

## Once Again 51

### Chapter 51

'I guess it's better than fake passion, at the very least,' Maru thought as he walked down.

Teenagers couldn't very well burn their life away with passion. Sometimes, it might be better to just ignore something to feel more comfortable for a time being. Only when they become adults, do they truly realize when it is appropriate to do such a thing.

'But doing that too early just isn't fun.'

This was pretty much the last chance for these students to be acting without reservation, acting purely based on their emotions. There would be value for them to act honestly right now.

'I guess I'm not in the position to say that though, am I?'

As a spectator, Maru had no part in all of this. Butting in right now would only make him seem rude. Especially as a person who didn't have enough bravery to even commit. Perhaps the one who really needed to act honest was him.

As Maru walked past the teacher's offices towards the supermarket, the door to the staff lounge opened, revealing Taesik. The man seemed to be bidding his farewells to a couple of parents.

"Oh, teacher."

"Ah, Maru. Heading to the market?"

"Yes."

"Let's go together."

The two of them started walking down the hall together. Several students greeted Taesik as they walked with massive smiles on their faces.

One of the surefire ways to see if a teacher was loved was in seeing how students greeted their teachers. In that sense, Taesik was definitely beloved as a teacher.

At the store, Taesik bought Maru's snacks as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He refused to accept the money from Maru as well.

"How's the club?"

Since that time last month, Taesik stopped visiting the club. He still occasionally visited, but not to cheer them on.

"It's alright."

"Just alright?"

"They were pretty sad about failing, but they've somewhat recovered."

"Is that so."

Taesik nodded subtly. Maru looked at the man for a bit. He personally thought the situation was getting bad, but he didn't have to tell the man. Taesik looked at the fifth floor with an understanding look.

"Thank goodness it's alright. I was pretty worried. Worried enough to actually think about talking to them. I didn't think it would be good for me to intervene though, so I held my tongue. There are things that adults should be involved in, and there are things that kids should solve amongst themselves. In this case, the latter is clearly the sensible solution."

As Maru thought, the man was a very thoughtful person. Taesik bought him a cold peach tea from the vending machine next to them.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm doing alright."

"Well, you're consistent."

The two of them looped around the field in front of the school. Despite being a weekend, there were no students out on the field. Probably because there was a game today. By the time they passed by one of the goalposts, Taesik spoke again.

"I had a drink with instructor Miso last time."

"Ah, is that so."

Taesik paused for a second with a conflicted face. He seemed to be wondering if this was alright to tell a student. He quickly put on a smile though.

"I think I can tell you for some reason, so might as well. Instructor Miso actually cried a lot back then. She was blaming herself quite a bit."

To think that such a tough instructor would cry just like that... Maru couldn't picture it very well, but he couldn't help but think it was somehow very fitting of the woman.

"Do you know the difference between a pro and an amateur?"

"Money."

"Right, it's money. In that sense, instructor Miso is a pro. She receives money to teach students. At the same time, she ends up feeling responsible about a lot of things. Having to teach students from her high school must have given her a lot of pressure."

To think she could act so loud and angry all the time despite the amount of pressure on her shoulders... If what Taesik was saying was true, then she really was a pro. No one was able to tell how she really felt, after all. The woman had quite a talent for self-control.

"The reason why she was so controlling was because the lot of you were amateurs. At least, that's what she said. Pros can act as freely as they want. They can take responsibility for their actions, after all. But giving freedom to amateurs only leads to laziness."

"...Did instructor Miso feel regret over her methods?"

“Yes. She was blaming herself. She said she should’ve made it fun for everyone. If she just let go of her greed for the club for a second, the kids wouldn’t have frozen in front of the audience like that.”

Maru scratched the tip of his nose. Everyone in the club was regretting their actions.

“It’s not something she should take blame for. She’s pretty timid in that regard, isn’t she?”

“Timid? Hahaha, sure. She might look savage on the outside, but she cares a lot inside. That’s why she worked so hard. She wanted to show you what she felt on the stage back then.”

“She’s competitive, too.”

“Indeed. Incredibly so.”

This summer seemed to be the season of pain. The one thing that instructor Miso did differently from the students was that she was honest about how she felt. She probably felt incredibly embarrassed saying it. Talking about your real feelings was more embarrassing than even confessing to someone you liked. Thanks to that, though, she was probably comforted well by Taesik. She definitely got a chance to self-reflect as well. She received all of the rewards that an honest person could reap.

“So, what about you guys?”

The same question as before. Maru thought for a little bit before deciding to answer differently.

“I’ll be honest. Things are actually pretty bad right now, in my opinion. Dangerous, actually.”

“That’s a different answer from before.”

“Isn’t this the reason you talked about instructor Miso in the first place?”

Maru sipped on his tea with a small smile. Taesik didn’t refute him.

“As I said before, the atmosphere of a club isn’t decided by how good the advisor is. The advisor is only there to be a mascot of the club. The person who really runs the club is the president and the vice president.”

“Yes.”

“Joonghyuk is... a very thoughtful kid. But he’s not the type that actually steps up to solve problems. That’s the reason why he’s not the president of the club, but rather a stage manager. He’s a lot like you, actually.”

“I think so, too.”

“There are differences, of course. Joonghyuk is, unlike you, within the circle that is the club. When there’s a problem, he actually tries to solve it. But you...”

Taesik stopped walking for a second to look at Maru.

“You always seem to be standing at the edges of the club.”

“.....”

Maru didn't say anything. Everything the man had just said was correct. Maru stared into Taesik's eyes. He was curious about what the man was thinking about him.

[I'd like you to solve this situation.]

"Why are you asking me to solve this?"

Was it because Maru asked before Taesik could actually say it? The man seemed surprised for a brief moment.

"As I thought, you're very different from your fellow students. It might sound strange to you, but talking to you feels like I'm talking to a parent. I can almost feel you rooting for the club members like an adult."

"Don't you think that's a bit cruel to say to a 17 year old?"

"True."

Taesik smiled lightly.

"You don't want to step in, teacher?"

"You should know what would happen if I do, don't you?"

Try to do well. Stop blaming other people, Geunseok. Don't be so lazy during practice. Be more honest.

The moment Taesik utters those words, the club really would shatter into pieces. That was the real problem with having spectators try to involve themselves.

"I know you have your own opinions and everything. I've heard a lot from instructor Miso. Whenever she drinks, nine times out of ten she would talk about you. She'd complain about how much like an adult you seemed."

"She really holds grudges, doesn't she?"

"You better not say that in front of her. A person told her that once, and she just grabbed that person by the hair right there."

"Ah, I can sort of picture that."

Haha, the two laughed lightly.

"You must be meeting instructor Miso a lot."

"I do. She's a mean student who calls me out whenever she gets drunk."

"She calls you whenever she drinks? Does she call other people?"

"No, I was always alone. She probably doesn't have anyone else to drink with because of her drinking habits. But it wasn't like I could just ignore her. It does get tiring sometimes, though."

"...And she asks you for advice a lot and everything?"

"Most of the time, yes."

"Are you married, teacher?"

“Haha, unfortunately not. Probably for the foreseeable future as well. I mean, with a fashion sense like this, how could I be?”

