

## Once Again 321

### Chapter 321

"The Montagues and the Capulets, two rival households in the city of Verona. A fated couple is born between them. That's right, it's the Romeo and Juliet that you all know. Romeo Montague, Juliet Capulet, and their tragic love that came from a misunderstanding. However, we don't like tragedies that much, so we decided to change it into something a bit different. And with that, let us call Romeo and Juliet to this very stage right now. We hope the next thirty minutes will be a fun time for everyone."

He slid his left leg backwards and took a bow. His right arm was on top of his bellybutton. He stayed in that position for about three seconds before raising his head again.

"I'll do that as an introduction. It will be boring if I do it for too long."

"Wow, you look really different, seonbae."

Aram applauded. Maru shrugged before sitting down. They had started practicing Romeo and Juliet, the adlib version thanks to Aram's suggestion. As they couldn't ad-lib everything from beginning to end, they decided to practice just the crucial parts of the play.

"I'll go out from time to time as the narrator. It's an ad-lib after all."

"Okay."

The director of this play naturally became Aram. Daemyung had stepped back as well. There was no strict practice since this was a play where they should enjoy themselves. They just prepared the play when they had time left over after practicing for the competition.

"We got permission. 1 hour in the hall. There's the applied music club's performance right after so we have to pull out quickly after we're done."

Taesik entered through the front door and handed out drinks as he spoke.

"What time?"

"From 12 to 1."

"That's lunchtime though."

"Other than that, there's no time available. If we do it in the school field, we might have more freedom, but that sounds a little difficult, doesn't it?"

"We can do the play wherever we like other than the hall, right?"

"No. The entrances of the buildings are for showcasing the prizes our school won over the years. I think the good places and good time slots are already taken by other clubs through a lottery."

Hearing that, Aram abruptly stood up.

"I didn't hear anything like that! What do you mean, a lottery?"

"The student council should have put up a notice before. On the noticeboard for the 2nd years."

Aram rushed out the back door. Her loud footsteps could be heard from the classroom. After a while, she came back with a depressed expression.

“I think it’s already set in stone.”

“Probably. Well then, what do we do? We did get permission to use the hall, but if you don’t like the time slot, I guess we can’t help it. I did have a hard time getting it, but lunchtime is no good after all, right?”

Taesik made a bitter smile. Since the acting club, which was an eyesore among teachers, wanted to use the hall, he must have received quite a few glares during the teachers' meeting. He left after saying that they should tell him once they came to a decision.

“If we do it at lunch, no one will come to see us.”

“That’s true.”

After contemplating for a while, Aram spoke again.

“How about we do it on the school field?”

“The school field?”

Aram walked towards the window.

“The platform to the right of the school field. I think that’s a good place. It’s close to both the gym and the lab building. Also, we get school lunch on the day of the festival itself, right?”

“Probably.”

“Then everyone has to walk past that place at least once, so that looks like the best location. You did something similar at the beginning of the semester when everyone was going to get their lunch.”

Something similar. That referred to the event where Maru did a performance along with Daemyung and Bangjoo in order to attract new club members. Aram’s words sounded plausible. Considering how the students would move about, that location was definitely one of the important spots. The problem was that other clubs would be aware of this as well.

“They said that the main building and the lab building will be taken by the clubs that have applied for permission, so what does that mean for the school field? Do you think it’s first come first served on the day itself?”

Daemyung asked as he looked down on the school field. Maru was curious about this as well. Since it was a festival held by students, the student council should be the ones managing most of the things. Perhaps the school field was already planned out since there were plans for other places as well.

“I’ll go ask.”

Aram stood up this time as well. Today was Saturday, the 31st of July. As today was a half-day, there should still be some students at school. It was very likely that the student council was still here since it was only 3 in the afternoon.

“She’s hard-working. I guess we should help her out a lot.”

Daemyung made a smile of satisfaction. It seemed that he liked the fact that his juniors were enthusiastic about the club. Maru thought that Daemyung wouldn’t be able to cheer for her that much if he knew what her true objective was. After all, the more effort Aram puts into this, the bigger the level of panic that Daemyung and Jiyeon would have to go through.

“Moderately. Everything is good when it’s done moderately.”

Maru tapped on Daemyung’s shoulders. Daemyung looked confused. He would find out on the day of the festival itself.

“Seonbae!”

Aram came back and rushed in through the door. After panting for a while, she raised a fist in the air.

“We just have to win rock paper scissors!”

“Rock paper scissors?”

“Yes!”

After taking a deep breath, Aram explained the situation in detail.

“I went to the student council and asked, and they said that they’re dividing up the school field into different regions and are receiving applications for each area. I told them that we want the platform on the right, but there seems to be 7 other teams that want that spot. That’s why they decided they would hold a rock paper scissors match to decide who wins that spot,” Aram spoke in a proud voice.

“So, who’s going to do it?” Maru asked.

“For now, let’s hold one amongst ourselves.”

The club members gathered around. Then they held the first round of rock paper scissors. After a few repetitions, the winner was Jiyeon.

“I-I’m not good at this.”

“But you won though. Today is your lucky day.”

Aram grabbed Jiyeon’s arm. Jiyeon shook her head and pulled her arm out.

“I just won because of coincidence. Let’s try that again. Please?”

They had no choice but to do that again. This time, Daemyung won the overall match with rock.

“Uhm... I’m not really confident,” Daemyung spoke bitterly as well.

As they were actors in need of a stage, this was a sensitive topic. It was giving pressure to everyone because this rock paper scissors was going to decide that.

“Does it have to be that spot?”

“Yes!”

Aram spoke without hesitation. Maru sighed.

“Then do a match with me.”

“With you, seonbae?”

Maru looked into Aram’s eyes as he prepared to do a match of rock paper scissors. No speech bubble appeared above Aram’s head until the match finished.

“I won.”

“Then this time....”

Maru looked at Aram once more as he spoke.

“I’m going to go with rock.”

“Eh? Rock?”

“Yes.”

They raised their hands above their heads like last time. Aram smiled as though she found something interesting before hiding her hand behind her waist. At that moment, a speech bubble appeared above her head.

-He said he’s going with rock, but that means he’s going with scissors, right? Then I’m going with rock!

Maru lowered his hand in the still-clenched position. What appeared from Aram’s back was scissors. Aram twitched her eyebrows.

“Again.”

“I’m going to go with rock this time as well.”

“You’re not fooling me this time.”

Although she was saying that, her inner thoughts were clearly revealed in her head. Maru glanced at those speech bubbles and went with paper accordingly. Aram’s jaw slacked since she went with rock.

“Next, Dowook.”

“Why me?”

“I’m going to compare between different types of people.”

He used the same method on Dowook. Although a speech bubble appeared the first time, it did not appear the second time. It was useless unless the opponent was specifically thinking something related to ‘Han Maru’.

“Think about what you’re doing before doing it.”

“Alright.”

He easily won the next two matches. Dowook looked at him suspiciously.

“I saw on TV that what the opponent is going with can be predicted from the movement of their hands.”

“You can see that?”

“Somewhat.”

He couldn't just rely on the speech bubbles so he prepared two methods. He was going to utilize his enhanced physical abilities as well. He would have to read the short moment before the opponent's hand reached out and change his hand accordingly. Of course, this was just in case the speech bubble didn't work. That was more of a gamble, so it shouldn't work all the time.

He had matches with all the other kids as well. His win rate was around 70%. Although the number of samples was low, it was quite a decent win rate. He had finished learning their patterns as well. If it was just a single match, he couldn't ensure that he would win the match. There were times when people just did the match without thinking which didn't allow him to play mind games with them. However, his win rate would increase if it was a best of three. The more opportunities he had to talk with the opponent, the more likely his chances of winning.

“So, when are they doing it?”

“At four. Oh, it's almost time.”

Maru followed Aram to the student council room on the 2nd floor. The council room was half the size of an ordinary classroom and had quite a lot of people. On the chalkboard was written 'For a successful Woosung Festival'.

“The acting club?”

A male student suddenly asked.

“Yes.”

“Then I guess you're all here. I'll explain things then. We're going to decide on your spots with rock paper scissors and there are eight options: the two side platforms on the school field, the main platform at the center of the school field, the spot between the main building and the school gates, right in front of the main building, in front of the lab building, and the back of the main building. There's nothing wrong with that, right?”

It seemed that he was the student council president. Maru nodded his head. The others did the same.

“We'll allocate the spots, but the festival begins at 9 in the morning and ends at 5 in the afternoon, so I hope you can give your place up to others that want the spot after your event is over. Not that you have to. Well then, it's time for rock paper scissors.”

“It's best of three matches, right?” Maru sneakily asked.

“Well, it's up to you.”

The other students didn't seem to have anything wrong with that either.

Maru looked at the girl in front of him. She was his opponent. He did feel a bit sorry though, since he was about to con her.

“Shall... we?”

She asked in a polite voice as she seemed to be a first year student. Maru nodded his head. The girl clasped her hands together and stared at it before leaning forward. It seemed she was ready.

“Uhm, you know?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to go with scissors.”

“...Okay.”

Maru smiled.

\* \* \*

“Anyone?”

She looked at the homeroom teacher who sighed as he looked for applicants. The school festival was next week. Just like last year, the class talent show was the problem. They had to create at least two teams per class. This ‘compulsory’ competition very much went against the ‘free’ festival.

“Anyone wanna sing up there? Let’s just get things done quickly and go home already.”

There was a reason why the afternoon homeroom wasn’t ending. No one wanted to go to the talent show. Last year, her classroom had a problem because there were too many participants, but this year, all the students in class were calm and composed and disliked doing such things. She was the same.

She looked outside the window. A truck full of audio devices ran across the school field towards the hall. It seemed that the school was planning to decorate the stage like last year.

“If there’s no one, we’ll go with a lottery.”

It came down to this. She sighed slightly. As the regional preliminaries were coming up, the acting club was practicing every day late into the night. She had no time to prepare anything else. She had to beg *her* president for the drama background role as well.

The class president, who sat at the very front, ripped off a piece of paper from a notebook and made enough pieces for each of the students. After that, the homeroom teacher said that they’ll pick 8 people and create two teams. He also said that it was up to the teams to decide what they wanted to do, whether it was singing, a performance, or a dance.

“Numbers 4, 7, 32, 23, 8, 16, 11, and 30. That’s that then.”

*She* held her number and sighed. Number 23 was *her* number. After telling the students to clean up the class well, the homeroom ended. At the same time, the 8 people whose numbers were called out were called once again. Everyone looked gloomy.

“I really don’t want to do this.”

“Me too.”

"This is horrible. We're going to have to do this on the main stage in the hall like last year right? Wow, that drives me crazy."

"I hate that homeroom teacher."

Although they were complaining, they had no choice but to do it. The teacher was telling them to do it, so they didn't have any choice.

"What should we do?" She asked.

None of the other classmates answered. It was almost time for her to go to practice. *She* couldn't stay still forever.

"Anyone here can sing?"

No one raised their hand.

"How about dancing?"

It was still quiet.

*She* put her head against the desk. This kind of festival was the worst.

At that moment,

"Why does it feel like a funeral here?"

A voice tickled her ears. It was the voice of someone who she knew well. She raised her head. Chaerim was outside the classroom, waving her hand.

"Chaerim-seonbae."

"So you were in this class. Aren't you going to practice?"

"Eh? Ah, the thing is...."

*She* couldn't say anything because she didn't know how to explain. Meanwhile, the others around *her* exclaimed after seeing her.

"Noona, I'm a fan of yours."

"Unni, me too!"

Although Chaerim went to the same school as them, opportunities to meet her were very rare. She could understand why her classmates were so ecstatic.

"Thanks. But what's going on here? You guys don't look good," Chaerim asked with a smile.

She sighed in relief. The master of singing and dancing was right in front of her. Asking for her opinion was a good idea.

"Uhm, seonbae."

"Yeah?"

“Have you ever gone to talent shows or something?”

“Talent shows?”

Chaerim approached them with an interested face.

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They applauded and cheered. Watching her performance up close was definitely different than watching her through a screen. Chaerim, who showed off her latest song, shined like an actor who had just finished their stage. The perfectly in-pitch voice as well as her little shoulder movements that moved perfectly according to the cute rhythm made them realize why Chaerim was loved by everyone. Professionals who had experienced many stages were indeed different.

It felt like they watched a mini concert. They applauded Chaerim again as she took a deep breath.

“That’s the general feeling. You don’t have to create a perfect choreography or anything. It’s a festival, right? Don’t try to do too well, and just do what you can. It’s just for making memories, isn’t it?”

“But watching your performance makes me feel even worse. Why are you so good?”

“I’ve practiced for years, so of course I have to do well. But I don’t do things for a talent show. I think giving your friends a laugh on stage has its own value.”

She nodded her head. Perhaps she was under the impression that they had to do well. The school festival talent show wasn’t a place where the participants were judged. There was no need to get so pressured into doing well. Although it was a simple matter, none of them thought about it until Chaerim reminded them. Everyone just thought about what they had to do. Changing perspectives was very important.

“It’s nothing that counts towards your grades, so take it easy. Also, you four were doing a dance, right? I’ll give you a CD of mine that has recordings of my choreography. That should help.”

“Really? We’ll be really thankful if you do.”

One of the boys sighed in relief. Five of them, who thought that dancing was better than singing, decided to practice the dance, while she and two others decided to sing.

“Then have fun. I’ll give you the CD tomorrow.”

Chaerim waved her hand and left.

“She’s completely different from how I imagined her.”

“That’s true. She’s really kind. Everyone on the internet was talking about how she was only like that on the surface.”

“They all say that because they’re jealous. I know that that noona has a pretty heart just like her pretty face. Hmhm, yes of course.”

“That was the first time you talked to her though.”

They started giggling.



“But Bunbun, you know Chaerim-seonbae?”

“Yeah. She comes to the acting club sometimes to hang out.”

“Ah, that’s right. She’s on a drama, isn’t she? She’s good at acting too. I thought it might be cringey, but it’s not like that at all. She’s really good. Do you practice with her at the club or something?”

“No, she just comes around to give us some encouragement. She’s a thankful seonbae.”

“Wow, that’s really kind of her. Actually, I used to write bad comments about her, but I guess I’m going to delete them all tonight and spam that she’s an angel.”

She pinched her prankster friend’s cheeks before standing up.

“I’ll be taking my leave first. I have practice.”

“Okay, okay. Bunbun is busy, so she needs to go. Let’s practice singing on Monday. As for the dance, you five can take care of it by yourselves. Now we’re going our separate paths. Since it came to this, let’s do it, whether it becomes a comedy or a serious one.”

“We’re going to be the TTO of Myunghwa High, so you girls should be prepared for it.”

The five boys who decided to dance made a suspicious smile. It seemed that they had gained confidence thanks to Chaerim. She told everyone ‘see you on Monday’ before running towards the clubroom.

“Sorry for being late.”

“If you know you’re late then do some stretching immediately,” the club president spoke as she pointed at the floor.

The other club members had already arrived. She changed into her gym clothes in the changing room behind the clubroom.

“Cleaning after school?”

“No. The homeroom teacher told me I had to go on the talent show.”

“You applied for it?”

“I got picked through a lottery.”

“Tsk, I guess you’re going to be absent during practice then?”

