thanks. Thanks to you, I got to show my face on public TV officially.”

“She said you might become a regular appearance. Try hard. Who knows? You might not stop at getting just a line, and will get a whole episode about your character as well.”

“I wouldn’t want things to go that far. I just wish I could talk to the main actors at least once in the drama.”

Stories of catching the director’s eyes while doing a part-time job in dramas and then joining the ranks of stars weren’t that entirely common, but it wasn’t purely something out of fiction either. Acting is said to be the fruit of effort, but talent definitely couldn’t be ignored, and actors who possessed a talent that could lightly surpass other people’s efforts were bound to exist. Hyungseok was a new actor who had less than a year of experience in acting, but from how he got chosen by producer Jayeon, who was known for being picky, he seemed to have potential. His good-looking appearance played a role as well.

“You said it was in Gapyeong, right?”

“Yeah. We’ll unpack near Yongchu Falls and start shooting immediately.”

“But what can I do, when I haven’t even practiced anything?”

“She won’t ask you to do something dynamic when you just received your script yesterday. Since I’m at it, have you read the script?”

"I skimmed through it about three to four times. It wasn't that long, so there was no difficulty doing that. But I don't think there's a role I can play. The main character should be you, and the one getting caught up in the incident should be someone else too."

"People can be used as props."

"So, I'm gonna be used as a corpse?"

"Maybe, as a body double."

"Will I get to put on special makeup? When I went to the drama shoot last time, the one Han Gaeul was in, I watched people putting on special makeup right next to me. It took so long."

"Do you think we can do something like that when we're a low-budget indie movie? When we arrive, everyone will take care of each other's makeup and set up props. Our director isn't someone who gives actors special treatment."

"You said it was a girl, right? How does she look?"

Maru showed him a photo of Sora.

"She looks cute. She looks like she'll act cute as well. She's quite small too."

"Once you meet her, you'll probably take back what you just said. Also, don't hit on her. She already has a man in her mind."

"Hey, what do you take me for? I'm not a cheap man who gives out my number on a whim. There are many girls who approach me when I go to nightclubs even now, you know?"

"Sure, I'm envious."

"Since we're talking about it, do you want to come with me next week? I'll help you so you can have an enjoyable night."

"Maybe later. After I'm around forty-five."

Maru drove to Gapyeong, the place they promised to meet up at. There were many people who came to play in the mountain streams as it was the weekend. He drove past the camping site at the foot of the stream and eventually found the cabin that Sora scouted out beforehand. He parked his car in the gravel-filled parking lot.

"Maru, look at that car."

There was a foreign brand car at the entrance of the cabin. Hyungseok got out of the car and walked over to the foreign car.

"I set up a few objectives when I ran my business, and I never knew I'd get to see one of them here. Hey, someone who's rich enough to drive this should go to a mansion, not a cabin, don't you think? This car is well-known for practically throwing fuel on the floor."

Maru checked the number on the car with smooth curves. It belonged to Sooil.

"So he came here before us."

“Who are you talking about?”

“The owner of this car.”

“You know him? I thought this was an indie movie. The definition of indie movie that I know of doesn’t really fit people who drive cars like this, you know?”

“I don’t know how poor the people shooting indie movies are in your mind, but in indie movies shot by famous artistic directors, not people who are doing it as a hobby like us, there are three to four actors who drive cars like this one.”

“Really? But who’s the owner of this car? Our money lord?”

“Yoo Sooil.”

“Yoo Sooil? Who’s that?”

He left Hyungseok behind to think for himself and went into the cabin. He mentioned the name of the booker to the owner who came out to greet him, and the owner pointed towards the stairs, saying that his room was on the 2nd floor.

“Yoo Sooil! You mean that Yoo Sooil!”

Hyungseok shouted in surprise as he followed him inside. Instead of explaining, Maru opened the door and pointed inside. Sooil, who was reading the script while lying down on the floor, waved at him saying ‘you’re here?’ Hyungseok, who was jumping around while repeatedly saying ‘Yoo Sooil’, laughed as though he was flabbergasted.

“You’re early,” Maru said as he took off his shoes.

Sooil put down his script and sat up.

“I had nothing to do. I thought I’d fall asleep if I dazed out at home, so I came early. Who’s the person next to you?”

“He’s Yoon Hyungseok, and he’ll be helping out for the day. You’re the same age, so you don’t have to bother with formal speech, or you can just treat him stiffly like it’s business. Do whatever you want.”

Maru walked past the living room and looked at the rooms. There were three rooms in total. He determined that the ladies should use one room and the men use the remaining two. If that wasn’t enough, they could just sleep in the living room. He unpacked his luggage in the room that had a window facing the mountain. Hyunseok and Sooil seemed to have introduced themselves to each other as they were just conversing among themselves. It was mostly Hyungseok saying that he enjoyed watching the drama that Sooil was in while he was in the military and him praising Sooil for his fashion. He also asked for tips saying that he was participating in a drama as a minor actor for the first time.

As Sooil had learned social skills from a young age, he immediately grasped Hyungseok’s way of talking and guided the conversation forward. He was the textbook example of sociability. It was probably the kindness and refinement that he learned as the offspring of a super company acting subconsciously.

“You’re early. I thought everyone would come around 10 since I said the meetup was at 9.”

Sora, who pushed the door with her foot to look inside, shouted behind her, 'Ando-oppa, bring the luggage.' She came inside after taking off her trainers and looked around the rooms as though Sooil and Hyungseok didn't even enter her eyes. Ando, who followed her inside, put down the luggage while wiping his sweat with the back of his hand. The camera bag, the laptop bag, the backpack on his bag, and even a pink carrier case. He was practically a porter. Maru told him that he worked hard and took out some cold water from the fridge for him.

"We'll make this the ladies' room."

That was the room that had a view of the stream because the window was facing the entrance of the building. The mosquito net on the window didn't have any holes either, so Maru was desirous of the room as well, but he thought that it'd be taken away from him in the end, so he grabbed the room on the other side.

"Who does the luggage in the other room belong to?"

"It's mine. I thought you'd use that room, so I gave up on it early."

"As expected of Maru-seonbae. You're quite considerate when it comes to things like that. Oh, and who's that next to you?"

Hyungseok, who was just referred to as 'that', introduced himself as Yoon Hyunseok with an embarrassed smile.

"So you're Mr. Hyungseok. You're a friend of Maru-seonbae, right?"

"Yes, I am."

"Please work hard today. We were lacking manpower, so we're glad to have you here. How's your acting?"

"It's decent?"

"Then that's fine. You look sturdy too. You pass! I'm Kang Sora. I'm two years younger than you, so you don't have to use formal speech or anything."