Taesik smiled, pointing at his old checkered shirt and worn out pants.

‘How could such a thoughtful guy be so dense...?’

A drunk woman calling out a guy for advice regularly? An older guy at that, and not a friend? She definitely had feelings for the man.

Maru asked Taesik to wait for a second before taking out his phone. He left Miso a very short message.

[Taesik’s getting married.]

Exactly five seconds later, Taesik’s phone started ringing. When the man picked it up, he immediately pulled it away from his ear.

“What’s up?”

“I don’t know. She just started screaming.”

“Um, teacher, can I take that call?”

Taesik handed Maru the phone with a confused look.

- How! Hooowww!!

Miso sounded pretty desperate from across the phone. Maru had to stop himself from laughing right there.

“I was joking.”

- Eh? M-Maruru?

“Yes. That was a gag message just now, so you can ignore it.”

- Y-you!!

“You have a pretty cute side to yourself, don’t you, instructor? Should I tell him in your stead? That you have feelings for him?”

- I’ll kill you! Don’t you dare tell him that! I’ll freaking murder you!

“Come to school, then.”

- ...What?

“Come check on the kids for a bit. I’m going to shake them up a bit.”

Maru hung up and gave the man his phone back.

“What was that about?”

“It’s nothing. But ah, teacher?”

“Yes?”

“Your future wife may be closer than you think.”

Maru decided to stop playing spectator for a second. It was an incredibly difficult thing for a teacher to ask something of a student. Despite that, Taesik was honest to Maru. Even as an adult, Maru couldn't help but want to accept the man's request.

He'd cut out the infected bits. The club might be unable to handle the pain and start to splinter. That's why he prepared some medicine.

'Miso will handle the rest.'

Maru headed up to the auditorium with a big huff.

## **Chapter 52**

Joonghyuk glanced at the smiling club members. The room became silent for a second after Maru left, but they soon returned to their usual, casual selves, talking about things that happened a few days prior.

Joonghyuk was joining in as well. He was just talking about stuff that came to his mind, like what movies he watched during the week, and what new snacks he binged on this time around. No one in the room dared say that there was something wrong with the atmosphere.

Today especially, Joonghyuk felt the auditorium was incredibly large. Back when Miso first came to the club, she told them that her objective was to make the auditorium feel very small and cramped to them. As she told him, the boy had never thought of the auditorium as being large and spacious during the last three months. But a month after they failed at the competition, the auditorium felt larger than a soccer field to him.

'Should I tell them?'

One reading session, some small talk, no more practice otherwise. In his head, he still remembered the script and blocking. Right now, if someone told him to act on cue, he had the confidence of being able to do it relatively well.

He just didn't know how long that confidence would last.

'Maybe even now...'

When skill is rooted in your casual behavior, you could call it confidence. Without that skill, though, you could only call your demeanor arrogance. Did the club have confidence right now, or were they just soaking in arrogance?

In the midst of talking, his eyes met with a first year's. It was Yurim, the girl with the phone. She was looking at him with nervous eyes. She was definitely thinking the same thing Joonghyuk was thinking right now.

Is this okay?

He turned his head to look at Iseul. The girl was sending the exact same signals. The others seemed to realize that they were on a rotting tightrope as it was already.

'Everyone probably knows, actually.'

This time, he turned to Yoonjung. She was talking about a dream she had yesterday very loudly. She was overdramatic most of the time, but things seemed especially worse this time around. She was even tapping Danmi's shoulder, trying to get an 'Am I right?' out of the other girl. Perhaps she was smiling with the feeling that they were on thin ice as well.

\* \* \*

"So I had this thought."

'What am I doing?'

"It was so funny."

'This isn't right.'

"No, for real."

'This isn't right at all.'

Yoonjung clenched her mouth shut after a loud laugh. Her thoughts weren't matching with her words at all. This wasn't the time for making casual talk. They shouldn't be acting like this right now. She was thinking of a bunch of things right now on the inside, but she couldn't help but say things that were unrelated to acting right now.

She was getting nervous. That stale air within the club didn't leave even after a full month. Whenever the club began talking casually after the reading session, Yoonjung was assaulted by nervousness. She was scared that the silence between the club would last even longer.

Starting from a month ago, there were moments where the entire club would go silent looking at each other. Whenever this happened, Yoonjung found it extremely hard to breathe. So she would speak even louder than before to prevent everyone else from recognizing that silence. But she was clearly reaching a limit here. She didn't even know what she was talking about at this point. Why was she caring so much about her lunch from yesterday again?

To Yoonjung, the club was a precious place. She adored the process of setting up a play from scratch, despite the fact that she was never able to complete one during her first year. Just the fact that she could smile together and cry together with other people made her happy.

But what was happening now?

She was feeling bothered and annoyed in the space that she's loved so much. At this rate, she might actually suffocate in the club. Back in the past, she would go to the club whenever she could to talk to club members. But what about now? She started attending the club exclusively on the weekends. How did this happen?

\* \* \*

'Mm.'

The auditorium was quiet ever since Yoonjung closed her mouth. It wasn't a silence that came from comfort, but rather awkwardness. The silence was so encompassing that members of the club started dividing into smaller groups.

Iseul looked to her side. The three students from the faculty of design were sitting apart from everyone else. Yurim was saying something quietly to Geunseok, while Soyeon was looking at the two in annoyance.

Taejoon was smiling, but his smile looked like one born from habit. Danmi and Minsung were whispering something to each other. Iseul couldn't hear them, but judging from their expressions, they were probably talking about the current situation of the club.

And then there was Joonghyuk. The boy was looking at everyone with trembling lips. He looked like he had a lot to say, but the words seem to be stuck in his throat. Whenever her eyes met with his, he would just smile bitterly.

'Hm, I feel like I should say something, but I don't really want to.'

Iseul didn't join the acting club because she was interested in acting. She just wanted a new experience. She already had a rock solid future set aside for her, which was to inherit her family's restaurant.

Iseul grew up with the smell of soup in her neighborhood. She would wake to the visage of her father slicing meat, and her mother making kimchi. She naturally grew into the mindset that she would have to inherit the restaurant after them.

Iseul loved the potent smells of the bone broth boiling in the background, and that of meat that rose up when they boiled it. She adored the spicy, sour smell of the kimchi that they made. She had no qualms about inheriting the restaurant after her parents.

That's why she didn't even think about going to college. She promised herself and her parents that she would help them out with the restaurant full time after her graduation.

Maybe it was because of that, but Iseul thought that her high school life should be bright and flamboyant. That's why she decided to join the acting club to begin with.

Just a month ago, she was very satisfied with her decision. Her muscles were constantly screaming at her in pain, but all she did in response was to smile. Memorizing difficult lines only made her more and more excited instead of getting her annoyed at herself. Handling costumes reminded her of the doll house play that she enjoyed in her childhood, and touching up the set props made her feel like a skilled carpenter.

Everything was a new experience to her. Back then, she thought joining the acting club was the best decision that she could've ever made. But what about now?

All they had left were boring reading sessions, casual talk she could make with her friends, and a few snacks.

'This is boring...'

What the hell was this? Everything about the club suddenly felt so gray.



'It'd probably be hard for us to return to that time, huh.'