“I’ll try to come here as soon as possible.”

“Forget it. It’s not like you’re bad enough that a day without practice would impact your skills. No wait, it’s two days, isn’t it?”

The club president narrowed her eyes and smiled. She laughed awkwardly and looked away.

“Learn a lot of things during your shoot. You’ve decided your future career on that path, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“But are you going alone?”

“Uhm... no,” she spoke as she remembered Maru’s face.

“That was a late answer. Tell me honestly. It’s a date, isn’t it?”

The club president approached *her* and whispered into her ears. She was startled and backed away. Thanks to the commotion, the other club members all looked at them.

“Go about your own business. Also, first years. Do you have time for this? Should we do some leg stretching?”

The first years started stretching since the club president was scary.

“What, I was planning to tease you, but it looks like I was right based on your reaction. Is it really a date? If so, you don’t have to hide it. You’ve done plenty of practice until now, so you can take a day off.”

“It’s not a date, seonbae. We’re really going to the drama shoot.”

“Really? But why do I see that your ears have turned bright red?”

Hearing those words she quickly covered her ears.

“Well, I believe you since you’re not the type of person to lie, but it’s still suspicious. No, wait. Aha, you said it was a drama set, didn’t you? What drama is it?”

“Youth Generation.”

“The Youth Generation that your boyfriend appeared in?”

The club president nodded her head as though she understood everything and did not speak anymore. She explained to her that it was just a background appearance part time job since the club president looked like she had a big misunderstanding, but it didn’t work.

“This unni only has other girls to talk to at night, but our cute rabbit will be whispering love into her boyfriend’s ears, huh. If it goes well, don’t forget to introduce me to a good man later.”

The club president pretended to wipe away her non-existent tears as she spoke. This was what was bad about joking around with the acting club members. It all became a play. *Her* colleagues, who had approached the two, started teasing her along with the president. A plot for a drama was instantly created on the spot. She dazed out for a little and she had become a bad woman who was bullying the tragic heroine.

“I never wanted a daughter-in-law like you!”

“Madam! Please calm down!”

Seeing the prank go too far, she gave up and told them the truth. They were really unreasonable. But she didn’t feel offended or anything since they were just teasing her. They would apologize if she told them to stop seriously.

“Let’s get some snacks and eat it while watching the episode with her in it. It’s in two weeks.”

“That’s fine by me.”

She sighed and told them that she would buy those snacks.

“Then are you going to meet Chaerim as well?”

“I’m not sure. I only heard that I have to go there by 7 in the morning. It was originally 6, but it was delayed by an hour.”

“It’s that early?”

“Yes. I was surprised as well.”

“Well, I guess the hours of sunlight aren’t that long.”

The club president clapped to get everyone’s attention.

“Well then. Let’s begin practice. Let’s do a run after I check the homework I gave to the first years. We’re going to do it until 10 in the evening, so bear that in mind. We should put our mind into this. Get yourselves ready.”

“Yes!”

She stretched her legs one final time before standing up. The club president no longer joked once they started practice. She would become a scary woman who would not accept a single mistake.

Phew - she took a deep breath before looking ahead.

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It was 5 in the morning on a Sunday. The weight of his eyelids was considerable as it tried to close itself again. He looked at the blurred clock for a while until it became 5:01. Only when the number indicating the minute became three did Maru slowly sat up.

“Fuu.”

After slowly pushing away the blanket that covered his body, he got off his bed. The air wasn’t that cold even though it was early morning. There were signs of the weather getting warmer even though it just changed from July to August. Maru opened the door to his room and walked out. The living room was colored purple. He went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, and the compressor in the refrigerator started making noises.

He poured some cold water into a cup and drank it. The cold water went down his throat and cleared his mind. A bit of chilliness came along with a sigh, signifying that he was waking up.

“How tough.”

The road to being a wife-loving husband was long and rough. He did have a shoot today, at 10 am in Sangam High School. Although he didn’t have to wake up so early, he had to for today. It was all for her. She said that she would be fine by herself, but he did not want to send someone who had never even tried a part time job to a place with the scary leader and lots of other men by herself. Since she was in the 2nd year of high school, it could be said that she was grown up and capable of taking care of herself, but to Maru’s eyes, she was no different from a child. He couldn’t just let a child running towards the river be.

The kimchi-jjigae he put on the stove started boiling. Working early in the morning required a lot of energy. He also messaged her to have breakfast.

“You’re going out already?”

“Yeah. The kimchi-jjigae is still hot, so you can eat that. Oh, there’s the pickled green plums in the fridge that you like so much. Also, I think you should probably eat the squid in the fridge by today.”

“You’re like a housewife. Don’t worry about me and get going. Watch out for cars. You’re not coming back late, right?”

“I think it’s going to end early today.”

“Give me a call if you think you’re going to be late.”

“Yes yes, Mrs. Lee.”

As the supermarket had no holidays, it required his mother to work today as well. He told her indirectly that she could rest at home, but she firmly said that she wasn’t at the age yet. His mother wanted to work at least until Bada got married.

“I’ll get going then.”

He gave her a call as soon as he left his house. After around two rings, she answered.

“You up?”

-Of course.

“Aren’t you sleepy?”

-I am, fuam.

“Where are you now?”

-On the bus to Suwon station. What about you?

“I just left the house.”

-What the heck? Come quickly.

“Alright. Don’t doze off and miss the station.”

-Do you think I’m a kid?

You’re still a kid in my eyes - he swallowed those words and hurried towards the bus station. The first bus of the day was coming through the morning fog. He got on the bus filled with people that started the morning to Suwon station. When he got off, the sun was rising. He walked inside the station as he looked at the sun that was crawling up behind the station.

“I’m here.”

“Quickly.”

She waved her hand from beyond the ticker barrier. He bought a ticket before going in.

“We still have plenty of time,” he spoke since she looked flustered.

Perhaps she was a little excited because it was her first part time job.

“Do we?”

“Yes. Have you eaten yet?”

“No,” *she* boldly spoke.

“I told you that you should have breakfast.”

“I thought I’d be late. Also, I’ll feel sorry if I wake mom up so early in the morning. She slept late last night because of editing her book.”

Maru sighed when she spoke like she had no choice.

“Follow me.”

He grabbed her hand and walked towards the convenience store in the station. He took out a bottle of warm soy milk from the warm drink storage right next to the counter. She liked sweet things, so he got a sweet flavor.

“Drink this.”

“I’m fine though.”

“It’s not fine at all.”

She nodded once before grabbing the bottle with both hands. A smile crept up on her face after feeling the warmth from the bottle.

“Have you had breakfast?” She asked as she sipped the soy milk.

“I have. Food is energy after all.”

The train arrived just as *she* almost finished the drink. It wasn’t the rush hour yet so there were no problems getting on. Maru watched the scenery flashing outside for a while before turning around to see her. He saw the reason that made it worthwhile for him to wake up so early in the morning. She was dozing off as she tightly grabbed his hand. She was nodding off. An old lady who was sitting in front of her asked if she wanted a seat.

“It’s fine. We’re still young, and we shouldn’t take away your seat. Thanks for your consideration.”

Maru grabbed her by the arm and pulled her close. She flinched and opened her eyes.

“It hurts a lot if you fall over while dozing off.”

“....”

She silently looked up at him for a while before looking in front of her again. She hadn’t pulled her arm away from him. After yawning, she started dozing off again. She really needed a lot of sleep. It was almost a miracle that she woke up early. The train entered a tunnel. As there was a noise, she flinched and woke up again.

“We’re almost there.”

“Oh, okay.”

“You should wipe your drool.”

“Drool?”

She quickly wiped off her mouth with the back of her hand. After feeling a dry mouth, she looked at him with angry eyes. Maru shrugged.

They passed another two stations. It was time to get off now. There was a huge crowd outside the train. Indeed, line number two during morning was hellish. The doors opened and before people even had time to get off, salarymen started rushing in. While Maru understood their feelings since they might not get the chance to get in... Maru saw that his girlfriend was being pushed back. She seemed flustered since this was the first time she experienced such a thing.

“Stay behind me.”

Maru barely got off the train with her at his back. One man, who was struggling to get in until the very moment the doors closed swore before turning around. She clicked her tongue as she looked at that.

“You’ll see that more once you get a job, so bear that in mind.”

“Really? I need to experience that every morning?”

“Sure you do.”

“Looks like I should get a car.”

“Don’t think that it’s easy if you have a car. Seoul in the morning is real hell.”

“Hmph, you sound knowledgeable. Have you experienced it yourself?”

“I have. A lot.”

She told him not to lie, but he just walked up the stairs with her. It was 6:30 in the morning. There was still plenty of time.

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She didn’t know when she started to not feeling awkward about holding hands. She looked at Maru’s back who was walking ahead. Although they sometimes walked side by side, there were many times when Maru walked ahead of her like this. She remembered the days where she went to Daehak-ro holding her father’s hands when she was young. She had to look upwards to see her dad’s back, and the sun shined on her face. The sensation of the hand that firmly gripped her hand felt vivid again.

At first, she felt embarrassed doing that and immediately walked up and walked next to him, but these days, she walked behind him comfortably. Maru walked without hesitation as he walked ahead while holding her hand, and while *she* relied on those steps, she was relieved of any worries she had. The worries that haunted *her* disappeared completely for that moment.

“Why are there so many people even though today’s a Sunday?”

“Because there are many people that go to work on a Sunday as well.”

“Really?”

“Mrs. Lee went to work as well. The subway was actually in a good condition. If it was Monday morning, we wouldn’t have been able to get off that easily.”

“Mrs. Lee?”

“My mom.”

They walked out of the station and walked along the streets. They saw the school far ahead of them on a hill. They had to walk up a gentle slope in order to get there. The four-lane road that headed up to the school was empty. Only a few blue trucks drove down from time to time. The scene was a drastic contrast from the subway station.

They walked past a single-floor building and walked up the hill. On the walls leading to the school, there were various paintings. There was a chubby caterpillar that had something in his mouth. After walking a few more steps, there was a dwarf holding a lot of hats. After that, there was a cute pig and a somewhat arrogant-looking lady.

“Alice, huh.”

The thing in the caterpillar’s mouth was a hookah if that was the case. She spoke as she looked at the queen of hearts, the soldiers, as well as Alice, who had a proud expression. Maru was also looking at the painting on the wall.

“So this was Alice, huh.”

“You just realized that?”

“I never paid attention to it. I also came here by car, so I didn’t have time to look.”

They climbed up the hill as they appreciated the paintings. The painting at the end was a picture of a rabbit wearing a tuxedo holding a pocket watch as well as the figure of Alice who was looking at it.

“It’s the rabbit you like so much,” Maru pointed at the rabbit as he spoke.

She looked at the rabbit holding a pocket watch as she walked. The other paintings were all depicted in a cute way but only the rabbit was depicted realistically. Its eyes were sharp as well. It was as though it was drawn by a different person.

“If you think about it, not many people hate rabbits, right?” Maru asked.

“Probably.”

“Is it because they have a cute image? Have you tried raising them before?”

“No, I wanted to, but mom said no. Though, to be exact, I gave up on it.”

“She probably told you to raise one when you can take responsibility for it, right?”

“How did you know that? Did you meet my mom in secret again?”

“No.”

Maru faintly smiled. *She* took her eyes off the rabbit and spoke,

“My mom allowed me to do most of the things I wanted to. The only exception was raising a pet. I can still remember. In my third year of middle school, I told her I wanted to raise a rabbit, I mean, it’s cute, right? But mom told me with a serious expression to sit down and asked me if I can take responsibility for it. When I was asked that question, I reflexively replied ‘yes’, but mom told me to think about it carefully again. Now that I think about it, she was a little scary back then.”

She looked at the tip of her trainers as she continued to speak.

“I think that was the first time mom told me to think about something instead of saying yes. It’s not that she said no. Think about it - that was her reply. I somehow thought that I shouldn’t be at ease back then and thought about it after I sat on my knees. Was there a problem with raising a small pet? But after I thought about it, I came to the conclusion that it’s not a simple thing where I can reply yes or no. It was pretty easy to find out that I have to put a lot of time into it.”

Her mom always spoke with a smile, but for that one moment, she had a serious expression on her face. She could still remember that her mom told her to not get confused between pets and a pleasing picture.

“So, you gave up?”

“Yeah. I’m planning to raise one once I have the luxury to.”

“A rabbit?”

“Probably.”

“You like rabbits that much, huh.”

“That’s true. I have liked them since I was young. Mom always tells me about how I used to nag her to buy me something whenever there was a rabbit drawn on it. Even though I don’t remember any of that.”

She looked at the ring on her left hand. It was the ring with a rabbit on it. Maru put his hand next to hers. He showed her his ring that was the same shape and smiled faintly.

They talked about acting club practice for a while until they arrived at the school gates. The sun had risen up completely and it was shining down on the entirety of the school. The fresh air and the green grass made the school look surreal, and looking at that, she exclaimed.

“So schools in dramas actually do exist.”

“This place does cost 2 million per semester.”

“Two million? Even though it’s a high school?”

She subconsciously exclaimed. Maru asked as they passed through the school gates.

“Where’s the meeting place?”



“In front of the main door.”

“It’s that place then.”

There were people gathered around where Maru was pointing at. There were a lot of students that seemed around their age. A middle-aged man wearing a sleeveless shirt was lining them up while shouting. Maru told her that he was the leader.

“Get going. I’ll be watching from the side.”

“Okay.”

They went separate ways before they reached the main door. She took a deep breath before going to where the people were gathered. This was the first part time job she did in her life. *She* was looking forward to what kind of events were waiting for her.

“If you’re here then stand in line.”

Hearing the leader’s instructions, *she* nodded her head and stood in line. The leader counted the people here before going into the school building. He also told them to wait.

“Are you a friend of Maru’s?”

“What?”

She raised her guard when someone talked to her.

“Oh, sorry about that. I unintentionally called out because I saw you coming with Maru. I’m called Park Woojoo and I...”

“Ah! I heard. Thank you for letting me come.”

She took a bow. This was the person Maru called to get her here. It was thanks to him that she could get the opportunity to work here.

“It’s nothing to be thankful about. I just forwarded you to someone else. Oh, tell me if you encounter any problems. Maru called me yesterday and told me to take care of you.”

“Geez, that guy. Sorry about that. You don’t have to do so much.”

*She* saw Maru who was yawning in one corner of the school. He was treating her too much like a child.

“Okay. There’s nothing difficult so I hope it goes well today.”

“Yes.”

The leader came out of the school just then. He told everyone to follow him. *She* clenched her fist slightly as she started walking. They walked up to the third floor following the leader. *She* had a peek on the 2nd floor and she saw students quietly studying. It was like today wasn’t a Sunday. They were told to stay quiet until they arrived at a classroom. There were a lot of adults in the corridor. There were some people holding cameras.

“Here, sit over there, there, and there.”

They sat down according to the leader's instructions. *She* scanned the classroom from where she sat. Unlike the luxurious-looking exterior, the classroom wasn't that different from her school's classroom.

'Wow, so that's a reflector?'

*She* had seen a video camera a couple of times, but this was the first time she saw a foil that was bigger than an average person. Some lights that glowed faintly entered the classroom as well. *She* thought that they wouldn't need any lights because the sunlight was strong, but it seemed that she was wrong. *She* also saw a furry microphone. There were cables messily strewn around where the camera wasn't shooting.

