

Once Again 191

Chapter 191

It was 2am when he woke up. Maru picked up his clothes, thinking back to his days in the army. He was greeted by Gwak Joon outside.

"Leaving?"

"Yes. You weren't sleeping?"

"I told you, I'm a night owl. I write better at night."

He was holding a cigarette butt in his other hand.

"I'll see you next time. Be careful."

Gwak Joon raised his mug at Maru as a form of goodbye.

"Wow, what a sight. He's actually saying goodbye?"

Geunsoo commented as he stepped up with a yawn, he looked exhausted.

"Will you be alright on the drive?"

"What, you scared?"

"Yes. I'm too young to go."

"Haha, don't worry. I'll keep the windows down on the way."

"...With this weather?"

"I thought you didn't want to die?"

"I might freeze to death."

They headed downstairs with a smile, where they were greeted with two mugs and a bottle of hot chocolate in the kitchen.

- Have some.

It must've been prepared by Suyeon.

"Let's have a cup."

The two of them shook off their sleepiness with the hot liquid and headed out, there's nothing better than a warm drink to chase away the cold after all. It wasn't windy, but the air was cold enough to make their skins feel like it was about to freeze over.

"This town is unreasonably cold."

Geunsoo revved up the engine, the heater started releasing hot air.

"You should sleep."

“When I’m sleepy. We can talk in the meantime.”

Geunsoo stepped on the pedal with a smile. After several minutes of driving on a dirt road, they finally reached an asphalt road.

“I hear it’s impossible to get in an accident even with your hands off the wheel if you’re on the autobahn,” Geunsoo said, taking his hands off the wheel.

The road ahead of them was completely empty. They could really be safe driving like this, at least until they got to the highway.

“If only life was like the autobahn, isn’t that right?”

“Life would be boring without any twists or turns on it.”

“That’s true, but sometimes I want to just drive on a straight road.”

Geunsoo looked into the distance dumbly, he seemed to be thinking about something.

“Is something wrong?”

“Wrong... I guess it is if I think of it that way, but it also isn’t if I don’t. Well, let’s say something’s wrong though.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Oh, of course, sir. I’d do anything to be consulted by Doctor Maru.”

The two of them exchanged a small laugh at the same time.

“It’s my brother.”

“Geunseok?”

“Right. I’m a bit worried if he’s doing well.”

Geunsoo tapped away at the wheel with his index finger.

“Why don’t you ask?”

“I’m not a very friendly older brother. I’m just incredibly concerned with my own work.”

“I don’t think that’s the case.”

Geunsoo was the one person who truly cared for Geunseok, he was the only person who came to see Geunseok’s performance. There was no way a person like him could be cruel.

“I went home a few days ago to see dad. To make a report.”

“A report?”

“A report of my success. I think he was satisfied, given that he actually sent me off.”

“I thought he was very strict...”

"I don't know whether to describe him as strict or if he just has a very clear worldview. He's a stubborn person, but he isn't that horrible in reality. He was a bit cruel when I was young though. I said I wanted to do something I liked and he did everything in his power to try to stop me."

"But you ended up doing it anyway, I guess you do take after him in that regard."

"The stubbornness just runs in our blood."

Geunsoo smiled self-mockingly.

"I started thinking about what I wanted to do in life after high school. College was too much for me. I didn't have the money. I thought for a while about what I could do. Eventually, I went to Senior Junmin and just asked him to raise me."

"...That's pretty remarkable. In the bad sense of the word."

"I was scared at the time. Once I stepped outside my home, I was immediately faced with reality."

"You didn't even have a place to live."

"That's right. At least in high school, I had a roof over my head. I had meals and I had a bed to sleep on. But once I was outside, I had nothing. I chased after my dreams. I only realized once doing so that dreams were only meant for people who had the money to chase after it."

"So that's why you invaded Senior Junmin's place?"

"Invade? That's a strong word. I just politely caused a scene at his house."

"Instructor Miso went into a factory to fuel her dreams."

"She's too much of a realist. The romanticist inside of me can't stand her."

Geunsoo quietly muttered 'but that's what makes her so smart' immediately after saying that.

"I spent a bit of time as a homeless person before Senior Junmin took me in. Every morning, the words my father said to me chips away at my heart. I understood why he was so against me chasing after my dreams."

"It's difficult for artists to make money after all."

"That's right. No parent would gladly allow their child to throw themselves into a fire."

"So you matured then."

"Haha."

What would Maru have said if his daughter said she wanted to be a singer? Moreover, if she tried to put aside her studies for it? He would've told her to stop immediately if she didn't have the passion to work on her studies as well. Although if she was able to work hard on both and succeed on both at the same time... She would've been a genius.

Parents often take two routes and start comparing the two. Which route was a safer route to success? The moment they put the question in their minds, their heads freeze over. The answer is set.

In the end, it becomes a matter of compromise. If the child is still set on taking the hard route even after learning the parent isn't able to support them, then all the parents can do is to let the child go. It's not easy, obviously. There are many, many horrible things in society, there were more than plenty of examples of people who were crushed while chasing after their dreams. Having seen all of this, the parents can't help but worry about their child.

"Father must've had it hard as well. Since his oldest son went out of the house just like that. Well, he might've been fine, but... I think I made things needlessly difficult for Geunseok."

"You think your father had been extra hard on Geunseok?"

"That's right. That's why I feel sorry for my brother."

"Now that I look at it, you're a total saint."

"Me?"

"Yes. I would've just cut ties right there."

Geunsoo turned to look at Maru.

"Until recently, I thought Geunseok was a necessary person in the acting club. Despite all the happenings between us, the boy was still very invested in acting. That's why I supported him when he became president."

"But then?"

"Several distasteful events happened recently. Some of his actions I can understand. But the rest... he crossed the line like it was nothing."

"Geunseok?"

Maru nodded.

"My rule in life is to try not to even interact with bastards that hit women or ignore words that people mustered their courage to say. Geunseok crossed both of them. I thought he was just immature in the past. Not anymore. He's twisted to the core."

"...That's very disappointing to hear."

"I'm sorry. I'd rather not lie about something like this if I can help it."

"I know. That's why I'm thankful. White lies are always easy to say."

The car passed through the toll gates, Geunsoo opened the windows a tiny bit. The sounds of the trucks passing by were accompanied by the cold air.

"You said Geunseok left the club?"

"Yes."

"By himself?"

"I got the news out of nowhere as well. He said he wasn't interested in such a thing."

“Hah. And here I thought things might’ve changed. In the end, he’s still in father’s grasps.”

“That’s probably what’s easy for him, because there’s no pain involved.”

“Would you take my brother if he comes to join the acting club again?”

“Do you think there’s even a chance of that happening? He did say acting was boring.”

“Just as a hypothetical situation.”

“...He’ll have to apologize to many people if he decides to. But I’m personally against it. I’d welcome him with a forced smile if I have to. I don’t think it’d come to that.”

“I’ve felt this before, but you’re way too cold.”

“I thought I gave people plenty of chances before finally giving up on them. But why are you...”

Geunsoo shrugged. There’s definitely something going on though...

“You’ll see once you go to school. Or not.”

“What?”

“I didn’t have any say in this, by the way. Blame Senior Junmin, if anything. He does odd stuff like this sometimes.”

“What are you...”

“He told me he had a talk with my father. And father actually allowed Geunseok to continue acting.”

“Ah, I see why Geunseok gave up all of the sudden. So his father found out. But why the sudden change?”

“No idea. Both my father and Senior Junmin are the type that house thousands of snakes inside them. There’s no telling what they’re thinking at all, but I’m sure they have their reasons.”

“I have a feeling this will get annoying.”

“I think Senior Junmin has taken a massive liking towards you. He made an odd expression when Mr. Moonjoong kept talking about you... and then this.”

“He’s pushing Geunseok because he likes me?”

“Can’t be all of it. I think he didn’t want to let Geunseok go just like that. I guess... a win-win strategy if anything?”

“I’m not getting anything out of this though.”

“Mm.... good luck. I have no idea how this will go, personally.”

“I’ve no plans on being friendly with him even if he pushes his way back. It’s petty to use club politics against someone, but I will if I have to.”

“Hey, hey. Stop being so scary. He’s still my brother, you know?”

Geunsoo smiled awkwardly. So blood really was thicker than water, wasn't it? To think how Geunsoo could still smile like that after being looked down on by his brother for all those years.

"I won't be nice to him, but I won't cast him out so quickly. Though... I don't think the other people in the club would welcome him either."

"R-really?"

"Yes."

Coming back to the acting club? Maru had no intentions of letting the boy back in. Thinking of what happened between Geunseok and Jiyeon, Maru was prepared to do anything to keep the boy out. He didn't want any internal conflict within such a small club. Denying Geunseok's entry was the best decision for Maru.

"Well, that's too bad. But acting is all about teamwork, so I get it."

"Right. We have it hard enough as is. Any more conflict would end everything."

"So it's over. My brother has nowhere to go. I suppose he could rely on a place outside of school if he really wants to take up acting as a career though. He won't be able to go to tournaments, but so what? Right, right."

"It looks like you're trying to persuade yourself."

Geunseok smiled lightly.

"Ugh, my poor brother."

"You're not going to persuade me with that. I'm not going to let him in."

"Oh, that didn't work. Well, whatever. Tsk, and I made the club, too."

Maru shook his head looking at Geunsoo.

"There's nowhere for Geunseok to go. Unless there are two acting clubs in the school."

"...Oho."

"What do you mean, oho?"

"That sounds pretty likely."

"Two clubs?"

"Even back in my day some of the bigger clubs were partitioned. Isn't that the case now too?"

"Well, yes... There's a few."

"The acting club can do that, then."

"What?"

Geunsoo smiled. He was smiling a lot like Junmin, actually.

“You’re planning something with Mr. Junmin, aren’t you?”

“What? Planning? Me?”

“You weren’t saying all that just now for no reason, were you?”

“No no, of course not.”

“So why are you smiling?”

“Well, I’m just happy.”

“...I’ll hope this is just a freaky coincidence.”

“Don’t worry.”

Geunsoo didn’t sound trustworthy at all. The man drove for a while without speaking a word more, Maru too just watched the scenery pass for a while. Just as he was starting to get sleepy...

“Odd, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“It became like this in the end. The boy who was iffy about taking up acting is already auditioning for a role.”

“True.”

“I told you, didn’t I? The monster of acting swallows up the people it takes a liking to. How does it feel to be halfway inside already?”

“It’s fun. Also nerve-wracking.”

“Very good.”

“I won’t get swallowed up just like that. I’ll try to tame it. And sell it. I’d like to take over acting completely.”

“Hey, give me a piece of that cash if things do go according to plan.”

“I’ll make you a regional president or something.”

Maru closed his eyes with that, the hum of the car lulled him slowly to sleep.

Chapter 192

“I’ll get going, mom.”

Daemyung stepped out of the house after saying goodbye to his mother. The sky was bright blue. Normally he would’ve stretched happily in weather like this, but he was in no mood to do so right now.

‘I hope big bro Mintae’s doing alright.’

He was doing his best with Mintae to make some progress into their production project. Unfortunately, they were stuck. Currently, Daemyung's goal in the project was to produce a play with three people before opening the project to investors.

Daemyung got onto the bus headed towards school, it was packed with other students. Several female students were in front of him as a matter of fact. In the past, he would've looked down in nervousness. Out of fear that the girls would be laughing at him on the inside, but he'd realized at this point that people don't care so much about others.

'And if they do, so what? It's not like I'd need to form a relationship with them anyway.'

Daemyung slowly observed the people inside the bus. There was a man in a suit with waxed hair, probably a new hire. Or maybe he just has a very troublesome boss. Or maybe he's even a perfectionist?

'A perfectionist character sounds pretty fun.'

