

## Once Again 161

### Chapter 161

The first thing that invaded Yurim's nostrils upon walking in was the smell of paint, the type of smell that would nauseate you if you smelled it for too long.

"Woow."

Soyeon exclaimed in surprise behind her, Yurim would've done the same under any other circumstances. The wall was colored in sky blue paint, the traces of fire completely disappeared in just a day.

"Clean, right?"

Instructor Miso appeared behind them, the woman was looking at the wall with pride.

"What happened?" Soyeon asked.

"Humans are amazing creatures. We managed to clean it all up in a flash. I did get a lot of help, though."

Right then, several people entered the auditorium with a yawn. Joonghyuk, Minsung, Taejoon, Daemyung, Dojin and Geunseok were there as well. All of the male club members were there except for Maru.

"You're here?"

"Yawnn. You came."

They all looked tired, their clothes were a dead giveaway of how their days went yesterday. They were spattered with drops of paint. Blue, white, blue. The fact that the auditorium returned to normal in a day wasn't magic, it was hard work.

"You stayed up all night?"

"We didn't go that far."

Joonghyuk responded with a smile to Soyeon's worried question.

"We just didn't sleep until it was pretty late."

"3am, was it?"

"Think so."

Minsung and Dojin exchanged words casually. 3am. while Yurim struggled with insomnia, the two of them were working hard.

"Are you okay? You have paint on you here."

Yurim stepped towards Geunseok. The boy looked just as tired as everyone else.

"You think? I almost stayed up all night."

Geunseok stepped away to the windows with an annoyed look, Yurim's heart dropped inside her. She quickly smiled and followed the boy.

"Y-you were tired, weren't you?"

"Are you trying to make fun of me? Can't you tell just looking at me? I was stuck here cleaning and painting all day. Fuck. It wasn't even my fault, and I ended up wasting a day. I don't know which bastard did it, but if I catch him..."

It was easy to guess where the sentence was going. Her stomach hurt. What if he learns that she was the one that did this? A cold shiver that started from her feet climbed all the way up to her head. He couldn't know of this. If he did, he would absolutely hate her.

'No. I can't. No. No.'

Her heart was thumping. They needed to talk about something else. She thought desperate for a while before coming up with a topic he would like.

"Is... that instructor a good person?"

Yurim felt her body stiffen. Inside, she'd already come to accept that Geunseok no longer liked talking about 'Yurim', but enjoyed talking about 'Suyeon' instead. She'd been trying to avoid that topic because she knew how Geunseok would react to that word.

'No.'

A scream echoed inside her ears, she slowly looked up to the boy's face. He was smiling now, the smile was sharp enough to cut her emotions into pieces. It ripped her apart, her head completely blanked out. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know what kind of a face to make. All she could do now was listen as Geunseok talked gleefully about his instructor.

"She's great. She tells me everything I need so kindly. And..."

His voice was ringing around in her ears. Yurim felt a little sick, so she grabbed the windowsill to try and support herself. At some point, the boy'd started settling into her very own being. At that point, she realized. The moment she's away from Geunseok, she would suffocate. It felt like such an amazing shackle when he actually paid attention to her. Without it, it just made her feel lonely and desperate for attention. Worst of all...

"I... see. Your instructor's a really good person."

She needed to speak things that made her stomach twist with a smile. If she frowned here, Geunseok would glare at her. She looked down with a smile, it was hard to control her expression.

"Now then, girls! Help us finish up. Let's throw out the trash and clean up."

"Yes!"

Iseul was the first to start cleaning energetically. Yurim ran over, she couldn't bear staying with Geunseok right now. The others arrived as she worked. By 11 am, everyone with the exception of Maru

was here. They cleaned up all the way till 12. Thanks to the boys completing the brunt of the work last night, they finished up quickly.

“You slept at school last night?”

“Yeah. Ugh, I feel so stiff.”

“You should’ve called us. We would’ve helped you.”

“How could we? We had to sleep in the classroom.”

“What the, you’re looking out for me now cuz I’m a girl?”

“Because I’m a gentleman!”

Iseul laughed at Dojin’s response. Yurim felt her stomach twist. Here she was struggling with worries and these two had the gall to play around?

“Yurim, are you okay?”

It was Soyeon, this girl looked so fake with her worried expression. A thought that the girl truly cared for her and that this expression wasn’t fake at all floated up in her mind, but it was quick to dissipate. She was a traitor, after all.

“So what if I’m not okay?”

“...Did something actually happen? Why are you so cold?”

“Think about it. Do I really have to explain everything to you? You’re too much. Are you even a friend?”

She felt a little good inside to let that out. Soyeon looked down sadly, the girl looked like she was about to cry. Yeah. Go on, do it. You deserve it, traitor.

Yurim regretted her words almost immediately though. She grit her teeth, Soyeon didn’t deserve any of this. Soyeon never even did anything wrong. She was only being so mean to Soyeon right now because of the suffocating feeling she’d feel if she didn’t.

‘Don’t talk to me. Don’t worry about me. Please don’t... act nice to me.’

She wanted to cry. How did this happen? How did she become so twisted? Why couldn’t she fix herself even when she’s aware of all her flaws? Yurim wasn’t able to keep going without blaming other people. She balled up her fists and looked forward. Thankfully, Soyeon stopped talking to her. Though she couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“Good work. I tried to get this done by myself yesterday. It was way too hard, which is why I called all of you here. Thanks for coming.”

“It’s our club room. It only makes sense we’d look after it.”

The boys nodded in agreement. Miso told them she originally tried to do this with Daemyung alone. They realized they needed more people, which was why they called out the other boys.

“Let’s eat first. We can talk after that.”

Instructor Miso was frowning when she put the word 'talk' in her mouth. Everyone became a little bit quiet. What did she want to talk about? They all tried talking about it as they ate. When they finished eating, the instructor gestured for them to get close to her.

"What I'm about to say now isn't good for anyone of us. But we have to go over it, so listen well."

Yurim felt herself becoming nervous. This atmosphere, those eyes... She could tell what instructor Miso was about to say.

"You probably all know this, but this fire was intentional. A fire couldn't have started on its own in the auditorium, so it had to be done by someone."

Silence. Yurim couldn't hear anything other than the instructor's voice. The air around her felt like lead, weighing down on her.

"There was fire and there were damages that resulted from it. We can't just let this pass."

Instructor Miso looked around the auditorium silently, the other club members looked around as well. Yurim, on the other hand, just stared directly at the floor.

"I heard recently that they're going to renovate this place soon. It won't be the acting club's anymore. It'll be the baseball club's training room."

"So next year..."

"We'll have to work in an empty classroom. Well, we can practice anywhere. The problem is that we'll run out of place to store props. How's the fourth floor clubroom? Is it still full?"

"It's only been getting fuller after you graduated, instructor. We have a lot of things we don't use, but it's not like we can throw them away."

Instructor Miso nodded with a smile.

"Thanks for putting it that way. In any case, we have to leave this place, so start thinking about that. Ah, that's not what I wanted to talk about. Sorry, I really don't want to talk about this either, so I keep changing the topic."

Instructor Miso sighed. Her eyes turned sharp again.

"Only the acting club was in the school when the fire happened. You should know what that means."

So it's come to this. Yurim wasn't able to even look at instructor Miso, she might pass out if their eyes met.

"I'll cut to the chase. It's only logical to think that the one who started the fire is one of us. Right?"

"....."

No one responded. Why would they? No one wanted to admit there was a criminal among them. Yurim hoped that this awkward atmosphere would dissipate quickly. That they would quickly dismiss such a thought as immoral. But.

"There's definitely someone among us. We need to find out who it is."

Instructor Miso stood up with that, she walked outside the auditorium. Before she left, she quietly uttered a few words.

“One by one, in that order you’re sitting in, come to the classroom in front of the auditorium. Got it?”

Instructor Miso was speaking with an incredibly scary glare. Yurim shivered. Did the woman find something? Did she have a suspect already? The doors closed. The club members stayed silent for a few minutes, Yoonjung was the first to stand.

“I’ll get going first. We’ll go in the order of the people to the right of me. Got it?”

The girl was clearly forcing a smile.

“I’ll be back.”

Yoonjung took her first steps with a concerned look.

\* \* \*

Miso sat down on a chair, waiting for a student to enter. She already had an idea of who might come first. Yoonjung, the club president. The door opened with a creak. Indeed, it was Yoonjung. But right now, the girl wasn’t smiling.

“I’ll be direct. Did you start the fire?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Yoonjung waved her hands in surprise. That was the right reaction. No one could remain calm if they become a target of suspicion.

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

She noticed the girl ball up her fists, her eyes were firing up with life. This one probably didn’t do it.

‘There’s no way kids like these would’ve started a fire.’

Miso wanted to believe that there couldn’t be a person who started the fire in the club, she wanted to believe that Maru was mistaken. She sighed before saying the sentence she prepared beforehand. What would this girl’s reaction be?

“I trust that it’s not you either.”

“.....”

“What about Maru, then?”

“What? M-Mar?”

“I heard he came out the last out of all of you. Isn’t that suspicious?”

“No. There’s no way he could’ve done that. And!”

Yoonjung jumped up from her seat with a frown.

“You know what he’s done... how could you get suspicious of him?”

This was the first time she’d ever seen Yoonjung react so strongly to something. The girl was usually so incredibly positive, but right now she was looking at Miso with disappointment. Those eyes of hers... Miso was glad to see it.

“So you think it can’t be Maru?”

“Yes!”

“Anyone else you might think it might be?”

“No!”

The girl sounded confident. Miso nodded.

“Alright, good. Go back inside. Keep this to yourself. I’ll trust that you’ll keep it that way.”

“...Yes.”

Yoonjung turned around with a saddened expression, Miso felt sorry that she had to burden the poor girl with something like this.

‘Han Maru, if you did this without giving it any serious thought, I’ll kill you.’

It was difficult to act suspicious of the club members. The thought of how Maru could be sitting in the hospital relaxing while she was doing this was starting to annoy her. She’d bother the kid at the hospital after this for sure.

“Alright, call the next kid.”

11 people left.

## **Chapter 162**

Maru’s ears itched for some reason. Was someone insulting him behind his back? He stood up from the bed with a stretch. The view outside the window was like a canvas, everything was so white the grey road that the shovelling truck swept was looking alien.

“Laziness is good.”

Looking back, he’d tried hard enough already. He was way too busy for a normal high schooler, maybe this was god’s way of giving him a break. He might as well take full advantage of it. He reached out to pick up a banana, eating a tropical fruit in the middle of winter... What an odd situation. He picked up his book as he ate. Just about everyone who would come to visit him already left. He told his family to not worry about him, so he should be free all day. After turning a few pages, Maru looked up from his book.

‘I wonder if she’s doing well.’

1pm. About the time where everyone was together, Miso might’ve already started talking. Right now, she had to play the bad cop. After all, people hated being the target of suspicion. Having to take on this

role was no easy burden for her. It would've been better for Taesik to have taken this role, actually. He was the advisor of the club and Miso was technically an outsider.

Emotionally speaking, Miso was a lot closer to the club. In terms of asking such questions, Miso was definitely the person for the job. Plus, she cared about the club more than anyone else. She probably felt personally responsible for what happened, but that didn't change the fact that Maru was sorry for making her do this.

"...Ah, is she actually insulting me behind my back?"

That would explain the bad dreams he had last night, he could just see Miso gritting her teeth in his head. But so what? That was her job as an adult.

"...Being a kid is the best."

Maru took a bite out of his apple.

\* \* \*

Daemyung first wondered why the second years all came back with a frown. Just what did instructor Miso ask them? He only realized now why the second years all looked so annoyed and slightly offended a few minutes ago.

"I'm suspicious of Maru."

He legitimately couldn't understand what Miso said. Did he hear her wrong? No, judging by her expression, he clearly didn't.

"What do you..."

"Maru was the one who was on the 5th floor when the fire started. You know what the implications are."

"Instructor."

"Be honest with me. Aren't you suspicious?"

Daemyung liked instructor Miso, she was always very passionate and he respected that. He always enjoyed her difficult and strict practice sessions because he could feel her passion. He'd never seen her badly once in her life. But right now... he despised her for the words that came out of her mouth.

"Are you being serious?"

He'd never gone against an adult, he'd never refuted what an adult told him. He used to always think adults were always right. But what's this? Did instructor Miso really suspect Maru? He was confused. Here he thought she would always support him.

"Yeah. It just makes sense. You guys were on the first floor and Maru was on the fifth floor. A fire started. What does that make you think?"

Miso crossed her arms. Did she really think that? She was truly worried about Maru just yesterday, she even said that it was a relief that Maru didn't get really badly hurt. She was also truly mad at Maru, mad at him for being reckless.

Could a person like that change her behavior just like that? Was she really speaking the truth? She usually didn't talk like this either. She wasn't the type to call in people one by one to interrogate them, she was the type that spoke her thoughts and asked the same of others. If she was really suspicious, she would've asked Maru on the spot yesterday at the hospital. If he said no, she would've just dropped it.

A person like that... calling people one by one to talk in secret? That wasn't the way she worked. Instructor Miso hated doing tasks that took a lot of work. This type of strategy, this roundabout way of reaching their goal rather than running straight for it... The one who usually worked like this was...