*She* wondered what it would look like if she looked at the classroom through the camera right now. She saw a man who had a serious face behind the big camera. He seemed to be the director.

She waited for around 10 minutes when she heard greetings outside the classroom. Following that, actors entered the classroom. A pair of man and woman, who were idols as well as the lead roles in Youth Generation, entered the classroom. Chaerim couldn't be seen. Perhaps she didn't have a shoot today.

The shoot began. All *she* had to do was to just look at the math textbook in front of her. She pretended to solve the questions with a pencil in hand. After a few NG cuts, she stopped pretending and started to solve them for real. *She* was that bored.

"It's not that fun to be here, huh," she stretched out her arms as she spoke.

They took a break. Her math textbook was filled with math formulas. *She* wrestled with the subject for about an hour. She didn't know if she was here to do acting or to study. *She* also got used to the equipment that she found new at first.

The shoot resumed. Hearing that everyone needed to change into gym uniforms, *she* returned after changing her clothes. Even though it was class romance until just now, it switched to a completely different story. It seemed that they didn't shoot the scenes in order and just combined each scene in editing to make an episode later.

"Okay, that's good."

The morning shoot only ended after 10. During this whole time, *she* wasn't able to speak a word.

"Phew."

She stretched her arms out before changing back into the school uniform. *She* heard that the background roles were to wait. While the staff moved out the equipment, the background roles were just left in class. Everyone started listening to an MP3 player or played games on their phone. Some just slept. *She* looked around to see if she could talk to anyone, but they were already in groups so it was hard to join their conversation.

'This isn't so easy huh.'

She now understood why Maru told her to bring a book or an MP3 player. *She* found herself regretting not listening to his words thinking that there would be no time to get bored during a shoot.

“So, what’s your impression?”

Just as she was blankly staring at the chalkboard, *she* heard Maru’s voice behind her. The voice couldn’t be more welcome.

“It’s boring.”

“Not as fun as you thought it would be, right?”

“Yeah. It’s completely different from how I expected. I thought it would be more active and passionate over here. But the only ones that are active and passionate are the actors. My job was to stay still.”

“That’s how it works. Here.”

Maru handed her a piece of chocolate. *She* was just feeling empty so she received it and put it in her mouth.

“Maru, you’re here.”

“You’re here, Maru.”

At that moment, the staff, who were cleaning up the cables, approached Maru and greeted him. Just as she was wondering whether to greet them or not, other members of the staff approached Maru. It wasn’t just the staff this time. Some of the background actors acted like they knew Maru.

Maru greeted the staff naturally. He seemed used to it. The staff welcomed Maru with a smile. They looked very friendly towards him. They looked completely mild compared to how they coldly treated the other actors.

“She’s a friend of mine who came with me today. Please take care of her.”

“Oh really? You were a friend of Maru’s? You should’ve told me.”

*She* was startled when she saw that the man who was behind the main camera this whole time offered to shake hands with her. She stood up immediately and shook hands with him.

“I’ll take a good shot of you in the next scene.”

The man who was called the camera director left the classroom after telling *her* that he’ll see her later. The other staff also left with the equipment.

“He said he’ll take a good shot of you,” Maru spoke with a smile.

“Do you know all of them?”

“For now.”

“Do you usually become close like that? I haven’t seen the staff greeting any of the actors even in the three hours I was shooting.”

“There was a small incident,” Maru spoke as he scratched his eyebrows.

“Are we shooting outside now?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“Perhaps we might get to appear in the same scene. They told me to prepare as well.”

“Really?”

Maru pointed at his pants. She noticed that he was wearing a school uniform.

“I’ll go down first. See you later.”

“Yeah.”

Maru told her to hold on.

*She* sighed slightly. Even though they were both high school students, Maru seemed like he was in a completely different position. It didn’t feel that realistic when she heard that Maru entered an agency. However, *she* found that Maru was indeed different now that she saw him on set. He had the look of a professional.

‘I should do my best as well.’

Maru was several steps ahead of her as an actor. She would have to put in a lot of effort if she wanted to catch up. Recently, *she* had a new dream. It wasn’t something vague like ‘I should become this’. It was something more specific. *She* wanted to act on the same stage as Maru. It didn’t matter if it was on a professional stage or an amateur stage. *She* would be extremely happy if she got to act with Maru in the same space. Though, she would have achieved this dream if Maru didn’t get injured last winter.

“I will catch up soon.”

*She* resolved to herself. She dusted the wrinkly school skirt and stood up from her seat. Her butt started hurting after sitting for so long. *She* approached the window and watched the lights being set up in front of the school.

Just then,

“Huh, why are you here?”

Hearing that voice, *she* turned her head around. Chaerim was standing there, wearing the same school uniform.

“Seonbae,” *she* greeted with a smile.

### **Chapter 324**

She said she was here for a part time job. Chaerim replied yes before scanning her from top to bottom. She had seen her exercising in the practice room of the acting club from time to time. Her body was very flexible and elastic, probably stemming from regular exercise. She was comparable to her in that regard even though she herself spent half a day practicing. Up until a little while ago, she thought that she just had a pretty body, but after that incident before, she saw her with a bit of annoyance. She had a small worry that this child might overtake her presence here. Though, the chances of that were slim.

“That uniform is a little too big for you.”

"I looked for one that fit me, but everything was too big. I had to go with the second best option."

"You would've looked prettier if the uniform fit you. What a pity."

"Not at all. I'm just an extra after all."

"Extras appear on screen as well. Who knows? You're quite cute so some people might recognize you after the episode goes live."

"Geez, seonbae, stop teasing me."

She laughed with a bright smile. Chaerim faintly smiled as well. It hurt her pride that she saw this girl as someone she should be wary against even for a little while.

"Uhm, they told you to get prepared."

One of the staff carefully approached her and spoke. Chaerim nodded.

"Do you still have a shoot?"

"I'm waiting for now. I don't know what's going to happen."

"I hope we get to appear in the same scene. I'll see you later if we can. Do your best."

"Yes, seonbae. Good luck!"

Chaerim left after her junior told her good luck. Today, the shoot was at the school. Although there was a scene outside the school, it shouldn't take that long since they were just shooting scenery.

"Oppa, my script."

"Oh, here."

She headed to the school gates while reading the script given to her by her manager. The actors were getting ready as well since the equipment was almost finished being set up.

"You're here?"

"Yeah."

Woomin greeted her. Next to him was Yu-ri who could be said to be the main heroine of this drama. She was combing her long straight hair again today. Just as the three of them were talking about trivial things, Gangha, who would become her boyfriend in the drama, waved his hand as he approached.

"Chaerim. I saw your photo book."

"You saw?"

"Yeah, through an article. Wow, you're doing well these days."

As the four of them had debut around the same time, they decided to become close. Of course, in terms of popularity, Blue, the group she belonged to, was the most popular. The groups that these three belonged to had never been first place in any rankings.

“But doesn’t she look a little cheap? I mean, it was practically underwear. Though, she was still pretty,” Yu-ri spoke.

She was combing her hair with her finger.

“Well. The people around me were fussy about how sexy I was. Oh, you don’t know since you haven’t tried such a thing, have you? You’ll see once you do a photoshoot. You’re getting quite popular now, aren’t you? Were you in 8th place?” Chaerim replied with a snort.

She wasn’t on good terms with Yu-ri ever since their debut. They didn’t meet that many times, and there was no reason for them to get on bad terms, but for some strange reason, they started finding flaws in each other and made sarcastic remarks whenever they met. It was normal for them, so neither minded that.

“There you go again. Let’s be friends with each other, yeah? You two are too hostile that I can’t even talk to you.”

Gangha interrupted. Chaerim just turned her head away. It would be annoying to explain anything.

“Main actors! Let’s do a rehearsal.”

Hearing the director’s call, the four of them stood in front of the camera. This was a scene where Chaerim blocked the path of the pair of lovers going home from school and sneakily telling a bad rumor to the boyfriend. This scene was where the love rectangle would properly surface. There were various comments on the internet predicting each person’s crush starting last week. The script had been changed to satisfy the majority of the audience.

Chaerim took a deep breath and stood behind the school gates. Now, she just needed to block Woomin and Yu-ri, who were coming from the school and say her line. As they did the rehearsal, the background actors were placed around as well. They were acting as other students going home from school. Her junior was mixed with them.

She thought of the line in her head and said it to herself in a small voice. A boy entered her eyes. It was Maru, who was receiving a pair of glasses from the staff. He had the role of a boy who gave in to her threats and feigned ignorance even though he knew the innocence of the heroine. Maru was having a conversation with a staff member. They looked quite friendly. From what she heard, he helped out the staff last time when there was a quarrel between staff members, but she didn’t know the specifics. At that time, the lead actors were all waiting inside their cars.

Chaerim glanced at Maru. She was aware that not everyone liked her, and in fact, she knew that more people hated her than liked her. However, there were extremely few people that expressed that to her face. If she thanked, they thanked her back, and if she smiled, they smiled back. Even her anti-fans were like obedient sheep once they stood in front of her.

When she tried to say thanks through Jiseok, she thought that she would naturally get a call. After all, she revealed her presence. Of course, she did not plan to tell him her number either. It was just an excuse after all. She was going to thank him and forget about him. But he ended up hanging up first.

She was angry because she felt like she was ignored. However, after thinking about it carefully, she came to the conclusion that the other party might be too embarrassed to do so. After all that was said

and done, he helped her out during the shoot. The sharp pain and words left a deep impression in her even now. Chaerim thought that she had to be more honest when she saw his face. Saying thanks to him was just an excuse. She just wanted to talk to him.

Liking him? She didn't know yet. However, she definitely didn't hate him. It was more like curiosity. The curiosity towards a boy that looked at her coldly.

They met eyes. Chaerim smiled faintly. Maru nodded once before continuing to talk with the staff member. She felt flabbergasted. Her prediction that he would approach her and greet her was very much off the mark. Maru just nodded as though that was enough as a greeting.

She almost ended up leaking a laugh. What curiosity? Chaerim looked ahead of her and got ready to act.

After the camera started rolling, the two main characters started walking from the other side. The camera which was on a rail slowly moved along and maintained the distance between it and the main characters. Chaerim waited until the two approached the school gate and stepped out just in time.

"You look good."

Her acting was smooth perhaps thanks to her annoyance. She said her line in a very sarcastic manner. She moved according to the plan and walked up to the main heroine. Then cut.

"Good. Chaerim, you're in a good condition today."

She got praised starting from the first scene. Chaerim smiled and thanked the director. The nervousness she felt last time wasn't there. She only had endless confidence. The camera director stood behind the main heroine with the camera on his shoulders. Chaerim looked right slightly so that the camera could capture the left side of her face more. Her left side was prettier after all.

The shoot began again. She said her line without making a mistake. Since she truly wasn't on close terms with Yu-ri she could say her words sarcastically with intention. Seeing Yu-ri's mouth, which wasn't captured on camera, twitching, she inwardly smirked at her on the inside. You're still far from reaching me. Whether it's popularity or acting skills.

"Chaerim, you're good."

"It's all thanks to you, director."

As they said good words, the atmosphere on set seemed brighter as well. Chaerim now had the luxury to look after others and she looked after the staff. When nervousness got the better of her and she had a narrow vision, she got annoyed at them whenever something happened, but that didn't happen right now. She had the luxury to improve her image. Her manager handed out the snacks and drinks that they prepared beforehand. Even the staff that didn't look at her in a good light thanked her since they received something. These small actions would change the evaluation of her in the long run.

After a small break, the shoot resumed. This was a scene where Maru, who appeared from outside the school, ignored what was happening even after seeing the main heroine quarreling with someone.

The cue sign fell. Chaerim made an arrogant expression and looked at the main heroine, Yu-ri. The camera, which shot her as well as behind her, should have caught Maru already. The steps got closer. Eventually, Woomin, who was on the other side, stopped Maru.

“Class prez, is this all true?”

Yu-ri claimed innocence while Maru knew the truth. Maru looked at the two interchangeably with shaking eyes before not saying anything. Chaerim, who was watching all of that happen from the side, unintentionally exclaimed in a small voice. Maru’s cheeks were trembling. He was flinching back like someone who was really nervous. Even though Maru had a decent build, he looked very feeble right now.

“I’m asking you a question here.”

“Uhm... I...”

Maru looked at her. Chaerim almost uttered something else instead of her line after seeing Maru’s eyes that desired sympathy from her. She calmed down and thought about the script before saying her line.

“If you have anything to say, say it.”

Maru shook his head before powerlessly saying ‘I don’t know anything’. Even though it sounded as though all of his energy was being drained, it was very clear. It was curious. Was it a difference in vocalization?

“Good!”

The director shouted cut in a brighter voice than ever. Maru, who looked like a herbivore about to be eaten, took a deep breath before putting on an expressionless face. He returned to Maru from being the class prez.

“Let’s keep this pace and shoot the parking lot scene. We should end it while we still have a good flow.”

The staff started moving the equipment again. The actors moved to the parking lot as well. The shoot resumed in the recycling area in the corner of the parking lot. Chaerim gave the script she was holding to her manager. This was a scene where she threatened the class president to scheme against the main heroine. She greeted the other supporting actresses that she hung out with in the drama before getting into position.

Maru was being instructed something by the action director. In this scene, the class president would fall over into the pile of trash with a kick.

“Let’s try that.”

Maru, the action director, and the supporting actress that had to do the kicking stood in front of the pile of trash. First, the action director and Maru showed a demonstration. The action director put his foot against Maru’s stomach and pushed him forward, and due to the force, Maru was pushed back and fell into the pile of trash. He fell over with a big frown as though he was kicked really hard, but his expression was as calm as ever when he stood up.

“Try.”

The supporting actress nodded before kicking Maru just as the action director told her to. Although it looked like she put in a lot of effort, it looked too awkward. In the first place, how many girls would have experience doing such a kick? It was natural for her to look awkward.



“You can push a little harder. The receiving fellow will take care of everything.”

The action director seemed to trust Maru quite a lot. The supporting actress kicked once more. This time, it looked like she put in more strength. She swayed after finishing her kick.

Maru was lifted into the air for a moment before getting himself dumped into the pile of trash. Along with a popping sound, some of the trash bags made of paper burst.

“Isn’t he injured?” Chaerim spoke in surprise.

That kick just now went too far. The supporting actress also became pale and rushed up towards Maru.

“That just now was good. Do the exact same thing during the real deal.”

Despite that, Maru was just standing up while dusting off the paper on his clothes. After dusting off his stomach, he put on his school uniform again. Perhaps he had learned to do stunts?

“Are you okay?” Chaerim asked first.

She was there, so it would be somewhat wrong to just ignore him.

“Yeah, well.”

Maru replied as shortly as ever. Chaerim felt obstinacy welling up inside her. Although she had decided to ignore him, Maru seemed a little too disinterested in her.

“Thanks for last time.”

“I heard from Jiseok.”

“But why did you not call me?”

“I got my message across, so there’s no need to call. Also, you must be busy, so you don’t need to mind me.”

“Aha, really? Then okay.”

Chaerim snorted and turned around. Now that she looked at him, he looked like someone who didn’t know courtesy at all. She just decided again that she shouldn’t care about him when someone else approached him.