Daemyung's eyes drifted over to a girl this time, she was wearing a high school uniform from a very famous school. She was holding onto the handle with one hand, and a notebook in the other. She was exchanging words with the businessman next to her every once in a while. Words about her studies.

"Math?"

"Nope, English first."

"What about Physics?"

"That comes last. It really hurts my head."

"That's when you pick up Korean literature. To take a breather."

"Yup."

Daemyung slowly mouthed the conversation he was hearing, lines from a play needed to be as realistic as possible a lot of the time. Practicing like this would help him very much in creating a three-dimensional character later down the line.

"What the heck? Is that guy following our words?"

"No way."

Daemyung quickly closed his mouth in surprise. Eventually, the bus came to a stop near his school. He checked the clock after getting off. 8am. He still had a lot of time. As he took a step towards the school entrance, he felt a slap on his back.

"Good morning!"

"Ah, morning."

It was Iseul. The girl who was always smiling.

"Where's Dojin?"

"How would I know?"

"A-ah."

Dojin and Iseul started dating at the beginning of the semester, Iseul seemed pretty hesitant at first. She apparently changed her mind when Dojin really started helping her family out.

"How's the acting club? You guys only have a week left, right?"

"We have two juniors for now."

"And?"

"...The end."

"Didn't you say there were a lot of juniors who came?"

"There were only two who were interested enough to join. I was pretty excited too, but it can't be helped."

"So it's just four people in total."

Daemyung nodded. Four people, the third years were only there in name.

"That's troublesome. You can't even do anything with just four people."

"We'll have to find a play with fewer people. Or take on multiple roles at once."

"Think you guys can handle that?"

"...Dunno. I think Maru can."

"What the, scared already? You need to be a role model for the juniors."

"You know I'm not good at that kind of stuff."

"Well, better get practicing then. You and Maru are the only capable ones in the club now."

Iseul pat his back one more time. Unfortunately, this just made Daemyung want to sigh more. Could they even get anywhere with four people? It was a horrifically low number, he wasn't even sure if they could make a stage.

"Hey, stop making a face like that. You're making me feel guilty."

Daemyung waved his hands in denial after seeing Iseul looking at him dejectedly. He must've shown his feelings while he thought to himself.

"No no, don't worry. Seriously."

"How can I not? If you need someone to help you make props, just let me know. I'll be really sad if you don't!"

"Y-yeah."

They'd be perpetually shorthanded from now on, there wasn't much they could get done with just four people. It wasn't like they could keep asking for help from others though. Maru told him already that getting help once from someone was bad enough.

- The guys would help us out every time if we asked. That's exactly why we need to do this ourselves. They are outsiders now. We don't want to make them do unnecessary stuff just because we're lacking in people.

Maru wasn't wrong, the acting club needed to take care of itself.

"Eh? What's that truck?"

Iseul commented just as they were about to get into the school, a truck towing a shipping container was slowly entering the school. The teacher guarding the entrance looked with wide eyes, he clearly didn't know anything about this either.

"If you could let us in, sir," said the truck driver.

The teacher quickly had a talk with the driver. After a few nods, the teacher led the truck inside, a forklift behind the truck followed them inside as well. Daemyung watched all of this dumbly before realizing something, he dialled Maru's number on the phone. After a bit of waiting, someone finally picked up.

"Maru, um..."

- Sorry, I'm not Maru.

"What?"

- Maru went to the convenience store for a bit. He'll be back soon. Call him again in five.

"Ah, yes."

He's heard the voice somewhere else, he couldn't tell who because of the background noise. Daemyung said goodbye to Iseul before following the truck to the back of the school, the forklift was positioning the container at this point.

"There's no way, right?"

Maru did talk about a container, but it was impossible to have it here already. They needed the school's permission. More than that, they needed money.

"Good! Put it over there!"

It was a pretty clean container. Big, too. If only they could use that... Daemyung watched for a few minutes more before heading back to the class.

"I saw a truck coming in. What was that? I thought we were done with building the gym," Dojin asked.

"They're putting a shipping container behind the school."

"A container? Maru?"

"Don't think so. He mentioned that on Saturday. No way he got permission in two days. It's also like 2 million won."

"2 million? Yeah, there's no way then."

That's when Dowook raised his head from his desk.

"Container? You guys need one?"

"Yeah? Yeah. We might."

"Tell me if you do. I can ask my dad about it."

"Really? You guys have a shipping container?"

"There's an unused container right behind the gas station. I'm sure my dad will sell it for cheap if I tell him Maru needs it."

That was good news. It was a mystery how much the man would sell it for, but as long as it was below market price...

"Wow, rich people are different after all."

"Rich my ass."

Dojin smiled as he tickled Dowook. Dowook stood right up and tried to grab Dojin, prompting the other boy to run out of the classroom with a shout. What good friends. They all got off to a bad start, but they've all become very good friends.

"So energetic. Running so early in the morning are we?"

He heard Maru's voice from behind him, Daemyung turned around in surprise.

"...Did you stay up?"

"Eh? Ah, kind of."

Maru looked horrible. His bedhead was incredible and his clothes were kind of dirty. Looking now, they were the clothes he's been wearing since Saturday.

"Ah! That was Senior Geunsoo on the phone, wasn't it? Were you guys together since Saturday?"

"Yup. I was imprisoned."

"I-imprisoned?"

"It was fun though."

Maru sat down with a long yawn, he started taking out convenience store food from his black bag and ate them.

"You didn't even have breakfast?"

"I have been in a car since dawn. Didn't have the time."

"What the hell did you do over the weekend?"

"I told you, I was imprisoned."

Maru grinned and told Daemyung he'd explain himself after the meal.

“What was that about the container by the way? Dowook spoke to me about it as he ran just now.”

“There’s a container at school.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. You didn’t do this, did you?”

“I had plans, but nope. Why do we...”

Right then, Maru’s phone rang. Maru took the call immediately, he lowered his voice as he spoke to the person on the other side. His expression was a bit odd.

“Yes, thank you. I appreciate the gesture.”

Maru smiled lightly after hanging up.

“What? What’s happening?”

“The container is a gift from Mr. Junmin. He already talked to the school about it. Hah, Senior Geunsoo did tell me something was going to happen, but...”

“So the container behind the school is...”

“It’s ours.”

“Really?”

The world around Daemyung instantly brightened. If that container was theirs, their prop issue was fixed. That alone was a big plus.

“Let’s start our move after today. We can get it done by the end of this week if we start now.”

Maru spoke as he took the wrapping off of his kimbap.

* * *

Geunseok thought with his chin resting on his hand, his father told him out of nowhere that he could continue acting. There was a condition, but it was nothing big. He was within the top three of the school all this time.

‘Mr. Junmin definitely has an eye for talent.’

Junmin was the one who persuaded his father, that person must treasure Geunseok very much.

‘But what do I do?’

Geunseok had no intentions of returning to the club, he’d rather give up acting entirely. Thinking about the humiliation he suffered from Maru made him grit his teeth subconsciously. Those arrogant eyes... He should’ve thrown a punch back then.

- If you’re going to do something, go all out.

Those were the words his father told him. Now that he’d gotten permission, there was nothing stopping his path. All he had to do was to show off his talent.

- You too need to learn how to lie. You need to learn how to compliment others. You need to learn how to be trampled like your brother if need be.

Hearing that was even more humiliating than the time with Maru. Being compared to his older brother... As the more talented brother, the thought was absolutely shameful. It was so obvious that Geunseok was better, especially since Junmin was eyeing him.

Geunseok smiled.

"Become kind, huh."

He'd learned a thing or two about life through this, he needed to learn how to act wisely like Maru. For now, he'd start off with turning his classmates into his allies. Geunseok went around the classroom dropping a few words here and there. Many of his classmates listened to him thanks to their good impressions of him.

"They were too much. They kicked you out just because of that?"

"Yeah, seriously. Geunseok, you're too kind. You should've been more firm."

"I mean, you're the reason why the club succeeded in the first place."

Geunseok smiled, so it was this easy. He shouldn't have tried to use force at all in the beginning.

'Father was right.'

Humans needed to learn how to stay low, they needed to learn to compliment. Just a few smiles and a few words here and there already earned Geunseok so many allies.

"By the way, you can create your own club as long as you have a few people, right?"

"Yup. As long as you have an advisor and a few members."

Geunseok nodded at the vice president's words, Junmin told him about this previously. Clearly, the man wants Geunseok to succeed.

"Really? Can you help me out then? I think I can count on you."

"Of course."

The vice president stepped up with a big smile. So this was it, this was how you use people.

"Thank you."

Geunseok had a feeling he'd be using the phrase a lot more in the future. He was confident of it, in fact. This too was but an extension of acting.

'So easy.'

A twisted smile crept its way out of his lips.

Thank you.

What an easy phrase to take advantage of.

Chapter 193

“What an amazing present.”

“His gifts are as grand as his wealth.”

Maru smiled looking at the container, he didn't think he'd really get one, in just two days no less. Maru headed to the clubroom, leaving Taesik to revel at the container by himself.

“Senior.”

“Hello!”

Jiyeon and Bangjoo were waiting next to the clubroom.

“I'm sorry for calling you out during lunchtime.”

“It's alright!”

Jiyeon flinched a bit at Bangjoo's energetic reply, the two of them were polar opposites. Can they work well together?

“Alright, we'll start off with cleaning the container itself. It's going to be our new clubroom, so take care.”

“Yes.”

Daemyung appeared with a handful of cleaning supplies. For now, they prepared some floor cleaner and mops.

“Take this down with you. Mr. Taesik is waiting on the bottom.”

“Sure.”

Daemyung left the clubroom with the freshmen, Maru took the ruler in the clubroom and started measuring the bigger props. “This should all fit nicely.”

As he made his way down the central staircase, he bumped into Geunseok coming up with his group of friends.

“Well, you guys look busy. Need help?”

Maru scanned the boy from top to bottom, the boy was smiling brightly at him. What was happening? When Maru frowned in confusion, Geunseok's smile only deepened. The boy's friends started muttering among each other nervously.

“Is he that acting club dude?”

“Think so.”

Geunseok's friends stared at Maru with a bit of hostility. Maru thought for a second. Did he ever get into a point of conflict with these people? Not at all. He has never even talked to them before. So what was this?

“If you want to, sure. We do need people.”

“I’ll head over in a bit then.”

A girl standing next to Geunseok poked him with an annoyed look.

“Hey, you really shouldn’t.”

She was whispering, but Maru heard everything. Well, this was odd. Maru tried looking deeply into Geunseok’s eyes.

[Confusing, isn’t it? Maru, I can fucking bury you if I just try a little.]

The word bubble above his head was a shade of bright pink, but the words inside were absolutely disgusting.

“He’s a friend, so of course I should. I may not be in the acting club anymore, but I’m still his friend.”

Maru couldn’t hold back his laughter after hearing that, to think that the boy would act in real life the way he would in a play... Geunseok looked at him a little oddly.

“No, don’t worry. What should I say... Trying hard, or just immature? Well, it was nice to see. Why don’t you try pushing forward a bit more with that character, now that you’re at it?”

“What are you talking about, Maru?”

“Hey, it’s seriously weird watching you acting friendly. More than that, you’re absolutely hilarious. God, what a show.”

Maru walked towards Geunseok and his friends, who were glaring at him. He put a hand over Geunseok’s shoulder with a smile.

“This isn’t how you start a party though.”

He continued down the stairs with that. The boy seemed to be trying to spread rumors about him, it was a novel idea accompanied by terrible execution.

“Geunseok, what a lad. Good job, man.”

Maru didn’t forget to give Geunseok a thumbs up before stepping further down. What little was left of the boy’s smile completely shattered. The boy’s friends were looking at him ridiculously, but whatever.

“W-what the, so annoying.”

“What’s he talking about?”