Iseul turned to look at Geunseok. The shining star of the club suddenly became such a boring person. Well, maybe her first impressions of him were false from the beginning. He just looked... so desperate to defend himself right now.

'To think the lead actor would become like this...'

The acting club was finished for her. Worst of all, instructor Miso stopped coming as well. Just the instructor's absence alone degraded the club like so.

'I'm not sure what I can do either.'

'Geunseok! Stop acting like a child! Let's practice!' Saying that was easy enough. What came after was the real problem.

Would the resulting play really be fun? Plus, if she said those words now, Geunseok would just leave the club right there. Without the main character, the play couldn't run at all.

'I guess I'll find a different club.'

This club's finished. At least, that's what Iseul thought.

\* \* \*

Dojin, on the other hand...

'I wonder where I should farm today.'

Was thinking of other things.

\* \* \*

Maru opened the auditorium doors. The place grew completely silent during the time he was out. The members were further spread out as well.

"Finally! You're here!" Dojin called out with a happy face.

Maru didn't know what the other members were thinking, but he could say with absolute certainty that Dojin didn't have a care in the world.

'Definitely not the type to ever get stressed about anything.'

The members started talking again when Maru put the snacks down in the middle. Nothing more than small talk, of course.

"You have good taste," Yoonjung said, grabbing one of the snack bags.

Maru shrugged. That particular one Yoonjung picked up was the brand one she said she hated just a few days prior.

"Time's passing pretty nicely, isn't it? It's already three," Yoonjung said, pointing at a clock.

A few of the members nodded with an awkward smile, while others didn't even bother responding. Yoonjung continued talking with a weird smile on her face. Just like yesterday. After another two more hours, the club would finish its activities. After that, the members would leave the auditorium with sighs of relief.

Maru scratched his head for a bit. He did feel a bit embarrassed to actually stand up and say something about this. But he really couldn't let this pass, especially with Taesik asking him to solve the situation.

"Let's practice."

The entire club looked at him curiously. They all had the gazes of 'Why are you of all people saying that?' on their faces.

"We got exactly two hours. Why not just get one more practice session in?"

The members looked at each other confusedly. Yoonjung nodded cheerily and grabbed her script, with the other members grabbing their own slowly.

"Might as well start reading. Maru's right, we should practice."

Yoonjung sent a few signals over to Maru as she did so. During reading sessions, Maru was in charge of all the sound effects and notifying scene changes. The reading would start when he says 'the sound of the television starts playing'.

"No, not a reading," Maru responded.

"Huh?"

"A proper practice session. You know, a run."

Maru threw his script off to one side and looked at the eleven members.

"A proper practice session?" Yoonjung was the one who responded.

"Get the proper motions in and everything. I'll watch from the audience seat."

"What?"

"We've all been doing just reading for the past month. It's about time you try to act it all out again. Before you forget."

Maru scanned the club. They were all looking at him with annoyed eyes. He didn't have the right to say stuff like this, after all. Even so, Maru asked the entire club to practice.

"We've practiced enough."

Yoonjung was tightly gripping her script. Her eyes were shaking lightly. Maru looked deep into her eyes.

[This isn't right. I should be listening to Maru.]

Humans are creatures of habit. Once they get used to doing something, they don't try to stop. For the last month, the acting club developed a habit of making small talk and having an extended tea time. Coming out of that routine meant... change. At the same time, a fracture in the club.

Maru nodded, receiving disapproving gazes from most of the club. As he thought, these kids weren't dumb. They knew exactly what was wrong with the club. They just couldn't do anything about it, out of the fear that voicing the problem would only make things worse. In the end, they decided that keeping things the way it was would be the best course of action.

Maru scratched his eyebrow and repeated one more time.

"Let's practice. Before the club becomes even worse than it already is."

### **Chapter 53**

"Worse than it already is?"

Yoonjung stood up, clenching her script tightly. The atmosphere of the club turned cold and silent. This much, Maru already expected.

"It's been a month since you guys did proper practice. Summer break is a week away, and then it's time for the competition. Am I right?"

"Y-yes."

"So you should practice. We don't have much time left. It's July 15 today, and vacation starts on the 22nd. The competition begins in the beginning of August. We just have two weeks left."

"We're already perfect," Yoonjung claimed.

Her eyes were trembling, though. Maru had to wonder what the girl was feeling on the inside right now.

[Maru's right. We need to practice. But if I agree with him here...]

She knew they needed practice. But she couldn't say it. Poor girl. She was worried about the same thing everyone else was worried about here.

For a moment, the club members turned to look at Geunseok, who promptly looked down at the floor again.

"They say your body is the first to know if you skip practice for a day. Your friends are the second to know, and thirdly, the entire world. It's just a saying, sure, but there's a reason it exists. You know we've been playing around for a full month now."

"Playing around? We've been doing reading all this time," Yoonjung said, showing Maru her script.

To Maru, she just looked pathetic.

"Do you like plays, or do you like the club?"

"...Eh?"

"When you first came to our class, you said you needed students to make a play with, right?"

"R-right."

"I'll ask you again, then. Do you want to make a play, or do you want to keep the club going?"

“Well...”

Yoonjung wasn't able to answer him. Maru knew very well what her answer was. She was a passionate girl. She was honest in the face of acting. Obviously, she would like to make a play with other students.

But unfortunately for her and the second years, they shared a similar trauma amongst each other. From the event that broke the club last year. That was probably what kept the second years silent. From the fear that they might destroy the club by trying to solve it.

Until now, they probably weren't able to think about this thanks to Miso's intense training. But now, they were leading the club once again. They had more to think about.

Ironically, they were letting the club fall to ruin because they loved it so much.

“I must sound incredibly rude to all of you. You'll think that a mere spectator overstepping his boundaries. That's fine. I know very well that I have no right to get myself involved here.”

It was indeed very rude for a spectator to involve themselves. To begin with, Maru's never even experienced this entire ordeal with them. The difference between people who experienced something versus people who never experienced it was incredibly big.

0 and 1. The difference between something existing and not existing.

Maru only ever observed how hard these club members worked. Never once did he actually take part in their pain. That's why he had to endure the stinging gazes of the club without saying anything. Maru looked down for a second. His two friends were looking at him strangely.

If even his friends were looking at him like this... He didn't even need to look to know what the others were looking at him were like.

“But as a spectator, I can tell you with confidence that if there's one thing that I'm good at, it's spectating. Right now, the club is a complete mess. The fact that the second years are having to be mindful of what the first years are saying is a testament to that fact.”

Minsung's eyebrows ticked upwards in anger.

“Hey, Han Maru.”

“Apologies. But I'll listen to what you have to say later. You must be feeling this to a degree as well. You should know better than anyone that if this keeps going on, the club would be in ruins. If you're a big fan of the tea time club that this place is becoming, then I have nothing to say to you. You'll be able to perform the play, sure. But it'll be very different from the play you were practicing a full three months for. Like I said before, even normal people can tell the difference if a pro stops practicing for three days. We're amateurs. Amateurs who rested for a month. Do you really think that reading... Hah. Do you think that reading words on the script is the same thing as actually acting it out on stage? What the hell was all that practice on the stage a month ago about, then?”