“Maru, something’s on your head.”

Chaerim turned around. What entered her eyes was the figure of her junior that was dusting off Maru’s head. Then, Maru, who was looking at her junior with a completely different expression than when he looked at her, entered her eyes. At that moment, she remembered when the people at the acting club said that *her* boyfriend had appeared in the drama they were watching. The name she heard back then was also Maru. She thought that she had heard the name somewhere, but it turns out it was from back then.

After watching the conversation between the two for a while, Chaerim hurriedly turned away. She did that because her junior tried to look at her.

“It looks like the shoot is going to begin. See you later.”

Her junior went back to where the background actors were. Chaerim sighed in relief only then. At that moment, annoyance welled up inside her. Why did she turn away like she did something wrong? She was the senior here, she was the main character here.

She was about to kick a pebble by her foot to shake off her weird feelings. Just as she was about to kick the pebble with her right foot, she saw a staff member walking past with heavy equipment in hand. She was startled and changed the direction in a hurry. Thankfully, she didn't kick the pebble, but her body was tilted. She swayed like a drunkard for a moment before getting balanced again. She felt the supporting actresses around her look at her like a strange girl. She felt embarrassed. She raised her head and looked around her. The supporting actresses that met her eyes coughed awkwardly before looking away. It was clear that they saw her. Some of the staff giggled as well before changing expressions in a hurry. They had seen her as well. More annoyance welled up inside her and she felt like she wanted to shout.

Just then, she met eyes with Maru, who stood behind her. Just as she was about to feel more embarrassed, Maru faintly smiled. He didn't hide his expression like the others. He just blatantly laughed at her.

“If you want to kick, then kick it that way. You'll get others injured.”

Maru kindly pointed out the pebble she was about to kick as he said so.

Chaerim felt embarrassment die down in an instant in her mind. She laughed in vain once before calming down completely.

“You saw?”

“It was within my vision.”

“It's funny?”

“If you tell me not to laugh, I'll stop,” saying that, Maru stiffened his mouth.

Seeing that, Chaerim chuckled instead.

“You are the person that's about to hit me, so it would be strange if we were awkward with each other.”

“Don't worry.”

“Please end the shoot as early as possible. Work hours are best kept short.”

As soon as Maru's words ended, the director approached them. The rehearsal began. As there was no big difference in movement lines, they started shooting immediately. Chaerim was flabbergasted when she saw Maru who looked very submissive. It was as though he was a man with different masks. Everything about him was different from moment to moment. After the much-practiced kicking, Maru fell over in a grand manner before the cut sign fell. They got an okay sign in one go this time as well.

Chaerim approached Maru, who had fallen over. Maru was about to stand up, but he fell back over again. Seeing Maru in the pile of trash, Chaerim smiled brightly.

“Aren’t you getting up?”

“I am.”

“Do you need help?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Chaerim extended her hand. Maru glanced at her before putting his hand on his knees to push himself up. Even though she looked rather awkward, she didn’t feel that bad.

“Han Maru, was it?”

“Yes.”

At that moment, Chaerim felt her junior looking at her from behind. When she sensed that gaze, she, for some reason, took a step closer to Maru. Then, she dusted off the pieces of paper on Maru’s head.

Maru blinked once before dusting off his own head.

“You were good at falling over.”

“That’s because someone kicked me well.”

Saying that, he just walked past her. Chaerim looked down at her palm. There was a strange sensation from the part where Maru pinched last time. Chaerim did not turn around to look at her junior. That was because she felt that she shouldn’t for some reason.

## **Chapter 325**

The equipment was moved to the annex building. The next shoot happened in the movie club, a secret hideout for the main characters.

“You look like you’re doing good today,” Gangha spoke as he raised his thumb.

“That’s true. I didn’t get a single NG today. Looks like I’m on a roll.”

Chaerim lightly clenched her fist before loosening it. She was definitely more at ease with this shoot. She had just enough tension in her body. She had the confidence to finish today’s shoot without making a mistake.

“Uhm, Chaerim. Can I get Dayoon-noona’s number?”

She was wondering why he kept talking to her since morning, but it turned out to be this. Chaerim frowned.

“I do want to tell you, but she hates things like that. You know what happened right? A fan of hers came to her house and caused a fuss. After that incident, Dayoon-unni is not good around men.”

Of course, that was a lie. There indeed was a stalker incident, but the reason she said that Dayoon was not good around men was to end this conversation.

“I guess that can’t be helped after she experienced such a thing.”

"I'll tell her for now. But do you like her?"

"I just wanted to meet her and have a talk or something. She's my type."

"What are you going to do if your president found out?"

"You know how this works. I will act in a way so that I don't get found out. The other groups date each other like that, you know? I mean, it's not like we can go out with an ordinary person. You know what happened to the senior that dated an ordinary person, right?"

"I do."

It was quite a famous event, so she naturally knew about it. The man involved belonged to a 4-person boy band that was quite popular, but the group was dissolved thanks to him dating. There was a problem with idols dating in itself, but the bigger problem was that the girl's identity was exposed and she was attacked by extreme fans. It became a controversial issue immediately and consequently led to the dissolution of the group. The group tried to make a comeback with the three remaining people, but they failed and disappeared without a sound.

"In other words, we can only date other idols. We can protect each other's privacy and secrets that way."

Gangha approached her close and lowered his voice.

"You don't have anyone you're dating?"

"Me? I don't."

"Don't lie to me. Really?"

"I said I don't. What about you?"

"Me? I dated once but we went back to being good colleagues."

"That's amazing. Aren't you scared? Your contract should state that you're forbidden from dating."

"You just have to be careful not to get found out. If you don't have a boyfriend, what about me? I'm quite popular, you know?"

"Alright, you can stop fantasizing."

"Why? We've known each other for quite a while, haven't we? Counting pre-debut days, it's been around four years, right? Hey, if a man and a woman have known each other for that long, you gotta date at least once. Don't you think so?"

"We've only known each other's faces for four years. This drama is the first time that we actually talked to each other, isn't it? We just greeted each other politely before."

"What happened before is not important, what's important is now."

Gangha reached out and grabbed her hand. Chaerim frowned and pulled her hand away.

"What a cold reaction."

"If you want someone to date, look for someone else. How about Yu-ri? She seems to like you."

"Oh? Didn't you know? I'm going out with her right now."

"What?"

"So you didn't know that. I thought Yu-ri told you already. Weren't you two close even though you act cold towards each other?"

"Close? We're more like enemies."

"Really? Then you two should be friends."

"Not happening."

"Geez, I don't get how women's friendship works. But hey, you don't have experience dating, right?"

"What are you on about so suddenly?"

"My intuition."

"You think I've never dated even once?"

Gangha pondered for a while before shaking his head.

"No. There's no way someone like you would have never dated anyone. So date me. Please? I'll let you have fun."

"I thought you were dating Yu-ri."

"Hey, do you date to get married? I date to enjoy myself. A girl for marriage has to be good and kind, and a girl for dating has to be hot and sexy. I know you know that."

"Forget it. Look for someone else."

"Alright, alright. Tell me if you change your mind later. I'm always ready to switch," Gangha spoke with a smile.

Chaerim thought of her unnie as Gangha walked away. They talked about this topic a lot when they were still trainees. I will date a male idol or date an actor once I become famous. The talk between girls full of dreams was fun, but now, they no longer even talked to each other that much. They always got into a fight whenever they talked about something, so they just didn't talk at all.

'We'll end up like The Five.'

'We're the eternal, The Five.' That was their greeting comment. Yet, such an idol group became strangers in just one day. Chaerim thought that the unfair contract wasn't the full story. If all of the members were dissatisfied with the contract, they would've all left the company, not split up into two-three like that. It was obvious that the disharmony between members was the reason and the unfair contract was just the trigger.

The contract Chaerim signed with Yellow Star couldn't be considered entirely fair either. In the news as well as various magazines, they talked about how Blue profited hundreds of millions to billions of won,

but the money that appeared in her bank account was less than 10 million won. And that only happened recently. The expenses required to create albums were also on the members. She thought that that was natural, but from the recent news, it seemed that that wasn't the case. The unnis recently started calling a lot of people, and from what she heard, they talked about contract deposits and whatnot. Perhaps Blue will follow a similar path to The Five in the very near future.

"I should do well."

This drama was a foundation for her of sorts. This drama would enable her to live as the actor Chaerim and not as the idol Chaerim. Since there were talks about movies as well, she would be able to receive the interest of the public as long as this drama went well even if Blue was dissolved.

'Me, no longer an idol huh.'

She never imagined two years ago that she would be thinking about such things now, but she now had to think about it since it might become a reality. She couldn't stay as a child forever. What would happen if she stopped being an idol and became an ordinary actress? After she thought about that, she was reminded of the dating matter that Gangha talked about.

Dating, huh. She went to practice starting in elementary school, and she did the same in middle school as well. She never missed school or anything, but since she never hung out with her friends after school, she never got close to anyone either. The same went for dating as well. Now that she thought about it, she was very obsessed with training. She had thought about dating someone and walking around hand in hand. When people paid too much attention to her to the point that she had stressed-induced gastritis, she imagined what ordinary life would be like whenever she slept. However, she soon realized that she liked her current self better than her ordinary self.

Despite that, she wanted to try dating. The idols she met during work were very cool, but for some reason, she never felt affection towards them. It was fun to play with them, but she never wanted to be alone with them. There were a couple of idols who indirectly expressed that they wanted to date her, but she refused back then because of the notion that she had to have meticulous self-control.

What did it mean by being lovers? It was a rather pointless question, but once she thought about it, she became conscious of it. She sighed just like the time where she saw her friends leaving school together from the classroom. The feeling she had back then was definitely vanity.

Chaerim shook her head. She thought that the reason she kept thinking in this direction was because of Gangha. No, to be more honest, it was because of him. In front of the annex building, Chaerim pretended to read the script and looked at Maru who was standing on the other side. He was reading his script with a serious expression. Even though he was a supporting actor without many lines, he looked into the script for a very long time. He concentrated on the script more than she did.

Then, there was her junior who stood a little away from him. Chaerim couldn't look at her junior. Back in the parking lot, she ended up dusting some trash off Maru's head without thinking about it.

'No, perhaps I intended to.'

It was a childish thing. Even though she was aware that her junior's boyfriend was Maru, she took those actions. No, perhaps she did so precisely because she knew. She didn't know what she was doing. She knew that doing such a thing just because she didn't like her junior a little was bad.

'...A prank, is it?'

Chaerim sighed. She didn't want to waste her energy on such a trivial matter, but she was conscious of it. Was it not just curiosity and did she like him after all? This wasn't good. She was still an idol. Dating was a taboo for idols. Some agencies went as far as to say that committing a crime was better than dating. It was just that much of a sin for girl idols.

She looked at her script, looked at Maru, and looked at her script again. She was angry at herself for being so flustered, but she did not have a way to solve this issue, so she had no choice.

In the following shoots, Chaerim made a few mistakes. Thankfully, the director still looked like he was okay. This was thanks to the fact that she did well in the morning. It also meant that the director wasn't at the limit of his patience yet.

"What's up with you?"

"I don't know."

"Who else would know if you don't know about it?"

"Are you picking a fight?"

"Is me being worried about you picking a fight? I'm telling you to do better. You're wasting all of our time. I need to go to the TV station quickly, but it looks like I'll be late thanks to you."

Yu-ri angered her before leaving. Chaerim leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. She had to focus. She slapped her own cheeks hard before standing up. She couldn't have any trivial thoughts, and she had to focus on the shoot.

At that moment, she met eyes with Maru who was standing on the other side. After pretending to not see her, Maru shrugged once before raising his left hand above his head. Then, he pressed the part between his thumb and index finger with his right hand. Chaerim did the same thing like a child imitating their mother. For some weird reason, the annoyance and nervousness within her died down.

'Oh yeah, there was this.'

After pressing it a few more times, she felt that her mind had cleared up. She looked back at Maru, but he was just looking at his script again. It was really hard to say thanks to that fellow.

After the standby sign, Chaerim went about the shoot with more ease of mind. She did her lines smoothly, and looked at her counterpart actress, Yu-ri, with a confident expression. Then cut. The director made a satisfied smile and signalled the end of the morning shoot.

They had two more cuts to shoot at the school after lunchtime, and after that, they would leave the school. Since the drama shoot was all she had for today, she would be able to go home and rest after the shoot ended. She thought about going to the shared residence but decided not to. She was fed up with getting into a fight with the unnis.

“Thanks for all your work, seonbae.”

Just as she was sitting on the platform in the school because she wanted to rest by herself, her junior had approached her and was offering a drink. She didn't want to see *her*, but she received the drink with an awkward smile anyway. It was a cool green plum drink.

“Where are you going by yoursel....”

There was one more guest. It was Maru, who didn't finish his sentence. In his hand was a lunchbox. She had heard that Woomin had brought lunchboxes for the staff, and that seemed to be it.

“Aren't you going to eat?” Her junior asked, sitting down next to her.

“I will. You two can eat here, I'll eat with my friends.”

“The other lead actors?”

“Uh, yeah. We promised we'd eat together.”

Chaerim wanted to leave this place immediately. She never arranged a lunch appointment or the like, but she needed a lie in order to leave this place naturally. Just at that time, she saw Yu-ri walking past the main entrance. Gangha was next to her. They met eyes as well. She waved her hand at them. Now, she just had to leave this place and join them. However, she couldn't leave. That was because Yu-ri had glared at her once before looking away. Gangha, who was next to her, also waved back in an apologetic manner before following her. It was obvious. She wasn't that close with them. She was aware that the two always ate together. The problem was that there were juniors next to her. She didn't want to show such a scene to these two either.

“Hey, look at this. There's a batter-fried shrimp. It's quite big.”

That voice was a little loud. Chaerim slowly turned around. Maru was speaking as he showed her junior the lunchbox. Thanks to that, her junior did not seem to have noticed that the other lead actors had brushed her off.

“Wow, it's big.”

Her junior smiled like a little child. Chaerim then looked at Maru.

“Why don't you eat with us, seonbae-nim. It's always been a wish of mine to eat with a celebrity.”

Maru called her seonbae. It seemed that he had heard that she was the senior of his girlfriend at school.

“Hey. She says she has an appointment.”

“A junior from school wants to eat with her, so she wouldn't be a senior if she just left like that, don't you think so, seonbae-nim?”

Maru offered her a lunchbox that still hadn't been opened yet. Chaerim blankly stared at it for a while before nodding faintly and accepting it.

“Then I'll go get another lunchbox.”

“Sorry about that.”



“You don’t have to be. Also, you can eat first.”

Maru left. Her junior, who sat next to her, opened the lunchbox with a bright smile.

“Please forgive him for his rudeness. He lives on his own ego.”

“R-really?”

“Yes. You wouldn’t know how much he boasts about himself. Well, he does have the qualifications, so I can’t say anything. But seonbae, are you okay? You had an appointment.”

“It’s just lunch. I’ll just text them.”

Chaerim took out her phone and sent a text message. She just entered a random number as the receiver.

She received a pair of chopsticks from her junior and put the lunchbox on her knees. She ate lunchboxes quite frequently. Since she was often busy with shoots, there were a lot of occasions where the place she sat became a table. Of course, she didn’t eat fried food like this normally.

