

Once Again 121

Chapter 121

The air in the auditorium froze over. The negative portrayal of the character wasn't the only reason. It was the way that Geunseok acted Yurim out that made things become like this.

The acting was done in a simple conversational style without any dramatic development. The character's concept was one with dual personality disorder. The acting portrayed the inner and outer self of Yurim.

"Do I need to be friends with others? No. I don't think so. I want to feel comfortable, but I don't want them invading my bubble. It feels lonely though. But I can't depend on others forever."

Geunseok imbued a simplistic expression of a character with dual personality disorder. Most of his gestures during his performance was composed of simple shoulder movements to indicate nervousness and confidence and nothing else. The rest was conveyed through his facial expressions.

"I'm still afraid of going outside at night. What should I do? I have to overcome it. I'm not that brave though. What, aren't you even going to try to overcome it?? Give me courage. Courage isn't something others can give. You have to make yourself courageous."

Maru silently turned towards Yurim. What Geunseok was saying wasn't something that could be observed. It felt as though something deeply private was being brought out. Maru had to wonder what Yurim was thinking while watching Geunseok's acting.

'Hmm.'

Yurim's facial expression was rigid. But as Geunseok continued acting, Yurim's expression also slowly returned to normal. Her expression ran through a gauntlet of emotions, from embarrassment, nervousness, anxiousness to relief, confidence, and faith. The most assured point was that Yurim was not looking badly upon Geunseok.

"I need the helping hand of others. I'll definitely give up without it. Do you really think so? You're already fully supporting another person. I am? When I'm like this? Sure, you're fully supporting at least one person in your life."

The lines finished off as they started, as though a grandmother was calmly retelling an old tale with a steady tempo and temperate demeanor. There was no word for a while inside the auditorium. The sense of void and emptiness were brought to an end with Miso's voice.

"What part of Yurim did you base your character on?"

"I heard it from her, about her difficult and hurt-filled past."

"The past, and you based your portrayal on that?"

"Yes."

"What was the intent of acting out the outer self for others and an internal self?"

"I thought about how the portrayal and verbal lines were short but would still be in front of others. Therefore, there should be a message to convey. I came up with acting and delivering a message for a single person."

"For Yurim?"

"Yes."

Miso crossed her arms and closed her eyes. After rocking back and forth on a creaky, foldable metal chair, she suddenly stood up from her chair.

"Clap three times."

Clap, clap, clap. The acting club members clapped as if they were kindergarteners who wanted to see what came next.

"Acting to deliver a message. I observed it well. Since the audience seems to have appreciated your message, I'll give this acting a hundred points. It seems like you put a lot of thought into this. Good job."

Geunseok's expression brightened. This was to be expected, as Miso did not once praise him to this extent since the end of summer vacation. With a satisfied smile, Miso sat back down on her seat.

"Oh, nice going!"

"As expected of the future of our club."

Yoonjung and Danmi cheered out as they gave a thumbs up to Geunseok, who was returning to his seat. Geunseok had a suppressed smile as he sat next to Yurim.

'A message...'

Though the acting went into the dark, inner depths of her mind, the person in question looked very satisfied. What did this mean? Was there something beyond the surface that may have affected her in the deepest parts of her being? Only those two would truly know.

"But!"

Miso crossed her legs and started explaining.

"This acting would be very uncomfortable for an audience that has no inkling of what's going on. Acting to send a message to one person is good, but next time, try to bring out the applause of the many audience members instead. Also, you should get prior consent from the person for whose private, personal story you're using. Otherwise, it can get complicated and messy."

Maru observed a passing frown in the boy's previously proud face. Miso didn't even give a look to Geunseok. Geunseok's mouth could be seen moving up and down, side-to-side, probably murmuring something along the lines of 'what does she know'.

'She could have just left it as is.'

He thought some rare praise came his way, but, of course, it ended as a lesson to learn from and improve upon. That was her way of doing things, so oh well.

“Next! Daemyung.”

“Yes.”

Daemyung walked stiffly to the front. No matter what others say, currently, Geunseok was the best actor in the acting club. Geunseok’s acting had power. With solid fundamentals, one couldn’t help but give attention to him. On top of that, he had a refreshing way of speaking and various ways of expressing. Junmin also mentioned in the past that if he had to choose someone among the students he was actively observing, it would be Geunseok. He mentioned then that he would have paid up to 500 million won if Geunseok asked for money.

Though a person’s worth should not be talked about in terms of money, it is true that many important things in life have an essential connection to it. His value of 500 million won alluded to his potential.

- Of course, being Geunsoo’s younger brother probably factored in as a large part of that potential. Geunsoo would obviously become a hugely successful actor, and if he were to give direction and help to Geunseok, the synergistic effect would be enormous.

Junmin made people into products. His job was to find prospective, sellable products. Coaches would be responsible for developing and nurturing. Casting directors would then choose which products were sellable. Furthermore, there needs to be an attractive element to be sellable, so the label as the younger brother of a future superstar was enough for Junmin to invest in Geunseok.

In that sense, Junmin really had a good eye for opportunity and talent. He already foresaw that Geunsoo would become successful. He also had Ganghwan. He already had two superstars under his management.

‘If I try hard, I wonder if I can also become a winning lottery ticket.’

Regardless, Maru did attract his attention. He decided to put his faith in Junmin.

‘I’m ready to jump into acting with everything I have.’

After laying down everything to elder Moonjoong, he started seeing and perceiving everything in terms of acting. An unexpected sense of pure joy arose from being able to put my all into one thing. This moment, of preparing to act in earnest, was immensely enjoyable.

As he was thinking about these things, Daemyung ended his explanation. Before starting his lines, Daemyung glanced towards Maru with a little hesitation, but Maru was just shaking his head slowly from side-to-side, organizing his thoughts to himself. Geunseok’s acting style focused on peering into the darkness. On the contrary, Daemyung’s acting style did not seek to poke and prod anyone’s sensitive points. Daemyung’s acting style was something Maru wanted to boast about to others and followed Miso’s lesson of being considerate and appealing to the entire audience.

Daemyung had prepared extensively. Though he said his script was simple, the few lines that Daemyung showed Maru defied any notion of simplicity, as the lines were filled with deeper, interpretive meaning here and there. Daemyung awkwardly looked around and brought up a chair. This was the Daemyung before starting a play, a little bit of confusion mixed with a little bit of awkwardness.

“Start when you’re ready. Don’t make us wait too long.”

Daemyung nodded his head at Miso's words.

"I'll start now."

Daemyung could be seen sitting on the chair taking deep breaths. With a long exhale, he finished his preparation. A change could be seen as he slowly opened his eyes. Though he did not have Geunseok's powerful energy, he had a way of pulling in the attention of the audience. When a singer grabs the microphone, the viewing audience eagerly awaits with anticipation, already imagining the song that will follow.

This is what Daemyung brought to the table. Everyone here was familiar with Daemyung's acting skills. In their very first play, he became a 40 something year old office worker without flaw. His acting was not noticeable. This is not a bad thing, it just meant that he melded into his role naturally. He brought his abrasive high school student self to his character's life in the People of Dalseok-dong.

'The essence of Daemyung's acting is naturalness.'

He doesn't have a singular, forceful punch. Just the roundness of his figure proved that the characters he portrayed were not that type. However, he did have a softness that enveloped the audience as if in a hug. Giving comfort to the audience with an appropriate tone of voice, no excessive expressions, and weightiness in his voice rather than extraneous actions, he exemplified an actor who was starting to develop his craft.

Furthermore, Daemyung's role in this play emphasized and maximized his strengths. He had a good sense. He decided to play to his strengths rather than focusing on covering his weaknesses. His conscious choice of using a chair as a prop also factored into this, he didn't decide on a whim to perform while sitting. Daemyung passed off his extensive preparation with bashful shyness, but Maru saw all this with admiration. If there was a god of effort, that god would be looking down on Daemyung with a knowing smile. That smile would also bring the god of talent to Daemyung's side.

"What should I do."

Daemyung started speaking with clasped hands as if he was praying.

"If you've heard my prayers at least once, my god, please send down, just this once, a helping hand. The single thing you've taken away represents everything to me, as you well know, my god. I know you are not cruel. Thus, I beg of you, please return what you have taken away and not let my faith be broken."

The grieving prayer of a man quietly lifted the curtain to the act. There was no Daemyung.

And.

Maru projected Daemyung's words into his own images of her, causing Maru to sit still with his mouth shut tight while watching his friend's play.

* * *

She smiled while gently thumping her fingers on the steering wheel.

"Something good must have happened," Taesik asked with a respectful tone.

“Yeah. Remember, tone.”

“Ah, of course. Hum hum, so what’s so good?” He said while changing his respectful tone.

“I saw my kids develop quickly. Personal training assistance really does make a big difference. I’m lucky they met some good teachers.”

Today was the day that Miso saw the likelihood of succeeding in the winter nationals. Geunseok and Daemyung. It would be fun to see both of them together. Once the People of Dalseok-dong play is over, if there’s time, she would create a play with both of them as leads. She felt an eagerness and anticipation that she hadn’t felt in a long time. Their acting was that satisfying.

While smiling, she rubbed Taesik’s shoulder, who was sitting next to her. It was a long overdue date. She felt a little sad that she had to drag out this boyfriend of hers who only wanted to stay home.

“Let’s go out on Sunday’s at least.”

“It’s cold though.”

“Anyways.”

Miso squinted while lowering Taesik’s side window. Taesik quickly begged for mercy.

“So how are the kids? I’ve been so busy that I haven’t been around to check up on them.”

“Everything’s good. The only thing is that I didn’t get to see someone’s potential blossom and meet my expectation.”

“Expectation? You mean Maru?”

“Yeah. It seemed like he gained a lot of experience after going here and there, but I feel he hasn’t been able to properly digest everything. Well, he could have experienced too much in too short a time.”

“He’s a smart kid, so he’ll regroup and show something soon. He’ll do at least that if not more.”

“Right, I think so too. Hey, where are we going?”

“... Anywhere...”

“Dang it! I really don’t understand why I started liking you!”

Even with someone shouting at him, Taesik warmly smiled and apologized. This was why Miso couldn’t contain her love for him.

“Okay, then don’t say anything to the contrary and just follow my lead today. Alright?”

“Do what’s comfortable for you. However, we shouldn’t be out too late at night.”

While watching Taesik continue to calmly speak, Miso started having naughty thoughts on whether she should take the initiative now.

* * *

“You’re not receiving anyone?”

“That’s what it’s come down to.”

“You mentioned that you had your eyes on this student.”

Junmin showed a picture of Geunseok while speaking.

“He’s the guy I met with Suyeon, right?”

“Yes, Teacher.”

“He has potential for sure. He’s the type that’ll motivate one to teach.”

“Then why....”

Moonjoong shut his mouth after taking a sip of his tea, Junmin kept his eyes on Moonjoong’s lips.

“I don’t want to teach anyone. Now that I think about it, I was just bored all this time. That young man... Maru, was it? Was more interesting to talk to than teaching.”

“Then you can teach Maru...”

“I’d like to keep him as someone I meet once in a while over drinks, like a drinking buddy.”

“Teacher.”

“If I feel like it later, then it’ll happen.”

Moonjoong got up from his seat while laughing; Junmin was sorry to lose this opportunity. If Geunseok was to learn under the guidance of Moonjoong, he could have learned a lot. However, what’s passed has passed. If Moonjoong says no once, he fully meant it.

“That young guy really seems like an upstanding human being, it’s been a long time since I met such a good drinking buddy.”

“He’s still a first-year student in high school.”

“Is there an age when one drinks?”

“.....”

“It’s become like that, don’t worry.”

Junmin bowed towards Moonjoong as the man left through the door. At least he’s keeping Maru close by. Moonjoong gave his soul to acting. One can learn and obtain a lot just from being next to someone like that.

‘Who knows, he might turn around and want to start teaching again.’

Junmin put away the photo of Geunseok in his folder. Unfortunately, this road ended here.

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Maru handed a letter over to Soojin. It was a letter that Dowook handed Maru as they were leaving school yesterday, a Saturday.

“Read it when you have time.”

“...Thank you. Really.”

“Though it’s just a letter now, you’ll probably get closer over time.”

“I hope so.”

Her eyes were red, but her face was filled with a smile. Soojin stepped on the accelerator, they were on their way to see the awaiting kids at the nursery today. Looking out the window at the snow twirling in the wind, Maru took out his flip cell phone.

- We’re meeting at the soup restaurant today! Geunseok and Yurim probably won’t be coming. They mentioned that they already had plans for Sunday before I brought anything up. Anyways! Make Soyeon come no matter what. Okay?

It was the group message that Iseul sent out. It was today, huh. Maru briefly smiled as he closed his flip phone?

Chapter 122

“Whatcha thinking about?”

“Oh, Senior, you’re here?”

Junmin stopped Ganghwan from standing up from his seat.

“Did you eat?”

“Yes, but I’m not one to turn down a free meal.”

“Your intestines are massive, as always. What are you looking at?”

“This? I had an audition recently.”

“Audition? For what?”

“It’s not for me, but the amateur class. They have a lot of motivation, so I didn’t want to give them roles and make them stick with it. I made them audition for their roles.”

“Hmm.”

“A few of them made up their minds about coming into this industry, so I really tried to make it official. They did really well. They looked out of the box a lot when it came to their character analysis, probably because they’re young.”

“It’s probably because they didn’t know, rather than them being young.”

“Again with that? Just look at them well for once. Anyway, I chose the roles, but one character’s still iffy.”

“Side character or the main?”

"The main. All four girls tried for it and I was able to fail two right away, but the other two are a bit concerning."

"Looks like you're putting a lot of work into this when you said you were going to go at it casually."

"That was the plan, but it became really fun. Plus, I'm just about done with the play I was in, too. I'm about to go back to the poor life."

"I'll buy you a meal, so don't starve yourself."

"Of course. I'll stick to you for meals as much as I can. But anyway, I'm worried about who to take between these two. It's a test in the end, but it's still a chance to act in the Myungdong Art Theater. You can't pass this up if you're an actor."

"Want me to take a look at them?"

"Do you have the time?"

"Well, I'm here already, so might as well."

"Why don't we wait for them as we have a little dinner?"

"Ugh, again with food... Fine."

* * *

"Want to get a chicken skewer?"