Maru headed down ignoring the group, he stepped into the container with a big smile on his face.

“What’s up with the smile?” Daemyung asked.

“Geunseok was being cute.”

“What?”

“I thought he was smart, but apparently not.”

Daemyung refrained from asking more despite the confusion, he clearly didn't want to hear any of it.

"How's the inside?"

"Pretty clean."

They took a look at the other side of the container, Taesik was looking inside with the two freshmen. As Daemyung said, the container was pretty clean with very little rust on it as well.

"It's in good condition. We can use this. But can we fit everything inside...?" Taesik asked.

"It will. We just have to stack it with a path down the middle for people to move through. It's twenty feet wide, so it'll be enough space."

Daemyung made a confused expression.

"How do you know that? What's a feet?"

"Kids don't have to know."

Maru still retained some knowledge from when he still worked in the trading company, his memories of containers were pretty clear from the amount of time he worked with them. Maru took a look at it from the outside this time.

"Side panels look alright. We'll just have to check the roof."

"The roof?"

"The top."

Maru popped open the top hatch and climbed up, he could hear Jiyeon squeal quietly in confusion below him.

"Looks nice."

It was well kept for a used container.

"We'll just have to tidy it up with a new coat of waterproof paint. There's no need to do wiring on the inside, so I think sweeping is enough for cleaning."

"You know this well. I was planning on helping out a bit, but clearly you know a lot about this."

"You've helped plenty already. This is school property now by the way, right? Do you think you can get some of the school's budget for fixing this up?"

"I don't know about that."

"Well, alright. I can buy the paint with my own money then. It's cheap anyhow."

It was a perfectly-sized container, so there wasn't much to do. All they needed to do was to clean it up and move the props.

"You should leave first, Teacher. We'll take care of the rest."

Taesik bought them a few drinks before heading out.

“Alright, onto the cleaning.”

“Yessir!”

Jiyoong and Bangjoo both replied energetically with a mop in hand.

* * *

‘That son of a bitch.’

Geunseok grit his teeth, he didn’t get the response he wanted. He wanted to see Maru confused and angry, not smiling back at him. His original plans to crush Maru with kind words failed.

“Geunseok. I heard from the faculty that you just need club members. Ten people by the end of this week and a signature from your advisor.”

The vice president handed him a piece of paper. With this, Geunseok would be able to create a rival acting club.

‘Good.’

He was a bit annoyed, but things were going well. Geunseok decided to gather a few people from his class first.

“Acting? I’m already in a club.”

“I heard it takes a lot of commitment though.”

“I have to study.”

To his surprise, not a single person agreed to join. Geunseok quickly calmed down though and started thinking.

‘I’ll go to the first years again. I just have to emphasize that it won’t take too much work.’

Geunseok was whisked into a feeling of nervousness as he headed down, Junmin was the one who suggested that he make a new club. All the preparation was done already, but can he even make one in the first place?

He decided to head into a mechanical engineering class first, most of the students were sleeping inside since it was nearing the end of the day. He steeled himself to walk up to the front of the class.

“Um, hey, guys? I’m sorry, but mind if I spoke for a second?”

A few of the kids raised their heads, Geunseok quickly started talking about the new club. Something wrong happened with the original one, so he was trying to make a new one. The new one emphasized personal freedom, Geunseok took a look at the freshmen after finishing his speech. Some were looking at him with annoyance, but most were fast asleep. Geunseok bit his lips. Sleeping? In front of a senior?

“Guys, listen to me!”

He punched the lecture stand below him, he could feel eyes gather to him in an instant. They all looked annoyed, Geunseok tensed up a little bit. He forgot that this was a school full of delinquents. Geunseok wasn't a fan of these gazes, he feared violence, he feared getting hit.

"Um, Senior?!"

Right then, one of the freshmen spoke out loudly. It was a kid with very short hair, he's seen this kid somewhere...

"I'm in the acting club. If my memory serves right, didn't you leave of your own volition? Senior Maru told me that you got bored of acting."

"W-what?"

"Is that not the case? I'm sorry. I'm a bit stupid."

The kids in the classroom started muttering, after waking up from the boy's shout.

"Bangjoo, quiet down a bit."

"So loud."

The class was clearly uninterested in the acting club, Geunseok nearly fled from the first year's class.

* * *

"That really was an unexpected gift. I didn't think you'd send over something this big just like that."

- I just happened to have a spare one lying around.

"Do you happen to have some more? I'd like them if you do."

- Very funny. Ah, did you only call to thank me?

"That's one of the reasons."

- One of them?

Maru leaned on the back of the wall.

"I heard Geunseok was trying to make his own acting club."

- Hm.

"But no matter how much I think about it, he's not the type to do something like that. He's not someone who would step out to do something all by himself after all. Thinking about it, I had a feeling you put him up to this."

- Yes, I gave him some motivation.

"Can I know why?"

- He's too good a card to lose. I already invested a bit into him as well and Suyeon is quite the expensive tutor.

“Ah, so she was his coach. In any case, why didn’t you just give him a different method? He won’t be able to make a club anyway.”

- Why not?

“We already ran a circle around the whole school. At this point, no one else is willing to join our club.”

- Fair point.

“I was just curious why you put Geunseok up to this. Especially when you’re such a busy man.”

- I wanted to see a reaction.

“Reaction?”

- I thought about two things. I spoke with the school to ensure that two acting clubs can exist. If Geunseok has talent, he’d be able to create a nice rival club in the school.

“You’re too much, we’re lacking in people as is,” Maru responded with a smile. He could hear laughter from the other side.

- It would’ve been fun if one really did get made. Well, if that’s not possible, I have no choice but to wait for the second reaction.

“Reaction?”

- The breaking of his pride.

“Aha, so that’s what you were going for?”

- Ugh, and here I was just planning on watching. You’re making me feel quite troublesome with your words.

“I hate having to go through trouble. I’m just going to say this now. No matter what Geunseok does, I’m not going to take him back into the club.”

- You talk as if the club’s yours.

“I’m the representative for now, so yes.”

- If I try to force you?

“I don’t think you’d do that.”

- Why not?

“Because you have expectations for me. Isn’t that reason enough?”

Maru put an index finger over his lips towards Dowook, Dojin, and Daemyung, the three of them were staring at him.

- I dislike smart people because of this. They just do what they want.

“I thought you actually liked them? Senior Geunsoo, Coach Ganghwan, Instructor Miso, and Ms. Suyeon on top of that... Oh my, what a roster you have there.”

- Bahaha, you're right. I dislike people who only know how to obey. That's why I made Geunseok do this, I want the boy to break out of his shell. He has talent. He's smart. He's also pretty stubborn, but he has no motivation. He doesn't know what to do. He'll do well if I just tell him what to do, but he won't do any more than that. I'm not looking for slaves here.

"He's trying to do something in front of me. What should I do? I understand your intentions, but I'm no fan of letting mosquitos do what they want."

- Do what you want. I gave Geunseok a choice. He can either try to carve out his own path, or he can just learn to swallow his pride. He'll become interesting if he learns how meaningless pride is. If he doesn't... well, that's just his fault.

"How cold."

- Working with people isn't child's play, so I have to be cold. I'm an investor. If something I invest in doesn't show results, I need to move onto better things.

"Could you tell me why you're so set on finding new rookies?"

Junmin became quiet for a second, Maru watched the clock in the classroom slowly tick away. After about fifteen seconds, Junmin finally opened his mouth.

- I want to see perfect acting. That's all.

The man's voice seemed to be colored with nostalgia.

"I understand. I'll take care of it on my end then."

- Sure. I hope you can lead him, but... I see what you're thinking now, so I won't expect much.

"It'll depend on how he acts."

- Sure. Whatever you want.

Junmin hung up.

"What was that? That sounded pretty scary," Dojin asked. Dowook was watching curiously as well.

"A debate on what to do with a lost lamb?"

Maru smiled.

Chapter 194

"Hey Geunseok, we're heading to Anyang. You coming?"

The girls were asking him to play, they were pretty cute too. Geunseok wanted nothing more than to play with them all day. Unfortunately, he just didn't have the time today.

"Sorry, next time."

"Whaat, why? Let's go."

The girl dragged out her words as she tugged at his arm, the other girls were asking him to tag along as well. Geunseok could feel a tinge of annoyance creeping up his head, these brats just didn't know when to give up. They were like little flies that didn't know when to leave. He wanted to shout at them, but he did his best to maintain his composure.

"I have work to do. Let's go together some other time. I'll play with you then for real."

"Well, alright, fine."

The girl let go almost immediately, her eyes seemed to have lost all interest. The other girls were no longer smiling as well.

"That's a pity. Everything's free if he tags along too."

"Didn't he buy everything last time?"

"Yep."

He could hear them snickering, Geunseok glared at the girls. They ran away almost as soon as their eyes met.

'Bitches.'

He could feel anger rising all the way to his neck, he forced himself to calm down. Girls were all like this anyway. He headed down to the freshmen classrooms, this time his destination was the design class. He might be able to score a few points if he used the fact that he's also in design. Unfortunately, he got nothing. Not a single student was interested in joining the acting club, this was troublesome. He won't be able to make a club at this rate, his stomach was starting to hurt due to the irritation.

Right then, he saw one of the freshmen girls laughing in front of him. She wasn't even listening to him talk. Instead, she was just talking to the girl right next to him. Geunseok decided that he might as well use this as a chance to let out some of his stress.

"Hey, you think I'm a joke?"

"What?"

The girl responded back to him with a smile. How disgusting. Geunseok continued with a frown on his face.

"You think I'm a joke? You can't hear me talking right now? You have the audacity to ignore what I'm saying when I'm in front of you? Huh?"

The wide-eyed girl immediately lowered her head, same with the other girl she was just talking to. Geunseok felt relief looking at their reactions, lowering their heads was a sign of weakness to a carnivore like him. He relished his control of the situation, they were obeying him, a good behavior to have. He was too scared to speak out against the big one behind the girls, but he could always crush herbivores like these.

"Watch out from now on, got it? I'll remember your faces. Understand?"

"...Yes."

“Good. You should respond like that to seniors from now on. What club are you two at right now?”

“U-us? We’re in the movie watching club.”

The girl looked at him with fear on her face. It was pretty satisfying to look at, but Geunseok knew very well that this wasn’t the right way to carry the conversation. He wouldn’t be able to get club members with a whip alone.

“Why are you guys scared? I was just kidding. Did you really think I was really mad?”

He immediately got rid of the frown on his face, he kneeled a little and got on the two girls’ eye level.

“Sorry about that. I was just playing around a bit so that I could get close to you. I think I went a bit overboard with my acting. Were you scared?”

“What? N-not at all.”

“Right? I’m not really that scary.”

He immediately continued, so that the girls wouldn’t be able to recover. Girls at this age often agreed to whatever as long as you pushed them around a bit.

“Won’t you try acting?”

“What?”

“I need cute girls like you. You have very good diction, too.”

“Me?”

The girl looked confused, Geunseok didn’t even pause as he continued.

“Yup. You have good eyes, too. You’d come right to life on stage. I feel embarrassed to say this with my own mouth, but I got the best actor’s award in the nationals. My teachers told me that I have an eye for good actors as well. You guys need to act. Are you guys really going to spend all of your exciting high school life just watching movies? This is a secret, but the acting club I’m making is going to be backed by some seriously famous people in the industry. In other words, I’m giving you two a chance. I don’t give this to anyone.”

“But just before, you were talking to everyone...”

“I was trying to get a reaction out of them. I don’t see many people in the class with talent, but you’re an exception. Do you know Kim Suyeon? The actor in the SBC drama?”

“I do! She was really pretty!”

“I’m very close to her.”

“Really?”