Chaerim took a bite off the batter-fried shrimp. She heard a crunch next to her as well. Her junior was eating with a happy face. Seeing that, she felt more pathetic. At the same time, she even pitied herself for feeling rivalry against her.

She forgot about calories for a moment to forget about this sad feeling and left her body to gluttony. Just as she ate a piece of fried shrimp and the Jeyuk-bokkeum,

“Seonbae.”

“Yeah?”

“I know this is a rude, and maybe a weird question.”

“...Yes?”

“Do you perhaps like Maru?”

## **Chapter 326**

Her junior asked her with round eyes that were like a rabbit. Chaerim felt like the shrimp she just ate came back to life and was jumping inside her throat. She coughed once before looking at *her*.

“What... do you mean?”

“Just saying. Perhaps it’s intuition? The way you avoided looking at me in the parking lot, and the way you looked at me in the practice room before made me think that. Of course, I might be mistaken. If I’m wrong, then just say no.”

Chaerim couldn’t say anything. She wasn’t in a situation where she could reply yes or no. It might have been better if she became angry, but she didn’t do that either. The continuation of strange silence made her suffocate.

“Fuah.”

The one who broke the silence was her junior. *She* was smiling. It wasn't a satisfied smile. *Her* lips were trembling slightly.

"I thought you hated me, seonbae. That's why I was worried as well. But it looks like I was wrong. That's fortunate."

Her junior picked up her chopsticks and started eating again. Chaerim kept watching *her* as she did so. The president of the acting club, who was her friend, talked about this junior from time to time. That *she* was a feeble girl despite how bold *she* looked. *She* was the type of person who would cry endlessly once *she* started to the point that it was worrying. However, the junior in front of her eyes right now was slightly different from how her friend portrayed *her* to be. Although *her* smile looked a little unstable, *she* didn't look feeble. In the first place, there was no way 'feeble' suited *her* when *she* could ask such bold questions to other people's faces.

"...You two are dating, right?"

She had decided to switch the topic, but what came out of her mouth was the complete opposite. Chaerim gulped.

"Hm, yes."

"Then why are you saying that it's fortunate? How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"Oh, you're right. Perhaps it's not that fortunate after all."

Her junior started mixing the jeyuk-bokkeum with her chopsticks. The tips of *her* lips softened a little.

"Then do you really like Maru, seonbae?"

"I don't know yet, but I definitely don't hate him," she replied honestly.

She didn't want to lie for some reason. Although she had lied numerous times today, she wanted to avoid doing so for this very moment. For some strange reason, she welled up with confidence. It was strange. She was like this even though she knew that what she was saying was wrong.

"I see."

"You wanted to tell me not to approach him?"

When she said that, her junior raised both of her hands and waved them in denial.

"No, it's not like that."

"Then I can become close with Maru?"

"Uhm... that's not it either. Haha."

Chaerim did not say anything until the laughter dissipated. Her junior was still mixing the jeyuk-bokkeum with her chopsticks.

Chaerim ate some rice. She wondered what she was doing. Despite that, she didn't want to end this conversation here. She was feeling embarrassed to the point that she wanted to leave this instant, but the desire to continue with this conversation made her stay.

They kept eating their meal quietly like that until her junior spoke first.

“Maru told me once before that liking something can’t be helped. There’s nothing right or wrong with that.”

“I never said I liked him.”

“Oh that’s right, I forgot.”

Her junior smiled faintly and sipped her drink. Chaerim also drank a sip from the green plum drink. This conversation made her feel very thirsty.

“I like Maru,” her junior spoke as she put down the chopsticks on the lunchbox.

Chaerim felt her grip on the chopsticks tightening.

“At first, I thought he was a strange kid. We came across each other on the streets and he acted as though he knew me. He was really strange. Back then, I never realized that I would become so close to him,” her junior chuckled as she spoke.

“Seonbae, I’ll be honest. I was actually jealous. When you dusted off Maru’s head, and when you avoided my gaze, I was even a little angry as well. Is she doing that knowing everything? If so, then why? When I thought about it, the answer was simple. You were interested in him. Haa, I honestly don’t get it. On one hand, I want to get angry at you and tell you that he’s my boyfriend and then tell you to stop, but on the other hand, I wondered if that was really necessary. Liking someone is not a sin after all.”

“I’ll say this again, but don’t conclude that I like him.”

“But you do have good feelings towards him, right? You said so yourself.”

“That’s....”

Chaerim looked at her junior. Unlike *her* clear speech, *she* had a shy face on. *She* looked like *she* was about to cry if she told *her* any harsh words.

At that moment, a shadow enveloped the two. It was Maru, who came back from getting another lunchbox.

“It’s rather hot today.”

Maru fanned himself as he sat next down to her junior. Chaerim started rummaging through the side dishes in the box with her chopsticks like her junior was doing just now. She didn’t know where to look. She couldn’t look at the empty school field, nor look at the skies that were clear. She also couldn’t imagine looking at her right where Maru and her junior were. In the end, her only option was to fix her eyes on the lunchbox and eat.

She tried to think about something else as she counted the number of rice grains, but the more she did so, the more vivid the conversation she had with her junior became. Why did *she* bring that conversation up? Was it *her* way of warning her after all? Was *she* expressing that they shouldn’t make the situation more complex than it is now?

“Please excuse me for a little.”

Her junior stood up after half-finishng her lunchbox. *She* looked very complex on the surface.

She didn't know what she was doing. They could've just started eating without saying anything. She could've just firmly said no. There was no reason to admit to anything, she could've just lied like she did usually, but everything went wrong because she mentioned the truth. She thought that she should've just lied like usual and be done with it.

Maru, who was sitting next to her, was just eating the lunchbox without any expression. He was eating lunch like it was a task he had to fulfill.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

Chaerim was startled and shook her head. Maru found out that she was staring at him.

"I will."

She ate a piece of kimchi. She was hungry, yet she didn't have any appetite. She chewed a piece of sour kimchi for a long time.

Meanwhile, Maru emptied a whole lunchbox. He stood up with a satisfied expression and started drinking. The long shadow cast by Maru's figure covered Chaerim's face.

"Good luck then."

"Uh, okay. You leaving?"

"Yes. Also, when she comes back, tell *her* to finish her meal. *She* didn't even have breakfast, so it would be bad for someone her age to skip lunch as well."

"You're quite considerate of *her*."

"Of course I am. She might look healthy, but *she* gets ill a lot."

Maru's expression as he talked about her junior was very warm. It was a dramatic contrast to his expressionless face during shoots. That twisted Chaerim's emotions in a weird way.

"Are you two dating?"

"Yes," he replied without a single shred of hesitation.

There was no 'haha' or 'why do you ask' or something like that. He said it very firmly as though he was stating a fact. At that moment, Chaerim was at a loss for words. She almost loathed herself for asking such a stupid question. She decided to change the topic.

"Thanks for last time."

"What do you mean?"

He was putting on a face as though he didn't know what she was talking about. Chaerim said 'nothing' and shook her head. Perhaps it was a coincidence that he distracted her junior away from her. Of course, it was just as possible that that wasn't the case. What was important was that Maru didn't think anything of it. It was him being considerate. Chaerim made a faint smile and sighed. She wasn't this

conscious of this matter until this morning. However, her feelings towards Maru expanded the moment she became conscious of her junior's gaze. Perhaps it was her that became jealous.

'I'm like a little kid.'

Maru's actions definitely instilled goodwill in her. She was definitely attracted to him due to how he was frank about his emotions. However, strictly speaking, was the emotion she was feeling now love? Or was it just appreciation towards someone who she felt thankful towards? It was complex. She couldn't decide if it was one or the other. Chaerim didn't like that hesitation.

She never felt this way before. She was always clear about whether she liked or disliked someone. However, right now, she wasn't. It felt like she wouldn't be able to sleep at night because of frustration if she kept feeling like this.

Chaerim raised her head. She wanted to stop being shy like an idiot. She was able to smile and act cute in front of tens of thousands of people. She could solve this small trouble like nothing.

"I think I'm interested in you."

She remembered Gangha's advice. It wasn't like they were dating with the intention of marriage, so she could be light-hearted about it. She wanted to relieve this frustration in her heart. She felt a lot better once she uttered those words. She felt like her face was heating up, but it didn't matter. It was much better to be embarrassed than to have a lump in her heart.

"...Okay, well. Thanks."

"That's it?"

Chaerim stood up and faced Maru in the eyes. Now that she started it off, she had no more hesitation.

"Yes. When else would I receive so much interest from an idol? I'm thankful."

"What do you think about me?"

"Can I be honest about it?"

"Yes."

"Nothing."

Those words were even scarier than just 'I hate you.' Chaerim felt her neck stiffening up. I am interested in you, and this is how you react? Obstinacy surged within her.

"Looks like I put it the wrong way. I'm not interested in you. I like you. Now then, how about now?"

Hearing that question, Maru scratched his eyebrows.

"What kind of answer do you want?"

"What?"

"You asked that with a certain intent. What do you want as an answer?"

"...."

“Haa, shall we sit for a moment?”

Maru sat down on the spot. Chaerim also bit her lips and sat down.

“I really don’t do romantic consultations like this. I mean, there’s no ‘winning’ when I get involved with another person’s love. But you seem to be mistaken so I’ll tell you a few things. First, dating is done between two people. Second, you should differentiate between goodwill and affection. Third, the one in front of you is a cocky dude, so let’s not think about him.”

“What do you mean?”

“There was an error in your emotions. When you’re at the emotional age, there are times where brushing past someone else feels like fate. If my actions caused a misunderstanding in you, then I will never take such actions again.”

“I’m mistaken?”

“Yes.”

“How would you know? Who are you to say that you know how I feel?”

She ended up raising her voice a little. She was disappointed that he didn’t give her any chance at all.

“It’s fine even if you’re not mistaken. I told you, didn’t I? That dating is something done between two people. I will tell you this upfront. You are the senior of my girlfriend, and that’s all you amount to in my heart. You know what happens if you like someone like me, right?”

He refused yet again. At this point, it upset her. Chaerim had the confidence. She had the confidence that she would do well with Maru. That was why she felt sorry towards her junior. She may end up hurting *her* after all. However, the more she talked with Maru, the more she felt that there was no gap between the two of them that she could exploit.

“Do you like *her*?”

“Yes, I like *her* a lot.”

Maru also replied without hesitation. The two were very alike in that regard.

Chaerim clenched her fist.

At that moment, Maru looked around for a moment and walked up to her before grabbing her shoulders. Then, he closed up on her face with a cold expression. Chaerim saw that his lips were infinitely nearing hers. She felt like her heart froze up, and at the same time, she felt a chill behind her back. She screamed and tried to push Maru away. At that moment, Maru let go of her and took a step back.

“Wh-what are you doing! Are you crazy?”

Chaerim faltered backward. Her heart was beating in a disturbing rhythm. She felt like she was sweating cold sweat.

“It feels unpleasant, doesn’t it? That’s what one-directional love gets you. Of course, this can also be a method of dating. However, that only works if the other party doesn’t have a lover. You’re free to like anyone you want, but if you touch someone that already has a partner, that’s a sin.”

Maru spoke with a firm expression.

“We can be good friends, but any more than that is not happening.”

For some reason, Maru looked upset. Chaerim couldn’t say anything.

“Let’s stop here before we truly embarrass ourselves.”

She had nothing to retort. She was aware that what she was doing was wrong. Despite that, she was upset that Maru so clearly drew the line. It frustrated her. Another part of her was already persuading her that the reason she was startled just now was because it was so sudden.

“But you wouldn’t know for sure, right? You might end up liking me.”

“No, that will definitely not happen.”

“Why?”

“Seonbae. Do you think people can live while holding their breath?”

“...No.”

Maru made a faint smile as he replied.

“To me, she is that very breath.”

## Chapter 327

*She* started watching the moment her senior told Maru that she was interested in him. *She* didn’t do so on purpose. *She* went to the bathroom because of the strange atmosphere, but in that short moment, the two were already talking. *She* had to step out at that moment. *She* should have shown up right at that moment with a clueless smile on *her* face.

However, *she* wasn’t able to do so. Her senior’s words stopped *her*. It was like a confession. *She* flinched and collapsed on top of the platform. *She* saw the two people through the flower garden behind the platform.

Her senior changed her words. *She* didn’t just express her interest, but outright expressed that she liked him. At that moment, *she* felt dizzy. *She* didn’t know that her senior would reveal her feelings so quickly. Although *she* calmly conversed with her before, *she* was feeling very complex on the inside. Her senior was a very famous idol. On top of that, she was pretty. Everyone *she* met evaluated her in a good way. Such a person was saying that she liked Maru, so there was no way *she* was comfortable with that.

Honestly, *she* didn’t have the confidence. Maru told *her* that he liked her, but she didn’t think that that would last forever. They were both just high school students. There was no way love gained at that time would last forever. They would have to separate one day, and *she* thought that she would just treat it as one of the good memories of her student days. *She* thought that it was only a matter of fact that he would move on to a better girl if one appeared. *She* consoled herself that way.

They would have to become strangers or friends one day. *She* thought that she would be just a little disappointed if they broke up now, and that she would be able to deal with it soon.

However, that wasn't the case.

*Her* chest ached. It ached so much that *she* couldn't breathe. It felt like there was a huge stone pressing down on *her* lungs. That stone even blocked out *her* cries. *She* could neither breathe nor cry. The only thing *she* could do was to watch the two people continue their conversation.

*She* couldn't hear any of Maru's words. *She* only heard her senior boldly confessing her feelings towards him. Every time her words passed through *her* ears, serious dizziness overwhelmed *her*.

Why? How? Was this something to be so shocked about? It was strange. Maru wasn't an object one could own. He was free to love anyone. He might like *her*, but he might as well not like her as well. Everything was up to him after all. *She* was supposed to be able to accept that even if he told her that they should break up, and she was supposed to be able to just accept the fact after getting angry once, but her heart just raced like it was broken, and now it was powerlessly slowing down.

*Her* brain was whispering to her that it wasn't anything much and that she should just laugh it over once those two decided to date, but her feelings were the opposite. *She* tried consoling herself by telling herself that the pain wouldn't last a long time, but it was no good.

Maru looked around. *She* flinched back and hid behind a large plant. Now, *she* couldn't leave either.

Right now, *she* had some scary thoughts. Even if the two affirmed their feelings towards each other and started dating, wouldn't *she* be able to continue her relationship with Maru if she pretended she didn't know anything? Wouldn't it be okay even if Maru went to meet her senior in secret as long as he acted the same way in front of *her*?

*She* was startled out of her wits and shook her head. That was no good. That wasn't good at all. *She* was already preparing herself for tragedy. *She* was already preparing for the worst. *She* was already drawing a picture where she sustained herself with the little bit of affection that Maru would give her without seriously having any feelings for her.

'Like a pet.'

*She* clasped her hands. *She* tensed her toes as well. Then, *she* perked her ears. Now, *she* could hear Maru's voice. The voice *she* consciously tried to block out could be heard again. *She* resolved to herself. If the two became lovers right now, then *she* would immediately rush out to them, slap both of them in the face, and smirk at her senior. Then, *she* would go home and start crying. Everything would be okay after crying a little.