Her eyes widened at the sound of chicken, just thinking about it made her drool. She remembered her mom talking about being unable to eat chicken during her pregnancy. Something about how being deprived of chicken only made her mom end up liking it more in the long run.

"Medium spice, right?"

"Yeah."

"Just a little bit of cheese?"

"Yeah."

She nodded almost subconsciously before turning to look at Maru oddly. He knew her preferences too well...

"What?"

"It's nothing."

They might just have similar tastes, so whatever. Now that she thought about it, there were a lot of instances like this, Maru was always detailed about the small stuff. He always chose things that she liked, making her wonder when she talked about it to him.

"Here you go."

The two of them crossed the streets of Myungdong. She had a slightly-burnt chicken skewer in one hand and Maru's hand in the other. After their confession, they started holding hands a lot more.

"It's cold. You should've worn thicker clothes."

"This much is fine."

"Look at you, you're sniffing already."

Maru told her to wait for a second. He walked into a store nearby before coming out with a pink little hat. She liked it the moment she saw it, so she stayed still as Maru put it on. It was warm, which induced a little smile out of her.

"Let's go. We're going to be late."

* * *

Maru jumped a few times to loosen himself up, feeling the hardwood floor under him. Their character roles would get assigned today. After that, they would go straight into practice for a month and then they would go on stage. The practice with them switching roles every time would end today.

"How is it? You think you can get the main role?"

She shook her head at his question.

"Yoojin's good. I'll have to give up this time."

"What the, you're just letting it go?"

"I don't want to put so much effort into something I can't do. I'm going to do my best with delinquent number three, though."

She sounded a little depressed. Three days ago, she competed with three other girls for the role of Seulmi, the main character of the play. The other kids saw the girls act and judged themselves, Ganghwan took those opinions into consideration to come up with a final decision. He was quick with all of the other roles, but he was really taking his sweet time with the main character.

"He said he'd let us know by today, right?" she asked, stretching her arms to the side.

Her body was bending smoothly like a yoga instructor.

"Since today's the day we start doing runs, yeah. You're really flexible, by the way."

"Do you even know how much I stretch at night? Flexibility needs to be practiced really hard."

She bent her back backward with a small groan. Maru smiled. So she's been maintaining it from a young age. She bent her back further and put her hands to the ground. Her shirt started slipping a little bit, revealing the white skin underneath. Maru quickly took off his jersey to cover it.

"You need to be careful."

"Of what?"

"....."

He didn't know what to say, especially with her sounding so innocent. She threw his jersey back at him, Maru caught it with one hand as he watched her. She was around 164cm tall. She would grow up to 170 when she enters high school. Her arms and legs were quite long, making her look pretty beautiful despite still being in a growing phase. Now that he thought about it, she was always very proud of her body more so than anything else. She always loved getting compliments about it even though she tried not to show it.

'Though...'

Maru scratched his eyebrows as he thought back to their first night, it was around eight months after they started going out together. She laughed when he asked to go on a one night trip with her and bought a condom from a nearby convenience store, Maru could remember laughing at how bold she was.

He rented a pretty expensive cottage for the two of them and had his first time with her there. He couldn't remember what they talked about or where that was. But he remembered one thing she said back then: Why don't boobs get fat?

"Whatcha thinking about?"

"...Nothing."

"Why do you look so suspicious, then?"

She walked up to look at him, with her long hair draped over her shoulder. This was really bad timing, he could see her body from back then getting overlapped with her right now. Maru couldn't help but look away, this was a little too much right now, especially looking at her adult body overlap with her younger self... it felt like a crime, somehow.

"What the."

"Just finish your stretches."

Maru pretended nothing was wrong. He saw her everything, but that was in his past life. He didn't want to have to explain what he was thinking to her right now.

"You're all here?"

Ganghwan walked in from the back door, Junmin was following close behind him. As soon as they got on stage, they called her out with Yoojin.

"Is it these two?"

"Yes."

What were they talking about? Junmin put a hand over his chin as he looked over the two female students.

"Why don't we take a look?"

"Sure. Alright guys, act out Seulmi in front of us. Yoojin, you go first. This is where we make our last judgment, so work hard."

It looked like Ganghwan ended up asking Junmin for help.

“Should I begin now?” Yoojin asked confidently.

As expected of her. Yoojin had confidence in her acting and she had the skills to support it. Yoojin’s greatest strength was in her pronunciation, Ganghwan admitted that as well. She was incredible at conveying language. Maru sometimes saw her practicing her pronunciation holding a pen in her mouth, her skills right now were surely something born out of hours of hard work.

The character Seulmi was very headstrong, a strong girl who always got into a conflict with the delinquents. There were a lot of scenes where the character would lecture the delinquents. In those scenes, Yoojin looked more like Seulmi than anyone else.

“Is it really that fun to bully kids? Look at what you guys are doing. This isn’t a play! It’s violence. What, you’re going to glare at me? Planning on hitting me too? Fine! Come at me! But I won’t stay quiet. You know what I’m like, don’t you? I’m going to spread rumors about what you did across the entire school. Come on, let’s go!”

She said her lines as if Junmin was a delinquent standing in front of her. She was good. Then again, she was a child actor. Maru had to wonder what the world of the pros looked like when even the child actors were already this good.

Yoojin stepped back with a huff. Junmin and Ganghwan talked briefly and it was now her turn to act. She could’ve picked out a different scene for her character, but she ended up choosing the scene Yoojin did. That was very like her. Ganghwan and Junmin talked again after she finished.

“Yoojin should take Seulmi’s role.”

“Thank you,” Yoojin said with a smile.

The girl had a very satisfactory smile on her face. On the other hand, she looked very dejected, but not defeated. She probably saw this coming.

“Please take good care of delinquent 3.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“And that’s that with the roles. We’re going to work our asses off for the next month before the play happens. Ah, were the prelims for the winter finals starting next week?”

“Our region’s next week, but the region to the south of us already started,” one of the male students answered.

Since they were all from an acting club, they knew information like this very well. The winter competition was backed by theater companies and various other entertainment companies. As a result, it had quite a bit of prize money compared to all other high school competitions. Aside from that, everything was the same as the summer nationals. The prelims were regional and the main event will be held in Seoul.

"I understand that you'd be more worried about your competition than this. You did volunteer for this as well though, so don't get too lazy. I hope none of you would act like a third rate just because the audience is watching for free."

The kids all nodded grimly at Ganghwan's words since both the winter nationals and the play at the Myungdong Art Theater deserved great attention.

"I don't know if you still remember this, but a very important guest will be coming as well. You'll have to do well."

Ganghwan smiled proudly. Right then, Junmin tapped Ganghwan's shoulder and whispered something into the man's ear. Ganghwan stepped back in surprise, saying "Really?" quite loudly.

"Guys, focus a lot on the winter nationals. You can put your leftover energy into this thing afterward. Got it?"

Ganghwan suddenly changed his words. By the looks of things, the so-called very important guest was no longer coming. The students all suppressed a little laughter.

"Now that we have our roles... We should do a little celebration."

Ganghwan turned to look at Junmin with a mischievous grin, Junmin shook his head before taking a seat in the audience seats.

"So, what will you be eating?"

Aha, so that was what it was. Maru looked between Ganghwan and Junmin. The former was jumping around happily and the latter was shrugging in mock defeat.

"Yes! Guys! Lord Big Senior is going to buy a meal for us! Let's practice hard and get some good food!"

Clap! That was the signal of the start of practice.

* * *

In the end, the group ended up going for pork belly after Ganghwan's incessant nagging. Maru didn't mind, personally. Free food was free food.

"Yeah, I'll be late. I'll have dinner, so don't worry."

She closed her phone, she was probably calling her mother.

"I should drop by to say hi some time."

"To who? My mom?"

"Yeah. Since I'm your boyfriend and all."

"You're crazy. If mom sees you... Ugh, I don't even want to imagine it. She's going to ask for more information, like, every night."

"That just makes me want to go even more though?"

"Don't you dare!"

She glared at him murderously. Then again, his mother-in-law was pretty sadistic, in a way. Maru remembered getting nervous as hell whenever he visited during the holidays.

In any case, the group ran straight over to the barbeque place. It was 9 pm on a Sunday. As a result, the restaurant was filled with people. Three tables were empty, thankfully. Junmin and Ganghwan took their seats on one of the tables, and the 12 students split up between the other two tables. They ordered and waited for their food to arrive.

“Maru.”

“Yeah?”

It was Yoojin. The girl was sitting at a different table, but she was right next to him before he knew it.

“What’s your phone number?”

“My number?”

“We’re a couple, so I need to know.”

Couple? That threw Maru off for a couple of seconds. But it didn’t take long for him to realize that his character in the play had a romantic interest with Yoojin’s character.

“I might message you often for questions.”

“Sure. Whatever makes you happy.”

Maru glanced at her after taking Yoojin’s phone. She was putting a lettuce wrap into her mouth, completely uninterested in what was currently happening.

‘Well, that’s very like her.’

Maru put his phone number into Yoojin’s phone.

Chapter 123

* * *

“So you guys had an argument?”

“A little bit. I should apologize first, right?”

“Apologize if you mean it.”

Inside the swaying bus, she was recounting what happened in her class to Maru. The argument started when her friend borrowed her manicure. Even close friends have these moments, no? She felt like she needed to say sorry but dreaded taking the first step. She felt some of that dread lift off her shoulders as she spoke to Maru. She now felt that she could approach her friend.

“There’s nothing more than this, right?”

“It’s not like I’m person who dutifully stores past slights. This sort of thing rarely happens. I usually resolve it right then and there.”

“Yeah, you do tend to do that.”

At that moment, the bus came to a screeching halt. Her body started to sway to the point of losing control despite tightly grasping the overhead handle. Right when she was about to collide with the guy next to her, Maru grabbed and supported her arm.

“Be careful.”

“... uhuh.”

She looked at her right arm. Maru, who was looking out the bus window without a care in the world, steadfastly held and supported her. She felt like there was a safety net wherever she went with him. It was these little things that Maru was always good at.

“Karaoke this weekend?”

“I can’t this weekend. I have practice. Doesn’t Woosung have practice too?”

“Yeah, but I can just say I’m sick.”

“Ugh, it’s one week before preliminaries. At least show some effort.”

“I’m actually putting in a lot of effort, but you know sometimes too much effort causes bodily harm. It’s just as important to get some rest.”

“Then rest at home yourself instead of causing trouble for others,” she playfully said while letting out a laugh and sticking out her tongue.

Maru really did have a direct way with words, but that’s what made it easy for her to talk to him. It seemed like yesterday that they first met, but she felt that their relationship extended far before then.

With Maru supporting her arm, she didn’t worry about the bus swaying. She took this bus to Myungdong 3 to 4 times a week. Without fail, Maru was always with her, as if he and she were attending the same school. She glanced at Maru and noticed his light pink lips curved upwards into a smile.

‘He’s changed a bit recently.’

She noticed that he previously acted cold to every other amateur acting group member except her. Maru was like a government employee who limited his words and actions to limit personal exposure.

However, the Maru now opened up and joined others in conversation. She knew how talkative Maru was, so it didn’t come as a surprise when Maru immediately started getting along with others in the amateur acting class.

She felt deep down that Maru always truly listened. Her heart stirred whenever she talked and looked into Maru’s calming eyes. Maru was like a professional psychologist, listening wholeheartedly and sympathizing with empathetic nods.

“What?”

“Nothing. You’re smiling more often now.”

“Have I?”

He didn't seem to realize the change himself. When he lifted his hand to his face in thought, she saw his surprisingly toned neck. She felt it every once in a while, but Maru really had a developed body, being 178cm and all.

“Have you been working out?”

“Just some boxing with my dad here and there.”

“Wow, boxing?”

“My dad was an amateur boxer. He won quite a few times too.”

“Really? That's amazing. Have you ever competed?”

“Just sparring.”

“Oho! You must be pretty good at fighting?”

“If a fight breaks out, I'm the first to run away,” Maru replied as he broke out another smile.

She really liked this about Maru. He didn't put up a fake bravado front nor did he take every chance to complement himself like other guys. Whenever she saw this side of Maru, she could picture him saying 'So what?' It was tiring to be around guys who flaunted their fighting prowess. It's not like being good in fights or hurting others is a good thing.

“Have you ever fought with your classmates?”

“Nope, not once. I'm too scared and cautious to let things get to that point.”

She saw Maru flex his shoulders subconsciously. She asked half-jokingly,

“If I get implicated in a fight, what are you going to do?”

“Knowing you, I don't think you'd ever let yourself get in that position.”

“If, what if it happens.”

“Then I'll work it out with all the parties involved and try to bring a non-violent resolution,” Maru stated with a smirk as if pleased with his answer. She saw this and poked his side, only to see Maru avoid her by twisting his body.

They didn't talk much after that. Everyone on the bus must have been tired too as it was silent inside. The only sound came intermittently from a couple girls talking at the back of the bus. She heard the bell for the next stop and saw out the window. Maru's stop was the one afterwards.

“It's your stop soon.”

She extended her arm and pressed the red button to signal for the next stop. A notification went off in the bus to signal that a passenger wanted to get off. There were only a few blocks left before Maru gets off. As she was mentally preparing some parting words, Maru turned his head and said,

“If a fight ever were to break out, I’ll stand in front and take everything... you make sure to run away. If you can, call the police too.”

Maru gently patted the pink hat atop her head and then got off the bus. She peered out the window and caught Maru waving his hand with a large grin on his face.

* * *

“Hmm.. The Youth and Chuljin.”

The preliminaries were a week away. If they made it to regionals in January, that meant that he would have to act in two plays, ‘People of Dalseokdong’ and ‘3rd Year Class 3’.

Having had ample time to prepare, Maru had a good grasp of the teenage character he needed to play in Dalseokdong. The character connected the separate acts of the play by helping the audience organize their thoughts and catch their breath. Thus, overacting and sticking out like a sore thumb should be avoided. After reviewing his Dalseokdong lines once more, Maru picked up the script for ‘3rd Year Class 3’.

Though it was just an hour-long play, the story developed quickly. The entire play dealt with the struggles that happened within the confines of classroom 3. The main storyline was about the disagreements that started due to a few classroom bullies and the ensuing story toward resolution. The Class 3 student representative wraps up the play after exploding his frustrations on the homeroom teacher. The play doesn’t neatly resolve any issues. The main focus is on the commonly arising situations in the modern Korean classroom, a reflection on the larger issues plaguing Korean society. Through this play, Maru was again reminded of how the emotional unraveling of a storyline could change 180 degrees based on the director’s intention.