"Um, instructor."

"Yeah?"

"Can I make a call?"

"To who?"

"Maru."

"What?"

"I won't tell him what you told me. I just want to ask him something. Is that fine?"

"S-sure."

Daemyung walked to the corner of the room before calling Maru, who picked up the call with a dazed voice.

"Hey Maru."

- Yeah?

"Can you be honest with me?"

- If you're asking me that with no context at all, I'm going to have to tell you no.

"I hope you can still be honest."

- What's this about?

"You asked instructor Miso to do something regarding the fire, didn't you?"

He didn't get a response back for a while. Did he get the wrong impression?

- Man, I keep noticing this, but... You're really sharp.

"Does that mean..."

- You got it. I think you know why as well.

"Y-yeah, a little."



Maru must've wanted to believe that it wasn't a club member who started a fire as well, but he needed to prove that was the case first. Daemyung understood that feeling all too well. In fact, he completely agreed with finding evidence instead of just blind faith. Assumptions made about him were how he was hurt by others until middle school, after all. He's fat and slow, so it's okay to bully him. It's okay to bully him because he's ugly. Daemyung grew to hate assumptions because of it.

"There can't be anyone in the club who did it though, right? That doesn't make sense at all."

He thought he'd get a response quickly, but Maru stayed silent for a surprisingly long time. That could only mean one thing.

"Wait, do you actually..."

- Please play along with my game for now. I do have a proper plan in mind.

"Do you actually think one of us did it?"

- I'm just being open to all possibilities. I don't want to be blindsided.

Maru sounded almost pained when he said that. Did he go through something in the past?

"Alright, fine. I'll keep quiet for now."

- Thanks.

"But tell me next time. I don't know if I can help but... I really don't want to get tricked by a friend."

- Yup, got it.

Daemyung hung up and started thinking. Did Maru already have a suspect? Or was he really just being open to all possibilities? How was he planning on finding the perpetrator anyway? He only had questions. Then again, he was never able to figure out Maru's plans until the boy was completely finished. That was the case with what happened before their summer vacation and that was the case with the school violence incidents as well.

'I just hope he doesn't use himself as a target.'

Maybe Maru didn't even care about becoming a target of hatred. Daemyung started thinking. Creating a situation where you become a target of suspicion and using that? He wouldn't even think about doing such a thing, personally. But Maru did, he differentiated between what and what not to protect. Then, it seemed that Maru classified himself as something he didn't have to protect, he would protect those around him rather than himself. That behavior had lessened recently, but it definitely hasn't disappeared. In fact, he still looked like he was working very hard for someone. Though Daemyung wouldn't know who that someone was until Maru talked about it.

"Looks like you heard everything from him."

"...Yes."

"Please play along for the time being. We might as well finish this now that we started."

"Do you think the perpetrator is in the club, like Maru?"

“No, I don’t.”

Miso seemed confident.

“Now. Bring me the next person. Two left now?”

“Yes.”

“That Maru’s definitely working me to the bone. I’m going to tease him a ton when I go visit him.”

“He’s still a patient, so please be gentle...”

Daemyung smiled awkwardly. Just before he walked out, he turned around to ask a question.

“No one’s been suspicious yet, right?”

“Of course.”

“That’s good.”

Daemyung gave a glance at Geunseok as he stepped back into the auditorium. Geunseok got up to go to speak with Miso next.

\* \* \*

“Maru?”

“Yes. What do you think?”

Geunseok closed his mouth. Maru? A fire?

‘Well, it’d be good to hear, honestly.’

He really didn’t like Maru, the boy was annoying from start to finish. It’d be great if someone like that was the perpetrator, but he had to shake his head in disagreement here.

“He’s a bit annoying, but I don’t think he did it.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. Anyone else you’d be suspicious of?”

“I don’t really know. But I hope you know that I didn’t do this. You should know that I’m working very hard for the club.”

Miso nodded, gesturing for him to get up.

“Yurim’s the last one, right?”

“Yes.”

“Bring her over.”

Geunseok came back to the auditorium, none of the club members were talking. Then again, they were all pretty shocked by Miso. There was no reason for any casual conversation to be taking place. He called out to Yurim, the girl flinched like someone who just got woken up.

“Why are you so surprised? You’re next. Go.”

“...Okay.”

Yurim barely managed to stand up, she shook off Soyeon when the girl tried to help her. Did they fight? Yurim walked out of the auditorium with a dark look.

\* \* \*

Yurim felt even more nervous than the first time she got on stage. What was instructor Miso planning inside? No one told her what had happened. But, given their expressions, it couldn’t have been anything good. She opened the door, instructor Miso was sitting down with her arms crossed. There was a chair in front of the instructor, so Yurim took a seat before anything else.

“I’ll make this quick. Just listen to my opinion and tell me what you think.”

“Yes.”

“I’m suspicious of Maru.”

The hair on her arms stood up. What did Miso mean by that? She looked at the instructor with trembling eyes. Why was the instructor suspicious of him?

This was a chance.

She was sick of feeling so nervous, she wanted to be done with this. It felt like she would go insane if this dragged on for any longer. Miso was suspicious of Maru, agreeing with that outright would make her look suspicious. Maybe she could imply her agreement a little bit instead?

There was no proof that she did it anyway. Right. If she says it might be Maru here... the nervousness inside her disappeared. This was a chance. A chance granted to her by the heavens.

“Yurim?”

“Y-yes?”

“What do you think?”

“Um... I...”

She felt conflicted, but her feelings quickly got swept over by the desire to feel comfortable again.

“Maru’s suspicious for sure. I’m not saying he did it of course. It’s just... anyway, there wasn’t a fire until we came down, but the fire appeared when he went up.”

“Right? I thought so too.”

Miso immediately put a small smile on her face, the woman was clearly a bit happy to hear this. Maybe this would go over more easily than Yurim first thought?

“Do you think the same way as me, instructor?”

“Mm, yes. Pretty much.”

“Maru hated acting at first. He just joined out of the blue. Plus, remember when he said those mean things to all of us? He might actually be a bully inside.”

Yurim closed her mouth in surprise. Maybe she went a bit too far here? Thankfully, instructor Miso was still smiling kindly.

“I heard your opinion well. You can go now. Do keep this to yourself though.”

“Of course.”

That’s good, instructor Miso was suspicious of Maru. Yurim really might’ve let out a smile if she wasn’t still in front of the woman. Instructor Miso stepped back into the auditorium after a brief wait.

“Good work, guys. You can all go home now. See you in two days.”

Everyone got up with dissatisfied expressions. They all left the auditorium one by one with their bags. Yurim approached Geunseok, but the boy left telling her that he was busy.

‘Can’t be helped.’

If she pushed the boy further, he’d hate her. She ignored Soyeon calling out to her and walked to the bus station. She really wanted to sleep, it felt like she could finally get some good sleep for the first time in a while. Right then, she got a call.

“Instructor?”

- Yurim, where are you?

“I’m at the bus station.”

- Can you wait? I want you to go somewhere with me.

“What?”

Instructor Miso’s car rolled right up to her.

“Get on.”

Yurim got on and the car took off immediately.

“Instructor.”

“What?”

“Where are we going?”

“Hospital.”

“What?”

The hospital? Were they planning on punishing Maru? Good. She was starting to look forward to getting there now.

### **Chapter 163**

The car came to a stop after driving on the slush-infested road for quite some time.

“Shall we go?”

“Yes.”

Yurim felt like instructor Miso’s secretary right now, she got on the elevator of the hospital with a grin. In a flash, they arrived at Maru’s room.

“Go inside.”

“What about you, instructor?”

“I need to think about something really quick.”

“...Yes.”

Well, that’s a bit odd. Yurim stepped inside, for now, on the bed was Maru with a book in hand. It felt uncomfortable to be around him, to be honest. Oh well. She opened her mouth to try to say hi.

“Let me ask you just one thing,” Maru cut in.

The boy was staring at her kind of scarily, their eyes met.

“Did you start the fire?”

The question came out of nowhere, punching Yurim’s throat completely shut. Why was he asking that? He looked like he knew something. Wait, did he know?

The boy shut the book with a loud clap. Maru’s cold, calm expression grew icier by the second. He kicked away the blanket on him before standing up on one foot. Something was weird, Maru was approaching her. She couldn’t breathe. Maru leaned over to look over her, she stepped back with a gasp.

“So it’s you.”

“W-what are you talking about?! You were the one who started the fire!”

“Me?”

“Yeah!”

“Why do you think that?”

“T-that’s!”

She didn’t know what to say. She knew Maru wasn’t the perpetrator, so she was speechless. She desperately tried to continue her words.

“Did you see me start the fire?” Maru asked.

"No. But there wasn't a fire when I came out. So it has to be you. It has to be!"

"I really started the fire?"

"Don't you even know? You started the fire with a tube of glue. The instructor already said you're suspicious. Be honest. It's you!"

"I started the fire with glue?"

"Yes. You started the fire and then called everyone else here!"

She shouted before looking at Maru. How dare he get suspicious of her! He didn't even have proof!

"Mm."

Maru loosened his expression before stepping back.

"Sorry."

"What?"

"I was just really mad. I didn't mean to shift blame."

Maru looked down apologetically. Yurim thought for a second, so Maru really didn't know anything.

"But it's not me either, please believe me."

Maru went back to his spot with a sigh, he looked tired for some reason.

"I was just feeling chaotic because I was hurt. Sorry. I got too agitated."

He looked like an apologetic sinner, Yurim relaxed a little bit.

"Well, fine. I'll take it. But you really didn't start a fire?"

"Yes. Please believe me."

"But instructor Miso's suspicious of you. I don't think so either, but the fire did start after you went up."

"That's true. But if I started the fire, do you think I would've tried to save the stage despite risking injuries? It's really not me. Believe me."

Maru balled up his fists, his emotions must be a mess right now. He was getting blamed for something he didn't even do, after all. That would explain his previous actions as well.

'Good. He doesn't know anything.'

What should she do? Should she push him a bit further? No. She decided to just watch him, it kind of felt good watching the boy struggle with his thoughts. That's right, you shouldn't even have thought about jumping into the fire!

"I heard from instructor Miso that we wouldn't take this to the police. The school only thinks of this as a mistake as well."

"What? Really?"

Yurim's complexion improved in a flash. She'd been worried all night about what she could do if teachers or the police get involved, she didn't want to get arrested. That would put her in a fate worse than death. But if the world saw this as a simple mistake? Nothing would happen.

It was like the nervousness and regret that's been stabbing away at her heart suddenly disappeared, it felt good to breathe again. Her vision cleared up and she began to notice things, like the little mountain of fruits next to Maru. Color was starting to come back into her world. Ah, she'd just noticed how pretty the snow is outside. Yurim smiled lightly.

"I don't think it's you either. There's no one here that'd do something like that."

"Thanks."

Maru sighed in relief, she felt a little less hateful of Maru now that she's relaxed quite a bit. It'd be nice if the incident just gets forgotten like this... She took a sip of the plum juice Maru gave her and sat down, only then did she notice Maru's hurt leg.

"Were you hurting a lot?"

"I'm fine now. The fracture doesn't seem like anything bad."

"That's good. I was worried."

Their conversation smoothed out. The plum juice was sweet. She felt like she could fly. Finally, she'd be able to sleep well for the first time in a very long time. Instructor Miso entered through the door. She didn't feel guilty anymore when she looked at the instructor.

"Yurim, can you step out for a bit?"

"Yes."

She stepped outside. Once they were out of Maru's view, instructor Miso started asking her questions.

"How was he?"

"He seemed suspicious, but I don't think it's him. He looked really guilty, so I felt sorry for him."

"Really?"

Right then, instructor Miso took out her phone. She must've gotten a message, she checked her phone after telling Yurim to wait for a second. She put the phone in her pockets after reading it.

"Hah, so no one in the club, I guess?"

Yurim nodded for now. She needed to snuff out any further reason for instructor Miso to investigate further.

"Alright. You're all good kids, so I believe it. I'll just think of it as unlucky."

"Yes, I think it'd be for the best. It feels bad to be suspicious of my friends."

"You're a good kid."

Miso patted her shoulders. Yurim felt freed from all of her shackles, she actually had to suppress a grin from coming up on her mouth.

“Yurim, I hate to say it, but can you go back by yourself? I want to talk with Maru.”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“Here’s your money for the taxi. Good work. I’ll see you in two days.”

“Yes.”

What a good day. Yurim dropped all of her worries and stepped outside.

\* \* \*

Maru stretched; his hips hurt from sitting for too long, he twisted his hips to loosen them up a bit.

“She’s gone.”

Miso entered the room. Maru handed her a plum drink to her as well.

“Here, it’s good.”

“Your words make you sound like a liar.”

And he was. It was honestly a bit too sweet for his tastes, so he’d offered it to anyone who came to visit him. Even with that, he had eight bottles left. When would he be able to get rid of them? Just as he opened a bottle of orange juice for himself, Miso snatched the drink out of his hands and switched it out for the plum drink.

“Plums are good for your health.”

“Hah.”

“Don’t sigh, you’re still young.”

Miso gulped down the drink in one shot. She must feel pretty stuffy inside. After all, a criminal emerged from the club, when she was so sure that they wouldn’t be in there. Miso frowned in annoyance.