"Alright, I'll do that."

"Looks like Maru-seonbae brought a good-looking friend. With Sooil-oppa here as well, it looks like we won't be lacking anything in the visual part. Unfortunately, our main character, Mr. Han Maru, isn't up to par."

"Sorry for looking subpar."

Maru leaned against the wall and sat down. As he had expected, Sora had gained control over all the men in this cabin like the strong girl she was. Daemyung and Jiyeon, who came a little later, ended up preparing food for everyone under her command as well.

"We won't be able to eat anything after this until the shoot ends, so eat a lot. We have to digest all the scenes while the sun is still up if we want to go home in time tomorrow, so bear that in mind as well. Mr. protagonist, you've learned the script, right?"

“Why of course. I don’t dare do things half-assedly when it’s your orders.”

“Good. How about you, Sooil-oppa?”

“Perfect.”

“I like confidence like that. Well, then we’ll be going to the mountain behind the cabin after we eat. We’ll first check if anything has changed since last week when we came here to scout this place out and then set up the camera and the microphone before starting. You have spare clothes right? We’re going to have to get mud and blood on you.”

Maru raised his half-scooped spoon to Sora’s eye level and spoke,

“I thought we were going to do it after we ate.”

“Yes, please eat. But Sooil-oppa, can you say some lines? I’ll have to see what you’re like.”

It seemed she didn’t have any intentions of letting everyone eat in peace. They had to answer her questions throughout the meal.

The busy mealtime finished.

“Where are Bangjoo and Aram?” Maru asked as he washed the dishes.

Sora, who had her eyes fixed on the laptop screen, reached out to her phone without looking and replied,

“They said they’ll be here soon. We’re going to start the shoot when they arrive. We can’t afford to waste time after all. Ando-oppa, have a look at this.”

Maru wiped his hands on his pants and left through the door with the script in hand. He read the script while looking around the mountain, which was going to be the stage. Sora should have scouted places that suit each scene already, but there was nothing wrong with having a look to find more candidates. He walked up the path that led up the mountain from the cabin before turning around. The thick trees blocked off the cabin and the stream below. This was nature untainted by human hands. Maru checked the scene number with the pen he was holding in his mouth before taking a photo. He planned to show it to Sora later and ask for her opinion.

-Maru-seonbae, where are you? We’re going to go now.

“I’ll return.”

It seemed Aram and Bangjoo had arrived. Maru took a deep breath. The moist air wetted the tip of his nose. The trees rose tall and blocked off the sun, and there were leaves rotting on the floor. This place had a stench of mud and moist rotten leaves.

“It’s the perfect place to bury someone.”

Maru looked at the cover of the script before walking back toward the cabin.

## **Chapter 787. Sequence 6**

“Does the term ‘accidental murder’ even make sense?”

Those were Daemyung's words from four months ago. He, who was in deep thought in the café, started jotting things down in his notebook that he always carried with him, and the next time they met, he said that he had the outline down.

"The plot is simple. A man who accidentally commits murder puts the body in a bag and climbs a mountain. The one inside the bag is his long-time friend, but he ended up killing him due to an emotional spike. The protagonist goes up the mountain and digs the ground to bury him. At that moment, the friend inside the bag suddenly spoke: Help me. When the main character looks inside the bag, he finds out that the friend he thought was dead is still breathing. He thinks that bringing him to the hospital will save him. As the main character apologizes and is about to take his friend out, it suddenly dawns on him: ah, my life is over if I take him to the hospital like this because I'd get arrested for attempted murder."

Then, Daemyung finished his script last week.

"Like what you said, Maru-seonbae, this spot looks good. Nice job finding it."

Sora put her hands on her waist and looked around. Maru put down the script and pointed out the spots he had thought of beforehand.

"Do you think this place is okay?"

"I like how gloomy it looks. There's sunlight, but it's still somewhat dark."

"Then let's start off things here."

"Yeah, we should. Sooil-oppa, let's get makeup done on you!"

While Jiyeon put makeup on Sooil, Maru looked around the clearing with Ando. As this clearing was quite far off from the main hiking route, there were lots of dried leaves. When he cleared some out with his hand, he saw tree roots tangled around above the ground.

"I'm supposed to be looking for a place to bury someone, so this place is no good, eh?"

"I don't think it matters since you're supposed to be on your way up. If I zoom in on the fallen leaves here, I think it'll give a gloomy feeling overall which will fit the atmosphere. Let's try shooting it."

Maru walked over to the tree that Ando pointed at. Sunlight seeped through the trees and fell on his head.

"Isn't it too bright here?"

"We shouldn't be concerned about this much natural lighting. Try sitting down on the protruded root over there."

Maru got down on one knee where Ando pointed at. He also put the sleeping bag next to him.

"How is it?"

"I think shooting upwards from below should be better than looking down from above. Wait a sec."



Ando changed positions. After staring into that camera on the tripod for a long time, he detached the camera from the tripod and lowered himself with the camera in his hands. After moving left and right for a little, he spoke,

“Maru, stay still. Director Kang, come over here for a sec.”

Sora, who was with Sooil, ran over.

“What is it?”

“I want you to have a look at the angle and see if it fits the storyboard you are thinking of.”

“Let me have a look.”

Ando moved his arm to the side so that she could see the display of the camera.

“If you do that, I won’t be able to see properly. Stay still, I just need to get closer to you.”

Hearing the word ‘closer’, Ando flinched. When Sora moved right one step, Ando would move exactly in the same direction by one step. Maru dusted off the leaves that got on his knees and spoke,

“Stop your public display of affection and tell me how it is. Maybe it’s because I’m old, but I can feel the chills in my knees if I kneel in a cold place like this for a long time.”

“How could your knees start hurting so early?”

“Why don’t you try reaching my age first? You’re bound to feel the chills. Rather than that, how does it look? Do you think it’ll be good to shoot from there?”

“Wait a sec. Maru-seonbae, can you get into the mood with the tree as the background? You remember the scene where you hear a sound while trying to dig the ground, right?”

Maru nodded and grabbed the sleeping bag. After zipping it up, he kneeled in front of the tree that Sora pointed at.

“Jeongsoo, you alive? You’re still alive?”

He hurriedly unzipped the sleeping bag and looked inside. As this was not a shoot and just a camera test, he didn’t bring out the fullest extent of his emotions.

“Seonbae, that’s enough. We’ll do scene 3-2 right here. Maru-seonbae, you should try coming up with a movement line.”

Aram, who was right next to Sora, busily jotted things down. Maru looked at the clipboard that Aram was holding. She was noting down the surrounding scenery as well as Sora’s words in detail.