“This story was originally about growth and development.”

The original storyline neatly resolved the issues and struggles of youth in ‘3rd Year Class 3’ and brought peace to the classroom, much like the first play in the amateur group, ‘The Cozy Table’. However, the play was now more nuanced and interpretive.

Ganghwan seemed to have really taken creative interpretation to heart on this play. Maru had to acknowledge that this form of creative interpretation was mild compared to Ganghwan’s ‘Human Repayment’, where the heavy topic of suicide was dealt with. Just thinking about it made Maru’s skin crawl.

Maru tried spitting out Chuljin’s lines while flipping through the script. He wanted to get into character rather than memorize lines. Memorizing the lines was just a point Maru needed to get to. It was more important for Maru to understand the emotional development and direction of the story and to naturally bring forth the dialogue that matched the appropriate scene.

This was also what Ganghwan expected of Maru. Either the actor or the director must take the interpretive lead. Since Ganghwan stated “You guys should show me your personal interpretation,” Maru understood that he didn’t need to strictly stick to the lines on the script.

“A student who is outwardly bright and cheerful,” Maru murmured.

There's a student like that in every class, someone who easily fits into any social circle, and the person students half-jokingly choose as their class representative. This outwardly carefree character named Chuljin had a private side too, like anyone else.

Although the character of Chuljin could be close and friendly in any clique, the character was skeptical of these shallow relationships. Ironically, Chuljin's closest friend in the class is the class representative. From Chuljin's point of view, the class representative seemed like a free spirit due to his deep devotion and friendship to a handful of classmates.

Just as Chuljin envied the class representative, the class representative envied Chuljin's ability to get along with the bullies in the classroom. These unspoken thoughts and the absence of understanding among the main characters slowly evolved and nurtured a powder keg that threatened to explode into violence.

"And then there's Seulmi."

Among the characters in the play, she was the only one that didn't have a conflicting outer and inner self. Seulmi's courageous conviction made it so that she couldn't bear to see any slights or ignore bad actions. This heroine-like personality of hers often led Seulmi to cross the line of what was appropriate, putting herself in the middle of a conflict.

Then there's the standard bad homeroom teacher who didn't even make the effort to memorize the names of his students. He was the first to think of an excuse and to point fingers at students whenever a problem arose. This homeroom teacher amplified the conflict among the class representative, Chuljin, and Seulmi. An amateur actor who had an abrasive, bitter outward appearance took the role as the homeroom teacher.

Along with these four main characters, the group of bullies and teacher #2 rounded up the cast of '3rd Year Class 3'. As Ganghwan mentioned before, the importance of developing the main characters led to more scenes and lines for these 4 actors compared to the eight others in the amateur acting group. The increase in his character's screen time led Maru to color a large part of the script with his orange highlighter.

"Phew."

The first thing Maru did after receiving the script was to highlight his lines and his character's influences on others with an orange highlighter. For the first time, Maru felt the importance of his character after seeing the sparsely separated black characters trapped in an orange highlighted jail. At the same time, Maru was greedy. Had it been a couple of months ago, he would have run away from this level of commitment. However, the current Maru was glad for the opportunity to stand on stage longer and tell his story to the audience.

Maru got up with the script in hand. To save time, Maru decided to focus on 'People at Dalseok-dong' at school and '3rd Year Class 3' at home.

"I laughed and talked with others so much but yet I'm all alone again. Is this some sick joke? Am I really the person who was so affable just a while ago? Why don't I have a friend I can speak to without concern," Maru read the lines of Chuljin who is speaking his thoughts aloud in the empty classroom before Seulmi walks in.

“Both of the characters look at each other briefly before ignoring the other. The class representative is the next to come in and frowns upon seeing the two other students.”

The class representative, who secretly likes Seulmi, eventually finds out that Chuljin and Seulmi are dating each other. This realization leads to a confrontation with some classroom bullies and quickly escalates into the main conflict point in ‘3rd Year Class 3. The audience should start to feel a sense of nervous foreboding.

Maru read the script notes that detailed some rushed footsteps coming from off stage. This gimmick and the acting needed to mesh well together in order to build the appropriate tension for the audience. Maru walked around his room while reading the script. He couldn’t get into the character of Chuljin by just reading the lines, he needed to understand and become Chuljin himself.

It was at that moment.

Maru saw his sister silently open his door and peek in. She didn’t open the door haphazardly like she did before.

“Big brother, what are you doing?”

“I’m reviewing a script.”

“Are you busy?”

“Why?”

“You have time to eat some snacks together, right? I’ll gain weight if I eat by myself, so let’s gain weight together, yeah?”

“It’s past 11.”

“But I’m hungry...” Bada pouted.

“... Okay, then I’ll have some ice cream. You’re going to get it right?”

“Yeah, I’ll get it. Wait here, I’ll be back soon!”

Maru could hear his sister’s scurrying footsteps reverberating across the floor. A smile crossed his face as he laid down the script.

Chapter 124

* * * *

“Hmm, this one or this one,” Bada said as she happily contemplated between the snacks, eventually choosing the chocolate flavored snack.

Bada shrunk back from the sudden gust of cold evening wind as she walked out of the convenience store, with her snack and Maru’s ice cream cone in hand. As she was telling herself to quickly get back home, she saw a figure across the street walking with his sleek bicycle.

“Oh!” Bada involuntarily shouted.

She didn't know him well, but she recognized his face. Dowook stared at Bada for a while before realizing who she was.

He let out an "Ah" himself.

"You're Maru's sister, right?"

"Yes, and you're brother's friend, Dowook, right?"

"Yeah."

She recalled being saved by Dowook and the awe-inspiring roundhouse kick he gave that weirdo bully in Myungdong. Bada recalled this older brother's full name, Kang Dowook. Maru told her to hurry and go home that eventful day, so she never had the chance to thank Dowook personally.

"Thank you for your help that day."

"No worries. I wanted to give him a piece of my mind anyways."

"Do you live nearby?" Bada asked.

"No. I came to meet a friend."

"My brother?"

"No." He kept his answers short. It was awkward enough for Dowook to be receiving thanks, so he wanted to end the conversation as soon as possible.

"I'll see you around."

"Oh, okay," Bada responded in surprise as Dowook passed by with his bicycle in tow. Bada felt that Dowook's personality was as cold as the sharpness of his eyes.

Just as Bada started to head home, she looked back at Dowook's receding figure and remembered what her mother said about receiving help from others, 'A responsible human being always pays back for the help received.'

Bada rushed back into the store, grabbed a hot drink, and ran towards Dowook.

"Um, here! Please take this," Bada quickly said as she handed the confused Dowook a warm canned drink.

This fulfilled her obligation as a responsible human being. Relieved of her obligation, Bada turned back only to immediately feel a tapping on her shoulder. As she turned around, she heard Dowook say,

"I don't like Red Ginseng."

Dowook tossed the canned drink back at Bada. The surprised Bada somehow caught the tossed can but immediately replied back,

"Just drink it. It's a gesture of appreciation."

"You drink it," Dowook snapped back.

Dwook lightly jumped onto his bicycle and powerfully pedaled away, quickly becoming a dot and then disappearing from the street. Bada stuck her tongue out in his direction and put the canned drink into her plastic bag.

“Hmm! As if I care if you drink it or not!”

* * *

Dwook stared at the blank letter on his school desk. His thoughts flooded onto the pages when he wrote his first letter to his sister, but he was truly at a loss for words right now. He recalled how each word was filled with sorrow, hate, and disappointment. The words rushed out onto the paper. He also recalled how each word helped him slowly release the pent-up frustration he carried around all these years. That was the first letter. This letter seemed infinitely more difficult.

He didn't expect much from his sister. It wasn't his sister's fault that the accident happened and that he needed to go through a period of grueling physical therapy. He never blamed her for the accident, but he did hold her absence against her. All he wanted was someone to talk to.

However, his sister chose to leave the house. She ran away from the mother who blamed her and the father who gave her pitiful glances. After she left, Dwook spent his days retraining his muscles on the physical therapy machines at home, laying on the cold gym floor while his classmates enjoyed PE, and could only look at the backs of the neighborhood kids who went out to play. He naturally became an outsider at school and didn't smile or laugh even once up all the way up to 5th grade.

Dwook started bicycling after his schoolteacher mentioned that it would help reinforce his muscles. Once he started seeing improvement, Dwook started playing all the sports that he missed. Immediately, his muscles started growing and eventually, bulging. He also started growing taller. Then came middle school. Due to his outsider status in elementary school, Dwook didn't have any prior friends to hang out with, so he started hanging out with the wrong crowd. They made him feel powerful, as he was now on the side of the oppressor rather than the oppressed.

Thinking up to here, he picked up his pencil and decided to write about the past 10 years. Just as he was finishing the first sentence, a clanking noise resounded out from a can that landed on the corner of his desk. It was a Red Ginseng canned drink. Dwook raised his eyes toward the person whose hand was still on the can.

“Delivery~” chimed Maru with a grin.

“Delivery?”

"Bada came back late last night from the store huffing and puffing about you denying this drink, so I came to deliver it myself."

"Ah..."

"Are you allergic to Red Ginseng?"

"No. I just don't like it."

"Then drink up. That poor little kid put in a lot of thought to give this to you."

As soon as Maru finished the sentence, he opened the can and put it in front of Dowook. Dowook knew Maru was bullheaded, so he just sighed and resigned himself to drinking the canned drink. He one-shot the drink and handed the empty can to Maru.

"Done?"

"Thanks~ Is that the letter you're writing for your sister?"

Dowook hid the letter from Maru with his arms. He knew that Maru was a trustworthy, good guy, but he still didn't want to show him the embarrassingly emotional letter.

"Hey, write it nice and clear. I'll make sure she gets it."

"Yeah."

"Older sister Soojin was relieved and happy to receive your last letter."

"..."

Maru gave a refreshing smile. He's changed, Dowook thought. It's as if a heavy burden has been lifted off his shoulders. His relaxed demeanor and facial expression seemed to prove that something good happened recently.

"Ah. Dad asked me if you were planning to work this winter break."

"Unfortunately, I'll have to pass. Something came up."

"Yeah? Dad's going to feel sad. He was really looking forward to it."

"Let him know that I'll come visit in the near future."

Maru picked up the empty can and walked back to his seat. As Maru casually opened up a book, Dowook couldn't help but look back and think of how his life changed because of Maru. If it wasn't for him, he may have been dismissed from the school like Changhu.

Dowook focused back on his letter and started to write. He finished writing as the bell rang to signal the end of the lunch break. All that needed to be done now was the delivery, but Dowook felt something was missing.

He shook his head and started writing another paragraph,

'I've made a good friend at school, so school life hasn't been too bad.'

* * *

"I want a girlfriend!" Dojin shouted.

"I knew you were going to say that," Maru replied.

In the last period of the day, the teacher talked about his first love experience. The juicy bits of his story made all of the class students hang on his every word, enough so that they wouldn't let him go even after the final bell rang.

“Spring will come for me too, right? I’m surrounded every day in a field of sausages. When will my day come?”

"What about Iseul?"

“... hey, why did you bring her up all of a sudden?”

Oho, look at this. The only single girl I recalled around me was Iseul, so Maru threw out her name. Who knew that it would garner such a wonderful reaction from Dojin?

"If you like her, just tell her straight up like a Korean man. Like Taejoon."

Ever since Taejoon and Soyeon successfully became a couple at the soup restaurant event, Dojin seemed to fall under the spell of the dreaded ‘solo disease’. He acted like his innards were painfully twisting whenever he looked at the two couples in the acting club. Maybe it’s not a ‘solo disease’, maybe he’s just a delirious animal. Maru looked at Dojin and asked,

"Iseul doesn’t look good enough for you?"

"Not good enough?! She’s pretty!"

"Then her personality?"

“She’s nice and sweet, and cute too!”

“I don’t think being cute is part of one’s personality but whatever. So, you like her then.”

“Well, I’m not sure if I like her... hey! Why are you steering the conversation this way?”

“You don’t have to look that far to make a girlfriend.”

“... you’ve magically become an omnipotent love guru now, aye? What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you! You and I are in the same field of sausages, man.”

It was then that Maru’s cell phone rang. He flipped the phone with his thumb and silenced Dojin for the moment.

“Hello?”

-Is this Han Maru?

"That’s right. You should know from my voice."

-Oh, so it is you. You sound different on the phone.

The person on the other line was Yoojin. Just when Maru was about to ask why she called, Dojin rushed close to Maru like a starved beast.

-You still there?

“Yeah, talk.”

Maru could see Dojin's eyes on the precipice of releasing a cascade of tears.

Having heard a female voice on the other line, Dojin put on a frown that reflected the deepest sense of betrayal from his fellow man.

-Do you have the script nearby?

"I do."

Then turn to page 27 where bully number 2 and 3 come out.

Maru slowly closed his eyes and reopened them. At this point, he already memorized the whole script. The scene in question was right after the student representative was beaten up by the class' bullies. Chuljin and Seulmi just stepped into the classroom and were about to ask what happened to the student representative...

-What's your interpretation of your line? How are you going to deliver it?

"What?"

-I'm not certain on what's going on emotionally for you in that scene.

Maru pushed Dojin away and started to visualize the entire scene. Previously, Chuljin tried to befriend the student representative, but their underlying envy of each other became a barrier that caused an argument. Right before the scene in question, the student representative tried to hang out with the bullies, only to be ignored and then beaten up. Having seen this unfold, what would Chuljin be thinking? He's probably thinking of getting back at the student representative, making this scene into a larger issue for the rep, right?

"The student representative sure is something, huh? Getting all friendly with you guys without reason," Maru stated his lines unabashedly to Yoojin.

Dojin squinted his eyes and asked Maru, "The hell's going on?"

Oh. I see. It's like that. You changed the lines a little too.

"It's after they've just had an argument, right? Chuljin's probably not too happy with the student representative. It's the perfect scenario: he wants to look down on the student rep, this situation falls into his lap, and his girlfriend is standing right beside him. Chuljin's probably ready to pounce and take advantage of the situation to get back at the rep."

-He's that type of character? Isn't he a well-rounded guy?