That was how normal people would react. *She* didn't want to become a tragic heroine. If it was going to be a tragedy anyway, *she* wanted to have her revenge. *She* didn't want to be the Juliet that drank poison and followed Romeo to death.

Despite how *she* felt though, her arms and legs were trembling endlessly. *She* was feeling just how big Maru's presence was in her heart. It was just one year. He had recklessly come to *her* house and confessed recklessly. He was a selfish man who only knew himself. Yet, right now, his presence filled *her* heart.



At that moment, Maru approached her senior and grabbed her senior's shoulders. Their two faces slowly closed in on each other. *She* wanted to turn her head away. *She* wanted to pretend that she hadn't seen anything. It would be much better for *her* heart if she just stayed ignorant. The two pairs of lips were about to touch each other. *She* felt as though the floor had disappeared. It felt like both her body and soul were falling into the abyss. *She* tried to stand up with a groan, but she couldn't put any power into her body.

Actually, *she* had faith that Maru would keep looking her way; that he would firmly refuse her senior's confession. However, his actions right now seem to indicate that he was about to kiss her senior, and her senior wanted to reject that. Was Maru that kind of boy? Was that all he amounted to?

*She* felt complex in her head. *She* was angry at herself for still having faith in such a person. Even though *she* witnessed decisive evidence, her heart was open to Maru. *She* felt stupid. *She* felt pathetic. A person with free will, a person that wasn't a toy would not find any excuses while looking at such a scene.

*She* decided to rush out and ask him what he was up to. Then, *she* thought that she would apologize to her senior. *She* pushed against her knees and stood up halfway when Maru spoke. *She* put down her foot that she was about to lift. Instead, *she* just looked at Maru absent-mindedly.

Maru cleared up his relationship with her senior with a firm expression. Her senior became obstinate and spoke a few more lines, but Maru shook his head and drew the line and said that he would never become lovers with her. In fact, he even got angry and said that he was not comfortable with her actions.

Seeing that, *she* felt indescribably complex. First, *she* was happy. *She* was incredibly happy that Maru only thought about her. At the same time, *she* felt pathetic for reacting to every word of his. There was no need for *her* to hide, there was no need for her to feel anxious, but she fantasized about a non-existent future and pained herself.

*Her* chest felt much better as though nothing had happened to it. The sweet air filled *her* body. At the same time, *she* started crying. Even though it was nothing to cry about, *she* still cried. If *she* didn't hold herself back, she might have started bawling her eyes out. *She* covered her mouth and blocked any sound that came from her mouth. It would be embarrassing if *she* got found out right now. If *she* did get found out, she wouldn't leave her room for a long while. Like, really.

At that moment, *she* heard Maru's voice.

"To me, *she* is that very breath."

*She* was just regaining her vitality from almost becoming ash, and she heard those words. *She* didn't know what to think, it just felt like Maru's usual cheesy words. He said those words like it was nothing. *She* gained enough immunity to such words from hanging out with him a lot, but she felt very embarrassed right now. If it was just the two of them, *she* would have just giggled, but he was saying that seriously to her senior.

Despite that, those embarrassing words were adorable. The serious feelings in those words came to *her*. How could *she* help but not love Maru who said to anyone anywhere at any moment that he loved her? Of course, that didn't mean that *she* wasn't feeling embarrassed. Now, *she* felt like she would never be

able to go up to those two. *She* felt that her face would redden up and burst the moment she stepped out.

At that moment, Maru looked straight into *her* eyes. *She* was startled. Maru looked like he knew *she* was here.

*She* realized why Maru said all those things to her senior. He might have had some intentions to tease *her*, but it looked more like he was scolding her. Why are you hiding? Why can't you be more bold about it? I'm bold when it comes to you.

Maru seemed to be saying those words.

"Anyway, once she comes back, tell her to finish the lunchbox. You have to."

He looked at *her* again after saying 'you have to'. *She* lowered her head. Maru walked up the platform. *She* hugged her knees and looked down at the ground.

Having walked up the platform, Maru stopped next to *her* for a moment.

"If you did nothing wrong, then don't hide. No, even if you have done something wrong, don't hide. If you have any worries, tell me at any moment. That's why I exist. Don't get pained all by yourself, and don't fantasize about foolish things. Also, if you want to hide, then hide properly. What are you doing in the open? Covering your head with your hands won't do any good."

"...Sorry."

"So, what are you going to do? It'll be awkward if you go down right now."

"But I will go down anyway."

"Really? Then do what you want. Oh, don't forget to finish your lunch."

"Yeah."

*She* looked upwards. Maru patted *her* head twice before going towards the staff. *She* took a deep breath before looking towards her senior once. Her senior made a vain smile before kicking a can on the ground with an angry face. The empty can made a twang as it was flung across the sports field. Her senior looked at the can for a while before sighing and went to pick it up.

*She* quietly walked down from the platform. Her senior looked at *her* once before looking down. *She* didn't know what to say. It felt like consoling her was overstepping the line and smiling would make *her* look crazy. *She* had no choice but to sit down without a word and pick up her lunch. Maru's words that told *her* to finish her lunch spread in her mind.

"I just told Maru that I liked him."

*Her* hands holding the chopsticks trembled. *She* didn't think that her senior would mention it right away. *She* didn't know what kind of expression to make. *She* couldn't get angry nor could *she* look at her with pity.

"R-really?"

“Wow. This is the first time I've felt like this. Call me cocky, but the only time when things didn't go the way I wanted was when I was young. Ever since I became a trainee, everything went the way I wanted it to. I was able to control myself and my environment as I wished. Lots of people swore at me for that, but just as many, no, even more people than that liked me.”

Her senior sighed and put her chin on her hands.

“But recently, nothing goes the way I want to. Whether it's acting, or the atmosphere within the group. Do you know? The group is in shambles right now. It might dissolve. We are at the peak of our popularity on the surface, but it's like walking on thin ice once we go back to the residence. Honestly, it's tiring.”

Hearing the sudden story, *she* held her breath and started listening. Her senior talked about everything as though she was confessing.

“You know? I take a lot of meds. Do you know what stomach cramps are? They hurt like hell. I feel like dying. But even if I go to the emergency, there's no cure. The only thing I can do is take some sedatives and lie down for a moment. The doctor told me that you can only endure stomach cramps. He says stress is the problem. But man, a high school student is suffering from stomach cramps?”

“You must have had it hard.”

“It was hard. But it was still fine. There were still things that went as I wanted them to. But after they started disappearing one by one, I just couldn't hold it anymore. What was left at the end was just the attention from the public, just that. Many people say things about how I'm putting on an act, right?”

“No! It's not like that. My friends really like you.”

“Thanks for telling me that. Anyway, in such a situation, Maru helped me out. I was surrounded on all sides, but his criticisms made me clear my mind. I was angry, but I was more thankful than angry. That's probably why I came to like him. I didn't believe in Cinderella, but I think I know what it feels like to believe in it. I can see why the prince fell for the princess instantly.”

Her senior bit her lower lip before making a faint smile.

“Your boyfriend was amazing. Wow, I don't know how he can say such an embarrassing thing in front of me. Do you wanna know what he said to me?”

“N-no, it's fine.”

“No, you have to listen. He said that you were his breath. He said that he can't live without you. Is this a drama or a movie? Geez, that was just absurd. But... at that moment, I became envious of you who could listen to him saying that. Also, I realized that I couldn't like him. It would only end up with me being in pain if I liked him.”

Her senior turned around her head and looked at *her*. Her eyes looked resolute and didn't contain any hesitation. *She* was going to avoid her eyes, but resolved herself and looked back at her resolutely.

“Do you want to slap me?”

“Wh-what?”

*She* flinched back. *Her* eyes loosened as well.

"I said all that because I felt sorry. If you felt angry after listening to me, then you can hit me. Ah, I guess the face is bad. We still have some scenes to shoot. Do you want to rip my hair out or something?"

"No."

"I won't ask twice. Are you really not going to hit me?"

"No. I'm not going to."

"Well, then, okay. There's an idiom that says there's no tree that's unfellable, but looking at him, I feel like I know what an unfellable tree is. Did you two perhaps... sleep with each other?"

"S-seonbae!"

"I guess you didn't. Sorry. I'm not sane right now. Haa."

Her senior stood up.

"You can ignore me from now on. You can leave bad comments as well. You can talk bad about me if you want. I won't say anything to you. I will not talk to him either. So don't worry about me. In the first place, he was only looking at you."

"...."

*She* looked up towards her senior. Her senior looked relieved yet depressed. *She* saw her hands trembling on her legs. It looked like she was about to cry.

"I just feel really frustrated. It's because of him, so you don't need to worry about me. I just feel a little stuffy, so...."

*She* looked at her senior who started talking all by herself before standing up and hugging her. *She* felt like *she* had to do that. Her senior was cornered. Maru appeared as someone who she could lean on in such a situation, so perhaps she became reliant on him. Yet, Maru decided to turn away from her. How would she feel? The group she debuted in was unstable, and her acting had hit a block. Although she was older than *her*, she was still a feeble high school student. She might be just as much of a crybaby as her.

*She* patted her senior on the back. Her senior started crying.

\* \* \*

"That world is really unpredictable."

Maru sighed as he watched her and Chaerim walk hand in hand around the school. He didn't know what happened between the two, but it looked like they made up. Just now, the two walked up to him and said some incomprehensible stuff before giggling and walking away. He felt confused.

"Hyung."

"What?"

“Girls are really unpredictable creatures, aren’t they?”

“Uh, yeah. I’ve been single my whole life, but I heard that.”

Woojoo looked away as he spoke.

Maru fell silent.

“Well... I’ll probably get married some day,” Woojoo spoke bitterly.

### **Chapter 328**

The moon was blue. Even though the sun hadn’t set when the shoot began, the moon was high up already. They were in the streets a little away from Hongdae. The dark hillside road was the location of the next shoot. The two boys were going to quarrel over Yu-ri under the moonlight. A cliché of clichés.

“Today’s the last day, right?”

“Yes.”

Director Kim, the action director, spoke as he put a cigarette in his mouth. After taking a deep puff, he threw it on the ground and put it out with his foot, even though the cigarette hadn’t burned that much.

“Quitting this thing is quite tough. Do you smoke?”

“I’m a student.”

“When I was your age, we all smoked.”

“I want to live a long life, so I don’t plan to.”

“Alright. I’m not sure about drinking, but don’t smoke. It’s frustrating.”

This director Kim, named Kim Choongho, was someone Maru conversed with quite often during breaks. He seemed to have taken a liking to Maru ever since his falling action during Maru’s first shoot here, and came to talk to him. He also told Maru to come under his wing if he had any thoughts, that is:

“Do you really have no intention to work under me? Although stunt actors are given the cold shoulder right now, I’m very sure that their treatment will change in a while. This area will gain its own expertise. I’m going to make my kind, who are suffering from pain and hunger right now, full and satisfied. Though, it is a stunt we’re talking about, so you can’t help the pain.”

“I’m an aspiring actor, so I’ll have to refuse.”

“You can be an action actor. You know how to use your body well. If you learn just a little, you’ll be able to get hit or hit someone else in a grand fashion. Don’t you think that a man’s dream is to let his back do the talking? An action actor does not need words. He speaks with his fist and back.”

Choongho clenched his fist.

“Well, if you don’t have any intentions, then I guess that’s that.”

“Thanks for the offer.”

“You really are good at sneaking your way out. I attracted quite a few people with my words, too.”

While they talked, the shoot went on. The two main characters played out an action scene that they practiced beforehand. Since it was a difficult action scene, they didn't take a long-take shot but split the scene up into different cuts. One punch was one cut. They would switch the camera angle and then shoot again. Choongho told Maru that it would look quite decent once those cuts were joined together in editing.

“Maru.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have anything after this? Like a drama or a movie.”

“No, not yet.”

“Then do you want to exercise your body with me after this? There's a noir film that's starting soon, and there are quite a few scenes that use the main character's younger days.”

“A film noir?”

“It's a movie with a mixture of crime, police, and thug-themes that's popular in the country, and I'm in charge of combat in that movie. I need someone young that's good at using his body, but this is quite hard. The director doesn't want an adult that looks young, but an actual high school student-like high school student. He talked about immature and unfiltered pure violence and whatnot, but the point is that he needs someone that's young yet capable of enduring rough actions.”

“I'm thankful for your words, but are you really okay with me? I'm not that good at acting.”

“Hey! You're more than enough. So how about it? Do you wanna do it?”

“Of course I do. It's an opportunity for me.”

“Then we're doing it, okay? The shoot begins late August.”

“That's quite early.”

“Everything's planned out already.”

“What kind of role am I?”

“You'll either be the one that gets hit by the main character, or someone at his side.”

“I don't get to hit anyone?”

“Maybe once.”

Maru chuckled. At that moment, he remembered Bangjoo.

“Uhm, there's a junior of mine that dreams to become an action actor, and he's quite well-built. He's a little short, but he's definitely sturdy. He exercises regularly and I heard that he's been doing Judo for five years. If you're looking for a lot of extras, can I take him with me?”

“Well, that’s not bad on my part. I was planning to go to a gym I know and get some people there if I lacked people. However, there’s no guarantee that I’ll use him just because you bring him. I don’t believe in stuff like ‘someone’s recommendation’. I only believe what I see. You know what I mean, right?”

“Yes.”

He’s the actress Ahn Joohyun’s little brother - he almost said those words but decided not to. There were people that took into account connections, and there were those that did not, and Choongho was clearly the latter.

“But hey, is the girl you came with in the morning a friend of yours?”

“Ah, yes. She’s my girlfriend.”

“Good. Good times.”

“Have you married?”

“I have. When I go home, there’s a middle school student that wants to go to a cram school, and there’s an elementary school student that wants the new game console. I have it tough feeding all of them. Don’t you get married early. You’re still a kid, but listen to me. I mean it.”

“But don’t you feel happy when you see your kids?”

“I do. That’s precisely why I’m working. Rather than that, I think the writer is looking for you.”

Maru saw the writer waving from afar. He nodded and stood up. Today was his last day of Youth Generation. The drama would continue being aired, but there was no more ‘class president’ role. That was because the years changed. They told him that he might be called later as a passerby, but the probability of that seemed slim.

The class president appeared as an underhanded and submissive character until the end. He just exited the drama after hearing from the main protagonist to not live a cowardly life after he found out that the main heroine was plotted against. He shot this final scene, which would appear after the scene they were shooting now plot-wise, at the school already. The class president would then get along with the rest of the class thanks to the warm-hearted main heroine. He was the typical antagonist character that had a change of heart. The mid-boss of the beginning of the drama would exit the scene there.

“Please take care of me.”

He greeted Woomin and Yu-ri, the two main characters of the drama. Since he had no opportunities to talk or even see them, he wasn’t close to them. However, Woomin kept approaching him to see if he was okay ever since he pushed Maru down during the first shoot. Meanwhile, he had never even exchanged greetings with Yu-ri properly.

“Please take care of me too.”

Woomin replied and Yu-ri focused on the script as though she had no interest. As this was a common thing for him, Maru just nodded before standing in front of the director. After the rehearsal, they

started shooting immediately. Yu-ri made a mistake once because there was a moth flying in front of the lights, and Woomin made a mistake once in speech. The shoot ended after three takes.