“Alright, so. How’s Yurim the perpetrator? And why did you just send her back?”

Miso spoke as she took out her phone with Maru’s text opened.

[I think Yurim did it. Send her back with thanks for now.]

Maru took out a voice recorder from his pant pocket.

“What’s that?”

“A recorder.”

“What?”

He wordlessly played the recording. The conversation he had with Yurim played out.



“....”

Miso's frown deepened.

“You didn't tell the club about the glue, did you?”

“Of course not. I didn't want to talk about it.”

Miso played the recording multiple times, Maru smiled bitterly looking at her. The woman was a fan of humans, so an incident like this must've been quite a shock to her. To think her student would try to trick her and pin the blame on Maru...

Maru realized that Yurim was the one who did it as soon as she stepped into the room. A giant word bubble popped up over her as soon as their eyes met. The word bubble was shaky and spiky, reflecting her current mental state. Moreover, it had the words 'did he find any evidence?' written on it. But of course, that wasn't good enough as evidence. So he brought his recorder.

“I wonder why she did it,” Miso sighed.

“Yurim's probably the only person who knows.”

“Hah, I should ask her.”

Miso's eyes narrowed like a hawk's. Maru grabbed her wrist with a shake of his head.

“What?”

“Leave her be.”

“What? Leave her be?”

Miso shook off Maru's hand with a confused expression.

\* \* \*

“I understand that you care for her. But we can't just let this go. She started a fire. Someone got hurt. You can't just forgive...”

Miso couldn't even finish her words properly. The quietest girl in the club started a fire. Maru was telling her to just let it go though, that wasn't right.

“Who said I was going to forgive her?”

Maru looked as calm as ever. Emotionless, really.

“If you commit a crime, punishment awaits. That's why laws and society exist.”

“Why did you tell me to let her go, then?”

Maru pushed his book over to one side.

“As you know, I need to show Mr. Junmin some results. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get into the nationals because of this injury. But if we win even without me, at least I can put my name under the team.”

He was speaking slowly. Emotionlessly. As if this and the fire were two completely different matters.

“Nothing good will come out of trying to damage Yurim right now. She’d either ask for forgiveness or play innocent till the end. Either way, it’s not helpful for the play. That’s bad. Yurim needs to act until the end at her best condition.”

Maru cracked his neck sideways. He smiled a little in satisfaction.

“I like and respect people who are close to me, but I’m not a philanthropist by any means. I’m quite greedy, as a matter of fact. I try to get as much as I can from what benefits me, and I throw out what doesn’t help me. In that sense, Yurim still has some value. So, unfortunately, I’m going to have to ask you to play coy until the nationals finish, instructor.”

Maru’s eyes were cold. They were a bit alien, but she did think that this might be what the boy was actually like. This boy was extremely lenient when he was getting harmed by his own volition. He didn’t think much about making sacrifices, but he didn’t have any mercy when he had to take losses from other people’s actions.

Miso was reminded of what Taesik said a while ago, back when the school was getting rowdy with talks about school violence. Taesik described the boy back then as the ‘Hammurabi code of laws’ back then, she sort of understood what he meant by that now.

“Let’s smile until the end of the finals. So that Yurim doesn’t get too shaken up.”

This was for the best, everyone would benefit from this for sure. But how did Maru personally feel about this?

“Aren’t you mad? Can you take it?”

He got hurt by the fire, he could’ve gotten seriously injured. He missed his spot in the nationals as well, a spot that could’ve possibly earned him a lot of interest from industry workers. He lost a great chance just because of Yurim’s foolishness.

“Of course I’m mad, but I have much to gain from being patient for a moment. Profits come first and foremost, emotions can come later.”

What a smart boy. He looked like the type of person who’d survived for years in society. Just where did someone like him come from?

“You should just start a company instead of acting. No, just start up a cult. You’ll succeed for sure.”

“I did think about that, but I don’t really look that kind or gentle.”

Maru smiled brightly, softening the mood of the room immediately. What a strange kid.

“Alright. I’ll go with it for now. What will you do after the nationals though?”

“I’ll ask why she did it. We can think about what to do after my curiosity is satisfied. I want to know what made her do this.”

Miso nodded as she stood up. She needed to take care of the club, now that it's come to this. For now, she'd tell the club that it was all just a misunderstanding. They'd hate her for some time, but whatever. She was an adult.

"Ah, what if she did it for a legitimate reason?"

She asked before she stepped out. Of course, the girl probably didn't have a good reason to start a fire of all things, but she was curious about what Maru would say.

"A legitimate reason. It's unfortunate, but that doesn't change anything. Reasons aren't indulgences. One needs to be ready for the consequences of their actions."

His last words sent a slight chill down Miso's back. She nodded before closing the door behind her.

## **Chapter 164**

Miso left. The smile she showed him before stepping out seemed hollow, she seemed dissatisfied that they weren't able to immediately take care of this incident. It'd be easy to make Yurim confess, it'd be easy to make the girl tremble in fear. The problem wasn't that, it was the fact that the nationals were just a week away. Yurim needed to keep her spirits up until then, for both him and the club.

"But why did she start the fire?"

Yurim's motivation was still a mystery to him. What led her to starting a fire? Without any evidence, he couldn't figure out why. Her plans were too elaborate to be dismissed as a simple mistake. She made up her mind to start a fire and she did it. Why?

Cold wind seeped in through the open window, people often said the day after snow was a little warmer, he didn't agree. The wind was cold enough to give him goosebumps, but he opted to keep the window open for now.

'Just don't think about it. No way to tell what the other person's thinking.'

Maru instead decided to think about what to do from now on, he had asked his sister to bring a few scripts. Looking at them now, he couldn't help but laugh a little. They were useless to him now. In just a few days, the two plays he'd prepared for for several months will end. He couldn't get on stage, though he might be able to at least watch it.

He did feel very disappointed. If he didn't feel any disappointment after being unable to perform for something he'd been preparing for months, he might as well be Jesus. He was able to accept what happened easily enough though. Stuff like this just happens, maybe it was even fate. He didn't believe in such a thing in the past, but after an encounter with god... well, it was a lot easier to believe than before.

'I want to complain though.'

Did you really have to do this, god? In the end, he was the one who made the conscious decision to jump into the fire. But what if god made him remember to take his phone as he got out? What if god stopped Yurim from setting a fire to begin with?

"Yaawn."

People stuck in a room by themselves become one of two things, they either achieve enlightenment or they go crazy. In the end, the only thing you can do by yourself is to think. Well, daydreaming, really. The play was over and the lights were out. The actor lost his job, so now he needed to move on. Should he try harder to figure out Yurim's motivations? No, never mind, he wasn't a fan of looking for a needle in a haystack. He finished his book as well and the TV was boring. So then...

"I should sleep."

Truly, a fitting choice. The hospital bed felt a little harder than usual under him, perfect. He had gotten used to sleeping on hardwood floors. He could only sigh when he thought about what to do after this, but for now, he decided to simply not think about it. Just as he closed his eyes, the door to the room opened. He opened his eyes slightly. As soon as he saw who entered, he got back up.

"Sir."

It was Moonjoong. The man looked incredibly stylish in his fedora and trench coat.

"No need to get up."

"I'm not that sick, sir."

Maru returned to his sitting position on the bed.

"Your face looks healthy, thank goodness. You're healing up well?"

"Yes. They said I'd need to be here for two weeks, but I think I can get out before then."

"The heavens must've helped you. I thought you went crazy when I heard the news from Junmin. To think you'd just jump into a fire..."

"It does sound crazy without context."

"Haha."

Maru offered the man a seat and took out a drink.

"How does sikhye sound?"

Maru gave the one drink he'd been saving up to the man. After taking a sip, Moonjoong opened his mouth.

"You must be disappointed after all the work you'd put into the plays."

"It can't be helped. I'm trying to move on, since my feelings wouldn't change anything."

"You're right. Disappointment does you no favors."

Moonjoong nodded in agreement.

"So what will you do now?"

"I was about to sleep, actually. There's not much to do here. I brought a few scripts here out of habit, but there's no point in practicing anymore."

Maru turned to look at the script next to him, prompting Moonjoong to grab them.

“May I?”

“Of course.”

Moonjoong looked at the scripts for quite some time.

“You’ve put a lot of effort into analyzing your characters.”

“I don’t know much about acting, so I gave my all into the one thing I knew best.”

“How was it?”

“It was easy at first. Since I just needed to think about the type of person my character was.”

“But then?”

“It got harder the deeper I got into it. That’s when I realized complex characters aren’t created overnight. It felt like I could write a book purely based on my analysis.”

That was when Maru really felt like there was no end to this. The moment you start working towards creating a meaningful character, a whole world opens itself for you to explore. Maru had quite the fun time navigating through these worlds in front of him.

“It’s very fun to think about characters,” Moonjoong put down the script with a beaming smile, “but try not to delve too deep into it.”

“Why?”

“Because people aren’t machines. The characters we act are too dramatized to exist in real life, but in the end they are human too. Thinking about the place they were born in, the people they met, the things they like is good for studying. But on stage, a vast majority of those things won’t matter at all. The only thing that remains are the character’s personality that grabs the audience’s attention and the character’s greed that drives the play. That’s all. Because in the end, everything about a character points to their greed. The ultimate point of character analysis is to use the character’s greed in such a way that it shocks the audience. At least, that’s what I think.”

“Greed...”

“Of course, this is just my opinion. Other people probably don’t think the same way. So make of it what you will and come to your own conclusions.”

Moonjoong laughed before taking out a book.

“Here, read this.”

It was a book with a white cover, titled ‘Twilight Struggles’.

“This is...”

“I’m going to be in a movie soon and this is the source material..”

Many movies were adapted from books, so this didn't come as a surprise. Maru was curious about why he was given this, though.

"We need an actor."

"Excuse me?"

"A side character. One that might as well get erased during the editing process."

"That means..."

"If you've made up your mind to be an actor, it might be good to get hands-on experience. Of course, there'll be an audition. It'll likely happen once the production crew comes together. Their name is Yongsoo. See if you like it."

Moonjoong got up from his seat.

"You're leaving already?"

"I just dropped by to give you that. You look healthy, so no reason for me to stay any longer. Do try to be more careful, if you don't want to suffer in your old age."

Moonjoong smiled slightly as he stepped back. Maru tried to stand up, but the man held his shoulders down.

"I'll get going."

"I'll see you next time, sir."

"Sure."

The man finished off his last line as he stepped outside.

"It'll be fun to work with you on the field. The movie industry has its own charms. Though, I suppose it's also a lot more bitter as well."

Maru bowed at the closing door with the new book in hand.

"Did you throw me this because I was complaining so much about not having work?" Maru said, looking out the window.

It felt like he could see the God of Fate winking at him. He opened the book in front of him. The moment he saw the name of the author on the first page, Maru gasped in surprise. He knew the author of the book. Not personally, of course. Just that he recalls a movie of the same name doing well in the box office. This happened in his thirties though, so it will be a while away.

"...Why couldn't you just let me remember a winning lottery ticket number?"

Or a company whose stocks would go through the roof? Maru thought of the 300 million won he owned. Thinking about it did make him happy, but it also made him feel a little frightened. He took a look into the real estate industry for investment. He only took a look to get a feel for it, because he needed to be a legal adult to be able to invest, but then... the real estate industry took a dive to the floor. So he opened a Cash Management Service account with a bit of his money to play around, but the bank where

he opened the account closed down suddenly. The media was still going wild with those news. So after that, he just decided to keep his money in his savings account. Those two events were probably a sign from god that investment wasn't worth his time.

Of course, it might just be coincidence. He was still thinking about investing in his later years, but that was not a worry for his younger self. He might as well think about doing this when he turns 45.

'Besides that, a movie, huh...'

He started acting because of her. Now, even without her, he found acting fun. Movies are different from plays, it did garner some interest from him. He'd need to pass the audition first of course, at least he had all the time in the world to prepare. Maru opened the first page of his book, he needed to figure out what the book was even about.

\* \* \*

The fifth floor auditorium was now off-limits, that wasn't much of a surprise. It was still depressing to think about how he'd never be able to go back there again. Daemyung looked at the calendar, the nationals were just a day away now. Miso concluded that the perpetrator wasn't in the club, Daemyung felt a little bit hurt inside when he heard the rest of the club saying mean things about Miso behind her back. Thankfully, Yoonjung quelled the situation by saying instructor Miso was just doing her job. It was also good that the nationals were so close. The mood of the club quickly returned to normal because of how busy they were.

'What were instructor Miso and Maru trying to do, though?'

Maru just told Daemyung that it wasn't the right time yet whenever he asked about it. Daemyung knew that the boy figured something out already, but just didn't tell him about it for a reason. Maru did promise to tell Daemyung what happened when all of this was over and he was happy with that.

"So it's tomorrow."

He wasn't nervous for some reason. Was it because he'd acted in plays several times already? If he got on the stage right now, he was confident that he could finish without making a single mistake. He got a few calls before bed, from other club members and Maru. They all told him to work hard. When he promised Maru he'd 'work even harder for Maru's sake', the boy just told him to not make any mistakes with a laugh.