"He often says that he's lonely. How would he feel if the representative approaches even his set of shallow friends and tries to befriend them? Wouldn't Chuljin feel disgusted that the representative, who seems to have it all, would even take away what little bit he has left? That's what I think, so I changed the lines accordingly."

-Oh~ So that's how it is. That's pretty impressive Maru!

"It's not really impressive. Are we done here?"

-No.

“There’s more?”

-I feel like I won’t truly get it unless we do it face-to-face.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

-Okay. Did you make notes regarding the characters in your script?

“Somewhat.”

-Can you show me?

“There’s no reason I can’t.”

-Great. I’ll see you tomorrow. See you later, boyfriend~.

The way that Seulmi said ‘boyfriend~’ was how she practiced for the play.

As soon as Maru hung up the call, Dojin shouted,

“You bastard!”

“What’s up with you?”

“You’re going to escape the field by yourself? What about Daemyung? What about me?”

“We were just going over our lines for the play.”

“She said boyfriend!”

“Haa,” Maru let out a long sigh.

How can Maru calm down this fiendish, tunnel-vision animal? He gave a quick chop on Dojin’s Adam’s apple with his hand, sending Dojin back a few steps with a sudden ‘Keuk!’ sound.

“Those who are thirsty should dig their own well. It’s not a saying for nothing.”

“... where’s the well?” Dojin croaked out.

“Somewhere.”

“Damn it!” shouted Dojin.

Maru ignored Dojin’s howls and calmly started reading his script.

* * *

“Han Maru.”

Today is Miso’s off day. After finishing his run, Maru was catching his breath when Joonghyuk called him over. He told Maru that they should speak in private, so they went outside.

“So, what we talked about the other day. You should have an answer now, right?”

"About being the President of the club?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think I'm the right person for the position."

"Alright. I'm sorry if I put any undue pressure on you."

"But, I would like to recommend someone."

"Who?"

"Daemyung. He's a responsible guy who's passionate about acting. I'm certain the others will understand and agree."

"Hmm, I agree with you that he's passionate and responsible, but he lacks the disciplinary leadership to whip the younger incoming students into shape."

"Senior, you're considering Geunseok, right?"

Joonghyuk gave a brief nod and replied,

"He seems to have matured greatly since the beginning, plus he's good at acting. He's dead set on becoming an actor and has the charismatic presence to get the job done for the club."

The stone statue-esque Geunseok versus the round ball of Daemyung. Since Joonghyuk prioritized discipline over every other quality, I guess it's going to be the statue that wins out against the ball.

"Geunseok's a great choice, too. My only concern is that he lacks the motivation and responsibility to carry on."

"Us second years are discussing the same thing. Normally, you guys should decide who the next president should be, but we have a club tradition of upperclassmen actively vouching for and solidifying the next president. I guess we'll have to choose between Geunseok and Daemyung."

"Wait, what about Dojin? I'm certain he can take care of the underclassmen."

"Yeah, sure. He'll probably start hanging out with them. Just look at the current president. That's why this responsibility fell to me."

It was an apt comparison without fault.

Joonghuk continued, "I get what you're saying about the others. Let's go back inside."

"Yes," Maru respectfully replied.

The reason Maru declined the president's title was simple. It didn't make sense to wear the emperor's cape if it couldn't protect the wearer from anything. Plus, constantly monitoring other people didn't fit with Maru's personality.

"How's preparation going for that separate play of yours?" Joonghyuk asked.

"We're constantly practicing, but I'm not sure if it's going well. My ability is so low, but I went ahead and signed myself up for two plays. It's a headache."

"Don't discount your ability. Blue Sky has over 10 seniors who've gone on to become successful actors. Furthermore, in the future, who knows? Maybe Geunseok, Daemyung, and you will be next."

"That would be great. We'd also be fairly well off by that time, too."

"Yeah, that would be great."

The silly, dream-like subject matter was too whimsical to continue with a straight face. They chuckled together before entering the auditorium.

Chapter 125

Maru took out the frayed script. He couldn't help but smile, ruminating on the long journey he undertook when first receiving the script 4 months ago. During the past 4 months, his perception completely changed. It was a pleasure to start with this script once again.

"It's been a long time doing a reading with the script in hand."

"Yeah. I haven't taken it out except for the occasional reference."

Everyone showed the same nostalgic feeling. Today, a week before the preliminary round of the winter nationals, the acting club members returned to where it all began, with the fundamentals of script analysis and reading. It's a script they knew by heart, but a month away from the script rejuvenated the members to review and re-interpret many parts. Every member was confident about his or her character, but minor modifications were still being made to the lines following their creative interpretation. Of course, this was all done under the supervision of Miso.

"Make the lines come alive. Dead words only have meaning in old literature; we're doing a modern play, adjust the dialogue to match the times. Don't use too much current lingo or else the play will get messy and the essence of the drama will disappear," Miso instructed.

"It's like a modern novel," said Daemyung.

Miso followed up Daemyung's words with a "Bingo" and then continued,

"Every play has a script. The script may look different in form, but it's still a part of a novel. If you change the directives to narrative phrases, the words will take the form of a novel. Just like how a cliché-filled romance novel isn't enjoyable, so too if the novel is only reflecting reality. One needs to navigate the line between reality and fantasy. Take Daemyung's high school student character. In reality, there's no such character, but I can understand and relate to the student as if he were real. A logician can probably conjure the most logical character, but the question is whether people are willing to understand or empathize with the character. I don't usually go deep into this stuff... since you're all smart and get my drift, I'll end the lecture here."

Everyone started heavily editing the script.

Since there was only a week left before the preliminaries, the editing was light. Most changes dealt with changing words and lines here and there. However, those little changes drastically changed the feel of the scenes. The members felt the difference after an initial run-through. With greater focus, the members focused their attention on the changed script.

“If we do some more changes tomorrow...” Yoonjung spoke with a twinkle in her eyes.

However, Miso firmly shook her head and stated, “The changes are up to here. We’re not going to change anything starting tomorrow.”

“Why? All the changes seemed to enhance the script. Wouldn’t some additional changes make it even better?”

“That’s a trap. I’ve only allowed you guys to review the script this close to the preliminaries so that we can limit our edits. You’ll never be fully satisfied no matter how many edits we make. Furthermore, this script wasn’t written by you guys. Some simple changes here and there can actually change the entire direction of the play.”

Miso raised her hand towards Maru. Maru handed over his script, which was filled to the brim with character notes and analysis. Seeing these notes, Miso grinned and said to the group,

“We’re only going to edit today. Change your lines if you feel it will benefit the scene. You’ve all lived and breathed the characters on the page, so you should know what works and what doesn’t. I want the lines to be lively yet still stay true to the character and direction of the play. That’s the script we’ll end with and use.”

Liveliness. Lines with breadth and depth.

Maru pondered on how to slightly alter his words to become theatrical lines.

‘Good lines are lines that seem like they would be used in real life but are not.’

Maru started putting red lines on his script. The increasing red lines were as if the script was changing clothes and transforming into something else. He did this late into the night. Focusing on edits until the moon was visible, Maru raised his head and saw that the other members were also peering at the scripts in their hands. Miso’s words made sense. There’s no assurance that everyone would be just as focused as today. There’s a limit to how long one can focus, so getting as much done in a short amount of time was essential.

“So hungry!”

“Wow, I haven’t even studied as hard as this.”

“Oww, my back.”

The members who hit their limit started to slowly open their mouths. It was already 9 PM.”

“You guys hungry?”

“Yes!”

Miso took out a credit card from her wallet.

“Good work. Let’s eat something first before reviewing the changes.”

Miso’s card flew through the air and was caught by Maru with both hands, as if he were praying.

“Some comfort food?”

“Does anyone want anything in particular?”

“I don’t want to wait, so let’s get some rice cakes, sausages, and tempura.”

“I agree!”

Maru nodded his head and got up. There were four fast-food type comfort food places in front of the school, 2 outdoor stalls and 2 attached to the neighborhood department store. The one’s near the department store were probably closed, but Maru expected that the outdoor stalls should still be open.

“I’ll go too,” Daemyung said as he got up to follow Maru.

“Why don’t you take a break and rest?”

“Going by yourself is boring, no?”

Daemyung’s round cheeks rose up and down as he talked. Maru couldn’t help but acknowledge Daemyung’s kindness. As they went out together, they saw that the school was blanketed in darkness. The only visible specks of light were coming from the fifth-floor auditorium.

“It’s kind of scary at night, right?”

“You see it all the time. You’re still scared?”

Maru kept walking in the frigid evening and crossed his arms to keep his hands close to his sides. Daemyung pulled out a pair of gloves and asked,

“Want my gloves?”

“You should put them on. Also, this kind of offering should be done for girls.”

“... ha ha ha.”

“Earlier today, Dojin had another episode about making a girlfriend.”

“He’s always like that. He riles himself up and then becomes pensive and worried about his future. I don’t know what to expect next.”

“That’s Han Dojin alright. Anyways, I wonder what kind of girl will be wooed by you, Daemyung.”

“I-I’m not interested in dating.”

“A doctor’s shot in the arm doesn’t hurt.”

“Huh?”

“It’s similar in truth to what you just said.”

“...”

“Should I try setting something up?”

“No! I really can’t do anything like that. No, don’t do it.”

“You need to hang around girls to feel comfortable around them. I don’t want to force it on you though.”

“That’s... I don’t know what to say to girls. If I’m left alone with other girls in the classroom, I’m lost on what to say.”

“You’re fairly confident when you’re acting with girls.”

“That’s because it’s acting.”

“Why don’t you approach it in that way then?”

“That’s easier said than done. I was born this way, what can I do.”

Seeing Daemyung put on a meek smile as if accepting his fate, Maru couldn’t help but acknowledge that Daemyung was truly a kind soul. Dojin would jump at the chance to talk and get close to girls if Maru offered, but Daemyung would probably shy away and be quiet the entire time.

If Daemyung was just another classmate, Maru wouldn’t have cared so much, but wasn’t Daemyung one of those friends you just wanted to take care of and see happy? Maru surmised that the loneliness and bullying Daemyung faced in elementary and middle school made him shy. Also, he must have been teased to no end for his round body. Those who teased him probably did it without any malice, but it must have been painful for him. His year in the acting club helped him somewhat get out of his shell, but he still acted awkwardly in front of girls.

Maru understood that empty words like ‘have confidence’ or ‘you’re a great guy’ wouldn’t resolve the situation. Daemyung already knew he needed to change, stating the obvious could sometimes drag one further down. It could also drive a person to believe that he or she isn’t capable of doing anything at all.

“If you find that someone, don’t hesitate. You’ll regret it later on.”

“I-if I find someone, I’ll consider it,” Daemyung replied with an embarrassed smile.

* * *

After practice, Geunseok walked Yurim to the bus stop and then turned to leave.

[Get home safely]

The text came from Yurim who had just gotten on the bus a moment ago. Geunseok sent a simple reply, ‘Yeah’, and then scrolled down his past call list, stopping at Suyeon’s number. He pressed call.

"Instructor Suyeon. I just finished."

-Okay, you finished pretty late.

"Yeah, it somehow became like that. Can I go over right now?"

-Coming over to a single lady’s apartment in the late evening is a little too scandalous, no?

“Oh, is it?”

Geunseok enjoyed the quick banter he had with Suyeon. There's nothing like this with Yurim, she just listens. Sometimes Yurim doesn't say a word and just nods her head, agreeing to whatever he said, making him feel like he's talking to a wall.

Suyeon was different, she not only had a pretty face but also charisma. She made him want to indulge her wit and tease her even more. Though she's five years younger than Instructor Miso, she seemed much more mature.

Geunseok recalled feeling out of place when Junmin first introduced him to Suyeon, an actress who often came out on television. Though only playing a minor character, she was part of a popular TV drama series. After the first meeting, Geunseok received a string of practice sessions at Suyeon's apartment. He remembered that Suyeon said she had a home in Seoul but would come down to her apartment in Suwon station whenever she was free.

-Come if you want, but aren't you tired?

"I'm not tired."

-Alright then.

He quickly got into a taxi after ending the call. He felt his chest warming, this is how it should feel when dating someone; it was different with Yurim. Geunseok felt excited just thinking about visiting Suyeon. Her crystal-clear eyes, shapely nose, blemish free skin, and perfect body... She was superior to Yurim in every way. Just looking at Suyeon made him dazed. It also made him want more.

He wondered if she was teaching him purely because he was her understudy student. A sense of desire reared its head within Geunseok. Being with Yurim didn't make him feel like a valued man. He wanted to go one level, no, multiple levels above Yurim and date Suyeon.

Conversations that weren't bland and childish, a lush and mysterious gaze, and a beautiful female body... Geunseok wanted it all. He wondered how to obtain it.

"I need to do something out of the box."

As a first year in high school, Geunseok couldn't contend with her in wealth or social standing. Then what can he put forth? He needed to be an understanding, attractive, and responsible human being. What else? While he was thinking, the thought of his brother and his group of well-known staff and directors passed through his mind.

'Those are all part mine too, right?'

He started to chuckle. A plan was forming.

* * *

"You can't underestimate the power of being well-connected, connections are important. Some problems can be resolved just by knowing a person. However, being well-connected is not tangible. If I can't even pull my own weight, all those connections will sever. Relationships are like that. If one doesn't get to the same level, the relationship will deteriorate. An exception to this is individuals who've connected on a deeper, more humanistic level, but even that means that someone possesses a humanistic trait, which could be seen as that person's skill."

Daemyung stopped what he was saying as he realized he was lecturing on his own personal philosophy of human relationships. This all started when Dojin mentioned that he could probably hang out with a lot of pretty girls if he were to befriend a rich guy. Daemyung tried to give a simple answer but found himself diving into human philosophy.

"Yeah, yeah, you're so knowledgeable so you already have a girlfriend, right?"

"Do whatever you want."

"Oh, omnipotent being! Please excuse this lowly human and from your graciousness bestow upon this poor soul an introduction to the fairer sex."

Everything was circling back to the beginning. Dojin was always singing about dating girls in the past, but he seemed to have calmed down recently. Daemyung thought that Dojin was starting to mature and see the bigger picture, but the recurrence of his 'solo-disease' these past couple days proved otherwise. Dojin either lost patience or gave up on his internal struggle.

"If you're serious about it, then I'll ask," Maru stated.

"Truly?"

"Sure."

"Yes! Yes!! Hey Daemyung, we'll have our blossoming spring time too."