“You really...”

Minsung tried to stand up, but got stopped by Joonghyuk. Maru gave Joonghyuk a curt nod before continuing.

"I'm well aware of what you're worried about."

Maru looked down at Geunseok. The boy slowly raised his head, feeling the gaze on him.

"You. Do you even want to do acting?"

"...I do. Obviously."

"That should be enough, then. At least you say you want to. Though I'm not very sure if that's how you really feel."

Geunseok's face stiffened. Yurim stepped up to defend him.

"Um... Aren't you being a little harsh? Geunseok also tried hard as well. He's suffered a lot. Can't you at least try to comfort him?"

That was strange. Yurim wasn't the type to say her opinions often. Did she like the boy?

"Everyone's been comforting him for a while. But personally, I can't comfort and cheer someone who isn't actually apologizing for his mistakes."

"Not apologizing? But Geunseok..."

"Have you ever heard him saying sorry? Can't you remember what he's been saying whenever that event gets brought up?"

"....."

Geunseok opened his mouth when Yurim fell silent.

"I apologized. I was very sorry for the rest of the club, so I kept..."

"Shifting the blame. You've never actually apologized."

"Me?"

Geunseok looked up stiffly, seemingly unaware of what he did.

"It's true that you made a mistake back then because of a crying child. The cause of your mistake was the child. But if an actor on a stage made a mistake because of an audience member, the fault lies in the actor for being unskilled."

"But the kid crying wasn't my fault."

"What about blankly staring at the judge afterwards? What about you acting like the entire play was over because of that one mistake? Do you even remember what you said in response to Iseul's line?"

"T-that..."

"Even a first-timer who has never looked at the script would've done better than you."

"Hey! Maru!"

Yurim shouted angrily. She immediately looked away, surprised by the volume of her own voice. Her face had gone completely red from embarrassment.

A fracture. Wherever Maru looked, there was a fracture in the club. It looked like they were about to collapse at any moment. The atmosphere the second years tried so hard to maintain was crumbling everywhere. Maru felt the club members glaring at him even more so than before. Even the second years were angrily looking at him.

Understandable. Despite being a club member, Maru had no part in any of this.

'I'm losing out on a lot by doing this.'

If it wasn't for Taesik's request, or hearing that Miso cried, Maru wouldn't have done this at all. But now after receiving the request, he had to see it through to completion.

"Are you going to keep playing around? You must be doing this knowing that you're going to lose all future competitions, I assume?"

"Han Maru!"

Yoonjung stepped forward. Her eyes were colored with anger and shame.

"I wasn't supposed to be the one giving this speech. This was your job. Are you a fan of the good old tea time club? Fine, then. I'll gladly buy snacks for you any time. I'll gladly talk about the food I ate just yesterday like you've been doing. I won't say a word about acting. Is that what you want?"

"We could've handled this without you doing this."

"Is that so?"

"Yes!"

"So why didn't you?"

"...We were going to. Once Geunseok calmed down."

Maru shook his head.

"More excuses. Geunseok shifts the blame to the kid, and now you're shifting it to Geunseok. Everyone's just blaming each other. What are we supposed to do, then? I guess we have to catch that little kid and get an apology out of him?"

"Stop saying that!"

Yoonjung shouted, throwing her script on the ground. Maru smiled bitterly inside. This was why people hated whistleblowers. The bitter truth never felt good to hear.

"You were just refusing to see the truth. Out of the fear that the club would just fall apart like last year. Why didn't you nudge the club forward? Why didn't you ask to practice?"

"Stop spouting bullshit. We're watching all of you carefully. We just didn't say anything because we were waiting for the right moment."

"Waiting for the right moment? How? You saw, didn't you? You can wait, despite seeing what was happening with the club?"

“Yes.”

“Well in that case, I can only say that you’re blind. You just pretended to see things. You need to look at this at face value. Impartial, without any personal opinions clouding your judgements. If you just take a second and take Geunseok’s pain, the club members, the event from last year and such out of the equation, things become a lot easier to look at. All we have here is a club that doesn’t practice. A club that just goes straight home after 5pm. A club that, despite all its current problems, talks about winning its next competition like it’s eating a piece of cake. Even a kid can see that there’s a problem with this.”

Maru looked down for a second with a sigh. He came up here with his mind already made up to do this, but it was still very hard. He wasn’t made to say stuff like this.

‘Well, I’m here now, so might as well.’

“Let’s make it clear once and for all. Are we here for tea time, or are we here to make a play?”

He had nothing to say now. Maru picked up his script, and dragged his chair into the middle of the auditorium. He opened the seat back up where Miso always used to sit, and sat down.

“So, are you going to practice?”

Maru looked at the eleven people in front of him. Save for a few exceptions, everyone looked very pissed. He managed to get himself ingrained into all of them as an annoyance who only knew how to talk, no doubt. Not that they were wrong.

“Fine! I’ll do it! We’ll do it!”

The second years got up first, and stepped onto the stage with their arms crossed. The first years followed suit. Daemyung and Dojin gave Maru a small smile before getting to their positions.

Now, the three students from the faculty design were all that were left. Soyeon was the first to step up. Yurim and Geunseok glared at Maru for a second before taking their positions as well.

“You better watch carefully. We didn’t just play around for a month. Even if we did, the three months of work we put into this wasn’t just for show. You probably don’t know that. After all, you never worked as hard as us. We still remember how difficult those practice sessions were. Practice, now? There’s a reason why we only did reading sessions until now.”

Yoonjung spat out words like a venomous snake. Despite her words though, she didn’t look angry at all. She looked pretty apologetic, actually. Maru understood. She was still a high schooler. She didn’t really know how to hide her real thoughts, and that was fine.

Maru closed his mouth and gave them a nod.

“Please show me that my worries were unfounded.”

“Gladly.”

The eyes of the eleven members shone. Maru started the play off by saying the words, “the sound of the television starts playing”.

The play was messed up from the very beginning. The student who was supposed to walk in first came in a little bit late, because he didn't care so much about where he was standing on stage. He looked very awkward with his acting as well.

Maru noticed the faces of the ten students outside of the stage stiffen immediately.

It's been a month. A pretty short period of time. But that was also the time it took for the club to get completely settled into their play.

The play continued straight to its end, just like a real run. Geunseok finished his monologue in the end, and...

"The sound of the television starts playing again."

Maru raised his head. The club members were looking at each other with a troubled face. That is...

They all looked like they just chewed on shit.

"Absolutely perfect. I can say with certainty that you'll win at the college competition with this."

Might as well go all out, since he started this to begin with. Maru left his script on his chair and walked back to the spot with all the snacks. He picked up one of the bags and started eating.

"Come back here. You clearly don't need practice. Yoonjung was right, you guys are at the peak of your skills right now."

"....."

Maybe he was being a little too rude here? Maru flinched a little on the inside, but it was whatever. He made sure that the club wouldn't become a casual place for tea time with this. From here, it would be up to them to go back to their usual practice sessions, or...

'To just give up.'

The auditorium was silent, save for Maru's crunches every once in a while.

## **Chapter 54**

"...Phew."