“I don’t lie. Moreover, I’m trying to create an acting club of elites. The one that exists right now is just garbage. I don’t like talking bad about people, but the guys there right now kicked me out just because I was too good at acting. So a big guy in the industry took pity on me and decided to back me fully. If

possible, I'd like to start this off with you two. If you come along with me, acting won't just be a hobby for you. Have you ever wished to stand on the big stage?"

"Well... yes."

"Me too."

The two girls nodded together, this was his chance. His first goal was to compliment them until they became dizzy and get their signatures on the signup form. After that, he'd raise the talented ones and leave the talentless ones to make props. He would use them for the next two years to make a play that made himself look good, he just needed the individual actor's awards. If they didn't get the overall awards, he could just fault that on the club itself.

Geunseok was confident that he could get things moving once he dragged them into the club. In the end, plays were propped by one talented actor. The others were just along for the ride, that was just reality. No matter how good you were, you wouldn't be remembered unless you're the main actor. The star.

He'd be that star as long as he got people under him. If they didn't listen, he might even beat them to make the play happen. A star was born by stepping over those underneath him. Right now, Geunseok desperately needed people to step on.

"But..."

"This is a chance. You guys have the talent. Are you going to toss away that talent just to watch some movies? That would be such a shame. You'd just be damaging yourselves if you did that. I'm just regretful that you'd be willing to waste yourselves just like that. I can just see what you'd be like within the next year if you join me. It's fine to watch movies with your friends on the weekend. Sure, it'd create good memories. Not the best memories though. It's a bit harsh, but you guys know it's true. What's normal is, in the end, just trash. What's truly unique is what's really valuable. Just look at the people behind you."

Geunseok gestured towards the laughing group at the back of the class, he could tell that they were delinquents almost immediately.

"Are you close to them?"

"N-no."

"Right? They're delinquents. They'll waste away their lives in an engineering school. You two are different, you guys ended up coming here due to some reason. You have a vision, either to go to college or to get a job right after high school. Am I right? You're different from braindead idiots."

The two girls nodded with an awkward smile. Again, Geunseok realized that everyone liked being complimented.

"I knew it. I knew I wasn't wrong. You two are different. You're not the types that would settle for normal high school life, you can get something more than this. I'll help you, so long as you allow it. This is a plea. I don't talk to those without talent. Behind me, I have someone big in the industry. I'm going to create something amazing with people that have real talent."

He knew his words had a lot of holes in them, but he also knew these two were too stupid to realize that. They were almost done being persuaded, he just said someone big was behind him and they believed him just like that. How stupid was that? People were so easy to manipulate, he should be able to recruit more people if he kept going like this.

“...What you said is wrong.”

Right then, a high-pitched voice cut into their conversation. Geunseok immediately realized who the voice came from, it was that idiot that came to hand over the sign-up form last time. Lee Jiyoung, was it?

“Senior Maru told me that plays aren’t done by just talented people. It can’t succeed unless everyone tries hard together. Stars can’t make a play successful by themselves.”

She spoke her mind despite the fear she exhibited, that annoyed Geunseok to no end. Thinking about it, she was the cause of conflict with Maru as well. He wanted to shout at her, but he couldn’t afford to look bad in front of the two girls.

“He’s just wrong.”

“...No, you are.”

“What do you know about acting, huh?”

“T-that’s...”

“See? You have nothing to say. Jiyoung, was it? Don’t try to do stuff like this. Trying to tear down a person with baseless arguments is a bad thing.”

Jiyoung shut her mouth up, she didn’t seem to be a person who knew how to organize her thoughts in an argument. Then again, he supposed she couldn’t, especially when he was glaring at her like this.

“I told you, right? Your acting club right now only knows to tear people down like this. I’m sorry for insulting a classmate like this, but I don’t think she can be helped at this point.”

The two girls glanced at Jiyoung with that, Jiyoung stepped back with a flinch. He’d won. Girls were so easy, he might as well use this as a chance for revenge...

Right then, a slipper flew towards his face. It hit his head and bounced onto the floor. Geunseok glared, putting a hand over his numb forehead. The delinquent-like girls were glaring at him.

“It’s that annoying senior from last time.”

“He doesn’t even deserve to be called a senior. Hey, what the hell do you want?”

“Our girl didn’t do anything wrong.”

The girls were all walking towards him. Geunseok raised his body, thinking that there was no way he’d get beat by girls. He ended up swallowing a little when he saw their faces, they weren’t the typical girls he knew. They were the rowdy type, they looked very athletic.

The boys started moving as well. Geunseok paled a little, looking at the big one headed his way, this one was even bigger than him.

“The fuck you want?”

Geunseok looked around frantically before looking at the girl who was just listening to him.

“...It’s nothing.”

“Scared, huh?”

Geunseok stepped out in a hurry, he could see the bigger boy step out behind him. He ran towards the central staircase but ended up running into the one person he wanted to see the least. It was Maru, he was grinning with a phone in his hand.

“I’ll hear the rest of it from Jiyoong. I’ll come to talk to you after that.”

Maru patted his shoulder lightly, Geunseok couldn’t even move a single inch. Right now, Maru looked absolutely terrifying to him.

Chapter 195

She felt a lot better after sighing. Where did she even muster all that courage from?

“Are you okay?”

“Want us to go scare him?”

Jiyoong told her friends that she was fine now, she was trembling when Geunseok was right in front of her. With her friends here, she could stand her ground. Her friends may be odd and rough, but they were very good friends nonetheless.

“Um, mind if I come in?”

Maru appeared by the entrance of the classroom, Jiyoong had called him as soon as she saw Geunseok enter the class.

“What are you doing here?”

“Why are all of you in such a hurry to bully this poor girl?”

Jiyoong had to frantically stop her friends from stopping Maru.

“No no, he’s fine. I called him here.”

“Really?”

Jiyoong stepped towards Maru.

“Geunseok just left.”

“I know, I saw him. What happened?”

“Nothing bad, just...”

Jiyoong turned to look at the two girls at the front of the class. She knew them by name, but not much else apart from that Maru approached the two and asked for a summary. Jiyoong couldn’t help but notice how nice of a person he was, especially with how he kindly consoled the two girls.

"I'll apologize first. It looks like he's tried to bully the two of you."

"N-no, it's fine."

Maru apologized to the girls and corrected the things Geunseok had said at the same time, the girls nodded with understanding.

"I had no intention of joining, to begin with. He was really weird, he was definitely mad when he first spoke to us. He kept repeating he was just kidding, but it definitely didn't feel like he was joking around though. I didn't even want to talk to him, but I was so scared so I kept listening..."

"Me too."

The girls spoke with trembling voices, Jiyeon felt sorry for them. If only she intervened earlier...

"Hey, you idiots. You should've said no if you didn't like the situation. Why did you just keep listening? I thought you knew that weirdo."

One of Jiyeon's friends stepped up with a frown, Jiyeon tried to stop the girl. She knew her friend didn't have any patience when it came to situations like this.

"Stop it, the one at fault is that senior."

"In cases like these, the victims are also at fault. Stop being iffy and allowing yourself to get whisked away in such a situation. If you don't like it, just say no."

Jiyeon understood why her friend was mad, but she was also baffled at how she would try to remedy the situation. At the same time, she was a little envious of her friend's confidence.

"What you said isn't actually very easy, you're the amazing one for being able to say no. There's nothing wrong with the girls here." Maru butted in.

Jiyeon's friend glared at Maru. Jiyeon stepped in with a smile, but she couldn't really do anything.

"Aren't you a friend of that senior from a while ago? You're both in the acting club. It's also partly your fault for not taking care of your friends. How could you let someone like that rampage at *our* class?"

"First and foremost, I'm not his friend. Also, I'm sorry. You're right. It's my fault for not talking to him first. I didn't even realize it until you told me. Thank you."

"...Ah, yeah."

Jiyeon's friend seemed to be confused. This girl was a true tomboy, the type who was incredibly sporty since a young age. Her fiery personality stemmed from the fact that she often exercised with her brothers, Jiyeon was a bit surprised that someone like that could look so confused like this moment. She was more surprised that Maru was able to render her friend to this state.

"What the, backing off just like that?"

"Yeah, really?"

Jiyeon's other friends laughed with playful mockery. In the meantime, Jiyeon sighed in relief. Thank god the situation didn't escalate.

"I don't like people who just admit their mistakes like that, it makes me just lose all of my adrenaline."

Her friend pouted annoyedly, Jiyeon apologized to Maru for the scene.

"Again with your habit. Your friend did nothing wrong, your apology makes it look like your friend was in the wrong. Apologize only when necessary."

"Ah, yes, I'm so... I understand."

"Anyway, things got pretty annoying. I'll try not to let this happen next time."

Maru left Jiyeon's friend an interested glance.

"By the way, didn't you come to the acting club last time?"

"Me?"

Maru nodded after Aram pointed at herself with a finger.

"I went that one time earlier in the semester, I left because I wasn't a fan of that bastard talking. I have a potty mouth, by the way, so you'll have to be understanding of my language."

"That's not even really a bad word in high school. Besides that, would you like to join the acting club? We're a bit short on people."

"I'm good. I like moving my body, so stuff like that's no good for me."

"Acting is a very active activity."

"But it takes a lot of time."

"An incredible amount, subjectively speaking."

"Why would I join a club like that?"

"Because it's fun. The amount of fun you'll have increases exponentially with the time you invest in it, it's also that much annoying and tiring though."

"Do you really think anyone would join from such words?"

"You think? I have no other way of explaining it. It's just the way it is. Let me know if you find anyone else interested in acting around you. We're recruiting until the end of the week."

Maru spoke with a smile on his face, being quite frank with Jiyeon's other friends for a second before finishing off by asking them to drop by once in the future. Jiyeon was reminded of a lady merchant in traditional markets during the whole exchange. She thought Maru was a very weighty, serious senior, but it felt like she saw a new side to him today. He seemed very friendly with his words.

"It's almost the end of the break, thanks for listening to me talk. Be sure to drop by when you're bored, I'll show you a play we filmed last year."

Maru took a look at the clock before finally stepping out.

"This one doesn't seem like an asshole, thank goodness."

“Yeah. He’s alright, actually. Kind of cute.”

“What, thinking of making a move?”

“Hey, don’t make this weird.”

Jiyoon’s friends started returning to their seats. Jiyoon thought of the acting club’s current situation. Maru sounded very casual about it, but Jiyoon knew full well how much trouble they were in.

“Hey, guys?”

“Yeah?”

“W-would you like to try acting with me? I just started myself, but the people there are really nice. It’s probably going to be tiring as the senior said, but it’s also going to be fun. Eh, so... so...”

She wanted to speak as seamless as Maru, but she couldn’t elaborate her train of thought. In the end, she just ended up finishing her line with an “it’s also going to be fun”. Her friends smiled.

“When will you stop being nervous in front of us?”

“Can’t be helped. We better take her on a lap around the school on top of our shoulders every time she stutters.”

Jiyoon ran away from her friends trying to ticker her into a corner of the class.

“Well, I want to try it, but band is pretty fun already.”

“Same, but with cooking.”

“I’ll watch your acting, so good luck.”

Unfortunately, they all refused. She wanted to be of help to Maru, but it proved more difficult than she initially thought.

“Hey, open your textbooks.”

The teacher entered the class, Jiyoon got back to her seat and opened her textbook. Right then, a ball of paper landed on her desk. She raised her head to see where the paper came from, Aram was pointing at the paper. When Jiyoon opened it, she found a message inside.

[Is the acting club really fun?]

* * *

[I think Geunseok has been spreading weird rumors.]

It was a message from Soyeon, who was in the same class as Geunseok.

“What’s this?”

Dojin leaned sideways to take a look at Maru’s phone. How brave of the boy, especially during class. Not that Maru was the one to talk, what with the phone under his desk. Maru showed Dojin the screen, causing the boy to frown.