In any case, he was in peak condition. Like always, Daemyung got into bed at 12am. He drifted asleep very quickly.

\* \* \*

"I don't think this will disappear," Maru exclaimed in front of a mirror.

There was a scar on his forehead, a faint line running above his left eye. Thank goodness his hair would be able to cover it up easily.

"Let's go, brother."

"Sure."

It was finally his discharge date, Maru left his room for the past two weeks behind and went back home. Laying down on the hardwood floor, Maru thought to himself.

'Home is best.'

His legs were fine, they healed up very nicely. He decided to keep the cast that was split in half, it felt like a waste to get rid of the writing on it. So this is what they meant about getting emotional over random things in old age.

He looked at the calendar on the wall, there were two red circles on it. Not birthdays, but the dates of the nationals and the performance of the amateur acting club. Both of them ended in early January. He wasn't able to participate, but he did have a great time watching it. They all did very well. Enough to cover for his absence perfectly.

"Third place."

They weren't able to take first or second place in the end. As always, Myunghwa High took first place. Second place was taken by Yoojin's Bosung High.

'Better than nothing, I guess.'

It was still a great achievement for Woosung High to get a prize, even if the prize itself inspired great anger and disappointment from Miso. The amateur acting class ended its performance well, too. Many of the students from the class got noticed by industry professionals thanks to it. Baekjoon, as a matter of fact, got casted for a movie on the spot. It was as an extra, but it was still something to be congratulated for. Yoojin told him she might get contracted with an agency as well.

"So it's all over for now."

He wasn't able to participate in any of these despite having prepared hard for it. He acted as calm as possible, but his disappointment lingered nonetheless.

"Brother! Come have dinner!"

"Sure."

He might as well eat first. Maru took out the voice recorder from his bag and put it on his desk. The festival was over, and there was a debt to collect.

"I wonder how she'll come out."

There was a saying about how a person's words could either absolve them of all debt or add another million dollars to it. Yurim's fate would be decided on how she responds. Of course, there was no reason for her to be completely forgiven. Because with all things considered, Maru was actually very frustrated about having to waste two weeks in bed.

## **Chapter 165**

Yurim was feeling excited for the first time in a long while, it was to be her first time seeing Geunseok again in a few days. She did call him several times, but their calls were short. Yurim always hung up, gritting her teeth at the fact that she knew exactly who was next to the boy at the time.



'But well, I get to see him today.'

She went to school with nervousness, fear, and excitement. She subconsciously walked up to the fifth floor and ran into the words, 'don't enter'. She forgot the place was going under renovations, she came back down to the fourth floor without thinking much about it. Their clubroom felt very cramped with all of the props inside.

"You're here?"

She nodded towards Soyeon, she'd gotten a lot better since the fire incident. She still didn't have great feelings for the girl, but she could at least reply to greetings.

"It's so cramped. Was it always this cramped here?"

"Yeah, it feels like it got smaller."

"It's because of all the recent props we used. I don't think the seniors would even be able to make it inside."

Dojin spoke as he leaned on the wall. The clubroom only had Dojin, Daemyung, Taejoon, Soyeon and Yurim inside currently, and it was already quite stuffy. Yurim pushed a tea kettle on the floor aside, there really was a mountain of props inside.

"So we have to organize all of these by today."

"It'll take forever."

They all sighed. As they started talking about how they were going to go about organizing everything, Miso and the second years arrived.

"Bit cramped, isn't it?" Instructor Miso said, "It really might be about time to sort out the trash."

The second years all sighed in defeat.

"As expected, huh?"

"We don't even have space for it, after all. We should just keep the reusable stuff and stuff the costumes to somewhere compact. I think we'll have to destroy the bigger stage props though."

The cleanup method was decided under Miso's instructions, the expensive costumes would be organized first before everything else would be taken care of. By the looks of things, they'd need to clean out at least half of the props in the room.

"Sorry, we're late!"

Iseul and Geunseok were the last to arrive. They weren't actually late, the club was set to meet at 11am and they arrived at 10:50am.

"Alright, let's take everything out first. Hold your breaths, it's going to be very moldy."

The boys took out the props and the girls took care of sorting it. Everyone worked together when it came to taking out the stage props. By the time Maru arrived, the hallway was absolutely cluttered with props.

“Oh, so much stuff.”

“Yo! Maru!”

“You’re here!”

Yurim gave Maru a short nod. Thankfully, he appeared to be in great health.

“You’re late! Get to work.”

“My leg hurts, instructor.”

“Stop bullshitting me.”

The club was vibrant with energy, Yurim used it to try to talk to Geunseok.

“This will take a while to clean up.”

“Probably.”

“I don’t really see a need to do it during vacation.”

“Maybe.”

“Ah, that! We used that in the beginning, didn’t we? It was just a few months ago, but it feels like it’s been years.” “Dunno.”

That was their entire conversation. Yurim spent her entire time prolonging it, but Geunseok left her for the clubroom before she got a word in. Why was he being so cold? She bit her lips as she looked at the boy, she’d to get back to how things were in the past. She was sure of it.

“Did you two get into a fight?”

Someone spoke to her from behind, she flinched and looked back to see Maru was standing behind her with a bag of trash.

“W-what are you talking about?”

“Boys usually look into the eyes of girls they like in conversations. It’s just instinct. Or they look away out of embarrassment. But Geunseok just now looked completely uninterested. That could only mean two things. You guys had a fight or he really isn’t interested at all.”

Yurim glared at Maru.

“Stop joking. We’re just used to each other. You know nothing about us.”

“That would be for the best.”

“You’re really a mean kid, aren’t you? Do you enjoy ruining relationships like this?”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“No way. I’m not good at that. I am, however, very good at catching lies instead. Ah, care to hear something interesting? My lie radar recently caught a very big fish.”

What was the boy going on about? Yurim was confused by Maru’s sudden approach. The boy usually doesn’t talk to her like this. Right now though, he was stepping forward towards her with narrowed eyes. This didn’t feel good at all. She tried to glare at him before leaving, but Maru caught her with his next words.

“I wanted to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Why do you think people start a fire? I seriously can’t seem to come up with a satisfactory reason for it.”

Yurim felt the hairs on her arm stand up. Why was he talking about this all of a sudden? She put on a smile trying to disguise her nervousness.

“How would I know that?”

“You don’t?”

“Why would I?”

“Really? That’s a surprise.”

Maru scratched his eyebrows.

“And here I was so sure you’d know.”

The boy seemed incredibly confident, Yurim felt like her heart was about to stop. The boy knew something for sure, he wouldn’t have spoken about the fire otherwise. Her hands got sweaty and her mouth was drying up, she curled up her toes out of nervousness.

“H-how would I even know anything?”

Maru tilted his head sideways with a slight smile.

“Don’t be that surprised. I don’t want to hear your confession so quickly.”

“.....”

She couldn’t even talk, Yurim looked around her. They were pretty far away from the club, so no one could hear them.

“Care for a change in scenery?”

Maru stepped down the stairs. The boy didn’t explicitly tell her to follow him, she could always choose to ignore him and go back to the club. Nonetheless, she found herself close behind, with his enigmatic words echoing throughout her head. By the time they were halfway down the stairs to the third floor, Maru stopped.

“Sometimes in life, you need to have some clout. If you follow me like this without even pausing, then you’re practically announcing to the world that you did it.”

“What are you talking about, I just followed you because you told me to....”

“Pretty weak response, don’t you think?”

Maru put down the bag of trash on the floor before taking out a long object from his pocket. Maru pressed it with his thumb, causing voices to come from it. It was the conversation they had in the hospital on that day, Yurim flinched in shock. He recorded their conversation? She didn’t complain about it. There was nothing he could do with it anyway, but his next words completely shattered this belief of hers.

“How did you know the fire was started with a tube of glue?”

Yurim lost strength in her legs the moment she heard those words, it felt like she took a hammer to her head. She put a hand on the wall and leaned on it, she couldn’t even stand. Maru walked over to hold her shoulder.

“Don’t fall down. I don’t want to be blamed for something I didn’t do again.”

Yurim trembled, she did actually consider falling down the stairs just now. Maru seemed to know about everything, unfortunately. She tried to shake off Maru’s hands, but the boy was incredibly strong. She thought about screaming, but she was afraid of what might happen afterwards.

The same old unperturbed face stared back at her, it looked like a predator’s to her right now. She was scared. If things continued like this, the truth would be exposed.

Yurim opened her mouth widely towards Maru’s arm, then bit down. She’d roll down the stairs once Maru gets off of her. Sexual assault. She might as well use that as an excuse. Blood started pooling inside her mouth. She really went for it.

‘Soon...’

Soon, Maru would scream and push her back. That would be her chance. But...

“Now you’re really making me curious. What pushed you this far?”

The boy sounded completely calm. Yurim lost strength in her jaws, she pulled back with a disgusted look. Maru didn’t seem at all surprised to be looking at his wet, bleeding arm. As a matter of fact, he merely took out a handkerchief and slowly wiped the blood and saliva off.

“.....”

She tried to take a step back to run, she needed to get out of here; she didn’t even want to think about what would happen next. As if Maru would let her, he reached out to grab her left arm. Yurim wanted to scream, it felt like she was completely paralyzed. A million thoughts passed by in her head. If everyone finds out she started the fire... If everyone finds out she lied... She could imagine the club members looking at her in horror. At the same time, she could see Geunseok turning away from her.

“I-I’m sorry. I was wrong. I was just scared. I didn’t mean to do it!”

“So?”

“...What?”

“So what?”

“...I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I won’t do it again. I won’t do anything bad ever again. Please just forget about it this one time. Please don’t tell anyone else about this. I’ll be hated. Geunseok would hate me.”

Her body was trembling, she gathered her shoulders and squatted on the floor. A thought crossed her mind, she looked up and glared at Maru.

“If you tell the other kids... I’m going to kill myself. You’re going to be killing me. Do you know that? I’m going to die because of you.”

She gulped. Did she manage to scare him? Maybe she might be able to solve the issue with this?

“If you’re trying to use death threats to solve the situation, you’ve come to the wrong place. I really don’t care if you kill yourself. Why? You and I are strangers. Sure I might feel a little bit guilty. But how long would that last? Not long, I assure you. After that, I’ll use you as a topic of conversation. Hey, you guys remember that girl who killed herself after starting a fire? I guess the other club members would remember you well. After all, you did start a fire.”

Maru’s words dug straight into Yurim’s skull, she trembled in fear. Maru felt like a ghost to her, she grabbed the stair railings and stepped back. She just couldn’t muster the energy. Tears were flowing out of her eyes, her teeth were clacking together.

Someone help me, please. Someone take this person off of me.

“Why couldn’t you apologize faster? Even apologies have expiration dates. What you’re giving me smells like it’s been rotten for weeks.”

“S... sorry... I’m sorry... Sorry...”

She couldn’t say anything else. She was scared. The boy in front of her was too scary. It felt like he’d read her mind again if she looked into his eyes. The humiliation and fear were starting to choke her.

Right then.

“...Really?”

She heard a voice from above, Yurim looked up in fearful trepidation. Soyeon was looking at her.

\* \* \*

Miso poured Maru a glass of soju.

“I’m a student, you know.”

“Milk, then?”

“No thank you.”

Maru flipped the meat on the grill, the sound of the meat sizzling spread across the table.

“So, what happened with Yurim?”

“I met with her parents first.”

“And here I thought you were going to bury her.”

“I was going to at first, but there wasn’t a good enough punishment. It’s not like I could legally punish her either since she’s still a minor.”

“You can do it if you want, I know that. I heard from senior Junmin that you asked for a lawyer in the past?”

“...Being honest, there’s no reason in me decimating a kid’s life. The girl just broke down like some puppet when I pushed her a little.”

He could’ve at least made her do a few hours of community service if he wanted. But looking at her trembling, crying face... Damn it, he ended up thinking of his daughter. Maru gulped down his drink. The moment Yurim’s face overlapped with his daughter’s, he started wondering what the hell he was doing to a poor child.

“Decimating? What a word.”

“I’m a bit cultured, you see.”

“Are you drunk?”

“I wish.”

His daughter was around Yurim’s age. More so than anger, Maru was curious about the motivation of setting the fire. Still, it wasn’t a matter that could be settled purely with words either. So instead, he met with the girl’s parents. If they tried to argue to him about how their daughter did nothing wrong, he would have gone straight to the police. Thankfully, they were very polite and calm.

“What did Yurim’s parents say?”

“Therapy.”

“Not an easy decision, huh.”

“She’s had prior experience with something similar.”

“...Okay, I didn’t really want to know about that.”

“I didn’t let the parents tell me more either because of the same reason.”

Maru didn’t want to know Yurim’s story, he was just curious as to why she started the fire. Yurim said it was because she wanted to be closer to Geunseok, the reasoning just made Maru laugh. Just where the hell did she get that idea?

“I suppose just about everyone gets blinded by love.”

“Stop talking like an old man, please. You know you give me goosebumps sometimes, right?”

“It’s because I’m drinking.”

"I'm surprised about Soyeon though."

"Right. She's an incredibly kind girl."

"I'm glad at least one person's looking out for Yurim."

"Don't know. I just hope Yurim doesn't get too attached to Soyeon this time."