It was 6 am. Maru got dressed and stepped out into the living room. Everyone was still asleep in the house, so he made sure to try to be as quiet as possible.

"Summer is summer, huh."

The sun was already coming up, despite the time. He breathed in deeply expecting some cool morning air, but it wasn't even that cool. It was August now. Two weeks after summer break started. Maru shook his hands and feet, thinking about how fast time was passing for him.

His dad was the first to greet him after he came back from a run around the park nearby.

"Been out for a run?"

"Yes. It's a bit hot out."



“Of course it is. It’s midsummer. Your mom’s still sleeping, so try to be quiet.”

“Yes. Good luck at work.”

“Sure, thanks. You work hard as well.”

“Yessir.”

Maru chugged a cup of water after bidding farewell to his dad. As he tilted his head back forward after drinking, he noticed a family picture in front of him. In the photo, his smiling dad was holding two small children. There weren’t any white hairs on his head back then. Maru looked back. He did see quite a few white hairs on his dad’s head a moment ago.

‘He’s getting... old. Hopefully nothing happens to him.’

It’d be nice if he knew if anything happens to his family in the future, but unfortunately his memory was fairly blurry in that department. The only thing he remembered to begin with was his sister’s divorce.

‘I suppose saving a person’s life does change the future immensely.’

Any memories that might allow him to have a significant impact on society was gone. Just like memories about his family. It seemed that god wanted to place an equal value on a person’s life and the flow of money.

‘What a kind god.’

It’d be nice if this god worked a little harder to achieve a fairer society. At least that would prevent good people from giving up on life.

After thinking of a few more things on a similar vein, Maru stepped out of the shower. It was a good time to stop. Especially when he started thinking about why god existed.

God would do God's job, and Maru would do Maru’s job. He was in no place to worry about an omnipotent dude’s life.

Maru made breakfast and woke up his mom. At some point, mom gave up on her side job due to a pain in her wrist. She said she could work again after a few days of rest, but gave up after dad and Maru got together to stop her.

“You should’ve slept more. I could’ve made breakfast,” mom said, grabbing a spoon in front of her.

She’s been repeating that same line for the last few days, but she hasn’t gotten out of the bed herself as of late. She was looking a lot better after she stopped working as well. To the point where she was going out for daily exercises, even.

“Don’t worry and just eat. How’s your hand?”

“It’s fine now. What’s up with you boys and worrying so much?”

Mom still smiled as she said this. She must be feeling a bit thankful.

“I’ll be going to work then.”

“Right, be careful of cars.”

“Sure.”

Maru stepped outside with a cap on. As soon as summer break started, he found himself a part time job at a gas station. He was able to start immediately, since they just started looking for a short term part timer themselves. The pay was 2800 won an hour. Quite a lot for a gas station.

The auntie who took care of the gas station’s food was the first to greet him when he arrived.

“You’re here, Maru? Here, have some cold seaweed soup.”

“Thank you.”

After drinking some of the icy soup, Maru put on his oil-stained work clothes and got right to work. There were two gas stations side by side next to a 6-lane road. This was a place where daily revenue would change depending on how good the employees were at catching attention.

Maru waved a towel towards the cars with blinking headlights.

“Sir!! We have the best gas here, promise! I’ll wipe down your windows if you come here! Come, come!”

Maybe it was because they saw Maru’s frantic handwaves, but some of the cars that were about to go into the other gas station turned to come to him.

“Come on man. That’s a little too much.”

An employee in a blue uniform complained from the other station. Despite what he was saying though, he didn’t look all that annoyed.

“I’m sorry!”

“You should just come here instead. They pay you 2800 over there, right? We’ll give you a 100 more.”

“I can’t be THAT rude to the manager here. I’ll go over there during my winter break though.”

“Sure, sure.”

The man walked back into the building, fiddling playfully with one of his gloves. There was a reason why he didn’t care so much about what Maru did just now.

Right under the logo of Maru’s gas station were the words, “brothers gas station”. The managers of the two gas stations... were brothers.

“Welcome!”

There were a lot of cars coming in. Probably because it was the beginning of summer. No matter how hard Maru worked, he could never get the line of cars to decrease.

\* \* \*

“Here, have some food!”

The manager called Maru over. Maru switched places with the midshift and stepped up to the office. He sat down to eat with the manager, two employees, and the auntie.

"You're made for the market, aren't you? You have quite the voice," said one of the employees.

The manager smiled brightly in response.

"Our revenue did go up, recently."

"Probably just because of the season. I didn't do much."

"Haha, look at how humble this kid is, big bro. Can't see kids like these too often nowadays."

Maru smiled embarrassedly in response.

"Maru, would you like to try washing buses?"

"Washing?"

"The guy in charge of it had to resign. Want to do it while we look for someone to take over?"

"Sure, the tips would be nice."

The machines usually made quick work of the buses, but a person did have to stay at the end to make sure the machines didn't miss anything. It was a tiring job, but if done well, Maru would score some tips from the bus drivers occasionally.

"You should be able to do well. Oh, and by the way, how long are you here for, by the way?"

"Summer break ends on the 24th, so probably before then. I'll tell you a week prior."

"Wow, look at him. This kid really looks like he's had a few jobs before."

"Seriously."

Maru took a quick swig of the makgeolli that the employees offered him. The cold drink washed away the heat inside him immediately. After clearing his bowl of rice, he stood up from his spot.

"I'll get back to work, then."

"You should rest."

"I rested plenty. I'd rather not spend my hours getting paid on slacking off."

"Haha, sure. Here, take this, Maru. It's ice water. You can just go straight to the car wash area."

Maru walked off to where he was pointed with a nod.

\* \* \*

5 pm. Maru took off his work clothes after the manager told him to come in.

'I actually earned quite a bit.'

Maru took out the 5,000 won and 10,000 won bills from his uniform and stuck them inside his pants. The bus drivers seemed rather happy about a younger kid cleaning their buses so well. If he added the 20,000 won that a truck driver gave him earlier, he's earned more than 50,000 from tips alone today. Well over his daily wage.

"It's time for you to go home, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Are you doing anything during dinnertime, Maru?"

"Nothing, really."

"You should have dinner here then. We're going out for oyster barbeque."

"Can I join?"

"Of course you can!"

Maru decided to stay. He was quite a big fan of oysters. He sat down on the office sofa and tried to take out his phone. Right there, he noticed a bike magazine sitting on the table in front of him.

'Bicycle life?'

If memory serves, this was one of the few Korean biking magazines out right now. He picked up the magazine and started flipping through it. This specific issue seemed to be about mountain biking.

"You must like biking a lot, sir."

"Me? With this body? Stop it with the jokes," said the manager, slapping his belly lightly.

"Oh, is this someone else's?"

"No..."

The man trailed off a little bit. He smiled a little bitterly before walking over to the sofa. He opened one of the drawers below the table to reveal many more bike magazines. He picked up one of them.

This one wasn't even unwrapped.

"My son seems to like them."

"Your son?"

"Yes. I know he really likes bikes, but not much more than that. I bought these to study, but I have no idea what any of them are talking about. Before I knew it, they kind of multiplied like this."

Maru picked up the dusty magazine. This one was a foreign one. Filled with English, from top to bottom. It must've cost a fair amount for the man to buy this.