“That bastard never changes.”

“You in the back. Be quiet.”

The teacher spoke as he smacked the chalk into the blackboard, Maru shut his mouth and focused on the lecture. The lecture about the crusades suddenly changed its course to king Lionheart, which eventually ended with the teacher recanting an epic of king Lionheart’s adventures.

“Don’t try so hard to memorize the latter part of the lecture. I’ll tell you what’s going to be on the test later.”

Engineering schools were odd in the fact that as long as you paid attention two weeks before the test, you could still easily get a hundred on the tests. The teachers were very lax in their classes as well.

“I, King Dojin the lion, will head off to punish that idiot now.”

“I bid you stay in your seat. I will take care of the matter myself.”

Maru pushed Dojin down by the shoulder as he stood up.

“I’ll come with you.”

Daemyung joined, Maru had no reason to stop a fellow member of the club from tagging along. Maru entered the design class, who were currently cleaning up the classroom before heading back home. He found Geunseok talking with his friends next to the television.

“Maru.”

Soyeon looked at him worriedly, Maru smiled at her gently before stepping towards Geunseok. Due to his sudden visit, the entirety of the class focused on him.

“What the,” Geunseok widened his eyes. He didn’t seem intimidated thanks to the presence of his friends.

“Geunseok.”

“What.”

“The only thing you should do with your mouth is to speak, not shit with it. You’re a smart kid, so why are you going around saying things you can’t even handle?”

“You son of a bitch.”

Geunseok stepped forward, he didn’t immediately attack though. Geunseok’s friends started observing the situation alertly, they looked like they would step in to help Geunseok as soon as things went awry.

“Just where did you learn to swear with every sentence? Can’t you be a little polite?”

“Are you crazy? Hey guys, look. This is the kid I was talking about. The one that kicked me out due to jealousy and his own incompetence. What a bastard.”

One by one, the students in the class started gathering. Maru actually welcomed the attention, he wouldn't have come here if he wanted to settle things peacefully in the first place. Maru raised his voice loud enough so that the class could hear him speak.

"Why are you saying such baseless things, Geunseok? Alright guys, think for a second. Do you think I could've kicked Geunseok out if he really was so talented?"

The students started nodding, causing Geunseok to immediately retort.

"Talent be damned. You kicked me out with that damn pig standing next to you. You did it out of jealousy."

"So how the hell did we do it, if we even did it, to begin with?"

Chapter 196

"That's... You..."

Geunseok couldn't think of a response immediately. His words were based on lies, so it only made sense that his next one would be a lie as well. To lie convincingly over and over again needed an incredibly logical mind, one that could keep formulating lies that made sense. The more you lied, the more difficult this became.

The boy would be able to come up with a good lie given time. Unfortunately, Maru wasn't about to give him any. He waited just a few seconds before dragging in the class further into their conversation.

"Look carefully. We're just students. Do you actually think I have the ability to kick you out? Is there a rule that lets students regulate other students? I don't think so."

Maru looked around with a shrug, a few kids agreed. Maru quickly scanned the classroom. Geunseok was smart, but there was no way he managed to become friends with everyone in the club. To begin with, the boy probably tried to get along with the smarter kids.

Maru immediately realized that the six kids standing to his right were looking at Geunseok in annoyance, they were vigorously agreeing with everything Maru said as well. Besides that, six kids to his left were slowly making their way closer to the boy. The other twenty people in the class were probably neutral.

'Geunseok, what's important about forming a party isn't what's black or white. It's what's grey.'

The enemy of your enemy is your friend, what you really need the support of are the people in the middle. Maru purposefully took the neutral stance as he spoke.

"I'm just worried for you, Geunseok. Why are you lying over and over again? I keep hearing rumors. Rumors about you talking behind the acting club's back. Why are you talking so much behind our back? If you have a problem, 'be a man' and come talk to us about it. If you really felt injustice towards your situation, shouldn't you have been more confident about it?"

Be a man. What a magical phrase, they were words that boiled the blood of any youth who heard it. At this age, being told your action 'wasn't manly' was synonymous with being immoral.

"I never lied!"

“Geunseok, would you feel better if I asked for Mr. Taesik’s testimony?”

“W-what?”

“I’m honestly worried about you. I wanted to finish this off nicely if I could, it’s troubling if you come out like this. You stepped out of the club on your own. Isn’t that right?”

“.....”

“You left then told me you were bored with acting. Now you’re talking behind our back? I’m confused. Why are you the only one having a different memory of what happened?”

“I-I never...”

“Oh, so I can call the teacher? Ah, but it’s rude to call him out when he’s so busy. But if that’s the story you’re going with, I’ll call him. Is that what you want?”

“The teacher has nothing to do with this.”

“Of course he does, he’s our advisor.”

Geunseok started rolling his eyes in confusion. This was why lying was so dangerous, the boy should’ve thought a bit if he was going to use this route. Foolishly for him, he built his tower on a single lie that could be broken by Taesik alone.

Maru took a look around, half of the kids in class indulged in mocking laughter. To them, the seriousness of the situation didn’t matter at all. All they wanted was entertainment, the actions of Maru or Geunseok didn’t matter to them.

‘No need to insult him for me. They just need to laugh.’

This was just a happening, just a small event that would be forgotten by tomorrow. But how would this feel to Geunseok and his pride? To a person who walked their own path, the opinions of the people around them wouldn’t matter to them. But to a person who fed on compliments, these laughs must be very painful to them.

“What the, Geunseok, you lied?”

“Why’d you go on and do that? You should’ve just joined them again.”

“Seriously. Hey, just join them again. You said you did well, didn’t you?”

The thoughtless words of the class wounded Geunseok deeply, the boy’s face was reddening like hot iron. He must be nursing in quite the shout right now, he was staying patient though. Maru took out his phone, it was time to end this. He checked that the other side picked up the call before handing the phone over to Geunseok, the boy stared at it dumbly.

“Take it.”

“Why would I...”

“It’s Mr. Junmin.”

“What?”

Geunseok hurriedly picked up the phone. After holding it next to his ear for a few seconds, he fell right down on his knees. Maru snatched the phone away from the boy’s hands, Geunseok immediately charged like a rabid dog.

“You bastard!”

Maru didn’t even flinch, Geunseok probably never got into a fight thanks to his cold expression and his large physique. He could tell just by looking at the way the boy moved, the boy’s chin was wide open. Maru sidestepped left and tripped Geunseok, who flopped right down to the ground with a bang.

“Ugh, what an ass. Hey guys, take care of Geunseok for me. He’s not a bad kid, but he has a bit of an inferiority complex. Got it?”

Maru didn’t want to further complicate things, he wanted to keep the class thinking that this was just an amusing event. Geunseok slowly got up and tried to leave the class. The boy came back though, once Maru mentioned “don’t you still need to clean up?” Maru noticed tears streaming down on the boy’s face.

“What the, is he crying?”

“Hey, Geunseok, you crying?”

The other students approached the boy with a smile, Maru gave Daemyung a slight glance. This was good enough, he wasn’t trying to ruin the boy.

“What was that call from earlier? Why’s he like that?”

“Oh, that? Probably just a word or two from Mr. Junmin.”

“What?”

“Probably something like, ‘the contract is over’ or something?”

“Really?”

Maru nodded. They say people are all equal, but that really wasn’t the case. People received preferential treatment based on talent, this was the same when it came to using people. You’re a novice if you end up using people and having their hatred directed towards you. An intermediate if you form a decent relationship afterwards. A pro if they stay desperate towards you even after knowing that you used them. Geunseok knew how to make bad blood between his friends and Maru, but he wasn’t subtle about it. It was odd saying that something like this could be “subtle” at all, but there was definitely a difference depending on the method.

Geunseok was stupid. Rather, he was immature. He played with an adult mindset in a children’s game, he must’ve thought everyone would believe the rumors he spread. That was his mistake. An adult would’ve calculated sticking to who would be better for them, but kids weren’t like that at all. At their age, rumors came and went as easily as the wind. That wasn’t to say Geunseok didn’t have friends anymore. But at least at this moment, his friends would distance themselves from him.

Maru turned around to look back at the class, Geunseok was standing dumbly in the corner while the other students were cleaning. That was exactly what it was, the girls who were so close to Geunseok just a second ago were distancing themselves, out of the fear that they'd be laughed at along with him. If this was at a company, things wouldn't have ended like this. There were actual lives at stake there, people didn't just distance themselves from others just because they were afraid of being made fun of.

'At the height of all this are politicians.'

Politicians don't stay in politics despite having done crimes because they're stupid, this was a war for them. To them, what's good or bad doesn't matter. All that matters to them is profit.

In the end, this was just a children's game, Geunseok should've used a strategy befitting that.

"I wonder if things will get quiet now."

"Maybe?"

"Phew, that's a relief."

"Relief my ass. We still only have four members. You need to try hard. Our deadline's Saturday. Past that, we'll really have to do this with four people."

"G-got it."

"Don't advertise like that dude over there, though."

"Yup."

Maru stepped back into his class with a stretch. Dojin demanded an explanation from him, but Maru chose to ignore him.

"Don't smoke, and if you get caught playing pool... Well, whoever loses in a match with me will have to pay, so just be aware of that."

Taesik ended the class with a smile, Maru approached the man to give him a short rundown of what happened.

"You should've been more gentle."

"I heard that it's preferred to cut off seedlings of misshapen growth."

Taesik shook his head.

"Do you think you'll find more members?"

"That's the real issue. Do you have any ideas?"

"Nope, nothing."

"Don't you feel a sense of responsibility as an advisor?"

"You're poking me where it hurts. I'm advertising a bit whenever I can, so hopefully, we get someone by Saturday."

“We just need up to ten. That’d be better than four at the very least.”

“What if no one comes at all?”

“We’ll seriously have to consider doing two roles at once.”

Though Maru didn’t know if they could even do that. Taesik left the class wishing him good luck.

“Maru, let’s go to the clubroom.”

“Yup.”

There was a disgusting amount of work to do, despite the fact that they had so few members.

Chapter 197

Today was a holiday celebrating the founding of the school, it was also a Saturday. Even though she made plans to go hang out with her friends a week ago, she ended up staying inside today.

“My head hurts.”

She was sick to the point of sweating like a waterfall yesterday. Today was a lot better thankfully, probably because of the medicine and the sleep from yesterday. She wished she could jump out of bed for some fresh air. Alas, her body didn’t want to take a single step out of the bed.

“How’s your temperature?”

Her mom stepped inside and put a hand over her forehead, she said she was fine to put her mom at ease.

“You should stay as warm as possible. Do you have anything in particular that you want to eat?”

“No, I don’t. You should rest, mom. This isn’t anything serious.”

“You should’ve taken care of yourself, to begin with. You took your medicine?”

“I did.”

After her dad passed away, she did her best to never show pain in front of mom. Because once she did, her mom would lose all rationality and start worrying. Looking at that made her feel more pain than anything else, she didn’t want to give her mom reminders of her dad again.

“Want some porridge?”

“Mom.”

“Yeah?”

“Go to work. I thought today was your deadline. Worry more about our budget, not me.”

She pushed her mom away lightly, her mom smiled as she finally walked out. The room was finally quiet again, she got rid of her smile as she lay back down on the bed. She was still feeling incredibly dizzy, she should just lie down all day.

She heard an alarm as she desperately tried to fall asleep, she grabbed her phone nearby and opened it.

[Are you feeling alright?]

It was a message from her friends at Namsan. She typed up a response, feeling sad at the fact she couldn't be with them. Well, at least they remembered her.

[I want to die. You better not have fun while I'm suffering!]

She grinned as she sent the message. Immediately, she started receiving multiple messages from her friends, all along the lines of 'just try to curse us, woman'. Though she only received words, it felt like she could hear their voice from the letters. She closed her phone and stared dumbly at the ceiling, the little glow-in-the-dark stickers she put up there as a child with her dad were glowing.