"We both know that won't happen though."

"Ah, true."

"A school in Jeju island, was it?"

"Yes."

"I suppose it's a good thing her family's well off."

"Well, accidents are always caused by the rich for a reason."

Maru got a call from Yurim's dad that the family would move all the way down to Jeju island. Amongst a myriad of apologies he received, Maru tried to cheer him up. He could only feel sorry for the man as a father himself.

"Good lord, what do we do with the club now?"

"Dunno."

"Dunno', again?"

"Why don't you lure in some freshmen if you're so worried? The club really might disintegrate at this rate."

Maru shrugged. The new semester was about to begin. The second years would all be gone and who knew how many of the first years would stay.

"No place to practice and the clubroom's so small, too."

"You still have to come, instructor."

"Only if you get ten members."

"Hah..."

"Don't you dare sigh. I'm the one that wants to cry here."

Miso took a swig of her drink. She was right, the club that nurtured her dreams was a mess.

"Pace yourself, please," Maru said, as he poured her another drink.

## **Chapter 166**

Twilight Struggles. It was a book whose title told you everything, a story of an abandoned old man who goes into a cruel killing spree. Maru was reading the book laying down in his room with his windows

opened. It was February; the white snow of January had completely disappeared and all there was left was an incredibly cold wind. In the end, Maru closed the windows. It was a bit too cold for his liking.

"I wonder when Spring will come."

He missed Winter in Summer and he missed Summer in Winter. He wished that the entire year could just be Spring and Autumn, but if that were the case, he'd probably complain about the boring weather. Humans can never be satisfied for long.

'...Is it because of the book?'

The book was clearly feeding him too much ill will towards humanity, he was reading through it for the fifth time now. He'd been constantly reading ever since he was at the hospital. It was an odd book where each read through took longer than last time.

The main character of 'Twilight Struggles' was an old man in his sixties long forgotten by his children, that age immediately made Maru think of Moonjoong. The main character lived a life like any old man of habit, he was someone who went around town collecting scrap paper for money with his bike. Since he had to wake up a bit earlier to get as much paper as possible, he got into a habit of waking up at 5. He ate cold rice in water for lunch at home and went out to pick up more paper afterwards. At night, he comes back and goes to sleep with his broken TV on. The book described this old man's mundane life in great detail. The writing depicted everything from his feelings to even what his room looked like.

A change occurred to this man, someone stole the old man's bike. Without it, the old man had to walk around town in his sneakers all day. Only at night was he able to find his bike, the criminal was another old man who picked up scrap paper. They got into a fight and they ended up going to the police. The main character shoved the thief out of anger, causing the man to call upon his children for retaliation.

Being pushed around by younger people made the old man call his own kids out of sheer anger. But his kids didn't come, and in the end, he was only able to get his bike back thanks to police involvement.

On the way back home, the old man keeps calling his children several times out of anger. None of the calls went through, so he walks all the way to his eldest son's home. There, he learns that his son has been ignoring his calls on purpose. Out of desperation, he goes to see his second daughter and his youngest son. There, he hears from them that they don't want to support him anymore, that they don't want him contacting them either.

The old man buys some soju on the way back home and drinks. He sacrificed his youth for his children, but all he got in return was coldness. By the time he starts falling asleep in the cold, he started feeling a few young men start touching him. He thought to himself that there are still some people who care for him. He got immediately let down when the young men beat him and started running away with what little money he had.

At that moment, the young men's expressions overlapped with that of his children's. Flames of rage took over his heart right there and then. Moreover, the words that one of the young men said as he ran stabbed him even more.

- How fucking retarded do you have to be to be alone with nothing at that age?



The old man comes back home and leaves his children a message. That he's lonely, that he wants to talk. All he got back was silence. The old man takes a look back on his life at his seat. He spent his life at work, since his wife's passing at a young age. He retired from his company at the age of 50. Then, he spent five years as the CEO of a smaller company and then he spent the rest of his time maintaining a restaurant.

By the time he sent off his youngest son to marry, all he had left was a tiny room and a broken bike. He was living on telling himself that he raised his children well. Looking back, he really was a 'retard' like the young man had said.

He gave his children money for college, houses, money for marriage, everything. He thought that was love, he thought this love would be repaid to him in time. In the end, all he received was nought. That's when he realizes that his children hadn't contacted him for the last three years, he got nothing back in return. He sat down thinking to himself all night and by the time it was morning, he was holding a hammer in hand.

The story speeds up afterwards, the old man's sighs soon turn into madness and the rest of the book dyes red with bloody carnage. Maru still couldn't forget the old man's last line at the end of the book at the face of his death.

- I can finally see myself.

Maru tried imagining this scene with Moonjoong. An old man who always looked so nice, acting in the role of a crazy actor? He couldn't imagine it.

"What's so wrong with using my life to teach wild dogs?"

Maru said the lines in the book as he rolled around, he emphasized with the main character since he was a father himself. If he was still alive and well, he would've grown old with his wife after sending his daughter off to marry. He had to wonder what his daughter would be like during the twilight of his life.

Surely his daughter wouldn't be this cold, but he did have some doubts. This book only had shades of grey. In view of the law, the main character was a demon. From an emotional standpoint, the children who said 'our dad just won't die already' were the evil ones.

The old man uses his broken body and his broken morals to unleash a demonic evil. Somewhere within this man, you were still able to see a vestige of a human you could still relate with. This book was bound to be a success.

He didn't know how he felt towards the movie's success. It wasn't a family movie and it was the type of movie that would look terribly frightening to people.

'That's just a prediction, but...'

Something might happen if the movie became a sensation, perhaps they might succeed if word about the movie spread.

"Bro, come to dinner," Bada said, walking into the room.

Maru closed the book and stood up. Three days until school starts back up again. He might be able to read it one more time before then.

\* \* \*

The frigid winds were as cold as ever, even during March. The school still looked square and the disciplinary teacher was still outside passionately 'educating' tardy kids. Thanks to it, the front entrance was lined with late students. Nothing much changed with the start of their second year. Maybe just the fact that he had to go up an extra set of stairs?

"Ugh, so cold."

Dojin was coming up the stairs behind him, Daemyung was there, too. They didn't end up splitting up as they headed up a year. The air was warm inside the classroom. Like always, Maru's seat was next to the back entrance, with Dojin sitting next to him. The one thing that changed was that Daemyung was right in front of Maru now.

"I just can't be rid of you fucks, can I?" Dojin said with a laugh.

Those 'fucks' included Dowook as well, the boy sat down in front of Dojin with a slight frown. They were sworn enemies at the beginning of the first year, but they were on fairly good terms at this point. They got along together pretty well given their faces and personalities.

Maru looked forward, popping one of Dojin's candies in his mouth. The blackboard had the words 'membership in a club is required' written on it.

"Come to think of it, it's today."

"What is?"

"Advertising."

"Advertising?"

Daemyung looked slightly confused, so Maru pointed down at the floor. Only then did the boy nod in understanding.

"We should go."

"You, me, Geunseok, huh."

"Yup."

Maru bit down on the candy in his mouth before turning to Dojin, the boy looked down shamefully.

"Just three people."

"S-sorry."

"So long as you are, help us advertise. Geunseok's pretty handsome, but he's way too cold for this kind of stuff. We'll need you to look welcoming."

"....."

Dojin didn't seem to know what to do, Maru decided to stop with the teasing here.

"Just kidding. Have fun in the cooking club. You're going in with Iseul, right?"

“Yeah. They were all nice people. I liked it.”

“I heard marrying into a girl’s family is always really difficult.”

“The hell does that mean?”

“Good luck. Let me try some of your food next time.”

In the end, the acting club was just left with three members. Aside from those who wanted to take up acting as a job, everyone went somewhere else. Dojin and Iseul went to the cooking club, and Taejoon and Soyeon joined the movie watching club. Taejoon didn’t seem to mind staying that much, but when Soyeon told him she was leaving, he made up his mind as well. They all apologized, but Maru told them not to worry about it. He didn’t want to tie down the club members with their sense of responsibility. After all, this was their last chance for any of them to do what they wanted. All the other current third years left the club, as they previously said they would. They decided to put as much work as possible into job hunting. They did say they would come by to help though, which was great.

The fifth-floor auditorium transformed into a fancy gym, which had been filled with a ton of new equipment. Looking at it made Maru feel a little bit empty inside. It felt like the half-year he had spent there was completely fake.

“This is the script.”

Daemyung handed Maru the paper, it was for today’s ‘advertising’. A little thing they would use to pull the first years into the club.

“...I wonder if I’ll be able to get a female underclassman?”

“Hah.”

Daemyung waved his hand, implying what he said was a joke with an awkward smile. Maru caught the little glint of seriousness from the boy though.

“Now now, let’s take a seat.”

The teacher walked in calmly, Maru looked at the man with a slight smile. It was Taesik, their homeroom teacher.

“We’re going to be choosing our clubs today, so think well. There’s a lot of hard-working and rewarding clubs out there. Like the acting club... for example.”

Taesik was talking with a smile on his face, making Maru shake his head.

## **Chapter 167**

And here Maru thought he paid attention in class. He looked at the math equation on his notebook and sighed. His memory and focus improved for sure, but he just couldn’t make use of it with stuff like this.

“Maru, we’re going to the clubroom after lunch, right?”

“Of course.”

Maru closed the notebook before looking at Daemyung, they were planning to advertise the club during the fifth period. There were a select few clubs in Woosung High that were granted the privilege of being able to advertise like this, most of these clubs were ones that did well in the nationals and whatnot. The acting club was able to advertise thanks to its past glory, but who knew how long this would last?

“The fifth period of the computer classroom is hanja. What do we do?”

“Well, we might as well try. If they don’t want us there, we can leave.”

The hanja teacher still hated the acting club as much as ever, so they probably won’t be able to advertise their club.

“Alright, let’s eat,” Dojin said, standing up.

Dowook stood up silently as well, he seemed to be having fish soup for lunch today. Or it may be a soup that smells slightly of fish, really. As they walked to the cafeteria together, they came across the design students on the other side.

“Looks nice,” Dojin muttered.

He must’ve seen Geunseok among the group of girls.

“Why don’t us electrical engineering students get any girls?”

“Dude, just look at the name, it stinks of men.”

Maru joked as he stuck behind the design students, Taejoon and Soyeon were there as well.

“Yo, Taejoon, weren’t you one of us?” Dojin asked.

“I’m in design only when I eat. Didn’t you know?”

“Tsk, tsk, this is why romance shouldn’t be allowed in schools. Such disgusting deeds happening in sacred educational grounds...”

Someone snatched Dojin away by his collar as the boy tried to nudge his way in between Soyeon and Taejoon, it was Iseul. She was here before they knew it, along with the rest of her fellow computer students.

“Stop ruining the mood.”

“O-okay.”

Dojin got quiet with an awkward smile. They looked like quite the couple when they were together, an energetic queen and her comical jester, Maru could already picture them together in his head.

“I heard the acting club is going to advertise today?” Iseul asked.

“Yup, with us three dudes.”

Iseul crossed her arms and nodded.

“Lots of girls should come for just Geunseok alone. Good luck.”

“Good to hear.”

It would be easy to drag in boys if they had Iseul, but it wasn't like they could ask for help from someone who wasn't even in the club anymore.

“How's the cooking club? Dojin was happy with it.”

“It's no joke. One of the upperclassmen already has their baker's license. Another one already has a job in a Chinese restaurant. I think we'll learn a lot. We'll also be visiting famous restaurants twice a month. It's gonna be great!”

“Good luck. Take care of him for me.”

Iseul gestured towards Dojin, who was nervously glancing at the two of them.

“Depending on how he does, maybe,” Iseul grinned. “Ah, what's happening with the instructor? Is instructor Miso coming back?”

“Mr. Taesik asked, but it's gonna be difficult.”

“Why?”

“She found herself a part in a play. She's going to go on stage in about two months and she isn't sure what her schedule's going to look like.”

“Makes sense. She's an actress after all.”

She probably wouldn't be able to instruct the club full-time like before. She had the passion, but not the time.

“Think we'll lose our funding, too.”

“...Because of the fire?”

“If they liked us, they wouldn't have chased us out of the auditorium to begin with. We'll probably get a significant cut. Or they might just get rid of the club altogether.”

“Man, now I feel sorry for leaving at the worst time.”

Iseul looked down at the floor bitterly, it wasn't a pretty sight seeing her sad like that. Maru tapped the girl's arm to try and cheer her up.

“We'll make do. I'm more worried about the underclassmen. If we don't get any new students, we'll have to go on with three people. That's impossible.”

They would need at least ten people. That was the rule for school clubs. If they couldn't get the ten required people, the school would no longer recognize them as a club. At the same time, they would be penalized greatly. That is, their clubroom would disappear.

There weren't many clubs that had their own clubrooms in the school. Music, acting, cooking, and Korean percussion. The other clubs made do with the empty classrooms during the weekend. In a situation like this, a permanent clubroom acted as a huge positive for the students. It was their home base. Losing the clubroom would negatively impact the acting club in a huge number of ways with the

props being the biggest problem of them all. There definitely wasn't a place nearby where they could store everything.

"We'll need at least three for sure."