“You’re good.”

“I should be, if I don’t want to get an earful from the picky junior. Rather than that, it’s been ages since I last watched you act from up close. How should I put this... you’re pretty different from when you are on stage.”

“Don’t put me on a pedestal when I didn’t even do anything. But aren’t you busy with running the dojo on weekends? I’m grateful that you’re here, but I’m worried that I might have brought someone busy.”

“I asked another teacher to take care of the transport, so it doesn’t matter. These days, dojos are more for looking after children rather than actually training them, so it’s busier on weekdays.”

“That’s good then. Sora should be grateful too.”

“I think she thinks that using me is something natural, you know?”

Sora, who had climbed down quite a bit, shouted at them to come. Maru went down with Aram and stood next to Sora.

“Seonbae, can you try going up this path while dragging the sleeping bag? Ando-oppa, try shooting Maru-seonbae’s back figure from up there and then come down.”

He did as she said and climbed the hill. As this place was quite far off from the main hiking path, it wasn’t easy to climb the mountain while stepping backwards. When he climbed about five to six steps while avoiding the protruding rocks and roots, Maru ended up stumbling over. He slipped on a wet leaf.

“Seonbae, you okay?”

“My butt hurts a little, but otherwise, I’m okay. But I don’t think I can do this with an empty sleeping bag. I’m no expert in doing mimes, so it will definitely look awkward if I pretend that something light is heavy. The center of gravity is off too.”

“I also thought that while I watched you climbing up backwards. You are supposed to be dragging up a corpse, but your center of gravity was too forward, so it made the sleeping bag look light. And like you said, putting in plastic wouldn’t bring out the feel either.”

“Then someone just has to go inside. It’s simple, isn’t it?” Aram said while scripting.

Maru scratched his eyebrow and laughed. That was something that even Sora, who rarely held back her words, refrained from mentioning. Sora must have thought of the same thing as well but didn’t mention it because she was concerned about the safety of the person who would be going inside.

“Aram-unni, you see the terrain here, right? There are rocks, mud and roots. Even if you’re inside a sleeping bag, you might get seriously hurt if you’re dragged here. Also, you saw how Maru-seonbae almost fell over right? It’s quite steep here, so if he ends up letting go of the sleeping bag or something, it’ll probably roll down all the way here.”

“So that’s why you need someone who can flexibly protect their own body in a situation where movement is restricted. I can do it myself, but I think he’ll do better than me.”

Sora followed Aram’s finger. Maru did the same. They saw Bangjoo, who was guarding the lighting and portable generator that they rented.

“So Bangjoo-oppa was here. I thought of him as just a porter for the day, so I almost forgot. Bangjoo-oppa! Come here for a sec!”

Bangjoo pointed at his own face with his finger. When Sora gestured to him to come, he said ‘wait a sec’ in a deep voice and came over.

“Bangjoo-oppa, do you learn about rolling on the ground when you do stunts? I mean like rolling on the ground without getting hurt.”

“Safety precautions are lessons that they always teach you from the beginning. Why do you ask?”

Sora smiled and pointed at the sleeping bag. Bangjoo looked alternately between the sleeping bag and Sora before looking at Maru.

“Seonbae-nim, can you explain this to me?”

“To put it simply, you’re supposed to be going inside the bag. The one who came up with the idea is Aram, who’s right there.”

After listening to the explanation, Bangjoo ran over to the cabin after telling them to wait. It was quite slippery due to the wet leaves on the ground, but he stably climbed down the mountain without issue. When he returned, Bangjoo was holding various joint protection equipment as well as a set of spare clothes.

“I brought these just in case, and I guess it turned out to be a good thing. Let’s try this.”

Bangjoo put on the protective gear and snuggled inside the sleeping bag in no time. Maru crouched down in front of Bangjoo, who just had his head poking out.

“I’m not saying that you will roll down; I’m just telling you that you should be prepared for the worst case scenario. But are you really okay with this? It looks like it’ll hurt quite a bit if I drag you. I removed the rocks, but the ground here isn’t exactly flat.”

“Don’t you worry, seonbae-nim. I was completely fine when I got hit by lumber in the last film because it was cut up the wrong way. If I was going to get hurt because of a few rocks, I would have been hospitalized a long time ago. I was fine in the military when someone murder-tackled me, so don’t worry.”

Bangjoo got ready, telling him to try dragging him.

“I’ll try dragging slowly, so tell me as soon as you feel something is wrong.”

“Don’t worry.”

Maru grabbed the sleeping bag and dragged it backwards with all his might. When he was dragging an empty sleeping bag, he kept misstepping because his center of gravity wasn’t right, but now that he was dragging a heavy one, his posture didn’t break. His thigh muscles became taut, and he started sweating. Now that he actually felt the weight that he used to replace with a mime, through his hands, it became much easier to focus on his act instead. Since he was at it, he decided to get into the mood.

There was no better method than breathing that allowed him to express the sense of guilt of having committed murder as well as the anxiety that he might get found out. He intentionally took a deep breath. The breath that piled up in his body and a new breath crossed each other and created a stifling breathing sound. He watched out for his backward step and decided to fall down butt first if he felt like

he was going to fall down. If he landed on his butt while holding the sleeping bag, Bangjoo who was inside the bag would be a lot safer, and it could also show the anxiety that the main character was feeling. After dragging the sleeping bag to where Ando was, he let go. The whole thing didn't even take a minute, but the back of his neck was drenched with sweat.

"You okay in there?"

"It doesn't hurt at all. But are you okay, seonbae-nim? I'm quite heavy."

"My words exactly. You need to lose some weight."

Maru wiped his sweat with the towel that Jiyeon handed him. Sora, who climbed up from below, had a look at the video that Ando shot and smiled. It seemed that she took a liking to the footage.

"Don't you think I should be the one to go inside the bag?" Sooil said from the side.

Having finished makeup, his face had turned pale.

"Who's going to take responsibility if you get hurt?"

"I won't get that hurt."

"The one inside the sleeping bag is someone who has learned to do that specifically, while you aren't."

"I just feel sorry."

"If you do, then try getting him in something later. He's someone who's into action acting."

"Really?"

"His acting skills shouldn't be bad either. He has one of the greatest teachers by his side."

"One of the greatest teachers?"

"Oh, I guess you didn't hear what Sora said while Bangjoo introduced himself. He's Joohyun-noonim's little brother."

"Ahn Bangjoo, Ahn Joohyun? You mean senior Joohyun?"

"Yes."

"I remember. I heard about him from her a while ago. She said she has a brother who's getting into acting. So that's him."