“Thanks for all your work.”

He greeted the director and the nearby staff before walking out. The drama which he started as a substitute, and ended as a minor role, ended like this. There was no ‘audience taking notice of him and gaining popularity’ that Daemyung had talked about before. Of course, he didn’t even expect such a thing. Bada had searched him up online a few times as a joke, and there wasn’t a single article about him. That was how minor roles worked.

“You did well. I’ll treat you to a meal later.”

After exchanging greetings with the camera director Kim Jangsoo, he left the scene.

There was no pressure that he had to portray the character well, nor fierce atmosphere at the scene, so he felt neither satisfied nor disappointed. He was just thankful that another day was over without any accidents.

His shadow stretched out since there was a light behind him. He wondered if his acting skills became as large as his stretched-out shadow. The work he did with elder Moonjoong was suffocating and heavy, but he definitely felt that he had walked up a level once that was over.

A child that did not know anything learned from his or her parents. A newbie was the same. If they didn’t know something, they gained experience and knowledge from the masters by watching them. A drama shoot was more like everyday life, but he enjoyed something that he could feel proud of better. Because he was at the age where it was okay for him to fall down while learning things, he wanted to taste a variety of things and more passionate moments.

After all, he would have to choose stability over challenge once he grew up more.

“See you next Wednesday. Bring that friend of yours as well,” Choongho spoke.

Since practice was short because of the festival, there didn’t seem to be any problem. There was a meeting on the fourth, and the preliminaries of the competition on the 8th. It was quite a full week.

“I’ll take my leave then.”

“Alright, thanks for your work.”

Maru quietly bid farewell before leaving the shooting scene. He messaged his manager on his way. The reply came back soon. Byungchan told him to send a message once it was set in stone.

\* \* \*

The next day, when Maru went to school, it felt much more real to him that the festival was the day after tomorrow. There was a large banner on top of the school gates that said Woosung Festival. The white had turned yellow due to time, but the students cheered as soon as they saw that.

“Sit down. Over there, wake up. You played games the whole night, didn’t you? Look at your eyes. Do things moderately and sleep early. You’ll suffer when you grow up.”



“We’re still young though.”

“Youth is short. I’m telling you this as a senior who experienced youth already. Oh, there’s something I need to mention regarding the festival.”

Taesik said they couldn’t bring eggs or flour or it would bring a mess with it. It seemed that someone did so at the last festival.

It wasn’t like there was anything grand just because it was a ‘festival’, but the students in class were all excited because they had no classes the whole day. It was said that the academic high school next to theirs invited a famous singer, but Woosung High did everything within the school without calling any outside people. Maru thought that it was a natural result since calling such individuals would cost money.

“Do you have anything you want to do?”

At Taesik’s question, everyone put on bored faces. Taesik didn’t ask twice. At the Woosung Festival, clubs were the main hosters of activities. There were a few classes that were preparing something, but they were few and far in between. Even those select few were mostly stalls that sold food.

“There aren’t any girls in our class, how are we supposed to make food?”

“Teacher, let’s not do anything for the festival.”

The electrical engineering class. There were zero girls across the two classes. Everyone solidly expressed their refusal since they didn’t want to spend the festival with sweaty boys. At that moment, the laughter of the girls could be heard across the corridor. Departments where there were a lot of girls, like chemical engineering, design, and computer-related departments looked like they were in a festive mood. The kids in class all became depressed when they heard that laughter.

“I should’ve gone to design.”

“Chemical engineering for me.”

“I don’t like this class.”

The class all sighed.

“Then I guess you’re all on your own during the festival. Ah, there’s a talent show event in the gym. There’s a prize, so go there if you want. There’s also a cross-dressing competition. Photos will be taken and will be on the graduation album, so it might be good to leave behind some memories. Don’t doze off during classes today and have fun. That’s it from me.”

Taesik left with the class roster.

“Maru,” Daemyung spoke as he turned around.

“What?”

“We decided that we’ll hold practice sessions during lunch for the play we’re doing for the festival. Aram said that we might end up ruining things if we don’t prepare anything.”

“Alright, got it.”

Daemyung turned back around and took out his textbook for the first class. Maru wondered what kind of expression Daemyung and Jiyeon would make during the festival. He wondered if he was driving the two too far into a corner, but Aram’s driving force couldn’t be stopped now. It would be for the best if things went well and the two started dating, but it would get very complex if the two just became awkward with each other.

‘Well, things will go one way or the other.’

Maru sighed as he opened his bag.

\* \* \*

“A movie?”

“Yes. It’s not confirmed, but you do need to take something like an audition. It looks like they’re looking for young people for the action scenes. How about it, wanna do it?”

“I’ll do it. I definitely want to do it,” Bangjoo widened his eyes as he replied.

Maru nodded. He thought that Bangjoo would hesitate at least, but it didn’t look like that at all.

“Are there things like wire action?”

“No, it’s nothing that grand. I’ve heard that it involves police and mafia, so it should be just fistfights, I think.”

“Aha. The basics of action.”

“Just in case, ask your parents for permission. You’ll need their explicit permission if official shooting begins.”

“They’ll probably allow me. They never objected to anything unless it was serious since I started living by myself.”

“I guess that’s reasonable.”

Since Bangjoo was independent since young, they should have that much faith in him at least.

“Do I need to prepare anything?”

“I’m not sure yet. He said he’ll call me, so he’ll probably tell me then. But I’ll say this for now, if you plan to do it, you can’t do it half-assedly. Also, you’ll have to do this in parallel with preparing for the national competition. If you quit midway because it’s hard for you, you might as well not start at all.”

“I can do it. I’m confident in my stamina.”

Bangjoo looked like he would beg Maru instead if he didn’t take him. Maru smiled and said yes. He didn’t know if Choongho would like him or not, but for now, he was very enthusiastic about it.

“But seonbae-nim.”

“Yeah?”

“The play we’re doing for the festival. Are we really going with that?”

“...Well, I think so.”

“Then the two will really end up kissing....”

“I don’t know. It depends on what happens that day. We can’t have anyone crying in the middle of the school field.”

“I’ll just do as I’m told.”

“I’m also just doing what Aram tells me to.”

Maru saw Aram who was giving a sermon to Jiyeon and Daemyung. Who could stop her now? He could only send his sympathies to the two sacrificial lambs.

“Seonbae! Practice, practice! Come here quick.”

“Alright, alright.”

Maru sighed as he stood up.

### **Chapter 329**

“There’s a week left now. The day after the festival is the last day of school, and then there’s Friday and Saturday will be the preliminaries. Let’s keep up the pace until the last day. We’ll do two practice runs a day until Saturday. Other than that, we’ll make up for our respective weak parts.”

“Isn’t two runs too little?” Aram raised her hand and asked.

“We’ve got the movements and lines down, so I think two runs will suffice. What’s important is that we don’t lose our pace. I think it’s better to finish things off in a way that we don’t forget what we’ve practiced rather than stretching our limits and practicing too much. I’ll also make sure that practice doesn’t go over 4 hours. Instead, we’re going to wear the stage costumes the whole time, so you have to get them ready, okay?”

“Yes!”

“Are there any questions?”

“What happened to visiting the theater?” Jiyeon asked in a calm voice.

“We’re going to go today. Like last year, it’ll take place in Anyang City Center. If we go there now, there will probably be badminton courts set up. We’ll go and see for ourselves how wide the stage is, and what it feels like to stand on stage.”

“It’s not the finals even if we pass the preliminaries right?” Bangjoo asked.

“Yeah. The Gyeonggi province will hold two rounds of preliminaries. First is the southern Gyeonggi province, then the Gyeonggi province as a whole, and after that is the nationals in the minor theater in the Seoul Arts Center.”

“The Seoul Arts Center? It’s held in Seoul?” Aram spoke in surprise.

“Yeah. It’s the minor theater, but it’s still the Seoul Arts Center.”

“Have you been there before?”

Hearing that question, Daemyung made a bitter smile. Last year, they didn’t even pass the preliminaries in the Summer. They never got close to going to the Seoul Arts Center.

“No, I went there to sightsee before, but I’ve never been on stage since, in the winter, we got the gold prize.”

“Gold prize is first prize, right?”

“No, first prize is the grand prize. It was taken by Myunghwa High.”

Daemyung looked at Maru as he spoke. The day everyone put in best their effort to get the gold prize, Maru was looking up towards them from the audience seats. He always felt sorry towards Maru whenever he thought back to that incident. The one that saved their props and stage sets and enabled them to do the play was Maru after all.

“What is it?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Maru yawned and stretched his arms out. Daemyung had a look at the clock in the classroom. It was 8 p.m.

“Thanks everyone. We’ll call it quits for today.”

He clapped twice to signal the end of practice. He was at a loss on what to do when the majority of the acting club members were in his 2nd year, but now, they were forging ahead with the help of the first years. Of course, Dowook was doing well as well. Although he complained a lot, he did not loiter about. He also had some competitive spirit in him and sometimes talked about getting the grand prize.

There was no need to talk about Maru. He was the pivot that gathered everyone together. If he just went ahead by himself, the play, which was a combined effort, would have been ruined, but Maru leveled himself with the first years that were still lacking and helped them out in parts where they were stuck, keeping the ship, that is, the play, from sinking.

This was something he knew since he watched Maru from the side. The first years were at ease when they practiced with Maru. Maru was helping them get immersed in acting.

After the movie and the drama shoot, Maru’s acting became more leisurely. The Maru that Miso mentioned, who would easily get excited once he’s on stage, would probably not appear again anymore.

On one hand, he became curious. He wondered what Maru would be like if he released his full potential and didn’t just level himself with the first years. He would be able to see Maru on stage again with the preliminaries this time.

Daemyung still remembered the ‘youth’ played by Maru last year. Back then, Maru popped out on the stage. There was no other suitable description than ‘popped out’ to describe that situation. It had been more than half a year since then. Ever since the winter preliminaries, they had never stood on stage

together again. Daemyung really looked forward to what kind of appearance Maru would show him on stage.

“Ah! Seonbae!”

Just as he was about to pack up and go home, Aram grabbed Jiyeon’s hand and stood in front of him. Daemyung blinked several times as he looked at Aram.

“Yeah?”

“Please take Jiyeon home for me. I have something to do today, so I’ll have to go in a different direction. It won’t even take 20 minutes of your time.”

“M-me?”

“Yes. You’re the club president, aren’t you? You should take care of your members.”

“Doesn’t Bangjoo go the same way as her?”

Daemyung turned around to find Bangjoo. At that moment, he saw Bangjoo who was being dragged by Dowook outside the classroom. He flinched and looked for Maru this time. He couldn’t be seen either.

“Anyway, it’s dangerous at night, so please take care of her for me.”

“Aram, if I take the bus....”

Before Jiyeon even finished speaking, Aram rushed out of the classroom. She didn’t forget to leave behind the words ‘you two are the main characters during the festivals so get close’.

Daemyung gulped. He didn’t know what to do in a situation like this. Jiyeon might misunderstand if he told her that he’d take her home, but it was too dangerous to let her go home by herself at this hour. He was agonized about what to do.

“Um... seonbae.”

“Y-yeah?”

“I want to repay you for consulting me last time... if it’s okay with you, w-won’t you go watch a m-movie with me?”

Daemyung looked at Jiyeon dazedly. Having finished speaking, Jiyeon was fidgeting. Her eyes were at a loss on where to look.

“A m-movie?”

“I-if you don’t want to, then that’s okay too!”

“No, I, I mean....”

A movie? As Daemyung had no experience watching a movie together with a girl, this offer was too big. He didn’t even know how to answer. What kind of answer should he give her? Say yes? No, she probably offered out of courtesy, so wouldn’t Jiyeon be at a loss instead if he just accepted without knowing how she felt? He should refuse here now, right? That was the right thing to do, right?

He really wanted to go... but that wasn't probably what she was intending. He thought that refusing was the right thing to do.

At that moment, he remembered back to March of last year. Back then, he had the victim mentality and couldn't trust anyone even if they came to him with goodwill. He interpreted goodwill as malicious intent all by himself and isolated himself, and he blamed others for his isolation. That kind of bad cycle continued.

-But if not, why don't you start talking with them for once?

Those words from Maru cut off that vicious cycle.

Daemyung clenched his hands and looked Jiyeon straight in the face. He always looked at the floor, he always looked elsewhere. Now that he thought about it, he was being rude to the other party by doing that.

Jiyeon had closed her mouth. She had shrunk back and her cheeks were blushing. Daemyung felt like he finally saw Jiyeon properly today. She might have asked out of courtesy, she might be expecting a refusal. However, for just today, Daemyung wanted to tell her what he was thinking. He did not twist the intentions of others and he himself showed his intentions honestly.

"...Today is a bit late, are you okay with that? If you're okay with it I-I want to go."

Why was it so hard to say those words? He felt even more nervous than when he first stood on stage. He could hear his heartbeat.

Thump, thump, thump.

It was loud enough that he thought that it might burst.

Jiyeon slowly looked back at him. Now, he would find out the answer. Jiyeon's mouth curved into a soft smile. He saw that she was relaxing her shoulders. The small and feeble girl sighed in relief before replying.

"I'm okay with that as well. Oh, just wait. I'll text mom for a bit."

Jiyeon, who was usually slow in her actions, took out her phone on the spot and started texting. Daemyung had never seen Jiyeon act so quickly before. After typing a text message with her two thumbs, she sent the message before raising her head. Then, she suddenly grabbed Daemyung's wrist.

Daemyung looked down at his hand. The delicate hand was grabbing his wrist.

"N-no! It's not what you think!"

Jiyeon was startled and let go immediately. Daemyung also flinched as well. Right now, his heartbeat was coming out of his ear canals.

"Sh-shall we go?"

"Y-yes."

Daemyung couldn't look at Jiyeon in the face. Why did she do that just now? He thought about it, but he didn't arrive at an answer. He felt good, but at the same time, he felt nervous. He felt like his head was about to burst already. What movie shall we see? What about the popcorn? Should I buy the coke? How about the time?

He climbed down the stairs in a dreamy state. He could hear the sound of footsteps following him from behind. When he went down to the third floor, Daemyung turned his head slightly. He saw Jiyeon, who was looking down at the floor with her hands locked. When the faint moonlight reflected against her hair, his head turned blank.

Daemyung reached out with his hand even knowing that he might regret his actions later. Even though he thought that he might roll around in bed in agony later, he still took action.

I must be crazy - he kept saying that in his mind and grabbed Jiyeon's hand. His Adam's apple wobbled. He felt like he was sweating cold sweat due to the nervousness. He was worried that Jiyeon might retract her hand in surprise and then proceed to look at him with disgust.

Just as he came to himself and was about to say sorry, Jiyeon grabbed his hand as well.

They didn't say anything for a while. Daemyung walked down the stairs with shaking hands. What he found out as he went down the stairs was that Jiyeon's hands were trembling as well.

\* \* \*

"...No way."

"What the heck is this?"

"This is different from how I imagined it would go."

Maru had a look at the three who stood there dazed, and then looked at the two people on stage, Daemyung and Jiyeon.

On the day of the festival, the acting club prepared a play on the right platform of the school field just as they had planned. They held the play at 1 p.m. since it was just after lunch, and people would be around the cafeteria. It was the golden hour.