"Ugh, I don't even know how it happened."

"Is there a problem?"

"...It's nothing. Don't worry about it. I shouldn't be talking about stuff like this with a kid."

The manager put the magazine back in the drawer. A father who studies to understand his son...

"You're a good father."

The man's face stiffened slightly. He shook his head lightly.

"I'm not a very good father."

"If you're trying this hard, I'd say you're pretty good."

"...You talk like you're my age, you know that? You definitely don't talk like a teenager."

"I did age quite a bit mentally."

"Hahaha, so you say."

"I don't know what's going on, but why don't you try talking to your son? Any child would be a fan of a father that tries this hard."

"I wish. But it's been quite a while since I last spoke to my son. I don't really know what to say to him."

"How long..."

"About two years."

"Two years?"

"I'm a bad father. I should've paid more attention."

The man sat back down on the sofa after standing up to leave. He took off his baseball cap to lightly graze his sweaty hair.

"He used to follow me everywhere when he was young. I would play with him a lot, too. But I paid him less attention whenever I got busy. I have an older daughter, too. She's turning twenty nine this year. My son is about your age. Maru, you said you were a first year in high school, right?"

"Yes. Your son was born quite late, wasn't he?"

"He was. He used to follow his big sister so well, but then... Hah, I wonder why I'm even telling you this. So sorry for making you sit through this."

The man stood up, whispering to himself, "to think I'm being consoled by a kid..."

"It doesn't matter who the listener is, if all you need to do is to rant. If you ever feel conflicted, just tell me. I'll be there to listen. Ah, I'll be taking pay, though."

"Hah, you have a real way with words. You'll do well out in society."

Just "well"? I've already lived that life for over a decade.

Maru smiled lightly and accepted a cup of tea from the manager.

"By the way, Maru".

"Yes?"

“You look like you’d be good at studying. Why didn’t you just do that? That’d help your life more.”

The man stared at him worryingly, which made him scratch his head awkwardly.

“I’m not really suited for studying. I studied more than most people, but I just can’t focus afterwards.”

“You were really into that book when you were resting the other day, though?”

“That’s the weird part. It’s almost like god’s telling me I’m not suited to studying. At this point, I might as well just accept it as a fact.”

“Look at you, worrying about life already. Well, it somehow suits you though. Don’t try so hard to make chump change though. I wouldn’t tell other kids this, you know?”

“Studying isn’t the only way, just one of them.”

“Haha. I know you’re smart, so I’ll believe you for now.”

Maru smiled. He was thankful that the manager worried about him enough to tell him this. He was studying more than enough as is. Enough to get third place in class. As long as he studied hard enough, he might even be able to go to a college in Seoul.

‘I have no idea where I want to go, though...’

Maru looked around the gas station. It’d be nice to run a place like this, as long as he had the money. He doesn’t have any though, so that’s a pass.

“Rest up.”

The manager ran outside as soon as he saw a car come in.

\* \* \*

An oyster shell popped open on top of a coal grill. Maru took the last one. After dipping it in the chili sauce, he took his gloves off.

“You should eat more,” the manager said.

“I ate plenty. Ah, auntie, thank you for the food.”

The auntie gave Maru a roast sweet potato as he was about to leave. One of the employees commented, “She’s never given me one after all these years. So sad, so sad,” as they watched from the side.

“I’ll be going then, sir.”

“Alright, be safe.”

“Yes.”

Maru stepped outside after saying his farewells. He got out of the red gas station, and stepped past the blue one. The manager from the blue station noticed Maru and gave him a wave. Maru bowed again. As he made his way over to his bike, his phone vibrated.

A message. He took it out to check who sent it.

“...They’re doing well, aren’t they?”

Maru put down his phone to look at the sky for a second. The moon was shining especially bright tonight.

[Yo, Maru! We got first place! The prize was 300,000 won!]

It was from Dojin.

## **Chapter 55**

“Have you been here before?”

Bada was pretty amazed watching her brother navigate Dongdaemun market like it was his home.

Dongdaemun market. It was the place to be if you were short on cash but still needed clothes. Bada was planning on coming here with friends before summer break ended, but they had a hard time scheduling. She gave up on going with them and came with her big brother instead.

‘Come to think of it, I’ve been to a lot of places with him.’

It was almost as if her brother became an entirely different person after going to high school. She found it cringey and weird at first, but at some point she became used to it. After the break started, she even went out to watch a lot of movies with him. Lots of restaurants, too.

Her brother was the one who asked her to go. At first, when she told her friends about it, they all thought he was planning something. But when this treatment continued, her friends’ words changed.

Your brother’s so kind. Or nice. Or both. To be honest, Bada was pretty proud to hear that. At the same time, she wondered even more as to why he became like this.

“A few times,” her brother answered her.

A few times? When? Bada stuck close to her brother. There were too many people here, and she didn’t want to get lost in the crowd.

“If you want to go somewhere for clothes, go to apm, doota, or migliore. The people over in this part of the market don’t like dealing with students. They tend to just overcharge and be done with it.”

“But you’re a student too.”

“I have experience already, you know?”

Maru stepped into the market with a grin.

Later that day, Maru entered a restaurant near the market. After ordering some food, he inquired while watching his sister admire her new clothes.

“Satisfied?”

“Of course! I should definitely come with friends next time. I got everything for so cheap! Thanks.”

“Make sure to only go to the places I told you about, then.”

“Sure. But by the way, are you really fine using all your money like that?”

“You can always pay me back when you grow up. Also, when you need more allowance from now, just come to me. You know how hard mom’s working, don’t you?”

“Ah, yeah.”

Bada’s excited expression immediately fell.

“Don’t get so sad all of the sudden. You can do whatever you want.”

The lady at the kitchen brought them the food Maru ordered. When Maru handed Bada a fork and a plate, she looked at him a bit strangely.

“Um, brother?”

“What?”

“You’re not sick, are you?”

She seemed incredibly worried about him. How cute.

“I’ve just turned seventeen. Why’d I be sick?”

“No, you’re just treating me too well.”

“So, you don’t like it?”

“No, of course I like it.”

“Well, that’s fine then. Let’s eat. We should go back before the sun sets.”

Bada started eating with a nod. She happily munched on some fries, seemingly forgetting about her worries. Maru watched her for a bit before turning to look at some of his own spoils. They were leather gloves and a handkerchief for his dad, and a coat for his mom. They were on sale right now, so Maru didn’t hesitate to grab them. Since he was able to haggle down the price a little bit more with the lady who had them, he considered this a great success.

‘Bada’s happy, too.’

He still remembered hearing about how his sister was divorced in his past life. He also remembered his distinct lack of empathy. Back then, the relationship between the two was practically that of strangers. No, even worse. He probably would’ve felt more sorry for a divorced stranger. In this life, his sister was smiling at him very happily.

‘Perhaps this is why god likes to give people second chances.’

He silently thanked the grandma who gave him the chance to live again. If not for her, his sister would still be a stranger to him.

“Want more?”



“Yeah!”

Maru ordered another serving of food from the lady in the kitchen.

\* \* \*

Maru’s mom couldn’t say anything even after looking at what was inside the paper bag.