The former second years would no longer be working with the club, but their names were still on the list. Joonghyuk decided to help them out after hearing about their situation. There were four second, no, third years on the club list, along with three second years. They needed three more students to meet the requirement.

"We'll get three, right?" Daemyung asked nervously.

Maru shrugged.

"That's the hope, but who knows?"

It was always good to think of all contingencies. Maru thought of a few friends in his class, they were the kids that didn't like to take part in clubs. If he told them he'd let them go to PC bangs so long as they just put their names in the club, they'd put their names on the list. Maru would have to talk to Taesik about it, sure, but he'd probably let it pass. It was against school rules, but they weren't in the position to care about that.

"They'll come for sure," Dojin said, as he tried to allay their worries.

\* \* \*

"What's this?"

"Advertising slogan."

Maru handed Geunseok a piece of paper, there were lines on it that Daemyung thought up. Geunseok seemed to think it was pretty childish, but the boy was reading through all of it regardless.

"At least three people. More is better, of course."

"We'll get three easily. All girls too."

Geunseok was smiling confidently, the boy was quite a relief to have around. Personality aside, he *was* very handsome.

"I'll do comedy with Daemyung. You should put weight behind our words."

Geunseok nodded, Maru turned to Daemyung with a grin. The boy wrote the script, knowing full well what Geunseok's personality was like.

"Alright, let's go."

Last year, they were the ones lulled into the club. This year, they were the ones left to advertise the club. They needed to drag in as many first years as possible, their first target was mechanical engineering. They opened the class door after a small knock, the teacher recognized them and motioned them in. Maru started his spiel as soon as he saw the teacher sitting down with arms crossed.

"Hello everyone, we're the Blue Sky acting club of Woosung High."

Might as well start off strong.

\* \* \*

Maru asked a question as he closed the door behind him.

“Next?”

“Design.”

“Hah.”

Daemyung took a sip of water nervously, the boy still hadn't built up any resistance towards girls. On the other hand, Geunseok stepped in front of the class with a confident look. They've done rounds on six classes so far. Mech, Electrical, Computer engineering. Those classes were all filled with boys, so the reactions they received were very uninteresting as well. When one of the students asked them, 'are there any pretty seniors?' all Maru could say was, 'we're about to get some pretty underclassmen'. As expected from an engineering school, they needed girls. Only now was Maru able to realize why Yoonjung and Danmi were the ones advertising way back then.

'One girl is better than a hundred boys.'

That was the truth, at least to a normal highschool boy.

“Let's crossdress.”

“W-what?”

“I'm joking.”

“Don't speak so seriously, I almost fell for it.”

Maru pat Daemyung on the back before knocking on the next class door. Geunseok would need to do well here, especially considering his appearance and his conversational skills. Given that not many students even cared for acting nowadays, these were the only two things they could rely on.

“Come inside.”

They opened the door at the teacher's words, the first years all awkwardly looked at the three of them.

'So this year too, the boys are going to be slaves in the design class, huh.'

The ratio of girls to boys was eight to two. In cases like these, the boys were submissive under the girls. If the boys don't understand or learn the politics between girls, they can often get chewed up to death before even knowing it. Only a select few boys here would be able to live out a happy high school life surrounded by girls. The rest? As mentioned before, slaves.

Maru gave Geunseok a glance. Already, most of the girls were looking at the boy.

“Hello, underclassmen.”

Geunseok stepped forward with a greeting, Maru and Daemyung stuck very closely behind him. Please don't make a mistake, please don't make a mistake... Daemyung's plan here was very simple: a

handsome boy, and the dumb and dumber. As Geunseok talked in front of them, they danced rhythmically with a silly face. They got good reactions, thankfully. The girls were smiling.

“Don’t worry about the guys behind me. They’re kind of like a signboard of the club.”

Geunseok went on according to Daemyung’s script. He was clean. This too, in the end, was acting. He commanded attention with his calm voice. Noticing that most of the class’s focus was on them now, Maru gave Daemyung a glance. Their silly faces were only there to loosen up the mood, they clearly didn’t need it anymore.

The two of them went back to looking serious. Geunseok started to explain about the specifics regarding the acting club. Some of the students frowned hearing that the club would be difficult, it was understandable. No one wanted to put time and effort into something difficult.

“But you can’t exchange the joy you feel on stage when you get applauded with anything else. You know the word ‘catharsis’, don’t you? The cathartic feeling you get then is unforgettable. You can’t exchange it with anything. The acting club is definitely difficult. But I can at least guarantee this. The one year you spend in our club will completely overshadow everything else about high school.”

Geunseok took a step back to breathe. As Maru expected, Geunseok was done here. The nervous air in the class was still there. Maru looked at Daemyung, the boy looked satisfied.

“...Point is, you definitely won’t lose out on anything as long as you’re serious about acting. The acting club’s clubroom is located on the fourth floor, right to the left of the central staircase. You can register until Saturday, so please drop by!”

It was very clean. As expected, Geunseok could be trusted with stuff like this. Daemyung started handing out papers about the club.

“Please take a look and come by if you’re interested. You don’t need to be pretty to be a good actor. You’ll be fine as long as you’re interested. I mean, just look at me!”

Daemyung smiled before saying his last line.

“Let’s make a play together.”

\* \* \*

By the time they finished looking around, the fifth period was almost over. Maru came back to his seat in the class as he cracked his neck sideways.

“How was it?” Dojin asked.

Maru raised his thumb.

“I’m happy for now. I don’t know how they’ll react, but Daemyung was really good with setting things up. Geunseok did well, too.”

“I didn’t do much...” Daemyung smiled awkwardly.

“How are they, though?”



“Who?”

“The first years. Are they pretty?”

Maru looked at Dojin for a second before sending a text message to Iseul. Exactly a minute later, the girl appeared in their class with a smile on her face. Maru looked at the clock after taking care of Dojin, there were three hours before five o’clock. How many students would come to visit them after school?

“You idiot, you just love making work for yourself, don’t you?” Dowook said, flopping down on his desk.

Maru threw a pen at the boy.

“I wonder how many people will come,” Daemyung said nervously.

“There were like four or five people who were really interested, so maybe three?”

They got good responses from design and chemical engineering. They should get three. Hopefully.

## **Chapter 168**

“The acting club, right?”

“The senior at the front was really handsome.”

“Tall, too.”

“Will it be fun?”

“Don’t know. But they said it was hard, right? A big time investment.”

“Hmm, maybe we should just go with something simple, after all?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you still want to visit? Acting sounds interesting.”

“Should we?”

The girls decided to give the acting club a visit after school. They weren’t interested in joining, but were curious enough to take a look. Acting. The girls wanted to see what this was all about.

“Lee Jiyeon, want to come with?”

The girls turned to look at Jiyeon, who was sitting quietly next to the window. They’d grown acquainted with one another during their week together. By now, everyone had some sort of an idea of what each other were like. Girls who were tomboyish, girls who were talkative, girls who liked to talk behind other people’s back. According to this metric, Jiyeon was classified as the ‘quiet girl’.

“Me too?” Jiyeon whispered.

The girls surrounded the girl with a grin, Jiyeon widened her eyes in surprise. She looked more like a baby than a high school student right now. Her cheeks were round and soft-looking, and her eyes were large. Combined with her tiny figure and her bobbed hair, she was already being called ‘round’ within the class.

“Yeah, you. Are you busy?”

“No.”

Jiyoong shook her head sideways.

“Let’s go, then.”

The girl was just adorable, she was the type of person that made anyone want to care for her.

“I wish I had a sister like you, Jiyoong.”

“Someone I can go buy clothes with.”

“Hey hey, forget it. Siblings hate each other the moment they’re born. I’d rather... have a daughter like Jiyoong.”

Jiyoong looked down when the girls laughed amongst themselves, she must be embarrassed.

“Hey hey Jiyoong, mom’ll treat you well, so will you be my daughter?”

Jiyoong shook her head, making the girls all laugh loudly.

“Oh, class is about to begin.”

They all collectively returned to their seats after looking at the clock.

\* \* \*

Jiyoong put the paper down on the desk, she rubbed the words ‘acting club’ on it carefully. She could feel the texture of the hard paper under her fingers.

‘This is... that acting club.’

Jiyoong saw a play in the civic hall with her friends at Anyang last December. She wasn’t interested in acting, it was just that her friend’s sister was acting and she couldn’t refuse her friend’s request.

The weather was pretty cold, she remembered.

Her friend had brought a ton more friends with her, Jiyoong honestly wasn’t a big fan of the loud noise. She stayed in the end because her friend had asked to watch the play. Thankfully, she didn’t have to stay long, since her friend’s sister’s play was up first.

- There are so many people.

- Eh! I know that person! I saw him on TV!

- Me too, me too!

It was an odd feeling. She heard it was a high school competition, but there were so many people. Were they all like this? Jiyoong held her breath as the play started. She was at the furthest seat from the theater, so she couldn’t look at the actor’s faces, but that no longer bothered her by the end. Looking at the people go back and forth on stage, watching people who weren’t much older than her act like that... was pretty amazing to behold.

Every time the light went off and the music switched, a change happened on stage. Jiyoan couldn't stop her jaw from dropping every time. It was a completely different experience from watching a movie. She found herself watching the stage nervously. She clapped in joy when a scene completed perfectly, she gripped her fist tightly whenever the actors made a mistake. By the time the play was over, she was completely exhausted.

- Cool, the play's over. Let's go, guys. I'll get you something tasty.

When Jiyoan's friend left with everyone else, Jiyoan headed back inside. She figured that they might just forget she was there. Plus, she didn't want this excitement in her chest to leave. She sat down quietly at the end of the theater. She wanted to go to the front, but she couldn't see any seats open. The lights went off quickly and the play began. Which play was next? As she looked at the stage, she couldn't help but notice the name 'Woosung Engineering High' appear. She was shocked, that was the school she was supposed to be going to. She sat there feeling an odd sense of nervousness. Right then, she saw two grandpas behind her. She did notice there were empty seats, but she still asked them if they needed a seat.

- I'm fine.

The grandpa spoke with a very kind voice, Jiyoan nodded and looked forward. The play was starting. From the very beginning, it made her laugh. To begin with, she was a fan of comedies rather than tragedies.

'Amazing.'

Were they not nervous? It wasn't just one or two people watching here. The actors made no mistakes under everyone's watchful gaze, Jiyoan flinched in shock when she tried to imagine herself on the stage for a second. Just imagining it was this difficult. How bad was it to actually be on stage? It was amazing. She put her hands together as she watched the play, she had no idea plays could be so fun. It was so breathtaking, she literally forgot to breathe at one point as she watched the play go on.

Right then, the lights suddenly turned blue. A new character popped out on stage, he literally popped out. The man jumped to center stage, threw his hat upwards and caught it before finally introducing himself. She was wondering what he would do. As a matter of fact, she was incredibly surprised to find that the man was talking straight to the audience.

He was so natural at it that Jiyoan almost thought the play was over, but it wasn't. The man on stage was reviewing the other actors with a very playful voice. Jiyoan couldn't help but think back to the kid's play she saw a few years back. A monster wearing a very scary mask came up on stage and a pretty lady stepped up with a microphone as well.

- Kids! If we want to punish this bad monster, we'll need your strength! Let's call for a hero who can save our princess here!

She looked for a hero as she sobbed, she still remembered this moment because her mom always teased her about it.

Looking at the man on stage right now reminded her of the woman from back then. An actor who was in the play, but who also wasn't in the play. Though she couldn't see the man's face, she was sure he was smiling right now.

If only she could see at the front...

In a flash, the man vanished behind the curtain. Again, the story returned to the people. The story continued as naturally as it stopped.

"An energetic kid."

She could hear one of the grandpas behind her say. She couldn't see them well, but it was the one with the big beard. They were talking so quietly behind her, that she could barely make out their names. Chulmin and Moonjoong. In any case, Jiyeon could only agree to what that grandpa said. She couldn't describe it well, but the man on stage was energetic for sure.

"Hah, stop dozing off and open your books."

Jiyeon snapped her head upwards. When did her teacher come inside? She hurriedly pulled out a textbook from her desk. Sixth period was hanja.

"Why does that teacher look so tired?"

"I heard he just got back after sick leave."

"Really? Is he sick?"

She could hear her friends talk next to her. Hearing that, she felt a little sorry for the hanja teacher. Was he sick?

"Hah."

His throat seemed to hurt as well. Oh man, what should she do? She was so worried.

"No, I heard from a senior that he just messed up in school politics."

"Politics?"

"Yeah. I don't know the specifics, but he isn't a great teacher. The senior told me he wouldn't be surprised if the guy gets fired."

"Really?"

Right then, the hanja teacher turned around and threw a textbook at the talking kids. The textbook bounced off a desk before hitting someone. Problem was, the book came flying at Jiyeon.

"Which idiot thought it was a good idea to talk during class, huh?!"

The teacher yelled with a scary glare, Jiyeon swallowed nervously. The man looked scary.

"Kids these days..."

The teacher was walking towards her, Jiyeon was just frozen there on the spot. The teacher kicked her desk with a big frown.

“Pick it up, dumbass. Are you trying to make me pick it up, huh?”

“Ah, yes.”