'I'm lonely.'

She could smile when she was texting with friends, but the immediate feeling of loneliness that came afterwards dampened her mood. She tried smiling, telling herself that this was only a symptom of her sickness, but that didn't stop her from sighing at all. She felt sicker, actually. She tried to go to sleep as best she could but it only made her feel more awake. She tried counting sheep in her head, but eventually, they started performing acrobatics and even sang together in harmony.

'Who the hell came up with the idea of counting sheep?'

She put a hand over her hurting head and turned over in her bed, nothing changed. The clock on her desk was pointing to 11:14am, even though it felt 11:14am passed hours ago. She sighed and sat up, unable to sleep. Her headache wasn't terrible at the moment, she might as well watch some TV. Just as she took a step outside her room, she heard a noise come from her bed. It was a call. Was it her friends? She smiled at her mom working in the living room before stepping back inside.

"Hello?"

- Why do you sound so tired? Did you just wake up?

"Ah, it's you, Maru."

She sat back down on her bed. She thought she could walk, but she was dead wrong. Her entire world was spinning from those few steps.

- You're sick, aren't you?

"No, I'm not."

- I can tell from your voice.

"I'm not sick at all. Really."

- Well, same habits as ever.

"What? What habit?"

- Don't worry about it. Where are you hurting? Is your mom there at home? Did you take your medicine?

"Why don't you believe me? I'm not sick."

She felt annoyed all of the sudden, she remembered how they were supposed to go on a date last weekend and he just cancelled it out of nowhere. She was fine with it last week, so why was she feeling so annoyed about it now? How could a person who likes her just cancel something out of nowhere like that? She felt annoyance creep up all the way to the back of her throat, it felt like she would just spill out all of her frustrations if she opened her mouth now.

“...I’m fine.”

But all she ended up saying were words to calm the other side down. It has become a habit of hers to avoid worrying others, she didn’t like it when other people worried about her. She let out some awkward laughter through the phone.

“I’m going to sleep, so call me later. Got it?”

- Wait.

“Bye.”

Her headache worsened after she hung up, she had no reason to be annoyed at Maru. She just couldn’t help it. Was it because she was still young? Why couldn’t today just be over already? Along with her sickness? She lay down and put her blanket over her head, it smelled good, since they washed it just a few days ago. She called this smell the ‘smell of the sun’, that was what dad called it. Wait, was it mom who called it that? In any case, smelling it made her feel a lot better. All of her annoyance and sadness disappeared from her head, she should’ve done this way earlier.

And just like that, she went to sleep.

* * *

She woke to the sounds of conversation from outside, mom was speaking with a raised voice outside. Was she talking with a publisher again? Or a friend she didn’t really like?

‘I feel a bit better.’

She turned her head to look at the clock. 5pm, so she slept like a baby for around six hours. Her body felt really stiff, but she didn’t have that terrible headache anymore. Moreover, she was hungry. She flapped her musky shirt with her hand. The resulting wind washed away the sweat, making her feel a lot cooler than before. As soon as she stood up, she was reminded of what she was thinking just before she went to sleep.

‘Why did I feel depressed enough to want to cry?’

None of the things she thought of were anything special, so why did she feel so sad about it?

“Hold on a second.”

She thought of the actors that started crying on the bed as soon as the camera got closer to them. Perhaps those scenes were just a culmination of a ton of historical evidence? She felt a lot better thinking about it already, it felt like she uncovered another secret about acting. Pft.

‘I should ask for ice cream.’

She would surely get scolded for asking for ice cream when she was sick, but she couldn't help her craving for strawberry ice cream. She couldn't remember it precisely, but back when her throat was incredibly swollen, her dad got her strawberry ice cream. Perhaps that was why she always wanted it when she got sick. Come to think of it, her dad liked strawberries. Strawberry milk, strawberry ice cream. But he never actually got the fruit itself.

"Do you really think so?"

She could hear a voice outside, mom still seemed to be talking. She could also hear a faint, male voice outside as well. They seemed to be in the kitchen. Mom's guest, perhaps? She looked down at her clothes. Upon confirming that she looked fine, she carefully opened the door and headed out to the living room. She could see mom resting against the kitchen counter. Despite her raised voice, she was smiling. Maybe she raised her voice out of happiness, not anger?

"Mom, did a guest come?"

She called out to her mom quietly, the woman looked towards her and smiled mischievously.

"Yup."

"I should say hi, right?"

Mom nodded slowly, male guests occasionally came to their house for business. All of them were related to publishing, mom was actually quite famous when it came to stuff like this. She stepped out of her room and closed the door, she noticed that the fridge was open in the kitchen. Right then, a hand popped up to close it.

"Mother, can you check the seasoning for this?"

...Mother?

She felt a chill run down her spine. No way. Wait, this was totally a thing he would do. She quickly walked into the kitchen, she could hear her mom laughing right behind her. It had to be him.

"Oh, awake?"

"Y-y-you!"

Maru was standing casually next to the stove. She looked at mom once, then back at Maru. They were both smiling, she wasn't even shocked anymore, her emotions were way past that. As a matter of fact, she was starting to get angry.

"How are you here?"

"I took the bus."

"That's not what I'm asking."

"Sorry, was I not specific enough? I bought stuff for you and then got on bus 66. I got on right as I got to the station. Very lucky. I rode the bus for exactly 53 minutes, and voila."

"....."

She closed her lips tightly and twisted Maru's ear. She would've felt a bit better if he exclaimed in pain, but...

"I guess it's true that healthy people aren't even pained by something like this. Mother, I must be very healthy."

Good god, she could feel her headache start to come back. Before she realized it, her mom stepped forward and took a spoonful of the boiling soup from the stove. It was black and white. She recognized the white stuff as egg white, but she had no idea what the black stuff was.

"It's good."

"Thank goodness. I guess it's a pass if you're fine with it."

"My daughter doesn't have a very finicky tongue, so I guess so?"

The two of them talked casually with each other. Since when were they so close with each other? She butted into their conversation.

"Mom, why is he here?"

"Because he came here."

"That's so far out from what I meant."

"We're inside, actually."

That last line was from Maru. Good lord, these two people sounded like they'd been doing this for years. That joke immediately made her lose all of her energy, it felt foolish for her to even get mad. She stepped back to her room and flopped down on the bed. It would be better for her to just go back to sleep... But then.

"Pft."

Chapter 198

She glanced at her shirt and pants as she lay on the bed, she thought her attire was perfectly decent in front of a guest, but now they looked very awkward on her. She crept carefully to the closet, there was a shirt inside that she recently bought. A white shirt decorated with little droplet shapes, she grabbed the shirt without much thought.

'Hold on.'

She stopped when the shirt was halfway out of the closet, she felt like she'd be losing at something if she changed now. Maru would definitely smile at her saying she looked good if she changed, sure. That's fine. But that would mean that she changed just to look good in front of him, that wasn't fine.

'Well, whatever. Who cares.'

She put the shirt back into the closet, Maru was the one who came unannounced. She had no reason to be polite or be all dressed up, but just as she was about to step outside, she ended up seeing herself in the mirror.

“...Was this shirt always this stretched? Ugh, these pants look so worn out. It looks like I’ve worn this for years.”

Her eyes widened as she analyzed her clothes, they looked tired as heck. Her hair was a complete mess, she even had eye boogers, and worse, a red streak running right past her left cheek. She looked back at her bed in surprise, there was a very thick string laying on the pillow.

“Crap.”

The line refused to go away even when she puffed her cheeks, it still looked clear after she rubbed the hell out of it.

‘He saw this, right? He totally saw this.’

“Agghh....”

She suddenly didn’t want to go outside. At the same time, she felt a lot more annoyed at Maru. He should’ve told her that he was coming! She could’ve at least washed her face, washed her hair, change her clothes, and maybe even do her nails...

She flopped down on the bed in the hopes that she’d fall back asleep. Alas, after six hours of sleep, she was as awake as ever. A knock came through the door as she sighed on the bed.

“Whatcha doing inside?”

It was Maru, his kind voice sounded incredibly irritating right now. She didn’t respond with a frown on her face.

“Food’s done. Aren’t you hungry?”

Hmph. I’m not going to respond no matter what you do, she thought. What kind of a guy shows up to a girl’s house unannounced? Her mom was worse, actually. How could mom bring him in without a second thought? He clearly didn’t arrive just now either, judging by his movement in the kitchen. Mom clearly had the time to tell her about it, but she didn’t.

“I made some chicken nuggets too. I know you like them.”

Now, how did he know that? She glanced at the doorway, thinking of how Maru would be standing on the other side was a little bit funny. Once the initial surprise of him being here went away, she started feeling thankful that he came here for her. How’d he figure out she was sick?

“I got some strawberry ice cream, too.”

Her ears perked up at that, she just couldn’t resist the words when she heard it. After all, she’s been craving it since she woke up. She felt saliva pooling up in her mouth, the smells of frying oil intensified through the door as well. Nuggets, nuggets. She loved eating a piece of it over a spoonful of rice.

“...Is it a stick ice cream?”

“Nope, tub.”

“Did you get a lot?”

“Two pints, just to be sure.”

“What about the soup?”

“Kim soup.”

“What the heck is kim soup?”

“My secret recipe.”

“Ugh, sure it is.”

“Anyway, come out already. Mother’s getting kind of sick of waiting for you.”

“Excuse you, but she’s *my* mom, not yours?”

“Are you an elementary schooler or something? So childish!”

“Yeah! So what if I am?!”

She realized how pointless it was to stay in her room like this, she knew that she’d go out to see him eventually. There was no way she could stay annoyed at someone who came all the way to see her. It was just... she was a little regretful that she didn’t have time to prepare. The red line on her face was still there, it’d probably stay for the next couple of hours. In the end, she settled for a change of clothes. She changed into that shirt in the closet. She didn’t want to look so unkempt in front of Maru, so she changed into a cuter pair of pajama pants as well.

She carefully opened the door, Maru wasn’t in front of the door anymore. She stepped towards the kitchen as if nothing had happened, her mom was staring at her a little strangely.

“...Give me food.”

Maru scooped her a bowl of rice on the spot. It felt weird. A boy? Giving her rice? At her home?

“Have some water first.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

She grabbed the cup of water Maru handed her. It was warm, warm enough to make her feel comfortable inside. She glanced up at Maru. He was staring at the cup, clearly waiting for her to drink it.

“Oh, you’re so lucky. You have a boyfriend who cares so much about you.”

She almost spat out the water mid-drink, she put the cup down and glared at her mom. The woman was grinning ear to ear.

“Why couldn’t you wake me up if you knew he was coming?”

“How could I? You were sleeping so well. You try waking up your sick daughter when you become a mother. I bet you wouldn’t be able to do it.”

She wanted to refute, but she just couldn’t. So she changed her target to Maru.

“You’re also at fault. You should’ve called if you were going to come.”

"I did."

"Not mom, me."

"Of course I did. Check your phone later."

"....."

Both of them had perfect alibis. What the hell? Why couldn't they just lose for once? She stabbed a nugget with her fork and put it in her mouth in annoyance, the crispy, juicy nugget immediately made her feel a bit better.

"Maru," mom called out.

"Yes, mother?"

"You don't have to be so nervous. You're making me worried just looking at you."

"...Ha, haha."

Nervous? How was he nervous? He was talking as casually as he ever was with her! Upon second thought, she looked closely at Maru. Now that she looked at him, he looked a bit more stiff than usual. He was speaking a bit faster as well, his smile was a lot more awkward as well. His arms were glued to his thighs and his back was as straight as a rod. He looked pretty comical like this, actually.

"Hmm, so you're nervous?"

Finally, something she could tease him on. Just watching his nervous self was very fun. To think just a single sentence from mom could shake him like this... What was so scary about her mom anyway?