“You don’t like it?”

“No, of course I do. Where did you get the money, though?”

“I work, remember?”

“You should’ve used that money for yourself.”

“Bah, just take it. I know how few clothes you have in the closet. Just try it on during winter. It’s not that expensive, but you can even show it off if you want to. Also, this is for dad.”

Maru’s mom felt her heart tighten a little. Since when did her son become this mature? She wouldn’t feel worried even if she ended up letting him go right now. He looked like he would be able to take care of himself. On the other hand, she was a little sad. To think her son wouldn’t need her help anymore... Her nose started to tingle a little bit. Tears threatened to stream down her face at any moment.

“You should rest.”

Maru stood up and left the room. He knew exactly what was going through her mind. Maru’s mom started wiping off her tears just as the door closed. After a few more seconds, she fumbled around to find her phone, and began calling a friend of hers.

“Oh, hey, Yoonji’s mom? Yeah, it’s me. No, it’s nothing serious. But my son recently bought me this coat. Yeah, with his money. It’s amazing. I tell him I don’t need stuff like this, but he keeps giving me more. First he gets third place in his class, and now this... hohoho.”

Maru’s mom continued calling all of her friends after this. The beginning of the phone call was always the same.

“You see, my son...”

\* \* \*

“I worked pretty hard,” Maru said, looking at a calendar on his table.

He had three days left until school began. He stopped working two days ago, and his manager ended up tacking on 200 won more on his hourly wage for his last paycheck.

[You worked hard.]

The manager was a rare person to see. From a manager’s perspective, it was difficult for them to care so much about a part-timer. They should know better than anyone how scary an extra hundred or two hundred won on an hourly wage could be.

[We should eat together some time.]

Perhaps that was why one of the most commonly used lies in Korea didn't sound so light this time. Maru took out the white envelope he put in his drawer.

"400,000 won left, huh."

He should probably be fine until winter break, as long as he didn't waste too much money. He wasn't going to get a job during the summer, but he changed his mind after watching his mom hurt her hand. Having some money was better than having none, after all.

After previewing some of the material he would be learning in the second semester of school, Maru laid down on the floor. He had texts from a few of his friends asking to play games, but they were ignored. He decided not to play anything outside of a set time.

As he was scrolling through the pages of a book in his hand, his phone began to ring loudly.

[Instructor Miso]

He stared for a few seconds before turning the phone down to silent mode. He got back to reading a book.

"To further one's greed, and to return to propriety."

He hadn't thought about that phrase in a long while. It was a sentence derived from Confucius. Back in his past, he spent considerable amount of time thinking about what humanity was because of it. Especially back when he worked as a road manager.

"Do not watch what is improper; do not listen to what is improper; do not speak improperly, and do not act improperly."

After speaking what sounded like a chant, Maru smiled.

"I still remember it, huh."

He ended up memorizing the words at some point. It was a quote from Confucius, to ignore all that was improper. Those words spoke to him quite deeply back in his road managing days. But...

"To further one's greed, and to return to propriety."

Those words didn't resonate with him so deeply this time around. Was it because of the times, or was it because he fundamentally changed as a person? Maybe it was because he realized that reality wasn't kind enough to let people chase after ideals. As he thought, he turned another page of his book.

Right then, his phone started vibrating. It was Daemyung. Looking at his clock, it was already past 9pm.

'Why's he calling now?'

He put his phone next to his face as he thought this. At the same time,

- Oh, so you're willing to ignore MY call?!!

Miso's screams hit him straight in the ears.

\* \* \*

'Pretty cool tonight.'

Maru stepped out of the house dressed in a brown cardigan, white shirt, shorts and slippers. If he just lost those cardigans, he'd look like an old man on the streets.

[Come out. You have ten minutes.]

His ears were still ringing a little from Miso's shout. To think she'd call him with Daemyung's phone... He really couldn't ignore him. She even said she was near his home. How'd she know that?

"I wonder if Dojin told her."

Maru stepped into the streets with his slippers. Every convenience store on it was opening their parasols and were selling beer. Pubs were doing great. It was a cool friday night, after all. As Maru walked down the road for a bit, he found a bbq store. One that sold thin-sliced pork. Even from here, he could hear loud noises coming from one of the outdoor tables.

"Ugh,"

It was the acting club. He got the message about them getting first place around two weeks ago, winning 300,000 won. Were they celebrating?

Soyeon was the first to notice him. The girl raised her chopstick hand a little awkwardly in greeting. The other members of the club all looked at him as a result.

"Hey! Maru!"

Miso waved him closer with a shout. Instead of stepping right in there, Maru assessed the kids for a little bit.

Awkward smiles.

Expressionless faces.

A little bit of hostility,

and a few apologetic looks.

Everyone had different expressions on their faces.

'Well, I did expect this.'

Maru walked towards the table. He said hello to Miso, then gave a nod to the second years.

"Why did you ignore my calls?"

"I was tired."

"Why didn't you ignore Daemyung's?"

"I wasn't that tired."

"You!"

Miso tried to get Maru into a headlock. Maru just stepped back a little to avoid it.

“Oh?”

“Did you drink?”

Maru could smell the alcohol from the woman’s mouth. Her face was pretty red, too. Come to think of it, she said she called Taesik out to talk with whenever she got drunk. Did she talk a lot whenever she drinks?

‘Then again, she talks a lot even without alcohol.’

Maru ignored Miso and sat down on the table. He wasn’t planning on making things awkward for himself, so he started eating immediately.

“So, who’s paying?”

“The instructor is. She wanted to see us before school began.”

“Aha.”

Maru nodded. They must’ve used the money they won from the competition already. He should’ve expected this. Miso was the only person who’s willing to call on him now. Maru took a few bites of the food, thinking that he should leave after eating a little bit. Dojin tried to talk to him, but Maru just shook his head in response.

The entire table had become quiet. Maru told the lot of them ‘congrats on winning’ and ‘the food is delicious’ before putting down his chopsticks.

“Thank you for the food, instructor.”

He stood up from his seat. The entire club looked at him.

“I’ll be leaving. You guys can talk now.”

He noticed a few members twitching their mouths, visible indications that they had something to say. Maru decided to ignore them. There was one reason why many people hated social gatherings. Because they’d have to eat food with people they disliked. And...

Right now, that person everyone disliked was him.

‘Well, at least I feel pretty full.’

Maru stepped out into the road with a satisfied smile. But before he could take another step, someone grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back. He was pulled with enough force to make him lose his balance, yet he was able to backpedal and turned around easily.

“.....”

As he expected, it was Miso who pulled him. The woman was looking at him with difficulty written across her face.

“Can we talk?”

“You know you can’t leave them right now. You’re the center of the club’s attention. If you want to talk, just call me. I’ll take it this time.”

Maru turned back around, ready to go back to his house. But.

“...Let’s talk. Ugh, please! I’m sorry! I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I... Waah. I’m sorry! I’m really sorry!”

Miso sat down on the sidewalk and started crying. Watching a woman nearing her thirties cry in the middle of the road was... quite a shocking and confusing sight. Especially if that said woman was pulling on your shorts!

“I-Instructor! My pants are going to come off!”

“Waaaah! I said I’m sorry! I did!”