Jiyoon picked up the book and gave it to the hanja teacher. The teacher clicked his tongue before slapping Jiyoon’s head with the book.

“Kids these days... You just don’t have respect for your teachers. You always twist teachers’ pure intentions into something evil. Because of you...”

Jiyoon clenched her eyes. The book came at her again. Slap. It kind of hurt.

“Sit down!”

“...Yes.”

“Go sue me for violence again, why don’t you.”

The hanja teacher stomped back to the blackboard. Jiyoon had to hide her trembling hands under her desk, she almost cried.

“Hey!”

A shout came her way as she tried to calm herself, Jiyoon raised her head in surprise. The teacher was glaring at her again.

“Pay attention. Don’t look down like an idiot.”

Jiyoon tensed up nervously. If only she had more bravery here... If only she could tell him she wasn’t the one that talked.

Right then, a piece of paper floated in front of her. When she turned to look next to her, she could see the friend that was talking a few minutes ago looking at her worriedly. She paid attention to the teacher as she opened the paper. It was written ‘I’m really sorry’ inside. Jiyoon shook her head. They did nothing wrong. She was just angry that she didn’t have the courage to speak up for herself.

“Pictographs are...”

The hanja teacher’s lecture resumed. Jiyoon looked at the blackboard with reddened eyes.

\* \* \*

“Ugh, so annoying.”

“You call that a teacher?”

Jiyoon told her friends to stop with an awkward smile. It was ready in the past, she didn’t want to think about it. Plus, talking about it more only made her ashamed of her cowardice.

‘If only I was a bit braver...’

Round. Kind. All words she had heard from her childhood, she wasn’t a fan of hearing them. When her cousin cried for her doll, she gave it despite her utmost reluctance. She did it because she was fearful of

what the adults might say. What she heard after giving away the doll was 'Jiyoonsuch an adult.' She didn't like hearing that either.

"Alright, fine. I'm buying tteokbokki for Jiyoons today!"

"Really?"

"Just for Jiyoons. You guys pay for yourselves."

"Ugh, you cheapo."

Thankfully, she felt calmer next to her friends. They walked up to the fourth floor through the central staircase. When they turned left, they found quite a few people. The classroom next to the staircase was marked with the words 'Acting Club'.

'So this is it!'

She could feel the play from back in December come back to life in front of her, she tried to step forward towards the club before her friends.

"What the hell are you doing, blocking the road!"

Jiyoons flinched backwards, the hanja teacher was walking towards them with an angry frown. As soon as he took out his little whip, the people around the clubroom all disappeared. Jiyoons moved a bit slower out of fear, that must've looked annoying to the hanja teacher.

"You... from the morning, right?"

Oh dear. Jiyoons didn't know what to do, her friends were looking at her nervously from nearby. She didn't feel annoyed that her friends weren't standing up for her, the hanja teacher was that scary.

"Acting club. Barbaric bastards. You're thinking of joining? I knew it. You just looked like a delinquent."

The teacher was walking towards her, brandishing his weapon viciously. Jiyoons couldn't even move away. She just stood there fearfully as the teacher came closer.

By the time the sound of the whip got too close for comfort...

The door of the acting club opened and a boy walked out. He looked at the hanja teacher for a second before turning to her and scratched his eyebrows. Jiyoons recognized this person, one of the three boys from the morning, the one who stayed quiet.

Before the hanja teacher was able to say anything, the boy started whispering something into the teacher's ear. Jiyoons was able to hear the voices thanks to being so close. The boy's words were short. Something about a lawyer Park? The color on the hanja teacher's face drained from shock, the man quickly turned from a scary hunter to a scared victim.

"H-how do you..."

"Let's keep things civil, shall we? Unless, if you want to lose your pension, do you?"

She could clearly hear that last bit for sure. The hanja teacher took a few steps backwards before practically running down the stairs, the students who had walked away previously all gathered back curiously.

“Hm, are you guys all thinking about joining? That would be nice.”

The senior spoke as if nothing had happened.

## **Chapter 169**

“Alright, raise your hands if you’re here to look into the acting club.”

Most of the students raised their hands at the senior’s words, Jiyoong quickly joined in as well.

“Around 15 people, huh? Thank you all for coming. I was worried that no one would come.”

The senior stepped back before coming out with some yakult in his hands, he handed one out to each of the students.

“Would you all come inside, please? It’s a bit small, your understanding would be appreciated.”

The door of the clubroom opened, revealing what was inside. The first thing Jiyoong saw was a steel shelf, there were all sorts of stuff laid on it. A pretty lantern, a massive dice, a set of knives... a bottle of some sort? It was a collection of all sorts of odd things.

“Try not to step on each other.”

Jiyoong walked inside at the senior’s gesture. It was small indeed, barely enough space for the 15 people that were inside. Jiyoong looked to the left of her, there were a bunch of clothes that were wrapped in plastic. Next to the tower of clothes was a hanger rack, which had clothes all over it as well. They probably had more than a hundred, now that she looked at it. Hanbok... suits... dresses... even a Chinese dress. Qipao, was it?

“Good thing it’s not summer, at the very least. Alright, let me explain what the club’s about. Obviously it must be about acting, right?”

The senior took out a large book. Inside it, there were a ton of photos.

“The acting club is 13 years old. A lot of seniors have come and gone through this place already. If you join this club, you’ll be the 14th generation of the club.”

The senior took out a different album. In this one, he was in the picture as well. There were other seniors holding hammers, ones in makeup, ones acting, et cetera. He handed out each album to the underclassmen.

“Take a look while you listen. The acting club has a set purpose. That is, to win the summer and winter nationals.”

“There are competitions?”

The senior nodded.

“You probably don’t know this, but there are a ton of acting competitions out there. The biggest ones are the summer nationals and winter nationals as I’ve just mentioned. Each province holds its own preliminaries and the winners of those, compete. You guys heard about the Seoul Arts Center, right?”

“Yes.”

Jiyoon responded here as well.

“That’s the stage for the finalists. We managed to go there last year, too. I didn’t get to participate, unfortunately.”

The senior showed them the pictures of last year’s competition, there were a lot of photos taken in the Seoul Arts Center. In the middle of the seniors with makeup on, Jiyoon noticed one wearing a cast on his leg. It was the one who was talking to them now, he must’ve been unable to participate because of that injury.

“Since we’re aiming for such a big competition, we can’t just sit idly by like some other clubs. While other clubs meet like twice a week, we’ll be meeting basically every day.”

“Every day?”

“Yes.”

“Then the weekends...”

“They might as well not exist when a competition nears. We might even practice till night starting from the morning.”

The room turned a little awkward, Jiyoon was a bit surprised too. She knew that she’d need to invest a lot of time into the club, but even the weekends?

“The weekends are a bit...”

“Right?”

She could hear her friends whispering behind her. Jiyoon turned to look at the senior for a second, the senior was smiling with eyes that seemed to say that he expected as much.

“Of course, you’re free to join casually. Plays aren’t made through just actors, after all. We do need staff members that can make props. Joining in as a stage manager is one of the ways you can contribute if you’re short on time. I used to be a stage manager myself before Autumn. You get a lot more time to yourself that way. You don’t even need to come during the weekends.”

“But um... you’d need to practice a lot in order to act, right?” One of the girls whispered.

Jiyoon was curious about the answer here as well.

“If you want to participate as an actor, you’ll need to invest a lot of time, as I’ve mentioned. You can make props by yourself, but you can’t act in a play by yourself. The reality is that time investment is necessary.”

The senior crossed his arms before sighing lightly.



“It’ll be good to make things clear now, so might as well. We don’t have an instructor yet, but once we do, you’ll have a lot less free time. Depending on the instructor, you might even get strained both mentally and physically. The one from last year made us stretch for at least an hour before going into practice. She made us exercise a lot, too. We did get pretty nice bodies thanks to that, but it wasn’t easy.”

The senior fiddled with his eyebrow before smiling awkwardly.

“It’d be terrific if you all joined, of course. Clubs need people, after all. But people feel stressed when they end up doing something they didn’t think they would do. Plays are fun from the perspective of an audience. Has anyone here watched a play before?”

A few of the underclassmen raised their hands, Jiyeon raised hers after a moment of hesitation as well.

“Quite a few. How was it?”

The senior asked the question to one of the boys at the front. The boy paused for a moment before responding ‘it was fun’.

“Sorry for the sudden question. But at least I got the answer I wanted. Plays are fun to watch. Because unlike movies, you’re physically close to the actors in plays. When we watch movies, we don’t much care for the present since we know that an actor isn’t going to make a mistake. We just think about what’s going to happen next. Because obviously, movies are edited almost to the point of perfection.”

The senior put his hands together in front of him gently.

“I’m not saying plays aren’t perfect. But unlike movies, plays take place in real-time. There’s a chance that the actors could make a mistake. That’s what makes plays fun. Having your heart strain a bit in nervousness as you watch.”

Jiyeon found herself nodding, he was right; she remembered watching the play with a strange sense of nervousness from back then.

“There’s also the matter of focus. We watch movies from the perspective of the director. We aren’t watching what we want to watch, we’re watching what we’re shown. Plays are different. It’s up to the audience what they want to watch in the play. The light might be focused on the main character, but the audience may always choose to keep their attention focused on the villain in the shadows instead.”

“Ah.”

They all nodded in understanding.

“Plays are very fun. But fun things come at a cost, as you might all know. It costs someone else’s effort. I’ll say this again. We need people who can put in the effort. It doesn’t matter if the results are good or bad. All I hope is that we try hard getting there in the end.”

The senior sounded as kind and gentle as ever, but his words had weight to them. The underclassmen all closed their mouths and looked at the senior. Looking at him now, he looked kind of strict. He was talking gently, but his face looked a little bit scary.

“If you’re thinking about joining the club, please understand this. The club will be difficult. It might not even be fun. So think about it carefully. It’d be very troublesome if you think about leaving midway.”

The senior clapped his hands and relaxed his posture a bit, that alone was enough to make him look completely different. He already looked much kinder than before.

“Though I say this, I’m actually pretty worried. Hopefully at least a few of you get in.”

Right then, the door of the club room opened and the other seniors walked in. The tall handsome one and the plump one.

“We’re a bit late. Hello, hello.”

The tall senior spoke with a big grin, he seemed like a cold person to Jiyeon in the beginning. Judging by his smile, that didn’t seem to be the case. The plump senior was the same as ever though, he was smiling behind the tall senior quietly.

“Did you already hear about the club?”

“Yes.”

“How was it?”

The students started speaking one by one after a moment of silence.

“Hm, I think it might be fun.”

“It might be difficult.”

“Does it really take that much time?”

“I want to know how you guys practice.”

The tall senior nodded before sticking out his hand, he was holding a bag full of snacks. He was probably late from going to the convenience store.

“Why don’t we talk over some food?”

Everyone nodded at the sound of the plastic bag. Jiyeon was a bit excited, she might even be able to ask a few questions herself.

“Let’s go to the class next to this one, then.”

They walked over to one of the third year classes near the club. Since school was over already, there was no one inside. The desks and the chairs were all moved to the back of the class. Probably done by the seniors here beforehand.

“You can ask whatever you want. Private, public, whatever.”

The senior who had been talking all this time closed his mouth when the tall senior stepped in, the tall one must be the president of the club.

“Is becoming an actor difficult?”

The tall senior replied to the question.

“It’s different for everybody, but not really. You know what it’s like memorizing a textbook when you take a test, right? You just have to memorize a bit less than that.”

“But the senior from before said it’d be difficult...”

The tall senior clicked his tongue at the calm-looking senior lightly. Jiyeon only managed to hear it because she was near the two.

“It must’ve been too difficult for him. Like I said, it differs per person.”

“Is that so?”

“Of course.”

“Um, senior. I heard the club meets pretty often. How many times per week?”

The tall senior answered the question again.

“Almost every day last year. But think about it. How efficient would that be in reality? I think it’s obvious that the talented practice less, and the talentless practice a lot. Don’t worry about the time. I’m thinking of lessening practice time greatly.”

Completely different from what the other senior just said, Jiyeon was a bit confused. As a matter of fact, she could see the plump senior make a troubled expression. He seemed to want to say something, but the calm looking senior was stopping him.

“Plays are led by talented actors. The others just need to pay attention to the set. We’ll be able to put on the play after just a few practice sessions. Don’t worry too much about it.”

“Could I be a main character too?”

One of the clown-like kids raised his hand with a grin. The tall senior just responded with a ‘if you have talent’. Jiyeon could feel a ton of pride from him. Was he the leader of the club?

“Which one of you is the best at acting?”

Jiyeon could feel her cheeks get red, she couldn’t believe someone could ask such a question.

“Mm, I don’t know if I want to answer the question myself.”

The tall senior looked back, prompting the calm looking one to talk.

“Geunseok. That is, this tall guy over here’s the best at acting out of all of us. There’s a lot to be learned from him.”

“Wow.”

Everyone turned to look at the tall senior, no, Geunseok. Jiyeon thought back at the play she saw in December. The person who took center stage back then... That must be him, then?

‘So this one...’

Jiyoon looked at Geunseok curiously, their eyes ended up meeting as a result.

“You have a question?”

“What?”

Jiyoon was surprised at the sudden attention, everyone was looking at her suddenly. She could even feel her heart start to beat faster, it felt like she couldn't say no.