"Are you blackmailing him, mom?"

"What kind of a person do you think I am? I've been pretty kind to him. Maru, have I ever made you feel uncomfortable?"

Maru rotated towards mom with a snap.

"Of course not. Mother's been very good to me. You allowed me to come over when I called you. I am very thankful for that. You must have been a little surprised when I announced my visit. No, you must have been very surprised."

Maru clearly wasn't speaking like normal, he was jabbering about as if he didn't know what he wanted to say. She laughed a little without even realizing it, mom laughed too.

"You find my mom super difficult to be around, huh?"

"Eh? No, not really."

"Good lord, I'd never have known you to be afraid of someone. Mom, can you tease him a bit more? This is a seriously rare sight coming from him."

Mom immediately told her that was a rude thing to do to a guest. Despite saying that, she looked very deeply at Maru. The boy flinched like a student under a teacher's gaze during a test.

“Alright, kids. Get eating. We can talk after that.”

Maru immediately picked up his spoon and started eating, it was almost as if she was looking at a well-trained dog.

‘What the hell’s up with him?’

For now, she picked up her chopsticks as well.

* * *

‘This is terrible.’

Maru prepared himself a bit before coming, but mother was as scary as ever. He was reminded of when he first met her in his previous life, they talked long enough to make him worry that the marinated beef he brought over as a gift was going to get over-marinated. It felt like an interrogation, no, worse. He was just getting censured, the fact that he was getting cold sweat just thinking about the conversation he couldn’t remember was proof enough of that. He could just imagine the scene in his head. Mother must’ve asked him numerous troubling questions and he must’ve had a wild time trying to come up with a proper answer.

“Relax, be comfortable.”

The voice came as mom started doing the dishes, Maru jumped up from his seat volunteering to do it for her. He sounded like a new recruit in the army, not that she allowed him to help. Maru sat down with a frown, ‘shutting right up’ as one could put it.

“You look like a trained puppy.”

She spoke to him with a big smile on her face. She was cute and pretty, yet he couldn’t help but feel that she was more of an enemy than an ally today. He totally had the lead when he came to the house earlier, too.

“So when was the second time you guys ever kissed?”

A terrifying question shot towards him from the kitchen, even she froze up in the middle of eating ice cream at that question. Maru felt a little amused looking at that, but became instantly terrified upon realizing who the question was directed to.

“No denial? So you guys did do it, huh?”

“M-mom!”

She frantically ran into the kitchen. Good job, wife! But even she was no match for her mother's words. She came back with a face as red as a beet, she looked so sad getting back into her seat. What in the world was said to her?

“We enjoyed the fruit you gave us last time. I’m sorry for the late thanks.”

“It’s nothing, mother.”

There was a plate in mother's hands as she walked into the living room, three apples and six tangerines. It was a lot of fruit for just three people, but mother started cutting the apples with a smile regardless. Maru swallowed a little as he watched her peel off their skins, she'd probably stop after two pieces. Same with mother. Then the rest...

"Have a lot."

"...Of course."

"You like apples?"

"Very much."

"Oh, good. You can have more, then."

Maru felt his eyes twitch from under him. Three apples, six tangerines. He knew mother didn't like leftovers. Maru steeled himself, preparing to wage war against the fruits in front of him.

* * *

"How could you just eat all of that?"

"Sometimes, you have to make sacrifices for your own survival. You wouldn't know since you're still young."

"Gosh."

She looked dumbly at Maru sitting next to her. He had two bowls of rice. Now, he was eating a ridiculous amount of fruits. He just kept eating and eating since her mom kept handing over more and more to him, she rifled through the contents of the fridge in the kitchen. Mom often got stomach aches, so they always had a supply of digestive medicine in the fridge.

"Here, have this."

"...Thanks."

Maru's mouth reeked of apples. The boy popped open the cap and chugged the medicine in an instant.

"Phew, I feel better."

"You know these don't work right away, right?"

She took a hand and stroked Maru's back gently, she always felt better when mom did it for her when she was sick.

"Feels good," Maru said with a grin.

She slapped his back as hard as she could.

"It's already nine."

"I should head home."

Maru slowly got up from his seat. Mom had gone to a nearby cafe to finish her work.

“Want me to take you?”

“You’re the sick one, so you better not think about going outside. Just go to sleep.”

“You know you look sicker than me right now, right?”

“Yeah, I know, I know.”

Maru stepped towards the front door with a hand over his stomach, she looked at him silently before remembering a question.

“How did you know I was sick?”

“I know you have a habit of trying to hide it when you’re hurting. Just tell me if it hurts. You have someone who can help you.”

“How’d you know that?”

“I’m your boyfriend. Of course I’d know.”

Maru waved his hand as if he was joking, she felt a bit sorry after noticing the worried tone in his voice.

“Get home safe.”

“Yup. You go to sleep already, too. Be sure to keep warm.”

“I’m not a kid, you know.”

Maru grinned as he turned around. The front door opened and cold air blasted into the house for a second, she crossed her arms as she watched Maru step outside. The door started closing behind him. Just before the door almost closed, she heard a voice from behind it.

“You look good in that shirt.”

And with that, click.

She could feel her lips start to curl up.

Chapter 199

Dowook’s home always smelled of oil, the smell had stayed with them for as long as he could remember. In fact, he’d feel pretty sad if that smell suddenly disappeared one day. Dowook stepped down from the second floor to find his dad reading the newspaper in their study.

“Did you have breakfast, dad?”

“Sure did. It’s a toasted sandwich. Want it warmed up?”

“I’ll do it. Will you have some coffee?”

“Sure.”

Dad smiled proudly, Dowook nodded as he headed into the kitchen. There were two sandwiches there made by his mom, she must’ve left for work early in the day. He put some water on boil as he poured two packs of instant coffee into a mug.

“Dad, they say black coffee’s better for you.”

“I-I’ll try it some other time.”

Dowook shook his head, he’s been hearing that from his dad several times already. He put the water in and started mixing. He brought the coffee to his dad before taking out two mugs again. One was white, with a striped handle, and the other had a drawing of a cute cat on it. He poured milk into both. He grabbed the cat mug in one hand and the plate with the sandwich on it in the other. He crossed the living room, passing the library in the hallway as well before coming before a room with a doll decorating the door handle.

Dowook took a deep breath. He thought he was used to it by now, but he still got nervous when he was in front of this door. All sorts of complicated feelings swept over him whenever he was here, Dowook smiled bitterly before tapping on the door with his foot.

“Have some breakfast.”

7am. Today was a day dad rested from working at the gas station. The ‘unfamiliar family member’ behind this door always stayed home as well. Dowook just didn’t know what her job was. After waiting a bit, the door creaked open and out came his sister.

“You brought it over for me? Thanks!”

Dowook just couldn’t get used to her smiling face.

“You have a lot to be thankful for.”

Dowook handed over the drink and the sandwich, which was received with careful hands. He could see a bunch of dolls inside through the gap in the door. His sister decided to move back into the house this past February. By the time her relationship with the rest of the family improved, dad said he wanted her to come back. Dowook told him to do whatever. That served as his agreement and Dowook’s sister moved in the very next day. Not fully, of course. She would be moving back and forth between her old house and this one.

His sister was actually a lot richer than he thought, she could leave the home in the first place thanks to her job. As a matter of fact, that house she used to live in was owned by her as well. An impressive feat for a woman in her early thirties, especially since the house in question was in the middle of Seoul.

Dowook wasn’t at all interested in what his sister did for a living before, but now, he started developing a little bit of interest. They were living together, after all. Did she sell dolls? He couldn’t come up with any better ideas.

“Why do you ask?” his sister asked curiously.

“It’s nothing.”

He’d stopped resenting her a long time ago, that didn’t make conversing with her any easier though. Not because he disliked her or anything, but rather their lack of shared interests. They were able to talk a bit during meals, sure. Things got incredibly awkward incredibly quickly outside of it though. His sister stood hesitantly there for a second before turning around. They were getting closer for sure, but not quickly enough.

“Um, Dowook.”

His sister called out to him just before he returned to the kitchen, she quickly went back into her room to find something. He looked inside out of curiosity. She was digging through pile and piles of dolls. She pushed a giant bear to the corner, threw a rabbit mask somewhere, and dug through a few more dolls before grabbing something with a smile. It was a cat doll roughly the size of her palm, she handed it over to Dowook carefully.

“Here, a gift.”

Dowook looked down at the doll, the belly shone when he pressed down on the tail end.

“It’s dangerous to bike at night.”

“Pretty sure it’d be more dangerous to bike with this in one hand.”

“.....”

Dowook turned around with a shrug. He wanted to say thanks, he felt too awkward to do it though. He came back to the kitchen and ate as he looked at the cat, he was a fan of its little frown.

“Dad, I might be coming home late starting tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Because of club activities.”

“Club? Biking?”

“No, acting.”

“Acting?”

Right then, his sister poked her head out from the hallway and asked him a question.

“You’re going to do acting?”

“Yeah, gonna try it.”

“Really?”

She was looking incredibly happy. Dowook looked down ill at ease as he took another bite out of his sandwich. He was only joining to even his debt to Maru, he never had the chance to pay the boy back before. When he heard that the acting club was lacking in members, he jumped at the chance. He still remembered the face Maru made when he told the boy about joining, the boy looked like he saw a ghost.

It wasn’t like Dowook was interested in acting. He never saw it, nor did he ever try it. The school encouraged it when the club went to the nationals last time, but he never cared for it. He didn’t have much interest in being on stage at all, he just wanted to help since they needed members. He was pretty handy with tools, so he might as well make a few props while he was there.

“Acting’s really fun.”

“Dunno. I’m only really going in there to help make props.”

“You should try it if you get the chance.”

“Maybe.”

His sister approached him slowly, Dowook started chewing faster out of nervousness. His sister was sometimes too energetic for him. He tried to stuff the rest of the sandwich into his mouth to leave, but his sister was a bit faster.

“Tell me if you take it up. S-sis’ll try to help.”

Dowook couldn’t even remember the last time his sister called herself ‘sister’, he looked at her dumbly before nodding. They were still awkward around each other, but slowly and surely they were getting closer.

“If I do it.”

“Yup.”

His sister smiled with relief.

* * *

“I’m Kang Dowook, a second year. I like riding bikes and being alone.”

Dowook sat down with a bored look. Maru scratched his eyebrows as he looked at Bangjoo and Jiyeon on the other side. Bangjoo was laughing happily at the new addition to the club, but Jiyeon was shivering like a wet puppy.

“I’m Jeon Aram, a first-year. I like martial arts and running. Knitting too. I came here after beating up everyone who bullied Jiyeon, over.”

This one was even more troublesome than Dowook. It was nice that they got two new members, but they both had strong personalities.

“Feels like they’d jump into a fight if you leave them alone together,” Daemyung noted quietly.

Dowook improved a lot over the past year, but his temper was still there. Aram was the type that picked a fight the instant she saw something she didn’t like. She was someone who would even throw a slipper at someone bigger than herself, like the time with Geunseok.

“Mm, well, let’s do well together.”

“Senior!”

Aram raised her hand.

“Hm?”

“We aren’t going to have a party?”

Aram twisted around with a big grin, Jiyeon tried to stop the girl with a troubled face. Of course, that didn’t work.

“Of course we are,” Maru said with a smile.

In the end, the acting club managed to reach their quota of six members. They got a container as a pseudo-clubroom as well, which definitely deserved a celebration of its own.

“Let’s drink beer!”

“What, you want to try it?”

“Yes!”

Jiyeon shook her head violently at her. She clearly wanted her friend to stop.

“Well, if everyone wants to, we might as well.”

Sorry Jiyeon, but the other five in the club all want to drink. In the end, the club decided upon a drinking party. Maru didn’t want things getting out of hand, thus no more than one can per person.