"I-I-I'm fine. I can't imagine doing anything like that."

"Hey, if I go and meet 1:1 it'll be awkward. So, let's make it a 2:2..."

"I don't want to go. You go do what you need to do. I'm going to wait patiently."

"Daemyung, at this rate, we're going to waste half of our youth attending a technical college and fulfilling our military service. You know that the majority of engineering high school students go to technical schools afterwards, right?"

"... but I'm going to major in theater."

"... this guy..."

Dojin's passionate pleas and Daemyung's shy, but firm, retorts continued. They were like water and oil, which may look good together but don't mix. Maru was questionable about whether Dojin's recent fiery passion to get a girlfriend would come to fruition. Maru thought that Taejoonn and Soyeon's success really pushed Dojin off the edge toward a sea of fervent passion.

While Maru was following his friends and observing their animated conversation, he got a call from her.

Chapter 126

"There must be something for you to call first."

- What, you don't like it?

"No. I like it."

- You always say you like it no matter what I do.

“It’s better than not liking it. So, what’s going on? I’m sure it’s not calling to see me at this late hour.”

- I’m going to have to miss practice tomorrow. It’s the anniversary of my father passing away, so I’m going to spend the day with my mom.

“Oh, right. Should I come visit and bring you something?”

- Yeah right. I know you don’t want to come.

She was right. Maru wanted to be by her side, but he had no plans to visit her house and concern himself into her family matters. It was too early for that. Plus, it would be better for each family member to fill the hole that their past father left in their hearts. Maru decided to just pray for her from afar.

- You’re not misunderstanding what I said, right? I didn’t mean that you didn’t care.

“I understood you, don’t worry. Spend a good day with your mother.”

-... Okay.

“Don’t cry too much.”

- Who’s crying? I’m used to it now. It just feels hollow.

“Sure, it’s good to hear that you’re not going to cry.”

Maru could picture her gently biting down on her lower lip on the other end. Even as an adult, she always cried on the anniversary day of her father’s passing. Even when so much time had passed, she’d cry like a broken fountain. He understood that all this came from her inner tenderness and love, she was truly a warm person at heart. Her tears would roll down like a little child’s, proving the pureness of her emotions.

Being a confident woman, she never wanted to show this side of her to others. Maru always loved that she could be such a responsible, mature woman on the outside but possess a sense of tenderness and innocence on the inside.

Immediately after hanging up the phone...

“Who is it? Who is it, huh?”

Maru didn’t know how to respond. He said a few words to placate Dojin and misdirect, but Dojin was still glancing at Maru with doubt.

“It was a girl, right? Right?”

Dojin sure had an active sixth sense.

Maru just shrugged.

* * *

“Come in.”

Geunseok gulped down hard as soon as he heard the door opening. He saw Suyeon wearing skin-tight orange leggings and a loose tank top that showed off her midriff. He could see a yoga mat on the floor and a Yoga instructor giving instructions on TV.

- Stretch out your legs, Now take a deep breath and...

He followed her into the living room while listening to the instructions softly coming out of the TV. Suyeon pointed toward the sofa with her chin and told him to sit.

"Let me just finish this part."

"Okay."

He felt that Suyeon's smile was mysteriously sexy, the sexiness of her smile was amplified by her clothes. On top of the smooth mat, Suyeon sat with her legs stretched forward and bent her upper body downwards. Her body was like a flip phone, completely folding down. Her chest was touching her legs and her hipbone was showing its oddly attractive contours. In this position, her butt looked as tight as fully expanded water balloons. All of this was accentuated from the skin-tight leggings, he could even catch a glimpse of her underwear. Geunseok couldn't take his eyes off of her. Utter fascination. Yurim's skinny body couldn't compare to this developed female body.

"Phew~"

The ridges on her back smoothed out as she slowly exhaled. He could see her toned and developed muscles come alive with each small action. She unraveled and started sitting on top of the backs of her feet. On TV, the words 'Downward Dog' rang out from the instructor. Suyeon bent down again and stretched her upper body with the palm of her hands far in front of her on the ground. With her back bent in this position, he could see her top open up and see the black lining of her bra. Geunseok balled his fists on top of his knees and squeezed. He found that just looking at this developed woman excited him. He started staring at her feet when she arched her back and lifted her chin towards the ceiling. As he moved his gaze upward, he couldn't see a single wrinkle or imperfection on her beautiful face.

His throat started burning, he wanted to drink some water but was unwilling to get up. He wasn't stupid enough to miss this sight for a drink of water. He wished that his eyes could record so that he could store this sight forever.

Suyeon continued with her yoga exercise for a further 30 minutes. Looking at her flex her body this way and that, he didn't realize time flying by.

"Phew. Geunseok."

"Y-Yeah?"

His voice came out weak and cracked, as he suddenly spoke after being enraptured.

"Are you sleepy?"

"O-Oh, no. Did you need something?"

"Can you help out?"

“Huh?”

“Press down here.”

Suyeon laid down on her stomach and gestured at her ankles. Geunseok nodded his head, slowly came up to her, and gently pushed down. He felt her lively vigor from his fingertips, her skin felt firm yet supple. He could tell that her toned, developed legs came from rigorous training.

“Thanks.”

She smiled briefly and then started to curve her back and lift her upper body. He couldn't help but appreciate her flexibility and upper body strength. Her back arched like a bow that had its string pulled. He marveled at the beauty of her curved back and the firmness of the two mounds right below.

“Can you press down a little above my calves?”

“Huh?”

“Come up a little more.”

He nodded his head and slowly brought his hands upward. He could have lifted his hands and placed them on top of her calves, but he slowly slid his hands up her knees as if he was giving her a massage instead.

“Hahat~ That tickles.”

Luckily, Suyeon didn't seem like she minded. His lips were parched and dry, a sense of nervousness and anticipation arose. She started raising her upper body once more. She didn't lift herself as high this time, but he was still able to see the muscles showing right underneath her shirt rippling.

“This time, push down here.”

Geunseok hesitated. The place she was pointing to was just above her butt. It was where her orange leggings and open skin met, this was pretty much the upper part of her butt.

“Here?” he asked at a loss.

“What? Are you being self-conscious? Because you're a guy?” she quipped.

Suyeon gave a quick smirk. Hearing her playful tone of voice, Geunseok felt a little slighted. “No problem,” he said and quickly placed his hands where she instructed. He could feel the softness underneath his fingers. A feeling of wanting to touch everywhere arose in him.

She refocused on her yoga and carried out the instructions on TV, her face didn't show any noticeable emotion. As she was going through the motions, he started lowering the position of his hands. This wasn't overconfidence. He felt that the mood was leaning in this direction, as if there was some mutual understanding that he could go lower.

As if to prove this fact, Suyeon continued like nothing happened. She actually started tightening her butt even more, as if saying ‘how about this’.

Geunseok had been putting a lot of downward force. What he felt was not the flexing of the hips but a part that had its own bouncy quality, it was soft and somewhat nonconforming. A bunch of erotic thoughts crossed his mind, he had to take a few meditative breaths to calm his racing heart. This was probably the finish line. She probably only wanted to go this far as a coquettish tease. If he took a further step from this point, it would just make him a pervert. He told himself that he should enjoy this moment, within the boundaries.

He couldn't stop his deepening infatuation for her. He never knew that women were such attractive beings. He couldn't even remember all the girls he dated in middle school. No, wait, could those relationships even be called dating?

His relationship with Yurim... was definitely different since there was some emotional support and dependence involved. Yet, he couldn't get away from the childish feel and nature of the relationship. Yurim was the type of girl that he got tired of soon. It was comfortable and nice having her around, but he wouldn't miss her if she wasn't around. She was that type of existence for him.

"Thanks," she said with a smile. He felt something dash through his stomach as he watched her gently lift away her slightly damp hair.

"One moment. Let me quickly wash up."

"You can take your time."

"It's so late already. Won't your folks be worried? It's already 11pm."

"It's okay. My parents trust me."

"Oh? Okay then."

She playfully squinted one eye and walked to the bathroom. A little later, he could hear the sound of water flowing out. He started imagining Suyeon washing her sweaty body. While in the middle of his daydream, he took out his phone and flipped it open. Of course, it was Yurim.

"Yeah."

- I got home. You?

"I'm home too. I'm actually getting ready to sleep."

- Already?

"What do you mean already? It's 11pm. It's time to sleep."

- Oh, okay. I guess you can't talk right now then.

"Sorry. I'm a little tired today. I'll make up for it tomorrow and listen to whatever you want to say."

- Don't say sorry. It's fine. Go to bed then. Dream of me.

"Yeah. I hope I dream of you too."

As soon as he hung up, he took out the battery. She couldn't even read between the lines. He realized that girls who put guys on a pedestal were the most boring ones. There needs to be some tension, some

give and go. Yurim didn't have any of this. It was kind of a waste to just let her go, so he decided to keep her around for now.

After waiting a while longer, Suyeon stepped out of the bathroom wearing a gown. She was drying her hair with a towel when she sat down on the sofa with her legs showing between the split in her gown. There were a variety of cosmetic products on the coffee table in front of the sofa.

A wonderful fragrance wafted from her body. He could see the drops of water on her chest, where the gown opened up in a V-shape. He felt a sudden urge to touch her.

"Our instruction time is tomorrow, but why did you want to see me today?"

"I had a few things to ask you."

"Hmm, few things? Okay. Ah! Geunseok, can you hand me that?"

Geunseok, quickly grabbed the purple glass bottle of skin lotion and handed it to her. She started dabbing skin lotion on her face with a cotton pad.

"How's the acting club?"

"We edited the script a little."

"This late? With just a week left?"

"Yeah."

"Wow, instructor Miso must really have a lot of faith in you guys. You can't do that with people you don't fully trust."

Suyeon twisted her torso and put her silky white legs on top of Geunseok's lap, his body slightly shook.

"You see that body cream there?"

"... yeah."

"Can you apply that on my legs? It's gotten so cold recently that my legs have been drying up. I'm not sure if my stockings will survive."

She had on a wide smile.

* * *

"I'll take off now."

"Next time call earlier. Come by when you specifically need something. It's not good to waste time like this when you're so busy."

"Okay, I'll do that."

She smiled and waved goodbye. Geunseok bowed and left the apartment. As soon as the door closed, Suyeon started laughing and said aloud,

"A little child trying to act like a man."

When he had slightly lowered his hands onto her butt, she had to hold in her laughter. He must have felt that he was going with the flow, but for her, it was like dealing with a curious little child. This is why she disliked young kids. If you spend a little time with them, they suddenly think whatever they want.

“Still, he’s not half bad look-wise, so I’ll let it pass.”

He had wide shoulders and was over 180cm tall. Outwardly, he had some handsome features, but he was a little kid inside. She thought it was at least fun to play around with him, but not enough fun to do it for nothing. She received money from Junmin to help out and guide him, but this wasn’t reason enough.

“How can I benefit from this?”

She walked toward the sofa, sat down, and started putting cotton balls between her toes. She decided that pink would be good today. After giving herself a pedicure, she opened her laptop on her lap. She went onto the actor information exchange website and clicked around until she arrived at the independent film page.

“Now this is a man.”

A picture popped up from her screen. It was a picture of a guy with the director and staff members all happily smiling at the camera. Suyeon tilted her head and focused on the guy.

“I want him.”

Hong Geunsoo.

She accepted Geunsook’s childish ways for one reason, to meet Geunsoo. If she were to be introduced by Junmin, there would be too much of a business vibe. There were probably other women who tried that way. But what if she approached him through his brother?

“Let’s think about this more later.”

Geunsook’s feelings and self-confidence may take a hit, but she didn’t care. It was nearing the end of her promise with Junmin anyway. It was until the end of the year, so her obligation to spend time with him was essentially finished.

“Goodnight, my darling~”

Puckering her lip, she blew a kiss at the screen. Suyeon was a woman who knew what she wanted and what she had to do to get it, not to mention men. Geunsoo would be able to fulfill her in bed and also in business. Of course, she wanted him.

“That came out well,” she said as she looked at the sparkling nail polish on her toes.

Chapter 127

“You’re alone today?” Yoojin asked as she approached Maru, who was seated near a side curtain.

She didn’t see the girl who was always next to Maru, or was Maru always next to her?

“Something came up.”

“What happened?”

“The anniversary of her father’s passing.”

“Oh.”

Silence ensued for a moment. Yoojin scratched her cheek as she sat next to Maru.

“Did I ask something that I shouldn’t have?”

“Just don’t say anything in front of her. Anyways, did you finish editing your lines?”

“For now. I wanted to go over it with you.”

She opened up her script and suppressed a yawn, she had stayed up late last night to review a production from one of her favorite actresses.

“You should try getting a nap in if you’re tired.”

“How can I sleep here.”

“Sometimes, it helps to just close and rest your eyes,” Maru said as he started to slowly close his eyes. There was nothing to lose in trying. Warmth started to come back into his fatigued eyes. After about five minutes, he felt his mind clear.

“Not too bad, right?”

“Yeah. I thought sleep was the only answer.”

“If your body is well rested, it’s not too difficult to stay up a couple days in a row. Though near the end, you probably won’t even know if someone is carrying you on their back,” Maru said while shrugging his shoulders.

Yoojin stretched out her arms and gave a big yawn before focusing on her script.

“What’s your thoughts on Seulmi? What type of person is she?”

“Seulmi? Like a heroine figure. More importantly though is the question how she became like that.”

Hmm? Yoojin gave a surprised but interested expression, she’d heard the exact same words before. When she visited and asked a more senior actress in the industry, she also mentioned that Yoojin should deeply consider the character’s background rather than simply interpret the character on preconceived notions. The only member in this amateur acting club to give her similar advice was Maru. Although everyone here wanted to become a professional actor, they were still just a bunch of inexperienced high school students.

“Wow, that’s really deep and insightful.”

“I just heard it from somewhere.”

“Can I see your script?”

Maru handed her his script. After glancing at Maru briefly, she started scanning the pages. She exclaimed quietly.

'What's all this?'

There were two scripts attached, the original and a photocopy filled to the brim with his notes.

"This is all character analysis?"

"It's not all analysis. Some are thoughts that arose in the moment, there was nothing else to do anyways."

Yoojin thought 'there's nothing better to do so you do this?' She set down her own script and started focusing on Maru's. His analysis and notes on Chuljin covered the character's experiences from youth to high school, his interaction with various people throughout his life, the influences he received from parents who weren't even in the script, and the impact from his surrounding environment. She couldn't help but exclaim at the thoroughness of Maru's analysis, especially because the play was a one-off trial.