"He's an earnest guy. Though, he's quite frustrating since he never uses his sister's name and wants his skills to do the talking even though using her name could easily land him in a minor role or something."

"You say that he's frustrating, but most of the time, people would say that he's upright. I should go talk to him."

Sooil approached Bangjoo. Maru grabbed the script he placed on top of his bag and sat on a root. The people here were all either working or were in college. They didn't even have time to rehearse, and they had to do everything in just one day, so he was quite worried, but now that he actually was here, he felt like he was worried for nothing. While clumsy, everyone was doing well in their respective roles. What

he had to do as an actor was to wrap things up cleanly so that they didn't have to prolong their efforts in vain.

He had never committed murder, so he couldn't perfectly understand what a murderer would feel, but he knew very well the meaning of life as well as the complex emotions of vanity that comes from the losing of it. Although he couldn't figure out the psychology of a murderer, he should be able to represent the feelings of the main character, who would get socially murdered upon being found out, if he calculated backwards from the moment of death.

As the important part of this act was the dramatic expression of the moment accidental murder becomes intentional murder, he had to analyze the psychology of the main character and dissolve himself into him. After accepting the air of the scene with a deep breath, he started reading down the script in a calm manner.

"Maru-seonbae! Let's get your clothes and makeup done. We should start."

"Alright."

He put down the script and tensed his stomach before loosening it again. It was time to change from Han Maru into a character who felt chaotic about everything.

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Maru relaxed his shoulders and let go of things one by one. First, the lines he was uttering, then the movement lines he pictured inside his mind several times, and then finally, the order of progression that he had planned out in detail. He also jerked his body as though to shake off some dust. Around the time the words were lingering in his mouth and the lingering motions at his fingertips and toe tips were shaken off, he slowly raised his eyelids. Leaves rotting in the shade; a plastic bag that flew past in the wind; rocks that would catch the feet of mountain climbers; deep pits; and finally the trees that surrounded the area – the visual information that he had forgotten about entered his eyes all at once. He forgot about his home, the path he took here, as well as the mountain cabin, and just took all that he saw as they were. He took a deep breath. The stench of wet leaves, the freshness of grass, as well as the unique scent of the mountains that refreshed his mind filled his head. He took slow breaths so that every inch of his body was filled with the air of the scene.

"Seonbae, are you ready?"

"Wait a sec."

Maru climbed up and down the hill with quick steps. He ran up and walked down. When he ran back and forth the distance of around 30 meters about 20 times, his heart started pumping blood fast. He showed himself to Jiyeon and asked if he was sweating too much.

"I'll wipe just a little."

After wiping the sweat around his forehead and his eyes, he returned to position.

"I'm ready now."

"How about you, Bangjoo-oppa?"

“I’m ready. You can zip me up now.”

Maru zipped the sleeping bag and told him to speak immediately if he felt pain. Bangjoo laughed, saying that he was going to be okay.

“Then I’ll start now.”

Aram stood in front of the camera with the slate. Maru waited for the signal while holding onto the sleeping bag. The slate was clapped, and Aram fell back.

“Action!”

Silence fell along with those words. Maru took a deep breath and took a large step backwards. He wasn’t dragging luggage; he was dragging up a corpse. The corpse was an ‘item’ that had a close relationship to the character’s life. It was akin to his life, and he could not afford to let go of it. Simultaneously, the item symbolized his cruelty and violence. It was an item that he could not embrace, and at the same time, one that he couldn’t just let go of. Even as he dragged the sleeping bag, Maru flinched and ran away as soon as he felt like the sleeping bag was too close to him, just as he would if he was chased by bees. By the time the rehearsed part ended, Maru suddenly felt his ankles sink. He didn’t slip on a wet leaf like he did during the rehearsal, but the whole ground was slightly indented. In this situation, where he was about to fall over, he put one hand on the ground and prevented the sleeping bag from falling with the other. The sleeping bag, which was dragged up in a straight line, suddenly turned diagonal. It was obviously an accident, but Sora did not shout cut. That was what Maru wanted. Although this wasn’t according to the storyboard, it was something within tolerance.

His wrist started aching. Maru did not hide his pain. Although he didn’t express it too much on his face, he let the audience know that he was hurt by rotating his wrist and looking at the injury. The things that happened between cuts were dramatic truths, so there was a need to be truthful in his reaction. If that method didn’t suit the film, then the director would just pick up the scalpel known as editing.

He dragged the sleeping bag up to the designated position. Although this was the part where his act was supposed to end, Sora’s mouth did not open. It was the director’s signal that changed an actor into a character in a film. Returning without orders from the director was something that must not happen. He grabbed the sleeping bag in one hand and kneeled down. He panted and looked at the sleeping bag placed in front of his knees. Inside it was a corpse; the corpse of his friend that he killed himself. Feeling a chill run down his back, he immediately lifted his head and looked around. The faces of his friends entered his eyes, but the filter of acting did not accept them as information. What the character that killed his close friend was looking for were the eyes of a third person. Mountain climbers, kids who liked climbing mountains, or locals who came to get vegetables. He prayed that coincidence doesn’t become the inevitable and prayed that he would get down the mountain safely despite the fact that he was a murderer who killed his friend as he looked for eyes again and again. He somehow knew the number of droplets of sweat on his forehead. He was so nervous that he felt like this entire area was a part of his body. He felt as though the thumping of the heart was rising from below the round. He felt like gloomy sounds were coming from around the area – at one moment, Maru realized that these feelings weren’t imaginary things that he created himself for the act; they were indeed real sounds. There was an ego that made his presence known within him. The masked man, his other self. The dramatic environment that his other self created played a big role in turning the imaginary into the truth. He didn’t have to

pretend that he was listening to something he couldn't hear; he was actually hearing something that he could indeed hear. The silent partner helped him out that way before erasing his presence again.

He thanked the one that would listen but not reply and continued his act. He stood up in a hurry and started dragging the sleeping bag again. Although he was already past the designated location, he just kept going forward since Sora did not give him the stop signal. Just as he clenched his teeth and started climbing again, he heard a cut sound from below.

"That's enough, seonbae."

Maru let go of the sleeping bag and unzipped it. Bangjoo sat up with a smile. It seemed that he wasn't hurt.

"Sorry for falling down mid way. I checked several times, but it looks like I missed a spot," he said to Sora.

She shook her head, saying that his apology wasn't necessary.

"Are you kidding me, seonbae? If you apologize after doing so well, then it makes me look like a fool for giving the okay sign. But still, I thought that falling over mid way would look too cliché and thought about taking it out, but looking at how you did it, I was clearly wrong. Did you know that a vein popped up on your forehead when you stood up after falling down again? I was so nervous thinking that it might actually burst."