Only the two main characters got stage costumes, and the others just went with casual outfits. Since the play's story was that Romeo and Juliet had revived in modern times, they didn't even need to care about the outfit. Other than that, it didn't matter how this play turned out to be. After all, even Aram, the 'director' of the play, said that she was satisfied as long as the two were given an opportunity even if the play failed.

Yes. The play didn't matter. As long as it created an opportunity for Daemyung and Jiyeon, it wouldn't matter even if they screwed up their lines or their movements. It was even okay if their diction was bad. Of course, it was 'called' an opportunity, but it was more like teasing them.

"Hey, I'm envious!"

"What are you doing! Are you going to do it for real?"

“Since you’re doing it, let’s go with a kiss!”

Maru smiled when he heard the cheers and boos from the audience.

Ever since the play started, he ad-libbed his way to the end. They were just enjoying this, and there would be no problems even if they made a mistake, so everyone just laughed and enjoyed the show. Then, during the final moment, the club members all left the stage with the exception of the Daemyung-Jiyoon duo and shouted ‘kiss!’. Aram said that they should put an end to the play if it looked like things were getting too unbearable. Maru thought that she was reasonable and had a look at Daemyung’s expression as they shouted ‘kiss!’, but something completely unexpected happened at that moment.

Jiyoon, who was looking up at Daemyung’s face, tiptoed and gave Daemyung’s cheeks a smooch. Aram, who was expecting a laugh instead, reddened and fell into a panic, while Bangjoo and Dowook made somewhat relieved-yet-bitter expressions.

“Whew.”

Maru clapped and shouted ‘why don’t you just kiss instead?’ like the people in the audience. The two smiled shyly before holding a curtain call all by themselves. After signalling the end of the play, the two held hands and went into the school.

Seeing that, Aram made an unrecognizable ‘huoh’ noise and collapsed on the spot.

“Aram.”

“...Yes?”

“How are you going to handle Jiyoon now?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Sheesh. You should find a boyfriend soon as well. Youth is short.”

Maru patted Aram on the shoulder before shouting at the audience.

“The play is over!”

### **Chapter 330**

Just speaking of the results, Aram’s ‘help’ was successful. After all, the two started dating. Though, the perpetrator Aram had an expression of disbelief on her face.

After the play, the club members all separated. Maru watched some of the events that were held in the main building before going to the screen room on the fourth floor. The sound of a movie could be heard from the small computer speakers installed next to the beam projector.

It was a war movie. He could see the figures of American soldiers that ran along the beach within a rain of bullets. It seemed to be set in the Normandy Landings.

The beam projector seemed to be nearing the end of its lifespan as it turned grey from time to time. The scene where the man, who seemed to be the main character, got hit by a bullet greyed out as well, but no one was disappointed. That was because all the students in the screen room were sleeping. It was



just as he had heard. He heard people say that the screen room was more like a sleeping room, and indeed, everyone here was sleeping. There were around six people here.

Maru put three chairs together by the window to make a makeshift bed. Sunlight shone through the gap between the curtain and the window. There was no better environment than this for a midday nap. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes. He could hear the laughter of students outside the window. They were burning their youth right now, so they must be having fun.

The sound of the movie and the occasional snoring, as well as the summer rays of the sun that tickled his eyes when the wind blew the curtains - all of these made him smile. He liked the festival, but he liked this leisure better.

\* \* \*

When he opened his eyes again, the first thing he saw was a couple kissing each other. The movie had changed to something else. What time was it? He took out his phone and checked the time. It was 4 p.m. There was an hour until the end of the Woosung Festival. The outside was still noisy. Only the screen room was quiet like it was isolated from the rest of the world.

He turned around slightly to have a look at the screen room. There wasn't a single student remaining in the room. It seemed that they had all left. He stretched his arms out and stood up. His waist ached a little.

"It's the holidays!"

Someone's shout could be heard. Tomorrow was the last day of school. The reason Woosung Festival was even more fun than usual was because it occurred just before the holidays. He yawned and looked at the movie that was rolling all by itself without an audience. Sometimes he needed solitude like this. Loud and noisy was good, but a time where he could organize his thoughts and calm down was also necessary.

He opened his phone which he put on the desk. He opened the message box and checked the message from Choongho. He wanted to see Maru at 4 p.m. tomorrow. A gym in Seoul was the location.

"If we practice after the closing ceremony... well, I guess there's plenty of time."

After that audition, he would practice for two days, and it would be the preliminaries. If the preliminaries and the audition went well, he would have to spend the month of August very busily.

Just as he was putting back the chairs in place, the door to the screen room opened and someone came in. That person walked to the beam projector and turned it off before starting to put it away. At that time, the speaker in the class told everyone to gather in the gym. It seemed like they were planning to end the festival.

\* \* \*

"Where were you?"

"In the screen room."

"Why did you go there?"

“To get some sleep,” Maru yawned and looked at Daemyung.

“Rather than that, who confessed first?”

Hearing that question, Daemyung made an awkward smile and avoided Maru’s gaze. From the looks of it, it seemed that Jiyeon confessed first.

“You happy?”

“...Yeah.”

“Should I transfer schools? Man, it feels lonely.”

The principal’s speech on top of the platform was nearing its end. When he walked down after saying that he’ll see them tomorrow, the students started whispering to each other, saying ‘we have to listen to this whole thing again tomorrow?’ or something like that.

“With this, I hereby claim the end of the Woosung Festival.”

The Woosung Festival ended along with the student council president’s proclamation. The teachers of each class took over from there. Although the festival was over, there was still cleaning up to do.

“Do we meet at the practice room after this?”

“Yeah. I messaged the others already.”

Each student took the chair they were sitting on and returned to their class. Everyone looked tired. They moved around busily under the sun the whole day, so it wasn’t that surprising.

“Don’t be late for the closing ceremony tomorrow. You’ll have to empty your desks and lockers, so make sure you take a portion of that today. The school might undergo maintenance during the holiday, so the school is not responsible for anything you might lose. Well done today and see you tomorrow.”

After a short homeroom, Maru picked up his bag and stood up.

“I’ll visit the container before I go. I’ll bring the props and shoes.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“I can take Dowook with me.”

“I’ll go as well.”

“No, you should go to the clubroom first.”

Daemyung was flustered about it for some reason. Dowook was also complaining about why he had to go. Daemyung dragged Dowook and climbed down the stairs.

Maru watched Daemyung and Dowook walk down the stairs before walking up to the fifth floor. The first years hadn’t arrived yet. They were probably still cleaning. It would take quite some time to put away the various equipment and things that were displayed on the 2nd floor.

“What, the festival is over?”

The one that came in like it was her room was Yoojin. She sat down with a disappointed face. She was wearing a white t-shirt and blue overalls.

“Are you on holiday?”

“Yeah. Rather than that, don’t you guys have practice? Why’s no one here?”

“They went to get some things. Rather than that, you should’ve gone to play with your friends or something. Why are you here?”

“I came here after playing a lot with your girlfriend so don’t worry about that.”

“Really? Where did you go?”

“We went shopping, I had her hair done at my mom’s shop, and we watched a movie together. How about it? Feeling envious yet?”

“Yeah, I feel very envious.”

At that moment, his phone started ringing.

“Yeah, what is it?”

-I’m planning to buy some things to eat while I’m here. Are the others there?

“Not yet. Oh, there’s one more person, so buy more than usual.”

-Yoojin’s here?

“Yeah. She brought a lot of things too.”

Maru spoke as he looked at the box that Yoojin brought. It seemed like a container for makeup. Daemyung said ok before hanging up.

“How leisurely. The girls at my club have been practicing since morning.”

“There’s not much time left, so what good is being so nervous about it? Rather than that, why did you bring that here?”

“The competition is just a few days away. So I’m planning to practice before the competition.”

“When are the preliminaries for the Seoul region?”

Maru opened the makeup box as he asked.

“Ours is this Saturday. Isn’t yours Saturday or Sunday as well?”

“Yeah.”

“When is it?”

“Saturday. Is this the foundation?”

Maru picked up a round container as he spoke.

“Yeah. I’ll need to touch up your face with that first and apply makeup according to the contour of your face. While we’re at it, let’s do you first.”

“Now?”

“Stay still and close your eyes.”

He couldn’t say no to Yoojin so he just closed his eyes obediently. He could hear some rustling noises. The smell of powder flashed past his nose.

“Don’t open your eyes. This thing will hurt your eyes badly.”

“I get it so be careful.”

He waited with his eye closed, but Yoojin didn’t start for a long time. Just as he was sighing, a cotton wool-like sponge touched his cheeks.

“Stay still.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll stay completely still, so make me pretty.”

The touch on his cheeks disappeared before something more moist touched his face. When he flinched due to the cold sensation, Yoojin told him not to move.

“You do know how to do this, right?”

“Well, I do.”

The answer was a little strange. He became anxious. He was worried that he might have become a clown when he opened his eyes.

“Pucker your lips.”

He puckered his lips as instructed. A lipstick touched his lips. The sensation of lipsticks put on him by someone else wasn’t that good. It was ticklish and somewhat embarrassing.

“I can put lipsticks on by myself.”

“Just stay still. Trust in this master and stay still.”

“What color is it?”

“Passionate red.”

“...Please don’t joke with me.”

“Don’t talk. It’s ruining things. I’m going to go over your nose now.”

When doing makeup for a stage play, the makeup on the contours like the cheeks was quite thick. This was done on purpose in order to emphasize the outline of the face of the actors when they stood under a strong set of lighting. Ordinary makeup would make the impression of the actor faint when they went up on stage. Thinking about it like that, the makeup of the actors was like a mask. It was like how the actor put on the mask of the character; putting makeup on their face was a way of putting a different personality on the face.

“What did you do during the festival?”

“Nothing. I just slept.”

“Sleep? Even though it’s a festival?”

“Only youngsters with stamina should play around.”

“You sound like a 70-year old grandpa.”

A finger touched his forehead. Something was being spread around on his forehead. At that moment, he heard the sound of footsteps. Maru wondered if the first years were here.

“Oh?”

Perhaps they found Yoojin’s presence here surprising. The one that Maru assumed to be Jiyeon, voiced out in surprise.

“You guys should watch.”

Yoojin spoke. There was a prankful tone in her voice. At this point, Maru was sure that she was playing a prank on his face.

“Can I open my eyes now?”

“If you open them now, it might hurt more than toothpaste entering your eyes.”

He had no choice but to endure. Following that, he heard the voices of Aram and Bangjoo. They all voiced out in surprise before laughing in a small voice. Had he become a clown already? Since it was like this anyway, he hoped he had a cool-looking teardrop mark on his face.

The hand that stroked his forehead and nose slipped. Maru frowned.

“Hey, aren’t you putting too little effort into this?”

“Stop talking and just wait. Working hard here.”

‘Sure you are.’

He sighed inwardly as he waited patiently. The makeup seemed to be done as he heard a small sigh.

“Is it done?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I open my eyes?”

“Go ahead.”

Maru slowly opened his eyes. In front of him was Yoojin holding a hand mirror. Behind her were the first years, and they all had strange expressions. It looked like they were all holding their laugh. He was sure that his face was messed up.

He received the hand mirror and had a look at his face. Unexpectedly, the makeup was decent, if he didn't count the lipsticks that had smeared past his lips, that there was a black dot under his eyes, and that his cheeks were too red.

"Are you really able to take care of all of us like this? It's a little disappointing."

"What are you dissatisfied with?"

"This place and this place. It's not symmetric either."

"So you don't like it?"

"I don't. If you were going to do it, you should've done it properly. Have you really learned how to do this?"

Hearing those words, Yoojin made a faint smile and crossed her arms. She looked triumphant for some reason.

"There you have it."

Yoojin looked behind her as she spoke. Behind? Maru turned around. There, he saw her who was smiling bitterly. There were a bunch of cosmetics in *her* left hand.

"It's bad, right?"

"..."

Maru didn't say anything and looked at Yoojin again. He did find a few points strange: the fact that she came here by herself despite saying that they played together, the fact that the preparation time took strangely long, and the fact that she said 'Well, I do.' He laughed. Now he understood why the first years were surprised.

"*She's* my helper. We're going to go together on Sunday."

Helper? Maru turned around and looked at her.

"How about Myunghwa High's preliminaries?"

"It's on Saturday."

"Are you sure it's okay for you to come? We're both south Gyeonggi, you know?"

"I don't think our school will fail just because I helped with makeup."

She looked confident. Maru smiled faintly.

"So you're the one who called Daemyung and sent him away?" He asked Yoojin.

She nodded as though it was natural. At that moment, Daemyung and Dowook entered with some food. Dowook looked at Yoojin and her alternately before making a confused expression.

"Well then! Gather round. Let's do your makeup. Let's see what suits you. Oh, *she's* Maru's girlfriend and she'll help me with your makeup for your play," Yoojin spoke heartily.

\* \* \*

“Stay still.”

“Go slowly. You keep poking my eyes.”

“Geez, you talk too much. I should just draw on your face.”

“Hey, I’ll see you after this.”

“How scary.”

Dowook and Yoojin growled at each other.

“They’re on good terms, right?”

Maru looked at her, who was next to him. *She* was smiling as she looked at the two.

“They’re like enemies. Rather than that, don’t you have practice to do? Can you come here like this?”

“We already finished ours in the morning. We decrease the amount of practice starting a week prior to the competition.”

After saying that, *she* hesitated and touched her hair. *She* had long straight hair when they met on Sunday, but today, it was a little shorter. Also, it had a wave to it. He wondered if he should act like he noticed. Looking at *her* sullen face was fun, but today, he decided to tell her that she was pretty.

“Your hair’s pretty.”

“Doesn’t it look awkward on me?”

“Not at all.”

“Really? I feel awkward though.”

“Why don’t you try short hair once? It will look good on you.”

“I think short hair will look strange on me though.”

“No, it will look good on you.”

Because I know all too well. I saw you with short hair a lot after all. Maru smiled and brushed up a bit of her that flowed down.

“Ah, that’s right. I actually have something I want to boast about.”

“Something to boast about?”

“I passed the first audition for a sitcom.”

“Sitcom? A TV program then?”

“Yeah.”

“When did you prepare that?”

“It hasn’t been that long. A graduate of our school works in an agency and asked me if I wanted to do one. I didn’t think I’d pass. Though, it’s still just the first step.”

“That’s good. Will I see you on TV then if you pass?”

“Yeah. I’m appearing as a friend, so even if I do pass, I won’t get to appear that much.”

“You never know. You might end up becoming the main character.”

“Nah, no way.”

Maru congratulated her. Good things would happen as long as she kept piling her career. If there was one thing that worried him, it was that she only stood in theaters until her mid twenties in his previous life.

‘So it will be a series of split paths from here on, huh.’

Maru grabbed *her* hand tightly. He didn’t know how life would turn out in the future, but he would be there for her.

“Over there! Dating is forbidden within school grounds!” Yoojin shouted.

Maru smiled and pointed at Daemyung who sat in front of him. Daemyung was flinching as soon as he heard the word ‘dating’.

“You should tell that to him.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Ask him yourself?”

Maru chuckled and looked at her. *She* made a confused expression before making a smile.

‘This is a decent end to the festival.’

A festival with her by his side. Nothing would be better than this.