"Isn't this a waste of energy?"

"I don't know much about acting or theater, so there's no such thing as waste. Everything helps me grow and develop as an actor."

Nothing is wasted on something you don't know. Yoojin took Maru's words to heart.

"Can I read this a little longer?"

"Yeah, feel free," Maru answered.

He closed his eyes like he did before, it looked like he was imagining something rather than sleeping. Yoojin briefly looked at that face before falling into a seemingly new world in Maru's script.

'Even his writing is neat.'

The script was jam packed with neatly written notes. Each note was well organized without a single crooked line. She felt these notes fit well with the sharp, keen impression Maru gave off. Maru's exhaustive analysis on the character Chuljin was flawless. She couldn't believe that someone who said that he wasn't knowledgeable about acting could do such thorough analysis. Flipping through page after page, her astonishment only grew.

'If I'm not careful, I might get pushed out.'

The character in a play changes based on the actor, which illustrates the importance of an actor's ability. This is the reason why some people say 'so-and-so would have been so much better in that role' when watching a TV show. The character Chuljin in this play was front and center with many lines. With such heavy usage and presence, the actor who portrays him will inevitably be scrutinized. A high level of scrutinization also meant that the actor would receive a commensurate level of recognition and reward.

Yoojin was confident in herself. Among the amateur acting group members, she felt that none could match her level. However, her firm confidence was betrayed by the presence of his script. She didn't feel nervous. Far from it, she felt a sense of anticipation. A rival. She firmly believed that development came after overcoming struggles and beating rivals.

The characters Seulmi and Chuljin would be conversing line after line to each other throughout the play. If Chuljin shines, Seulmi would be pushed off to the side.

A fiery fire ignited in Yoojin's eyes and her excitement grew. She heard that current professional actors would be attending this trial play. Instructor Ganghwan mentioned that an important figure would not be able to make the play, but in her eyes, all the people who were attending had standing and value.

She heard that 70% of the audience would be from the general public, 20% from the professional actors' crowd, and the rest from those who were in the industry. She had her eyes set on this last group. Who would show up for no reason? They were coming because it related to their work.

The amateur's play would be on the final day of the main play, which kicked off the celebratory opening of the Myungdong Art Theater. On that final night, current actors in theater and cinema, celebrity actors on TV, and hot new actors from smaller theaters would all be in attendance to celebrate the main play's curtain call. They'd also be the audience that would watch the amateur's play.

All 12 members of the amateur acting group were picked from separate high school acting clubs. Though they were set to perform a one-off play, no member took it lightly. Even the famous director Lee Junmin would often come and watch the practices. Though he often came to visit Ganghwan, he would also come unannounced and observe practice sessions.

What did this signify?

This space was more than just a practice and learning facility to give amateurs a chance to hone their skills. It was also a training ground that allowed directors and agents to recognize up and coming stars in the field. There were probably even more savvy industry people keeping a close eye on the college amateur facility. All the members of that acting group were already semi-pro.

'I like acting. It's fun. So, I want to succeed even more.'

Do I need to always be fearful, cautious, and calculative when chasing my dream?

Does someone in the arts always have to live that way?

If an actor becomes commercially active, does his or her value drop?

Yoojin didn't think so.

She recalled an actress who started in theater and later became a superstar after starring in a movie. The actress wasn't that well known even in the theater scene, she was an actress when the curtains went up but worked part-time when away from the stage. Once she found fame through her movie role, she started taking every commercial marketing opportunity offered.

The long hours spent crafting and honing her skills in the theater allowed the public to recognize and acknowledge her acting chops in her movie role. However, after chasing lucrative commercial opportunities one after the other, the actress was often attacked online as being too greedy and shallow. Whenever Yoojin saw these negative online comments, she disagreed. Why are people in the arts singled out as greedy when they take advantage of opportunities presented to them?

There was a turning point in public perception for the actress. After shooting commercials one after the other, she later starred in an independent film and brought herself back into the forefront of the public

eye. There was no pre-marketing or advertisement about her participation in the film, which was made by recent college graduates. People started recognizing her only after they saw her appear on screen in the film.

She then started an amazing film career that highlighted her wide breadth and exceptional acting skill. She appeared in a movie dealing with homosexuality, a film about the corruption in modern corporations, and even a B-rated horror film. She didn't look back on the romance role and genre that initially made her into a star. Yoojin watched all this with amazement. In a specific hair-raising and eye-opening moment, Yoojin decided that this was to be her 'dream' too.

At a later point in the actress' career, she gave an interview and stated,

- I don't have to worry about money anymore, nor do I feel that I need to conform to other's expectations. I may not be able to do cosmetic commercials, but I can choose any role or shoot any film I want. My early life plans and decisions led to success, so I'd like to take this opportunity to say something to the detractors. Eat X.

Even though the magazine used an 'X' instead of the actual word, Yoojin recognized the phrase and had the word 'shit' echo in her mind. She re-read the article countless times. From that day forward, whenever she was asked if she looked up to someone, she replied confidently without a shred of doubt. First were her parents who raised such a finicky daughter and second was the actress who gave Yoojin her dream.

Yoojin didn't have an exact role or specific project in mind. However, she was motivated to earn as much money as possible for her future. Therefore, she needed to show her value now.

Your drama will shine if you cast me.

That's how it'll be.

'I'm not going to be pushed around.'

Yoojin gave a refreshing smile, she welcomed her fellow actor preparing so thoroughly on his end. The tension wouldn't be there if her counterpart were to be underprepared or less motivated. She believed that one could only shine if there was a sense of nervousness and eager anticipation amongst the actors who worked together on a play.

Though she couldn't base his acting level purely on his script, she knew from watching him practice that he was not an unskilled actor. He sometimes showed signs of inexperience, but she could see his potential blossoming and then exploding onto the acting scene in the future. Since Ganghwan and Junmin often focused their attention on Maru, she knew her thoughts weren't unfounded.

"Thanks. I got a lot out of it."

She handed over the script to Maru, who opened his eyes.

"You look happy."

"Yeah?"

She replied with a lilting voice and an eyebrow raised. She then picked up her own script. She understood that he was putting his all into the play. She needed to cooperate and synergize with her counterpart with as much effort and focus.

"I want you to know, I'm the main."

"... fine."

"I'm going to steal the show and make an impression, so you need to do well too. You need to do well in order for me to shine."

She turned and left the confused Maru.

This one-off play and nationals.

The time to shine was right in front of her.

* * *

Yoojin stood in the middle of the stage and read her lines with a confident, loud voice. There were some who stopped what they were doing to look over, Maru also took a glance. She had a clear voice and perfect diction. He felt a sense of competition, having someone with such exceptional skills would also help him develop.

"The main, huh."

He felt like a general who received a declaration of war.

Maru got up from his seat. He thought today would be uneventful since his girlfriend was absent, but he found an unexpected source that set off his competitive spirit.

'Sorry, but there's no one who likes to lose.'

He felt the motivation to act.

He wanted to thoroughly enjoy his time in this field before focusing on money. This sense of enjoyment spread throughout his being and turned into an unstoppable force.

Maru already received the go ahead from his past life's wife. She already said yes, so what's there to worry about. He would firmly show the experience and understanding he accumulated in his past 45 years.

The wisdom and experience gained over such a long period of time is also an influential part of acting. If he were to put on 'fake smiles and tears', he could take his acting craft a step further.

Maru stood off at a distance from Yoojin.

He then started reciting his lines to the empty audience seats.

* * *

"Hmm."

Ganghwan looked at the stage with his hand supporting his chin. It was a practice like any other day, but there was one person taking the spotlight, Yoojin. It was as if she was competing with someone. He felt it was good to see.

“Is she thinking of someone?”

The stage is where an actor develops, it widens one’s spectrum and heightens one’s confidence. This is why everyone wants to be on stage. No matter if it’s the main or minor role, everyone benefits and takes away something by being in that space.

And another reason.

There’s something that allows an actor to develop.

That something is the counterpart, the actor on the opposite side.

Older plays often had a hero-like figure as the main character. The hero would struggle and overcome hardships and shine in front of adversity. However, the hero’s shine is incomparable when standing next to the sun, that’s why a shadow is needed.

Every hero needs an opposing rival.

Just as light plays off dark, having opposite, competing forces is essential.

Ganghwan didn’t know why, but it seemed that Yoojin had Maru on her mind. That influence pushed her to amplify her strengths, her clear diction that often-lacked emotion was now full of emotion. In the industry, the phenomenon when a character suddenly comes alive was commonly referred to as ‘attached’. Today, Yoojin was definitely ‘attached’. If someone were to come in and observe just for the day, they would think that she was the main character who would carry the play.

“You’ve gone off and ignited the fire in someone, but where are you, Maru?”

Maru’s acting was fairly good, he had a way of capturing the audience’s attention. His acting training and short performances in Anyang became something like a nutrient for his development. Now, Ganghwan thought, all Maru needed was to absorb that nutrient.

Maru recently changed.

Previously, he was realistic and calculative, but now, he seemed more relaxed and able to see the forest for the trees. Ganghwan, who saw Maru daily, could feel the change. Teacher Moonjoong’s must have also been a large influence.

The stage was set for change.

There was now a motive for that change.

“Good. Good. It’s a great environment for growth.”

Everything now depended on Maru.

Chapter 128

Her friends were waving to her with concerned faces. These were the same friends who she would laugh out loud with while walking together on any other day. Seeing their concerned expressions, she couldn't help but feel supported and loved. She was blessed to have people who cared for her.

"See you tomorrow," she said as she got on the bus.

She hadn't gone straight home after school in a while. Even when she didn't have scheduled practice sessions, she often visited the acting club room after school to hang out with other members. However, today, she was quietly going back home.

Before the bus took off, she leaned onto one of the poles. She thought of Maru. If he was here, he would have held her hand without any word.

'How did this relationship move so quickly.'

He was a weirdo who went up to her and asked her name, then there was the time he professed his feelings for her, and now he was someone that gave her comfort whenever she thought of him. She cried a little last night after speaking to him over the phone. When he said she shouldn't cry, she felt a sense of release and cried.

The front of her nose started tingling again. She always cried like a fountain on the anniversary day of her father's passing. She thought she was okay, but her eyes were truer to her feelings.

'Eek.'

She felt that she'd start crying immediately, so she forced herself to smile. Taking out her cell phone, she called her mother.

"Mom, I'm heading home. I'm thinking of buying some barbeque chicken. What do you think?"

- I've already bought some.

"Oh, really?"

- Buy some strawberry milk.

"Okay."

They didn't have anything special planned for the anniversary. Her father enjoyed barbeque chicken and strawberry milk, so they decided to eat those at home today. Though it's the anniversary of his passing, they rarely spoke about him. This was a silently acknowledged rule between her and her mother. Once they started talking about their father... a river of tears would burst out.

'Mom really cries a river when she cries.'

Her mother was usually very proper and strict. When she's speaking with an editor, she even sounds intimidating. However, whenever her father was brought up, her mother would wither and become lifeless. It was as if her soul had left her body to float around outside. That's why she tried to avoid bringing up her father. It's his anniversary day, but any mention of him was avoided as much as possible.

She got off the bus and bought some strawberry milk from the corner convenience store. She carried the milk in a plastic bag in one hand while stuffing her other in her pocket. While the plastic bag made a crinkling noise whenever it swayed, she started humming a tune.

Um-mm...heung. It was a tune she hummed since she was a little child. Her father was the source. Whenever her father was focused on something, he would hum this tune. It wasn't a popular nursery rhyme or song, but it was a tune most people would feel familiar with. Her father's habits had now become his daughter's. She walked up to the elevator humming the tune but stopped immediately once inside. The tune reminded her of her father. She often saw her mom humming the tune while looking out the window and inevitably crying.

"I'm back," she said aloud after opening the door.

Her mother, who was seemingly wrestling with her laptop in the living room, looked towards her and smiled.

"And the strawberry milk?"

"Of course, I bought it."

"Then let's eat dinner."

Today was the anniversary day of her father's passing.

It was barbeque chicken and strawberry milk day.

And.

It was the day to hold back tears.

* * *

"Is that your plan? Tell the teacher everything? You think our homeroom teacher will understand any of this? He'll probably see this as an opportunity to get us all suspended. But you're saying we should tell him everything? Aren't you even considering what would happen to our class representative?"

"Hey, why are you bringing up the class representative? Why do I need to be considerate towards him?"

"Considerate? When did you become so childish?"

"Lee Seulmi. Watch what you say."

"I should have known once I saw you befriending and hanging around those guys. This selfishness is the real you, right?"

"Me? You think I'm selfish? That fucker is the one who's selfish!" Maru shouted while huffing and puffing.

Yoojin shrunk back inside. For a brief moment, Yoojin broke out of character after seeing his fiery stare. If it was the character Seulmi, she wouldn't have backed down. Actually, Seulmi would have instantly replied back. However, for that brief moment, Yoojin broke character and felt her body stiffen from Maru's stare. Once she realized what was going on, Ganghwan had already said, "Stop there."

"Since it's not the actual run, we'll stop here. Everyone, gather around."

Yoojin bitterly smiled. The instructor recognized what happened quickly, there was no way that anything would pass by his discerning eyes. She felt exposed from the quick recognition and action from Ganghwan, she felt embarrassed and a little ashamed.

"Is it because bully #3 is not here? Why are all the bullies without energy today?"

"There's a break in the flow of our lines, so I don't think we can help it."

"That's why I've been reading bully #3's lines for you guys."

"C'mon instructor, it's different hearing the lines in a man's voice. Plus, your voice is so deep."

Everyone started giggling, Yoojin included. Ganghwan conducted practice and his instruction in a relaxed, comfortable way. He gave precise feedback when needed but was mostly easy-going during practice.

"Yeah, I guess so? Still, let's focus. There's exactly 29 days left. Let's be more careful and focused."

"Yes, instructor."

"And Maru..." he said while gesturing with his finger to come forward. Maru, who was in the back, walked to the front.

"Don't put too much force into your acting. Are you trying to pick a fight?"

"It's the scene where we fight, though."