"Looks like I strained myself too much. I do feel a little dizzy."

"I was really going to shout cut, but I held back after seeing you continue your act. No, that's not it. I just couldn't tell where you were going with all this because you were completely different from the rehearsal. Did you practice that part beforehand? You really looked like you were fleeing after killing someone."

"In my head, I killed dozens of times. I can't kill someone for real."

"You just gave me the chills. Also, I'm going to use this cut as it is. I don't think it'll be respectful of me to cut parts out."

"Wouldn't that become too long then?"

"You should have a look at the footage later. The sense of tension is unreal. It was a good thing that I rented a wireless microphone. Your breathing sounds were captured with so much detail."

"Do you think it made up for the 20,000 won rental fee per day?"

"More than enough. We'll clean your sweat a little and continue right away. If we finish our morning quota quickly, we can shoot more."

"Don't squeeze me out too much," Maru said as he shook his wrists.

\* \* \*

"Are you alive? Jeongsoo, you bastard, you still alive?"

Sooil looked at Maru, who looked touched as he looked at him. When he witnessed the moment the cruelty in his eyes turned into warmth, he felt like laughing in vain. Maru's act was frighteningly candid. He couldn't help but do his best in front of his candid act. He realized that they would be compared to each other the moment he put some leeway. He didn't want their relationship to be the genuine versus the fake. They were actors before they were friends. Losing out in terms of acting was not something he wanted.

"Jinho."

"Yes, Jeongsoo. It's me, Jinho. Are you okay? Are you really okay?"

"Jinho."

Sooil burned up in rage as he looked at the expression of the person that grabbed his face. The person that drove him to death was shamelessly climbing up a mountain, and not only that, he was climbing with a corpse in a sleeping bag. This drove him nuts. Frustration and rage as rough as the terrain here started sprouting up. How could he do this when they've been friends for a decade? His limp body started heating up. His stiff neck became taut, and all of his muscles got ready to sprout up. He even momentarily forgot that he was about to die. The 'son of a bitch' that rushed out of his throat was not in the script, but he couldn't hold back from uttering those words.

Maru's face, which looked apologetic as he clutched Sooil's face, suddenly started stiffening up like a car that was braking suddenly. The retrospective look on his face as he regretted the mistake he committed against his close friend started disappearing along with his paling face. His eyes were clearly hesitating; hesitating on whether to save his friend's life or save his own. The change from human affection to obsession towards life made Sooil's stomach hurt.

Sooil felt death looming over him as he looked at the eyes that were becoming empty. He forgot that they were acting and accepted the surging wave of emotions without any filters.

"Don't do it, Jinho. Don't do it."

The saliva in his mouth started bubbling. As the temperature of his words screaming 'don't do it' started rising, the rage conversely turned cold. The moment he realized that the friend in front of him was turning from the person who 'almost' killed him into the person who 'was definitely going to' kill him, he started shaking. At the same time, he felt joyous. Becoming emotionally synchronized to a partnering actor was something incredibly exciting for actors. With the exception of monodramas, all acting was the art of 'union'. Every time his own acting combined with the other person's acting blurred the boundary between fiction and reality, Sooil thought that it was a good thing that he became an actor.

Maru was squeezing himself. His act was just that desperate. In order to pay back that acting in kind, there was a need for him to condense his emotions so that they didn't start leaking. The presence of the onlookers became faint and eventually, only he and Maru were on this mountain. As death became clearer, the fear became more and more concrete. His breath only tickled the ceiling of his mouth and did not get pushed out.

"Please."

"Jeongsoo."



“Jinho, I won’t say anything. You know, don’t you? I will stay quiet no matter what happens. The hospital. Just bring me to the hospital. I’m really going to die, Jinho.”

“Sorry, Jeongsoo, I don’t want to get caught for attempted murder.”

“Son of a bitch, I’m not dead yet. I will never report you to the authorities.”

“How am I supposed to believe that?”

“We’re friends.”

“Sorry, Jeongsoo. I feel so complex now. Thinking is too hard for me.”

“Kim Jinho, you fucking bastard!”

Maru standing with a rock in his two hands, entered Sooil’s eyes. The stone fell on his head. Sooil shut his eyes. He felt like death overwhelmed him in an instant.

“Cut!”

His body, which had scrunched up, with even his fists curled up, turned loose in an instant. Sooil opened his eyes slowly. He saw Maru’s smiling face.

“Hey, someone might think that I’m really about to kill you.”

“You were planning to, until about half way through, weren’t you?”

“How quick-witted.”

Maru unzipped the sleeping bag for him. Sooil shivered even though it was the middle of summer.

“I think I need payment for this. This is way too hard.”

“You can consult our director for that. Here, grab my hand.”

He grabbed the hand that was offered to him and stood up.

## **Chapter 789. Sequence 6**

“Drive very slowly when you come in.”

Maru stepped on the pedal slowly. He drove the car right up to where Ando was and turned the wheel to the right. As he listened to the sound of gravel being ground up, he stepped on the brakes and switched the gear to neutral.

“Is it okay now?”

He poked his head out the window. Sora was watching the footage that Ando just shot. From the way she was tapping on her chin with her index finger, she seemed dissatisfied. Thinking that he had to do it again, he rested his head on the headrest and got ready to back out. This was the third time or something. She, who gave the okay sign without a problem when he was acting, did not say a single word during the driving scene as though her mouth was locked up with two padlocks. Seonbae, is that all you can do? - her eyes requesting a re-shoot looked scary.

Putting an arm over the window, Sora spoke,

“We’ll go with this one.”

“It’s done now?”

“Yes. I felt this while we shot, but you don’t suit cars. You looked so cool when you were acting in the middle of the street, but you strangely look like a middle-aged man when I put you in a car. You look awkward even if you try to look cool.”

“Spare me since it’s not an important scene.”

“That was the plan. I’m going to use this as a jump cut, so if it doesn’t feel right, I can just cut off the beginning and end. We’ll go back to our lodging for now. Sooil-oppa must have fixed his make-up, so let’s bring him out.”

When they went back, he saw Sooil talking with Daemyung. Having wiped off the pale corpse-like makeup, he had returned to his celebrity self.

“Maru, come here for a sec.”

Daemyung waved at him.

“The lines here. I think we should change them a little.”

“Wait a sec.”

He opened his script and picked up a pen. This was the scene where he talked to Sooil, his friend in the film, over a drink. A trivial misunderstanding combined with the alcohol in their systems leads to a big fight and ultimately leads to murder. The main character ended up having to carry a sleeping bag.