“U-um.”

“Go on.”

“C-can I act, e-even though I'm introverted?”

She immediately looked down nervously, her face was super hot.

“Mm, it'll probably be difficult to make it as an actor, logically speaking.”

Geunseok replied without holding back. Jiyoon let out an 'ah' of understanding. She asked a stupid question.

“Next?”

They all looked away from her. She was still nervous, she shouldn't even have thought about acting. She got up first to leave, it felt like she could change something with a bit more bravery, but she couldn't do anything. She stepped outside to take a breather. Just before she could step back inside, the calm-looking senior stepped outside.

“Being introverted means that you're more sensitive. That you have more tender emotions than most people.”

“.....”

“That might work to your advantage. Personality isn't what's important when it comes to acting. It's greed. It's fine if you're an introvert. That doesn't matter in the end.”

The senior turned around with that. She only realized after a moment that he was trying to console her, his words did calm her down a bit.

“T-then, can I do it?”

“As long as you're greedy for acting, then yes. Life is all about patience. Ah, I'll have to admit though, talent does matter.”

He wasn't just being nice to her.

“Do you think I have talent?”

“Only one way to find out, right?”

“C-can I try?”

The senior turned back around, he looked a little bit cold.

“That’s not my decision to make, but yours. Ask yourself that question, not others. The answer’s surprisingly easy. Keeping through with it is what really matters.”

## Chapter 170

“The tteokbokki here is great, I’m telling you.”

Jiyoong followed her friend to a restaurant. It was a small one that was a bit of a way from school. The walls were decorated with childish drawings, it was a calming place.

“You’re surprisingly good at finding places like this.”

“Finding good restaurants is a responsibility of any good student!”

Jiyoong laughed along quietly with the rest of her friends, before ordering tteokbokki, kimbap, and instant noodles. Her friend suggested they pay in advance. Jiyoong quickly took out her wallet as well.

“You don’t have to pay, I told you I’d buy for you, remember?”

“But...”

“Just pay for my food next time. Alright, the rest of you, pay up.”

Jiyoong’s five friends paid up. Jiyoong tried to sneak in a thousand won, but her friend caught on and slapped her hand away. In the end, her bill was returned to her wallet.

“The acting club did look fun.”

“Oh, yeah. The album they showed had a ton of fun pictures. I wanted to join in!”

“Me too, me too.”

Their topic of conversation quickly shifted towards that of the acting club. Jiyoong picked up a steaming piece of rice cake as she listened in.

“But I don’t know about the time investment.”

“The handsome senior said they were going to lessen it, though?”

“Well, they’re still going to meet up more than other clubs, right? Going to school on the weekend... ugh.”

“Really? I think it might be pretty fun.”

“You’re thinking of joining?”

“Nope.”

“What the, I thought you would.”

“I’m just sharing my opinion.”

While her friends were giggling amongst themselves, Jiyoong took a small sip with a slight nod.

“Jiyoong, come on, say something.”

“Yeah, you’ve been quiet for a while now.”

Jiyoong smiled nervously when everyone suddenly started looking at her.

“Is the talk about the acting club boring?”

“No! Not at all...”

“Then why aren’t you talking? Are you bored?”

“...I couldn’t find the right time to jump in.”

She fumbled with her fingers as she talked, she didn’t dislike talking at all. In fact, she wanted to try gossiping really hard like all the other girls. The problem was that she never knew where to start.

“Couldn’t find the right time?”

“Yeahh.”

“Hah. Just talk. It’s not like you’re presenting.”

“Right, right.”

“But...”

She was like that from a young age. Whenever it was her turn to talk, her head would turn completely white. Not one of her friends made fun of her for it, but if she had bad friends... she didn’t even want to think about it.

“Ugh, you’re worried about something so pointless!”

“Hey, but it’s really like Jiyoong though! So cute!”

“So that’s why you’re quiet all the time?”

Jiyoong nodded, her friends laughed loudly around her.

“Then again, it’d be odd if Jiyoong suddenly started talking a lot.”

“Alright, I’ll talk more in her stead then!”

“You need to talk less. If you just talked a little less, you’d have a boyfriend already.”

“What the, you’re taking it there now? Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Our class doesn’t have any lookers. They’re all stupid!”

“I kind of get it. There’s four of them, and thirty of us. It’s only obvious that they’d feel self-conscious.”

The talk shifted over to boys. There were a total of 35 students in the second design class. 31 of them were girls, and 4 were guys. A week had already passed, but the boys couldn’t properly settle into the class. Their table started getting noisy again, so Jiyoong hid in all of the noise. She was happy with staying quiet for now. Her friends were talking about some of the handsome guys in class. But in the end, everything circled back to ‘there’s no one good in our class’.

“Come to think of it, that senior in the acting club was really handsome.”

“Tall, too.”

“He has a great body, too.”

“Oh my gosh, you pervert.”

Jiyoon thought of senior Geunseok. The one that was really confident as he talked.

“He’s kind of annoying though.”

“For sure.”

“He must think he’s a prince. 100%. Looking at him gesture at the other two to praise him was so irritating.”

They laughed for a bit before turning to Jiyoon again, Jiyoon widened her eyes like little plates.

“Jiyoon.”

“Yeah?”

“What do you think of that senior?”

“Me?”

“Just for fun. And also, maybe someone you like in class?”

Her friend handed her a spoon like a microphone, Jiyoon just bit her lips nervously.

“We’re not serious about it, so just answer as you please. Otherwise, it’s going to be too quiet.”

“Y-yeah.”

Jiyoon thought for a second before giving an honest answer.

“He’s probably really talented for sure. I mean, the other seniors did acknowledge as much.”

“That’s true. But what about his personality?”

“...E-everyone’s unique.”

“Oh? Look at you! You’re avoiding the question!”

Her friends grabbed her arms and started tickling her sides. Of all the weaknesses Jiyoon had, she hated getting tickled the most.

“I’ll talk!!”

She ended up squealing. Oh dear. She looked at the lady inside the kitchen with a flinch, the lady was looking at her with a small laugh. She was so embarrassed.

“The boys are all nice. But I don’t want to date anyone just yet.”

“Ohh, they’re nice, huh? Ms. Choi, what do you think?”

“Yes. It’s game over when a girl says a guy is nice! An even worse review than saying a guy is mean!”

Jiyoon closed her mouth with a slight frown.

“Alright, what about the three seniors, then?”

She tried to keep her silence, but a tiny jab on her sides caused her to raised the white flag. She really couldn’t handle tickles.

“They all seemed nice.”

She gave her friends a small glance after speaking. They were still glaring at her, they clearly didn’t like the answer.

“What if the tall one asked you out?”

Her friend suddenly asked the question. What the? She just sat there nervously, but her friend was only staring harder with an odd smile.

“Ooh, I want to hear this one.”

“Yeah, this one’s a must! How is it? Would you date him? Or will you reject him?”

She knew there were more tickles headed her way if she feigned ignorance. Her friends were creeping towards her, in fact. In the end, she answered honestly.

“I don’t want to date him.”

“Why?”

“...He doesn’t seem nice. W-well, that’s just my personal opinion. That might not be the case. N-no, not at all, actually. I’m sure he’s a good person.”

She was fumbling around endlessly, but her friends all nodded in understanding. She became sorry for that senior for no reason.

“Hoh. Finally, something bad coming from Jiyoon’s mouth.”

“So it’s confirmed! That senior is a bad person!”

Her friends were giggling, Jiyoon didn’t know what was going on. This was the first time she had such energetic friends in her life.

‘It’s not bad, though.’

Talking was still difficult and she didn’t like voicing her opinions, but she didn’t mind the noise. That’s because of her friends that were looking out for her.

“Are you guys going into the acting club, by the way?”

Her friends all simultaneously answered “no”. Jiyoon refrained from answering.

“Eh? Jiyoon, are you thinking about going in?”

“Really?”



Jiyoon shook her head, she didn't make a decision yet. She did want to get on stage, but she was afraid of the amount of work she'd have to put in.

"Just do it. I'll cheer you on."

"Me too!"

She felt like courage swelling up inside her from her friends' words. At the same time, she thought of something the other senior said.

- Ask yourself the question instead of others.

Did she really want to act? Jiyoon started pondering on the question seriously.

\* \* \*

By the time they put the chairs and desks back in place, it was already 6 o'clock.

"Thank goodness so many people came."

"15's definitely a good sign. I think we'll get 3 members for sure."

It was a relief so many people came. It was still a mystery how many of them would join, but this at least meant that they had a chance.

"By the way, Maru."

"Yeah?"

"Why didn't you become the president? I heard from Joonghyuk that you were the first to be offered the position."

"Oh, that?"

"Wouldn't that have been better? I mean, Geunseok's not bad, but..."

"I don't want extra responsibility that comes with no benefits. It's not like being a president gives you a ton of power. Plus, jobs like those are best taken by the people who want them."

"A typical Maru response. But it just felt like Geunseok wanted to do whatever he wanted."

"What's so bad about that?"

"He said he was going to shorten practice time. He was also beating some of the students down before they even joined."

Daemyung definitely must've gotten bad vibes, considering how seldomly he talked badly about people. Maru understood completely, Geunseok did say some pretty harmful things a while ago.

"But you can't say he's wrong."

"....."

"Plus, if they got discouraged from joining from just that... It's better that they don't come."

“Aren’t you being too cold?”

“Did you ever see me being kind?”

They stepped out of the classroom after tidying things up, Daemyung walked next to him after he grabbed his bag.

“Are you really fine with shorter practice times?”

“That’s up to the instructor to decide. It’s not something Geunseok can change.”

“But that’s what he said he’d do.”

“I’m sure president Hong can take care of it.”

Daemyung stopped Maru in his path as he yawned, the boy seemed agitated.

“Aren’t you a bit too calm about this?”

“About what?”

“Geunseok’s changing the rules however he wants.”

“Rules? We had rules?”

“No, traditions! Yeah, traditions.”

“If raising morale by staying together for a long time is just tradition, then it might be better for Geunseok to get rid of it. He didn’t say anything wrong.”

“That’s true, but...”

Daemyung frowned sadly. Maru thought about giving the boy a chance to think it through on his own, but felt he couldn’t leave it at that.

“Alright, I want to make something clear. You refused the offer to be president when it was handed to you, didn’t you?”

Joonghyuk offered Daemyung the presidency after the nationals and Daemyung refused. Maru didn’t know the reason, that was all he heard. Daemyung nodded slowly.

“I understand what you’re worried about. But I think it’s rather stupid that you’re trying to have your way, especially when you avoided the responsibility when given the chance.”

“I just... want the acting club to turn out well.”

Daemyung dropped his shoulders. What a nice kid, he’d basically be perfect if he was a bit more confident in life. Sadly, it seemed that all god decided to give the boy was a passion for acting and nothing for his manliness.

“Do you dislike Geunseok?”

“Not really, but,”

Maru cut the boy off before he could talk.

“Be honest with me. Don’t try to speak about it in a roundabout way.”

“...Honestly, I was really disappointed with the way he was shifting the blame during the summer prelims. I know some things happened afterwards and that he’s really good at acting. I know he’s talented, but I don’t really like him.”

“Then what should you do?”

“Eh?”

Maru scratched his eyebrows. High schoolers were at an age where they could start figuring things out about a person, they were at an age where they could start to detect problems like an adult. But what about the next step?

“If you don’t like Geunseok and his way of doing things, shouldn’t you have a vision about what you want to do yourself? If you just complain without having a plan in mind, you might as well be a child. It’s fine that you dislike his ways. But what about it? Are you going to tell him to leave?”

“That’s not right.”

“Then what?”

“...Praise him the right way?”

“Bingo.”

A smart lad indeed, Daemyung was following him well.

“Let Geunseok do what he wants. He’s not dumb either, so he won’t go too far. He was just saying stuff to make himself look good, not to flip over the club completely. I’m sure he’s not really thinking that.”

There was a kid begging for praises. If you praise him, he does a good job. If you complain about him, he gets angry and blames you. What should you do in that situation? Do you get angry at the kid? No, that’s a waste of both time and energy. There’s one thing you should do, praise him. Praise him to work harder and better, then the kid would work hard. All that’s left is to watch him from the back and reap the results.

“You’re right, but I don’t really like that method. It feels like... I’m looking down on him. I don’t like Geunseok, but... Ah, I don’t know. I can’t explain it.”

Daemyung’s lips curled downwards.

“Would you have done the same if I acted like Geunseok?”

“You wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“Just out of curiosity.”

Maru smiled. He already knew the answer.

“If you acted that way, I would’ve even gone to using my fists to make you come back to your senses. But I don’t care about Geunseok.”

Daemyung brightened in a flash. What an easy kid to read.

“Plus, you don’t have to worry about it. He’ll step up once the club activities start.”

“How do you know that?”

“Opportunists never do something that would so obviously harm themselves.”

Right then, they saw Geunseok walk up to them from the other side. Maru whispered to Daemyung quietly.

“Old sayings are almost always right. Think about what it means to give rice cake to someone you hate.”

Daemyung nodded.

“You guys aren’t leaving?”

“We are.”

Maru looked at the club sign one more time before turning away.