“I-I can’t drink.”

“Just drink juice, then.”

“What? I don’t have to...?”

“Nothing of the sort. Just a little bit for the ones that want to try. Anyway, where should we go...”

He couldn’t really think of a place. He wanted to just sit around a convenience store and relax under a parasol, but at his age... He’d have a very interesting one-on-one with a teacher. A place for them to drink and converse easily... It’d be best to go into a friend’s place, but there was no way a high schooler would...

“Why don’t we go to my place, senior?!” Bangjoo said.

“Your place?”

“Yes. I live by myself.”

“What about your parents?”

“They both live at Jeju island. They only occasionally come back up.”

“Wait, do you really live by yourself? What about housework?”

“I take care of it. Well... sometimes my sister comes to help.”

Living by yourself since freshman year in high school... Maru would understand it if the parents were living nearby. But Jeju? How bold were Bangjoo’s parents? Living alone was a difficult task, especially for a student.

‘Maybe his parents had confidence since he’s a good kid.’

Perhaps Bangjoo was an even better person than Maru first made him out to be. It was nice that they had someone like this in the club.

“Alright, we can go to Bangjoo’s place.”

“Senior! What about the beer?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Ohhh!”

Aram raised her hands in glee.

* * *

“How is it? Think you’ll have the time?”

Taesik took his phone off his ear for a second, he could hear a person’s screams from the other side.

- Eh? Say that again?

“Can you be their instructor again?”

- Ah.

Miso stayed silent for a while after hearing the question, Taesik rolled a pen in his hand as he waited. She’d probably refuse, he felt sorry for asking despite knowing the answer already.

- Sorry. I really don’t have the time. I could check on them every once in a while though.

“It’s fine. Sorry for asking. I knew you were busy too.”

It was three weeks ago when Miso told him that she’d be going into a play with a fellow named Ganghwan. She told him that the play was set to run for quite some time, meaning that she wouldn’t be able to help out the club at all.

“How’s acting, by the way?”

- So fun. I like teaching, but... This has more life to it, I guess?

“Good to hear. Don’t overwork yourself though.”

- Hey hey, Mr. Taesik. I’m not your student anymore, you know? Don’t worry. I know my body better than anyone else. Speaking of which, you really need to start exercising. Your beer belly is starting to show!

“Just a natural consequence of the job. Can’t help it. Alright, I’ll be hanging up now.”

- Love you.

“Hm, humph. Love you too.”

He hung up with a little sigh. The gym teacher patted Taesik’s shoulder as he passed by. Taesik sighed as he looked at the calendar, it was April. Time for actual practice. They were good kids, but they still needed a good instructor nonetheless. Without Miso, Taesik was a bit troubled on who he should find.

“What do I do?”

Just as he started thinking, a text message window popped up on his phone.

Chapter 200

"I'll leave this to you."

Taesik took the folder the Korean literature teacher gave him before looking back at his phone, there was a text window on it.

[Do you have time for a call? I am Lee Junmin.]

Lee Junmin, Taesik had heard of the name countless times. This was the person who took care of Geunsoo and Miso, a person who had immense power in the acting industry. Why would someone so influential be contacting him out of nowhere?

'Besides that, how'd he know my phone number?'

Right then, he got a phone call.

- Did you get a message from Senior Junmin?

"Literally just now. So you were the one who gave him my number?"

- Yup. Call him if you can. He wanted to consult you about the instructor situation.

"Instructor?"

As confused as he was, he still called Junmin. The instructor situation was definitely an issue, so any help was very welcome.

"Hello? Is this Mr. Lee Junmin?"

- Ah, I didn't expect you to call so fast. Yes. This is Lee Junmin. I heard a lot about you from Miso. I've been meaning to speak with you for quite some time. Didn't expect our first interaction to be over something like this.

"I'm curious about what Miso told you, but I would like to know why you called me first."

- I heard moments ago about how you had some troubles over finding an instructor. I was wondering if I could introduce someone to you.

"An instructor, to me?"

- Yes.

"Thank you for the offer, but..."

Taesik almost smiled gladly before realizing something critical. Would he even be able to afford an instructor with their current budget? The club budget was cut in half this year due to the decline in club members, trying to get more budget by arguing about the awards from last year didn't even do anything either.

"We don't have a very high budget. I think it'd be difficult."

- You needn't worry about something like that. I'll take care of all of the fees. I'll pay for all the other fees involved with the club as well.

"All of it?"

- Yes.

A very welcome offer yet again. It did make Taesik start wondering though. What did this person want from him? No one would throw away their money without good reason, even donations have strings attached. Why was someone so big in the industry particularly interested in this club?

"I'm sorry if I come off as rude, but may I know why? The offer is a welcome one, but I'd like to hear a reason before accepting it."

- Sounds like you might refuse depending on my answer.

"Again, I'm very thankful and gladly welcome the offer. But I can't accept money for no reason. I apologize."

Strictly speaking, Taesik didn't know Junmin. He'd only ever heard of the man from his acquaintances and there was no way he would take money from a stranger. Not that the money was a bad thing, but the intent behind that money was always important. Taesik refused to teach children without knowing where the money came from.

- Can't you turn a blind eye just this once?

"I'm sorry. I can't."

He was truly sad he had to respond like this, especially with what the other side's offering. Besides that, he didn't even know how to face Miso after this.

After a few more seconds, Junmin finally responded.

- I occasionally wonder when I look at Geunsoo and Miso. Just who managed to tame people as wild as them? I can't judge someone purely off of first impressions, but I think I've got a decent understanding of what kind of a person you are.

Taesik could detect some enthusiasm behind that voice. He decided to keep listening for a few more seconds.

- The reason behind the money is very simple. Maru and Daemyung are under me. I don't skimp out on money when it comes to my investments. I'll be there to help them so long as they have the talent.

"Maru and Daemyung?"

- That's right. The person I'm planning on sending as an instructor is one of my own as well. I don't know what to make of her morals, but she's a talented actor at the very least.

Don't know what to make of her morals? It was an odd comment, but Taesik let it pass for now.

- You should be well aware that the passion of the people involved matter far more than the ability of the instructor when it comes to competitions. I heard Blue Sky took first place at the nationals when it was first created even without an instructor. Is that correct?

"Yes. It's an old story though."

- That's a relief. The person who I was planning on introducing never actually taught anyone in the past.

"Wouldn't that be a little troublesome? The nationals are a lot different now compared to the past."

- I'm aware that it's going to be troublesome. But I believe I should only invest in the people who can overcome troubles by themselves. The instructor I'm going to send is going to spark some trouble among the children, but they'll end up becoming great stepping stones for each other.

"You mean to say that they'll motivate each other?"

- Precisely. Flowers left to grow in the same environment all bloom the same. I think change is required for growth.

"Will it hurt the children...?"

- I always act with the worst possible outcome in mind. In this case, there is no such thing. Because there's a student who will never succumb to the pressure no matter what my instructor does. He should be able to take care of it.

"Sounds like you trust Maru quite a bit."

- Haha, I'm surprised you caught on so fast. It seems we've reached similar conclusions about him.

Taesik smiled slightly. For sure, Maru could handle the situation regardless of what happens. Maru was even better than him when it came down to dealing with people at times.

- I think I've explained enough at this point.

"Yes."

- So you accept my help now?

"As strange as it sounds, I'll accept the offer. Thank you."

- We should meet when we have the time. It's a hobby of mine to enjoy a meal with someone I like.

Taesik hung up before heading towards the clubroom. He slowly made his way up to the fourth floor before making a surprised face. He looked at the place where the club used to be. It was empty.

'I think they were supposed to meet today.'

Taesik tried calling Maru. It was 5:45pm. There was a high chance Maru was still somewhere on school grounds. After a few bleeps, Maru picked up the phone.

- Yes, teacher?

"Are you at school?"

- No, we just came out. We're about to grab a bite to eat.

"I see."

- Why did you...

"Mr. Junmin called me just now."

- What?

"He told me he'd introduce a new instructor."

- A new instructor?

"That's right."

- So I take it that instructor Miso is too busy?

"That she is. He did say he was going to send someone with no experience though. Is that fine?"

- If it's him, I'm sure he has a reason. I'm not worried. I don't think it's going to be very easy though given his personality.

"Hahaha."

Taesik definitely didn't need to worry, judging from the relaxed voice.

"Alright, we can talk more about this later then. How are the new kids? Three freshmen and one sophomore?"

- Yes. They all have interesting personalities, so it'll be fun trying to handle them. April's going to be a busy month.

"It better be, if you want to win at the summer nationals. And... You need to get on stage too."

In the last nationals, Maru watched from the audience. He watched with a very calm face, but Taesik knew that wasn't the case for him inside.

- That's right. We'll go for some expensive beef when we get first place this time.

Right then, Taesik heard the voices of the club members nearby.

- Senior! I like beef too!

- Pork for me!

Loud voices, foreign ones at that. It definitely felt like a new year. A lot of troublesome things happened till now, but this was a new start.

"Have fun."

- Of course.

"Don't drink too much."

- Who do you think we are, teacher? We're going to enjoy a few glasses of milk and juice, that's all.

"That only makes me want to tell you to be more careful."

Taesik smiled lightly as he took the phone off his ear.

* * *

"Alright, let's go back to Seoul now."

"Finally?"

Suyeon asked as she jumped up from her seat. A full month passed since she first came to this villa. She got used to life here, but she also missed the city life quite a bit. Moonjoong talked about going back at the perfect time.

"I think I got the gist of it."

Moonjoong spoke as if he was still lacking something. Suyeon was flabbergasted, his skill right now seemed more than good enough to her.

"I got the general plot of my next work as well, so I think it's fine."

"Thanks for your hard work. You must've suffered a bit coming all the way here because of me."

"Not at all. I learned a lot thanks to you. I've had a great time writing here as well."

Suyeon pouted looking at Moonjoong and Gwak Joon conversing with each other.

"I worked hard too, teacher."

"Of course, of course. You worked hard, Suyeon."

"Hehe."

Gwak Joon clicked his tongue and stepped upstairs, he was cold to Suyeon until the very end. At least she learned that his real name was Gwak Joon, that alone was a bit of an improvement.

"Why couldn't he just tell me that was his real name? He's so twisted."

"I think he's a polite person."

"He just has a mask on in front of you. He's a mean, mean person."

Moonjoong laughed her words away. A lot of things took place here, but it was good that she came. She managed to regain some of her sanity after that massive disappointment over not gaining popularity in a drama. She learned what it meant to be an actor through Moonjoong and she enjoyed some intellectual conversations with Gwak Joon. The best part was that she managed to get a lot closer to Geunsoo with this.

"Suyeon."

Junmin came into the house as he called out to her, she stepped towards the man with a curious look.

"Yes?"

"Take care of some kids for me."

"...What?"

"How's your schedule looking?"

It was a sudden question, but not one she couldn't answer.

“Nothing until this movie starts shooting.”

“You didn’t even audition yet and you’re already worrying about it? Have you received any other offers for roles?”

“You should know that better than me.”

“Still nothing? Good. Then do it.”

“Do I look like I’ll take care of a bunch of kids just because you tell me to?”

“Want me to ask someone else?”

“Wait, no, I’ll do it. Jeez, so cold. Can’t you just ask nicely?”

“Ask nicely?”

Junmin slowly turned towards her with a glare, Suyeon immediately retracted her smile.

“Just a joke. A joke.”

She put her arm around Junmin’s as she spoke. Of course, the man immediately pushed himself away.

“Things will get busy for you once you get to Seoul. Since you’ve never done anything like this before.”

“It’s just taking care of kids. How hard can it be?”

“Teaching kids is a lot different from taking care of them.”

“What?”

“Get ready, we’re leaving.”