“It’s this part. The part when you two talk after having a drink.”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Sooil said he wants to ad-lib it. I heard what he said and indeed I think that would sound more natural.”

“Ad-lib it?”

Sooil pointed to a part of the script.

“I was wondering if we could try it according to the script first and then try ad-libbing. When else would we be able to improvise like this? I think it should be fine since this part through this part doesn’t have any relation to the general plot of the story.”

“If the writer of the script is fine with it, then sure. Director Kang, we have something to talk to you about.”

Maru called out to Sora. When he pointed out to her the range of the script that they were going to improvise, she said that it sounded fun and even ordered them to do it properly if they were going to.

“This part is a relaxed part, so you can play with it however you want. We should just shoot for about 30 minutes and extract about 30 seconds.”

After saying those words, Sora went over to Jiyoong, who was on her knees. It seemed she was going to check up on the clothes.

“We’re going to just do it without even deciding on a topic?” he said to Sooil.

It wasn’t a one-liner ad-lib. They were going to ad-lib the whole scene. If they started recklessly, they might look like two mutes.

“Don’t you think we should just talk about what we usually talk about? We can talk about the dog at your house or talk about girls. I think bringing up the money problem mentioned in the script slightly isn’t a bad idea either.”

“To do that, though, we need some booze.”

“Should we do it over a drink?”

“Sounds good.”

Sooil’s eyes headed to the fridge. There was a bunch of soju and beer that they bought for the afterparty. He took out a bottle of soju from the fridge. Sora looked towards them, asking what they were up to.

“We are taking props necessary for acting.”

“If you want empty bottles, we got them over there.”

“Empty ones are no good.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to do it while drinking?”

“Don’t you think it’ll look better that way?”

“How are you going to act when you’re drunk?”

“He and I aren’t going to get drunk with just one bottle. We’re just setting up the mood. It’ll be even better if our cheeks get flushed red or something.”

“You’re not trying to have a drinking party with that as an excuse, are you?”

“I’m not that much of an alcoholic.”

While they set up the drinking table in the room, Maru heard that the shoot was ready outside. Bangjoo, Aram, and Jiyoong were sitting on benches outside the mountain cabin. There was a baeksuk that had an impressively big chicken, as well as some sliced watermelon pieces. The owner of the cabin, who was bringing out a lot of food on some food tray, spoke to Sora,

“Tell me if you need anything else. I’ll try to get them for you.”

“We’re grateful to you already. But we aren’t bothering you, are we?”

“It’s fine. It’s not like I have any reservations today. It was my dream to become a film person when I was young, so I couldn’t hold back from helping you young ones out. If you need any empty rooms on the first floor, just tell me. I’ll open them for you.”

“You’re the best, owner. After we shoot the film, we’ll stamp a large logo of the mountain cabin here since you helped us so much.”

The owner of the cabin, who had his white hair parted 2:8, said that there was no need but still pointed at the sign of the mountain cabin. He looked like he wanted that sign to be in the film. Seeing the owner’s half-serious, half-joking reaction, Maru smiled.

“Then do your best.”

The owner put down the food before going back to the managerial office with his hands locked behind his back.

“Everyone, I was originally going to do this more leisurely, but I don’t think we can. We need to shoot as much as possible and then do an additional shoot. For now, the four of you on the bench can talk amongst yourselves. I told you the setup, right? You are two couples who coincidentally met while you were traveling.”

Daemyung, who was checking the script next to Sora, sat down on the bench as well.

“So who and who are couples?” Aram asked as she raised her hand.

“Of course, it’s the Daemyung-Jiyoon couple and the Aram-Bangjoo couple. Those two are a real couple, so they can probably do fine. As for you two, just bring out the long friendship between you.”

“Me and her?”

Bangjoo said that he’d rather enter a sleeping bag and get thrown into the water. Seeing him freak out, Aram chuckled before speaking in a gentle tone,

“Don’t say that, my boyfriend~.”

“You picking up a fight?”

“Don’t say that to your girlfriend~.”

“Director, no, Sora. I don’t think I can do this.”

Bangjoo was stubborn, but Sora just told him to do it.

“Bangjoo, an actor can’t reject a role out of personal feelings,” Maru said a word to him as well.

Bangjoo nodded with an expression that looked like he had swallowed a piece of hard persimmon. As those two had a friendship beyond the opposite sex, it was quite normal to see Bangjoo freak out when he saw Aram acting cute. Maru patted Bangjoo's shoulders and wished him luck.

“Seonbae, that goes for me too. Right?”

“Of course. I wish you luck.”

Sora said that they should start the rehearsal and gathered everyone’s attention with a clap.

“Hyungseok-oppa. You go over to the bench while holding this and catch a glimpse of the two people getting off the car here. The camera will shoot over your shoulder.”

“I should just do it naturally, right?”

“Yes. There’s nothing difficult, so just do it naturally. You told me you learned acting, so I’ll trust you for now.”

Maru walked to the car with Sooil, who came down from the 2nd floor. He heard Sora’s voice from where the bench was. Her voice was like a sharp needle. Even though they were so far apart, he could hear her voice clearly.

“I feel like Sora is more suited to be on a construction site,” Sooil said as he opened the door to the passenger seat.

“Try saying that in front of her. I’m sure you will get to have a long talk with her.”

Maru got in the driver’s seat and waited for the director’s signal.

\* \* \*

Hyungseok rubbed his hands together before picking up the tray. Although the temperature was reaching 30 degrees celsius, his hands strangely felt cold. His back and his butt were drenched with sweat, so he couldn’t believe what he was feeling.

“You ready? We need to shoot before the sun sets. Well then, standby! 6 dash one dash 2.”

Sora clapped the slate herself and shouted action. Hyungseok tried his best not to be conscious of the camera behind him. He took a step with the tray in his hands. He had to show the natural-looking steps of a part-timer at the mountain cabin giving food to the four people on the bench. He counted his steps as he stepped on the gravel. He stopped right next to the gravel he marked beforehand during the rehearsal and looked at the car that was parked. Maru and Sooil were opening the door and getting off.

“Cut.”

He didn’t know how to react to the cut sound, so he stayed still. He did the same when he was doing a part-time job as a background actor. Stay still no matter what the director says – such were the leader’s orders.

“Hyungseok-oppa.”

“Yeah?”

He was startled when a hand suddenly entered his view over his shoulder and turned around to her. Sora was looking at him with a corner of her lips down. It was a stereotypical expression of dissatisfaction.

“Was it strange?”