"It's a good portrayal, but you need to understand where you both are emotionally. Although you're both angry at the situation with the student representative, you were both happily walking back from the cafeteria in the previous scene. There needs to be a reason for such a powerful show of emotion. This is especially true for the character Chuljin, who's been on friendly terms with everyone. Obviously, Chuljin goes astray towards the latter half of the play, but we're only at the transition phase right now. If you go full on angry right now, then it'll have to be much worse later on. This play isn't that twisted and cynical."

"I understand."

"You did well to hold back when I told you to do so before, but you've seemed to have reverted to old habits recently. If you show strong emotions at logical times then there's no worry, but if you're getting swept up in the heat of the moment then you're overdoing it. You have to better control your emotions."

"It's difficult."

"Anyone can scream or cry. But few people can cry while smiling or laugh while crying. If you can convey sadness with a blank face, then you can say that you've become an acting god. Let's go slowly. Develop the character and then release your emotions. Okay?"

"Yes, I'll do that," Maru answered as he nodded his head in agreement.

Yoojin was jealous of Maru. Ganghwan had two ways of giving advice. He could go with the flow and comfortably speak as he did with the bully characters or be detailed in his explanation to an individual, as he did with Maru. When he was largely unsatisfied, he would go with the flow and give general feedback, but when he gave specific feedback, it meant that he was satisfied with everything else outside that one detail.

"And Lee Yoojin."

"Yes?"

"Don't get surprised. Do you understand what I mean?"

"... yes."

"For the most part, you did well. But you were definitely losing to Maru right now. He can't control his emotions well right now, but it's also a problem if you can't appropriately react to that. If you guys can match each other's level of emotional output then there could be some positive synergy, but just now you lost the initiative, causing your character to wilt. Your character was domineering over Maru just a moment ago. Once you lost and got pushed into a corner, I couldn't enjoy your character anymore."

"Just now... It was my fault."

"If you know then I won't waste words. You're smart, so you should understand what I mean. And student representative!"

"Yes!"

"You little... come over here."

Ganghwan put on a playful face while shaking a leg. The actor playing the role of student representative gave a smile and walked forward.

"Aren't you motivated? You need to ignite a fire in your stomach and bring it outward. You saw those two next to you, right? Han Maru and Lee Yoojin. If you're not careful, your main character role will become a side character to those two. You know how important your character is, right? Your character is supposed to ramp up the anxiety and nervousness level. But you're standing back and losing? You can't do that. You can't! You should be the one oppressing those two. Take that to heart when you're acting. Act as if only you can shine in this play."

"Yes!"

"And..."

Yoojin drifted away from the ongoing conversation and started to reflect on what happened between her and Maru. His stare was unsettling. When he started ramping up emotionally and shouted, she froze. She felt as though he was going to rush at her at any moment. The acting seemed too real. If this were easy, then anyone could be an actor.

Acting is a form of lying, an actor portrays a character in the character's made up personality within a fictitious world, but one cannot truly impress by just lying. Only when a lie is wrapped up in some truth does it become effective. Then what truth could she find. The answer was emotion.

She needed to wield her emotions to transform a lie into a truth. Maru excellently showcased this transformation.

'Alright. So, you want to compete, huh.'

She became determined. To combat the intensity of Maru's emotions, she had to face him with as much intensity. Until Ganghwan says, "Don't overdo it," she was planning to meet Maru's force with force.

* * *

'The heat's certainly rising.'

Maru felt Yoojin's glaring stare, he waved his hand towards her in response. He meant it as a gesture to stop staring so intently, but she must have taken it a different way. Her pretty forehead scrunched up, forming deep lines. He felt guilty for no apparent fault of his own.

"Maru."

"Yeah."

The actor who played the student representative called Maru. His name is Kang Baekjoon. Wearing frameless glasses and having wavy hair, this amateur acting group member was like the real life Chuljin. Though there were only 12 members in the acting group, there were already some cliques that formed, but Baekjoon was able to join any clique fairly easily.

"Should I be more abrasive?"

"I don't think the instructor meant for you to go in that direction."

"I know. It's just that I need to act a little psychotic, but it's too difficult. If I yell and scream, won't it seem like a couple of screws are loose?"

"That might work."

"So, you know the scene when I get hit by the bullies and you come in and speak to me like you knew something like this would happen."

"U-huh."

"Can you push me at that moment? I'm not exactly sure where we'll end up on the stage, but can you try doing that without blocking the audience's view?"

"Okay."

The placement and pathing of the characters were not set yet. Outside of the larger storyline, Ganghwan's teaching style left much of these smaller details up to the actors to resolve. Each of the actors were responsible to find the most effective pathing and positioning on stage.

"Hey Yoojin!" Baekjoon called out.

The homeroom teacher was also a main character, but his scenes rarely overlapped with these three other main characters. Maru, Yoojin, and Baekjoon gathered together.

"Why did you call?"

"Let's figure out the positioning and pathing for this scene."

Baekjoon grabbed her shoulders and moved her around the stage like a mannequin before putting her at a spot in the corner. She crossed her arms and stuck out her lips.

"You want me to just stand right here?"

"I need to see how it looks, so just indulge me for a moment."

"Ugh, just hurry it up."

"Okay."

Maru looked over and smiled. Baekjoon knew how to interact with others without making them feel uncomfortable.

"Let's say our lines and start moving around. You both cool with that?"

Maru nodded his head and stood next to Yoojin. They flatly stated their lines since they were focused on pathing. Maru slipped past Yoojin and stood in front of Baekjoon.

"Why are you looking at me like that? You think this is funny, huh? A fucker like you will never know how miserable it is for me."

Baekjoon read his lines as if he was fighting through tears. Maru felt awkward, as he had flatly stated his lines before this sudden outpouring from Baekjoon. It seemed like Ganghwan's advice made an immediate impact on him.

"Should I push you at this moment?"

"Yeah."

"How hard?"

"A little hard, at least with enough force to push my shoulder backwards."

Maru put his hand on Baekjoon's shoulder and gave a strong push. Baekjoon suddenly cried out, "Woah woah!" as he tumbled on the ground.

"... a little less force," Baekjoon said as he stood up.

Maru looked down at his hand.

'My body has certainly gotten stronger.'

"Your thick forearms are definitely not just for show. You surprised me there. It felt like I was lifted into the air," Baekjoon said as he chuckled.

Controlling his strength, Maru pushed again. It must have been the right amount of force as Baekjoon took a couple steps back and then delivered his final lines. He then exited the stage. As he came back on stage, Baekjoon gave Maru a thumbs up.

"This should work out, right?"

"As long as the instructor okays it."

"Alright, I'll go ask him right now. Thanks Yoojin!"

Baekjoon happily skipped towards Ganghwan.

Maru felt that he was seeing the real-life version of Chuljin and smiled.

Chapter 129

"Alright, we're done!"

"I've always felt this, but it feels like our instructor is always the most excited when practice is over."

"Of course. This is work. You'll understand once you get older. No matter how much you like something, once you start accepting another person's money for it, it becomes harder."

"Like forcing yourself to do homework?"

"Bingo."

Everyone started laughing at Ganghwan's words. 9:30pm. The amateur acting practice session finally concluded.

"How did you all feel about today's practice? Have you all gotten used to your characters?"

"Not yet. I've definitely memorized all my lines, but it's not coming out the way that I want."

"I get confused with the character I'm playing in my school's acting club. Our school's play is also set in a school, so I get some parts confused between the two."

"It's difficult since we have to decide ourselves on a whole host of things."

Everyone started voicing out their frustrations. Ganghwan nodded in understanding.

"As you guys mentioned, doing two plays at the same time is difficult. Even a seasoned veteran chooses to do only one play at a time if he or she wants to really get into character, but you guys are young and trying to do two at the same time. Obviously, it's difficult."

The members who related to his words started nodding their heads in agreement. Maru nodded his head with the others but didn't feel confused like the others. Strangely, he found it easy to absorb and become each character. When focused, like flipping a switch, he could put on the character like how one puts on clothes and truly become that character.

Maru's main concern was that the scattered practice times may affect the overall plays themselves. His acting was still unrefined. Until he proves to himself that he can do one role and play perfectly, he'll keep feeling this way.

"Still, your difficult experiences now will bear fruit later. Being young means what! It means your mind can absorb everything, right? Get to my age and you become a sad animal that only has the mental capacity to do one thing at a time."

"Instructor, you're only 31 this year."

"That's right. You're not even old and yet you keep saying you are."

"Boo~"

The girls cupped their hands around their mouths as they started booing. Ganghwan tried to retort by saying, "The difference between people in their teens and in their 30's is like heaven and earth," but the students were having none of it.

"Man, youngsters these days."

Ganghwan couldn't help but laugh out loud after saying a commonly spoken phrase from the truly older crowd.

"Does anyone need to get back soon?"

Everyone shook their head because they knew what was coming next.

"Then, should we get something to eat?"

"Sounds good!"

Since 7pm, they moved around for two and a half hours. At an age where anything seems edible when hunger strikes, the students were famished after expending their mental and physical effort during practice. Even Ganghwan spent a lot of energy giving advice.

"My wallet is not as happy as it used to be, so let's be satisfied with hamburgers."

"What about fries?"

"I can cover up to there. I'm deciding on the menu though."

They weren't the type of students that would let him off that easy.

"I want a shrimp burger!"

"I want a marinated beef burger!"

"I want that new burger that just came out!"

After seeing the talkative, elated faces of his students, Ganghwan resigned himself to his fate and walked outside while shaking his head.

"Hey, I need a helper! One of you needs to help me carry the food back."

As he was gesturing for volunteers, Maru got up and followed him out. As they were leaving the hall, they heard, "And ice cream too!"

"They said ice cream too."

"In this freezing weather... strawberry or chocolate flavored ice cream?"

"Let's go with strawberry."

"Isn't it usually chocolate?"

"I like strawberry."

It's what she liked too.

Both entered the fast food restaurant next to the theater. As the restaurant was situated at the heart of Myungdong street, it was crowded inside. They weaved through the crowd and put in an order before sitting down.

"Your expressions have improved a lot. It's good to see that you're putting a lot of thought into the details, even your finger movements."

"I'm trying to be purposeful and aware of all my movements, but it's not as easy as it sounds."

"Of course, it's difficult. How old are you right now?"

"Seventeen I believe."

"If you're seventeen then you're seventeen, what's with 'I believe'. Regardless, did you ever consider the angles of your spoon when fitting it into your mouth in the last seventeen years?"

"No, I don't normally think about those things."

"Exactly. We actually do most things subconsciously. Especially those things that we do every day. We also start to daydream and think of other things when doing something that we do repeatedly. Our body is like a fine-tuned machine that automates processes."

He then raised his left hand to eye level and his right hand at chest height.

"The left hand is the area where I'm conscious of and the right hand is the subconscious area. Most of our body movement happens in this subconscious area, so if we need to bring our consciousness to this area..."

He slapped his hands together.

"There's going to be a shock to the system. Even those things we did well subconsciously start becoming difficult. Once we start bringing our consciousness into the realm of actions that were previously done subconsciously, we start to question ourselves, 'did I always do things this way?'. Since the brain is asking a question towards the body that has always done it a certain way, confusion ensues. For example, how do you breathe and when do you blink your eyes?"

He smiled as he asked. Hearing this, Maru started becoming aware of his breaths and annoyed by his blinking.

"You said something unnecessary to prove your point."

"A student's pain is this instructor's happiness."

"Oh gosh."

"Think carefully before moving. You first need to observe. You can record your movements and see the tendencies that you have. Once you start recognizing these tendencies then you'll be able to start controlling your bodily expressions."

He stated the major points and the road towards them, but he left the rest to be done by Maru. Ganghwan would put the spoon in your hands, but the person with the spoon had to grab it with the right amount of force, guide it to the food, and then bring it back to eat it. Of course, while finding one's way through this path, there could be a patch of thorny bushes to go through or a steep cliff one had to miraculously clear.

"Your order is ready!"

Since the order was for 12 people, there was a lot to carry. With numerous bags in hand, they went to the theater where the students eagerly greeted them. With a proud face, Ganghwan expected some praise but was largely ignored as the members devoured the food.

"Hey, at least say thank you."

"We'll eat well!"

"Instructor, you're the best!"

"... it's not the same when you ask for it," murmured Ganghwan as he joined the students. They talked about each other's school plays, what types of practices they were doing, what roles they were playing, and other related subjects.

"When are your preliminaries?"

"This Sunday."

"Woah, you only have three days left. Ours is the following Sunday."

"How many teams are participating in this region?"

"I think a little above 18."

"Wow, that's pretty competitive."

With the Kyoungkido province being so large, the preliminaries were divided between north and south with the south already sporting more than 18 teams. After the contenders come out of the north and south, two teams would come out of the province as representatives. There would be two representatives from Seoul, two from Kyoungkido Province, and one each from the other provinces. 16 teams in total would compete in the nationals.

"I guess we're competitors now."

Everyone nodded at the short haired girl's words. They were talking and laughing together while preparing for this play, but once they turned around, they'd be competing against each other in the prelims.

They were all 1st year high school students.

Though they just started acting, they each had their own levels of passion and skill. This was why they were all able to come together here, being hand picked or referred.

“Our region has Myunghwa High, so it’ll be hard to even get through prelims.”

“That’s true.”

Maru noticed that the name of her high school became the main topic of conversation. They recently won the summer nationals. Myunghwa High had a storied history. The Woosung High acting club won nationals in each of the first three years since its creation but hadn’t won since. However, the neighboring Myunghwa High were like seasoned hunters. They didn’t have as much luck in the winter nationals, placing second at best, but were regular podium visitors in the summer nationals.

Even Miso mentioned that it would be easier after going through Myunghwa High.

“By the way, why isn’t she here? Did she skip this to join her school’s practice?”

“She had something come up. It’s not practice,” replied Maru on her behalf.

“What came up?”

“Something personal.”

“C’mon. You’re protecting her with excuses, right? Just because you’re together?”

“If you really want to know... today’s the anniversary day of her father’s passing. She didn’t come because of that.”

“Ah...”

The short-haired girl who was speaking so brashly suddenly closed her mouth and had an apologetic expression on her face. The light-hearted laughing and talking suddenly became silent.

“You guys finished eating? Let’s clear this out.”

Ganghwan broke the silence. His words came at just the right time, allowing the students to forget the awkwardness and resume their lively talk while picking up their trash.

As Maru was picking up his trash, the short-haired girl approached.

“I’m sorry.”