“It wasn’t that strange, but it’s way too precise that it’s vexing. You know that feeling right? Where you try to show off too much while trying to make it not look like acting, and it makes it look more like acting. Just relax. You’ve forcefully decreased your stepping distance since you tried to match what I told you, so you look like you’re ill or something. Try walking with confidence, and just stop right here, next

to this stone so that we can catch you on camera. You have to be careful with walking anyway since you have food in your hands. Try bringing that out more.”

Sora even used examples to explain. He instantly understood what he had been doing wrong. The way she walked back after saying what she needed made her look like the assistant director he had seen while he was working. It was clear that she wasn't the director because of picking lots.

“Also, you people on the bench! I can tell that you look clumsy! Watch yourselves. Try thinking about what you do when we talk amongst ourselves. Especially Aram-uni and Daemyung-oppa! You're too eye-catching since you're bringing your habits from doing plays, so tone it down a little.”

She finished her directions without hesitation and picked up the slate again. Hyungseok also returned to his starting position with the tray in hand. He exercised his legs a little and recalled the advice he was just given while also remembering his acting instructor's words: fools can never become actors.

He blew the camera out of his consciousness and focused on the four guests in front of him. The movement line was important, but for now, getting into the scene was an even more urgent matter. He had to carry the food carefully before it cooled down.

“Action!”

The gravel, which got on his nerves more than the food on the tray, was pushed out of his eyes. He fixed his eyes on the food before lifting his head to look at the bench. There was no time to think about the car that had just parked. When he looked down after taking a few steps, he saw a faint outline of his cheeks as well as the gravel. It was too late to stop, so he took another step. He did it as naturally as possible.

He looked at the two people getting out of the car before starting to walk again. Until this part, it was just according to the rehearsal. Even he thought that he did pretty decently. Although all he did was walk with a tray, the change in the distribution of his consciousness made his movements a lot smoother, and it showed in his acting as well. The camera should have captured him as just an 'ordinary part-timer' as well.

Just as he was waiting for the cut sound with a satisfied smile, he heard a not-so-welcome sound.

“What the heck, why is a helicopter here?”

Chak-a-chak-a-chak-a – a helicopter was flying towards the mountain stream. It seemed to be a helicopter from a TV station that had come out to shoot people enjoying themselves in the mountain streams. Hyungseok put down the tray and went over to Sora.

“Wasn't it good just now?”

“Yes, it was, but.”

“But?”

“I think we need to do that again because we picked up unnecessary noise. I'll have to ask you to do it again.”

Hyungseok frowned and glared at the helicopter passing by. That was a really good act just now too.

“We’ll do that once more!” Sora shouted.

### **Chapter 790. Sequence 6**

“Shoots aren’t easy alright,” Jiyoong said as she fixed Maru’s makeup.

As the schedule was tight, they couldn’t take any breaks. Once they finished one scene, they had to pack up their equipment in a hurry and move to the next place and check on the makeup and clothing before shooting again. If they shot according to the storyline, they would be less prone to changes of clothing or makeup, but as they had to finish everything within two short days, they kept skipping back and forth between scenes. As a result, they ended up switching back and forth between different clothes as well. Sora kept staring at the sky as the sun started setting while kicking her foot back and forth, and the nervousness in her kicking made Jiyoong’s hand move busily as well.

“Dramas are incredible. They shoot an hour-long episode in just one week. They don’t do it in just one location either.”

After checking his face in the mirror, Maru said that it was a bit too thick on his lips and asked her for some tissue.

“I’ll do it. I have to wipe just a little, right?”

She wiped it with some cotton pad and touched up his lips. The color spread out evenly. Although the makeup was thin to the point that the camera would barely pick it up, Maru was picky about this.

“Thanks.”

Maru stood up and Sooil sat down next.

“Sorry about what happened in the morning. I was too clumsy.”

As she didn’t learn special makeup techniques, it took quite a long time for her to put the makeup to make him look like a ‘dying person’ on Sooil. Sooil told her to take it slowly, saying that he was okay, but as Jiyoong ended up making everyone else wait, Jiyoong was quite nervous when she did her work.

“I said you don’t have to worry about it. If you guys were trying to do things in detail, you should have called professionals. Sora should have considered preparation time as well, so don’t get nervous and focus on the makeup. Honestly speaking, I thought you were massaging my face with a machine in the morning. Your hands were so shaky.”

“Am I like that right now?”

“No, you’re okay.”

Jiyoong sighed softly and picked up the makeup base. She slightly applied it on Sooil’s nose and chin and then spread it out evenly before finishing the tone with foundation. She thought this in the morning: Sooil’s skin didn’t feel like it belonged to a man. When she put makeup on Maru, she had to put in quite a bit of effort in order to cover up the wrinkles around his nose and forehead, as well as his pores and the freckles on his chin, but for Sooil, she just had to tone his skin down a little to make his contours a little more distinct. His skin was supple and soft. He probably went through a lot of management, but his innate skin was just that good as well. She even slightly felt a little jealous.

“Is something wrong?”

“N-no, I was just thinking that you have good skin.”

“I had some skin trouble before, but it became better after I switched out my makeup and cleansing foam. These days, men have to go through management. The resolution of TVs has gotten so good that not managing your skin will show up on TV.”

“It definitely does feel like that.”

She wanted to ask what the products he used on a regular basis were, but she swallowed it in, thinking that things might become awry. While Sooil acted like a gentleman, he also gave off a feeling that there was a thin membrane around him. He was someone who she could easily communicate with but hard to approach.

“Done.”

“Thanks for the job.”

Jiyoon put the cosmetics inside the plastic bag. As she was told that they were going outside again once the shoot inside the room was done, she had to prepare beforehand.

“Turn the lights on and bring the reflector here. There’s too much shadow on the actors’ faces.”

The preparations for the shoot were underway inside the room. Maru and Sooil, who had finished their makeup, were getting into their positions in the room. The position of the reflector changed according to Ando’s gesture. Jiyoon watched the whole preparation occur from the side. She thought that one camera was the only electronic device they needed, but it turned out that they needed more than she had originally expected. Not to mention large lights that were going to be used for the outside shoot, there was even a generator and a separate microphone. They were all rented. Renting them for two days cost more than 100 thousand won.

“Actually, paying wages is usually the largest expense, but we are exploiting labor. This, renting equipment was the most expensive, along with fuel costs. Oh, the lodging expenses as well.”

Those were Sora’s words in the morning.

“Sorry about this when you need to get some rest on the weekend.”

Jiyoon looked at Daemyung, who was standing beside her.

“I came here because I wanted to come, so there’s no need for you to feel sorry, oppa. I feel like I came here on a trip.”

“Let’s go traveling next week, wherever it is. Though I don’t have a car, so I can’t bring you somewhere far.”

Daemyung smiled awkwardly. He was really disappointed that they couldn’t meet frequently, and whenever he made that apologetic smile, Jiyoon once again felt that she was being loved. She was satisfied with just being with him, and yet he always tried to do more for her. How could she not love him?



“The two of you, quiet down,” Sora said as she put her index finger against her mouth.

The light was fixed in place and the shoot was about to begin. Jiyeon pinched Daemyung on the flank in a joking manner and looked at the two actors sitting on the floor. In front of the two was a bottle of soju, a bottle of beer, as well as some dried snacks. These were props for true ‘drunk’ acting. When she heard that they were going to act ‘while’ drunk instead of ‘acting’ drunk, she first treated it as a joke, but the two people opened up a bottle of soju and started drinking. They said strange things like acting while drunk would look more natural than acting drunk.

“You can’t get drunk, you two, okay?” Sora said as she pointed at the two actors with a rolled-up script.

She announced to them that she would not allow them to sleep if the shoot got delayed because they were drunk.

“Get ready”

Getting a signal from Sora, Aram held up the slate and stood in front of the camera. Jiyeon wanted to try clapping the slate once, but she didn’t say anything for fear of distracting them. After saying the scene number, the cut number, and the take number before falling back, Sora shouted ‘action.’

The two actors became limp at once. The way they leaned on the wall and barely breathed like they were invertebrates made them look like they were completely drunk. Their hands lifting their glasses looked unstable as though the glasses would slip out at any moment, and the way they loosened their jaws looked like they were drunk to the top of their heads. She suddenly had the thought that they might do well even if they didn’t drink. They didn’t open those bottles just because they wanted to drink, right?

“Hey, do you remember how I looked out for you in high school? Punk, I practically fed you throughout high school because you were dirt poor,” Sooil said while tapping on Maru’s cheek.

Maru snorted back at him.

“You call that looking out for me? You were just pitying me. Don’t you remember what you said to me every time you treated me to food? You asked me what my parents were doing that they can’t even feed their own son.”

“I said that because I was worried goddammit. So what, it’s not like I didn’t buy you food. Heck, I even paid for traveling expenses, didn’t I? Without me, you would have been a wimp throughout all of high school. Where else would you be able to find a friend like me? I taught you how to study, I treated you to food, and I brought you to a place like this.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’m fucking moved to tears, punk. But did you know? You’re doing that out of self-satisfaction. I’m not some idiot. Do you think I didn’t know? You just feel superior by helping me out, don’t you? Tell me honestly.”

“Punk. That’s not something you say to a friend.”

“Like hell you’re a friend.”

Thorns grew out in what started off as a joking conversation. Jiyeon bit on her thumbnails and watched the two actors. Just ten minutes ago, they were talking about a trip they went on together, how they

were scolded together by the teacher, and about how one helped out the other in confessing to a girl, but the friendship between the two became colder. The distance between the two, which originally looked like they were going to toast at any moment, started widening. The change was gradual, but once they started talking about money, the distance widened dramatically. They came back from ad-libbing to the script.

“That was a little harsh, don’t you think?”

“What’d I do?”

“Hey. You’re supposed to be thanking me when I brought an unemployed guy like you to somewhere so good. Why are you acting so proud? Honestly, it’s because you had a friend like me that you can come to a place like this, you know? Without me, you would have become a dropout a long time ago. No wait, you still can’t get a job, so you’re practically a dropout even now.”

“Shut your trap before I start saying cuss words.”

“Cuss words? From you? Now you’re getting angry at my jokes?”

Jiyoon looked at the script in front of her as she listened to the conversation between the two. Even the lines that sounded like they were spat out spontaneously were precisely according to the script. Every little detail down to each little space and comma was on the script. Although they were speaking with heavy breaths and crooked lips, the words that hit her ears were crystal clear. She knew from high school how hard it was to say the lines exactly according to the script. She knew how tricky it was to get her words across.

She suddenly had the thought that perhaps Maru, who acted alongside her and the others on the 5th-floor hall a long time ago, might not have been able to bring out all of his skills. Jiyoon honestly didn’t have the confidence to receive those words that were filled with emotions. She had the thought that it was thanks to Sooil, an actor that could receive his words, being in front of him that he could bring out his full skills. Actor – that word echoed inside her head.

The air given off by the two people became more and more vicious, and they looked like they were going to break out into a fight at any moment. She was feeling nervous watching them even though she knew that they were just acting. Eventually, their emotions reached their peak and broke out of the frame of patience that bottled them up. Sooil kicked the soju glass with his foot. The soju inside the glass spilled everywhere, and the glass rolled over and hit the wall next to Ando, who was holding the camera. Neither the actors nor the camera director bat an eyelid.

“You’re a fucking beggar.”

Maru charged toward Sooil, who stood up and turned his back. Jiyoon was able to see Maru’s face from the front. His face, which she presumed would turn vicious, looked incredibly sad. He smashed down the soju glass at the fallen Sooil’s head. Jiyoon clenched her eyes shut. She forgot that this was a shoot. She was reminded of the cat that died because it was run over by a car a few days ago. A sense of disgust spread out from the top of her head all the way down to her toes like a flash of lightning.

“Cut!”

Only after listening to Sora's shout could she open her eyes again. She saw Maru looking down at Sooil, still with those gloomy eyes. Sooil also did not budge under him. Just as she was thinking that something may have happened, both of them heaved a deep breath before standing up.

"That wasn't bad, was it?"

"That was decent. But you should have hit closer. I could tell that you would miss."

"If I did that, you would have a broken head."

"If we get a good picture with a broken head, that sounds like profit to me."

"The problem is that I would get two broken heads if you get one. Director, how was that?"

The vicious atmosphere dissipated in an instant. Jiyeon spat out the breath she was holding back. For a few seconds after the cut sound, the two should have still remained as the characters in the film. The disdain and rage in their emotions definitely remained after the cut sound. She recalled how actors frequently had mental consultations. She could understand why after looking at the two. It would instead be strange if they were normal when they could act like that.

"Gosh, this is going to be hard to edit. You two should have held back a little. You're trying to kill me by doing so well, aren't you?"

Sora groaned in joy. She seemed to have taken a liking to it. Jiyeon looked at the two in a daze for a while before collecting herself and approaching the two.

"I'll fix your makeup a little."

Jiyeon thought as she wiped the sweat on her forehead that it was perhaps a good thing that she let go of her dream to become an actress while she was still in high school. She didn't have the confidence to do something like that.

"How was it?" Maru asked.

"You mean your acting?"

"Yes."

"It was the best."

Jiyeon put up her thumbs.