She spoke with a meek voice. He told her not to worry about it. It wasn’t like she was saying something wrong. She was just curious. Still, he was relieved to be amongst people who cared enough about others to apologize. The older generation might say ‘youngsters these days...’ but even younger people had to be differentiated on a case-by-case basis. There were young people like Changhu, but there were also people like this short-haired girl.

After cleaning up, everyone said goodbye to each other and headed out. It was the first time in a while for Maru to leave alone. As he was waiting for the bus to arrive, he heard an approaching mid-size vehicle honk its horn.

“Hey! Get in!”

Isn't this the famous line for the notorious 'Hey! Get in!' playboy crew?

Maru gave a brief smirk before walking to Ganghwan's car.

"What's going on?"

"I'll take you home."

"You live in Seoul. I'll just take a bus down."

"When your instructor tells you to get in you should get in. I haven't spent time with you in a while. I'm supposed to mentor you, but I seemed to have shirked some of my duties recently."

"It's already hard digesting everything you've taught me so far," said Maru while getting into the passenger side seat and buckling up. Ganghwan checked his side mirrors and was about to take off when he heard someone knocking on his window. She was wearing a grey-brown fur coat. Her make-up naturally blended with her face and gave off an erotic vibe.

"Ganghwan?" asked the woman outside.

He looked at the woman with an awkward smile. He was part happy to see her and part not, it was a unique sight.

"Ah, yes. Ms. Suyeon. I didn't expect to see you here."

"You don't have to use a respectful tone. I'm five years younger than you."

"I still have my manners."

Suyeon, the woman who Maru had never met, smiled blatantly at Ganghwan.

As if it didn't feel right to be in the car, Ganghwan opened the door and got out.

"Let me have a word. I'll be back."

"Sure."

For a guy who longed for a woman, Ganghwan didn't seem very happy to meet this attractive woman. What type of person is she? Since he was in the car, he couldn't really hear their conversation outside. The woman, Suyeon, seemed to be happy to see him but Ganghwan had on a forced smile. Did they have an awkward or embarrassing past? Or was there another reason?

Maru thought that the talk must have ended, as Ganghwan returned to the car. As he released the side brake and got ready to take off, the rear driver side door opened. With a shy smile, Suyeon got into the car. Ganghwan stared at her with a dumbfounded look. Maru thought, 'they didn't plan this?'

"We haven't seen each other in so long. You're just going to leave like that?"

"Oh. It's just that, this guy right here, he has something really important to discuss with me. Really important."

Ganghwan actively appealed on behalf of Maru. Maru felt like a product that was getting tossed around, but seeing Ganghwan's nervousness, he decided to stay silent.

"Ha, I'm just joking. I just got in to see your face once more. Your car is really clean by the way."

"I just had it cleaned. Ha Ha."

"It's a great car to take out for a spin."

"No way. The shocks are so worn that you can feel every bump on the road."

"Oh really?"

"Of course."

"Do you not like me, by chance?"

"What are you saying all of a sudden. Why would I dislike you, Ms. Suyeon. It's just that it's so sudden that I'm lost for words."

"That still makes me a little upset. We haven't seen each other in so long, but it seems like I'm the only one who's excited. Ugh."

"Let me treat you to a meal next time. I'm really busy today."

Ganghwan gave Maru a look. Maru turned to Suyeon with an apologetic look.

"Then I guess it can't be helped. But I expect you to treat me tomorrow."

"T-Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow doesn't work either?"

She pouted her lips. Ganghwan, at his wits end, ultimately made an appointment with her. It was only then that Suyeon smiled brightly.

"But what's the name of the kid in front?"

"Him? His name is Maru, Han Maru."

"Wow, that's a really unique name."

Since his name came out, Maru turned around and gave a greeting bow toward Suyeon. She waved her hands and smiled.

"I'm Kim Suyeon. I'll see you later," she said as she got out of the car.

As if afraid she might return, Ganghwan stepped on the accelerator and hurriedly left as if he was running away.

Chapter 130

Ganghwan slowed down his car when he could no longer see Suyeon from his side mirror. He let out a sigh.

"That's the first time I've seen you like that."

"Like what?"

“Surprised.”

“Me?”

Maru nodded confidently. Ganghwan looked absolutely terrified just a moment ago, which was very unlike him. The man was usually the one who surprised people, not the type to retreat like this.

“Was I that obvious?”

“You probably know the answer to that yourself, don’t you? You even looked kind of rude.”

“That bad?”

“Why were you so surprised? She was pretty, too. Don’t you sing about wanting to meet pretty women all the time?”

“Yeah, she’s pretty. But I don’t know if I’m into her.”

“She’s younger than you, too. So why?”

Ganghwan was usually very friendly towards just about anyone he met, but he put up an immediate wall in front of Suyeon. Very odd, considering how pretty of a lady Suyeon was. Didn’t Ganghwan always talk about treating women nicely? Ganghwan opened the window slowly, letting the cold winter air in.

“How was Suyeon, in your opinion?”

“She seemed gentle. Kind of cute, considering how she seemed to want to get friendly with you.”

“By the way, you know you sound really experienced with women sometimes? Also what the hell’s up with you describing Ms. Suyeon like a kid? You know she’s six years older than you, right?”

“Really?”

Maru shrugged. He hadn’t been able to change his way of talking since he got back, so he gave up on it altogether. Whenever people asked him about it, he just told them he picked it up from his grandmother.

“Anyway! She looks really nice and pretty.”

“Nice body, too.”

“...You saw a lot in such a short time.”

“What can I say, men are naturals at this kind of stuff. It’s like how girls like to pick out changes from each other when they meet their friend after a long time.”

“Fair enough.”

Ganghwan grinned.

“Right. She has a great body, cute, and has a nice personality, so it’s all cool if I meet her at work, but...”

“But?”

“I never want to see her in a casual environment.”

"Why not? She'd look great with you, coach. She resembles your ideal girlfriend a lot, too. Long hair, sexy boobs, nice body."

"...You sound way too much like an old man right now."

"I'm still a young lad in my teens, you know?"

"You're a huge pervert, you know that? Wait, could it be, with that girl... you're not going too wild, are you?"

That girl. Maru shook his head as he thought of her.

"I'm taking it slow. You should savor what you truly value."

"Look at you."

"Stop changing the topic and please answer me. What don't you like about her?"

"Mm, if I had to put it in words, I'd say that she knows she's charming too well."

"She knows she's charming?"

"Man, what am I saying in front of a kid?"

"I'm in my teens, I'm all grown up."

"Didn't you literally just say something about being a young lad?"

"People need to learn to be flexible with their words in society."

"Give me your damn ID. You're actually over thirty, aren't you?"

Thirty? No way. Forty five was more like it. Maru just decided to grin lightly in response.

"That doesn't sound like a bad thing though."

"That's true, but... No, it's fine. I shouldn't be talking about stuff like this."

Ganghwan changed the topic right away. Maru caught the man's expression pretty quickly, though.

"She's a vixen?"

"Man, you're too persistent."

"I'm curious. I want to know what about her has you like this."

Ganghwan let out a defeated sigh before brushing his hair upwards. The car came to a stop on a streetlight and Ganghwan finally started talking.

"First off, I don't judge how other people live as long as they don't hurt others. Got it?"

"That sounds like an excuse for whatever's coming up, but okay."

“Hm hm. Miss Suyeon uses the fact that she looks charming to the best of her abilities. Most men just fall for her right away. I worked with her once before in a play and there was an incident. It wasn’t her fault, but if you really dig into it...”

“She wasn’t really at fault, but she was the source of the problem?”

“Pretty much.”

“Crime of passion, basically?”

“Where’d you learn something like that? You watch way too much TV.”

The light turned green and the car started moving again. Ganghwan drove towards the bridge nearby.

“Not that bad. Well, maybe it was. One of the writers and an actor both fell in love with her at the same time and that’s where the trouble started. They’re both pros, so the play ended well, but the two of them basically became sworn enemies afterward.”

“That sounds fair. Doesn’t sound like a big issue.”

“On the surface, yeah. It sounds perfectly normal.”

“Was there something more to it?”

“I learned this later, but the writer ended up moving to a project Suyeon was doing. Originally, he was supposed to work with the actor together on something else. That entire project went up in flames after what happened.”

“You think Suyeon destroyed their relationship just to take that writer with her?”

“Who knows? Suyeon actually looked very sorry about it when the thing actually went down. But then...”

Ganghwan narrowed his eyes a little, as if he was staring off into a point in the past.

“Something similar happened one more time. Also, I ended up meeting that same writer in a different project. Since the industry’s small and all.”

“Right.”

“I thought those two would naturally be going out together. After all, he was very deeply in love with her at the time. But they weren’t actually dating. They were just friends. He actually confessed to her beforehand, but she said she was afraid to get in a relationship. At the same time, one of the more famous actors in Hyeon station followed Suyeon into her new project.”

“Because the actor was into Suyeon?”

“According to the writer, yes. The writer became uncomfortable watching the two acting like they were dating, so he just co-wrote one of the scenes and left the team. What’s scary is that immediately after he left, Miss Suyeon brought in a new writer...”

“A male one?”

“You get it now?”

“Yes. Sort of.”

“I’ve no intention of judging people with this, of course. Everyone has their own ways of living, but she’s definitely not the type of person I would work well with. So I’m trying to distance myself from her, I’m only okay with her in a work relationship.”

“She’s quite charming, isn’t she?”

“She is. That’s why people follow her.”

“Why don’t you just go for it anyway? Who knows, you might turn her into a princess just for you.”

“Nothing good ever comes from gambling.”

Maru nodded. He understood what kind of a woman Suyeon was. Every person had a weapon of their own and Suyeon’s weapon was her charm. Knowing what he did about the wars waged in the name of this woman... Her weapon was very powerful.

“How’d we start talking about this, anyway? I had so many other things to tell you today.”

“Stuff like this is nice to talk about every once in a while. Knowing how the rest of the world works can also help with my acting.”

“Did you grease your tongue with oil or something? Since when did you have such a smooth tongue?”

“It smells very nice, doesn’t it? I used butter.”

“Damn it, give me your ID. I actually need to check your age.”

Maru grinned as Ganghwan pinched one of his cheeks.

* * *

“Hello, Teacher.”

“You’re here.”

Junmin glanced at his friend, gesturing to speak a little later. His friend, the director, nodded before getting ready to leave with his assistant.

“You should stay, sir,” Suyeon said with a smile.

“We have no place in actors’ talk. We’re much more comfortable talking about the backstage.”

Junmin asked his friend to wait outside for just a little bit.

“Why did you call me out yourself? I was surprised.”

“I was wondering how you were doing.”

“Very well, as usual. I’m teaching that kid you introduced me.”

“I see. How’s Geunseok?”

“He’s alright. He has a great sense for things and he knows exactly what he needs to do to make me happy.”

“Sense, huh. Of course. That’s what he was raised for.”

Junmin nodded. After asking a few more questions about the boy, he changed the topic.

“The filming for the drama’s over now?”

“Yes. I’m annoyed that it isn’t doing too well on TV. It’s getting pushed back by all the other shows.”

“How many episodes left until the end?”

“Four.”

“6% for the ratings, was it?”

“It’s a total failure.”

“You must feel quite depressed about it.”

“Very. It was my first time as one of the more important side characters, but the show’s not getting any views. It almost feels like my fault.”

“Stop lying.”

“Heh, was I that obvious?”

Suyeon smiled cutely, Junmin had to wonder how many men she charmed with that smile. He knew Suyeon very well. The woman knew how to grasp the hearts of men, she was born with the talent. The only reason why Junmin took her under his wing was because she knew how to use that charm of hers for acting.

“By the way, Teacher.”

“What?”

“Why did you stick that kid of all people to me? I was surprised.”

“Do I ever tell people the reason for why I do certain things? Find out for yourself. Anyway, what happened to your movie audition?”

“I’ll have to work hard for it in my own way.”

Junmin nodded. He silently wished luck towards the director of whatever that movie she was auditioning for was.

“There’s a person from the Woonjung theater company on the first floor. Go greet them if you can.”

“Yes. Ah, Teacher.”

“Mm?”

“Would you like to have dinner today?”

She accentuated her chest a little bit as she spoke, her usual innocent self was gone and in her place was someone a bit more erotic. Junmin took a sip of his tea as he blinked once.

"I have a meeting with that friend over there."

"Man, I got rejected twice today already, boohoo."

"Twice?"

"Yes. I met Ganghwan outside and he just avoided me. I'm pretty mad about it."

"Haha."

"Anyway, I'll go meet that Woonjung person now."

"Sure."

Suyeon stood up from her seat and walked towards the stairs. Her hips swayed sideways naturally. It didn't feel erotic or anything, but rather very controlled. She looked like a total model.

"I'm impressed that you're managing to keep her with you."

Junmin's friend came back. His assistant wasn't with him anymore, probably got sent to do work elsewhere.

"Everyone has their uses somewhere."

"I don't think this often, but man you're evil."

"I've worked here for 30 years now. This industry's littered with people who only look nice."

"I heard you put one of your kids with her?"

"Yup."

"Isn't that dangerous? I feel like she would just rip apart a young boy who hasn't even matured yet."

"That's the hope, actually."

"What?"

"The boy's still in his shell, he doesn't even know why he's acting just yet. He started because of Geunsoo and that can't continue as his motivation. Not only that, the boy often acts subservient in front of you, but he's actually laughing at you behind your back."

"Rotten to the core, is it?"

"He has talent, though. He's Geunsoo's brother, after all. I don't want to throw away something that has potential. That's why I stuck him with Suyeon."

"What if he turns into a puppet?"

"That's just his luck. I'm not a nice person. I like to help people, but only if I profit off of it. Why would I keep someone who has no value?"

“The maestro’s actually a very cold person, is that it?”

“Don’t look at me too badly, I’m doing pretty nice things too. I just don’t like people who like to try to leech away my time and money.”

“What about that kid called Maru, then?”

“...I have no idea about that kid, actually. Haven’t felt like this in a long time. The boy’s finding answers by himself. He has his reason for being confident, he’s not overconfident, though. But it’s not like he’s conservative about his actions. It’s odd. Very odd.”

“He’d get along with my Mintae very well.”

“They’d probably become very good partners.”

Junmin’s friend nodded. Junmin opened his notebook to check his next schedule. Time was, to him, equivalent to people. Junmin couldn’t miss a person even if his life depended on it.