She was way more drunk than she made herself look out to be, huh. Maru quickly turned to look back at the restaurant. The club members were all looking away with an embarrassed expression. This only made Maru more embarrassed in turn.

In the end...

“Fine, fine. I’ll talk, so please let go. Before you actually take my pants off.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Sniff.”

Miso stood up, pretending as if the last thirty seconds didn’t happen. It was so ridiculous to see that Maru almost let out a laugh.

‘She must make a ton of people tired when she drinks.’

Maru couldn’t help but think of Taesik for a second. To think he had to deal with this for ten straight years?

‘He’s the reincarnation of Buddha. He must be. Or Jesus.’

Maru shook his head as he propped Miso up with his leg.

## **Chapter 56**

Yoonjung put down her chopsticks as she watched Maru leave. The meat was sizzling on the grill, but she didn’t dare pick it up.

“Maybe I should’ve invited him to the last party after all,” Yoonjung whispered.

Her voice was small enough to be buried by all the noises around them, but it was still heard by all of the club members on their table.

“He left because he didn’t like it. It would’ve been weird to call him,” Geunseok said.

The boy regained his confidence again after the competition. As a matter of fact, he was able to show off even more skill than in the regionals. They didn't slip even once, and thanks to it, they were able to get first place.

A few members agreed with Geunseok's words. The first to speak was Yurim. The brown-haired girl picked up the pork belly Geunseok gave her as she spoke.

"Geunseok's right. Things would've been awkward if Maru was here. I mean, didn't you see what just happened? He has no shame. He just ate a few pieces of meat and left without even saying sorry. He ruined the entire mood. He's too much."

Yoonjung wanted to retort, but couldn't.

'I have no right to say anything to them.'

That day, Maru picked a fight with the club members. He used all the right words to get them all mad. Like a woodpecker who kept pecking at their wounds. After that event, the club members got to practicing again.

At first, they began practicing to reclaim their lost pride, but at some point, they practiced to prove Maru wrong. Back then, Yoonjung didn't even know what their problem was.

'No, I knew all along. I just decided to ignore it. Because if I didn't... I would get attacked.'

Maru told them to look. He told them to stop pretending, and look at the club for real. Thanks to him, the club was able to examine the problem properly for a brief second.

'...He had to make us act, in order to make us look at the problem.'

The main reason why they started practicing again was because the play they performed that day was horrible. Maru told them to look at it directly. Yoonjung had to wonder, what was Maru thinking when he told them that? It didn't seem like he said those words just because he was mad. That would be very unlike him.

Maru was a spectator. He was never the type to step in aggressively to taunt the rest of the club.

"Yoonjung," Joonghyuk called out at her.

He was smiling, but his smile had no trace of happiness in it. It looked like a mask to hide his current feelings with.

"Let's eat."

Only then did Yoonjung snap back to reality. She noticed the club members looking at her now. Even Geunseok and Yurim seemed troubled by her. All of the sudden, Yoonjung felt like she stepped into foreign territory. Was this really the acting club?

"Y-yeah! Let's eat!"

That was the only thing she was able to say. As she stuffed meat into her mouth, she thought to herself for a second. She finally realized what made her feel so nervous when instructor Miso asked the club to meet up.

\* \* \*

“Come back to your senses. You’re an adult already, don’t you feel embarrassed?”

“Who said I’m over thirty?! I’m still twenty nine! I’m not in my thirties! I’m not!!”

“.....”

Maru had to wonder why he was reminded of the time he had to carry his boss back after a company meal. He dragged Miso to a nearby playground, absolutely convinced that people’s weights nearly doubled after getting fully drunk. After arriving at the old playground, Maru laid Miso down on one of the benches.

“Phew.”

The unexpected workout tired him out completely. He wiped his forehead and looked around. Thankfully, there was a convenience store right next to them. Maru gave Miso a short glance.

“Nothing should happen while I’m gone...”

He ran over to the convenience store to buy Miso a hangover drink, and a soda for himself.

“These things are expensive as always.”

The tiny bottle cost him 5,000 won. During the time when a full bowl of soup with rice would only set him back by 3,000 won.

“Take this, instructor.”

Maru handed the bottle to Miso, but the woman didn’t budge. Maru didn’t want to waste time. He pinched Miso’s cheeks to open her mouth, and stuffed the drink into it. Miso coughed once after drinking it, and sat up with a small moan.

“You have no manners...”

“Just drink this already. What do you even think you’re doing in front of a student?”

“Ugh. You remind me too much of my dad. So annoying.”

“I’ll leave then, if I’m so annoying. You should go back home on a taxi.”

“Hey, hey! Where do you think you’re going?!”

“It’s 10pm. I need to go home.”

“...Ugh.”

Miso stumbled forward and grabbed Maru’s arm.

“Don’t leave yet.”

“If you want to rant, I can call someone for you. Taesik’s good, right?”

“Youu! If you call him! I’m going to cry! Ugh...”

Watching the usually strict instructor act like this was actually quite cute. Come to think of it, as long as she closed her mouth, she was quite the looker. It was just her blonde hair that made her look intimidating. Without it, she'd have the appearance of a proper lady.

Maru shook his head and walked back to the bench. There were a lot of people outside, since the night was cool. Even this old playground had a few visitors. The last thing he wanted to deal with was a crying woman in front of all these people. Experiencing that once in his life was more than enough already.

"Can we rest for a bit?"

\* \* \*

After saying their goodbyes, Yurim quietly made her way over to Geunseok. The boy grabbed her hand gently.

"Want to walk for a bit?"

"Sure."

Yurim liked Geunseok's hand. Grabbing the boy's big hand tended to calm her down. After she started grabbing his hand, the time she spent on her phone drastically decreased. It felt like his hand was making sure she wouldn't get nervous without her phone again.

'Warm.'

It was a hot summer, but she didn't feel hot at all. As a matter of fact, she wanted to get closer to Geunseok. The boy changed his grip to clasp her hand gently. That calmed Yurim down even more.

Geunseok was like a tree. A tree to lean on.

"It was a bit awkward a moment ago," Geunseok said.

Yurim had to agree.

"For real. I didn't think he'd really come out."

"Is it really that difficult to say sorry? He almost managed to split the club apart back then."

"Yeah, yeah. He was saying all sorts of strange stuff. Especially about practice. We were going to practice anyway in a few weeks, but he acted like he knew everything."

"He probably wanted to try sitting in a pedestal or something."

"Yeah. I thought well of him until then. Turns out he was a total fake."

Yurim looked up at Geunseok after speaking. The boy was looking down at her with a proud smile. What a beautiful smile. Yurim couldn't be more proud of the fact that Geunseok was her boyfriend.

"Let's not hate on him too much though. He's a friend."

Geunseok gently rubbed her cheek. What a thoughtful boyfriend. To think he'd still care so much for Maru after that...

"Okay."



Yurim tightened her grip a little more around Geunseok's hand. Right then, she felt her phone vibrate inside her pocket. It was Soyeon.

"Give me a second," Yurim picked up the call. "Yeah. Soyeon?"

- Where are you? I thought we were going back home together.

"Oh, really? I'm going back with Geunseok."

- Really? You should've told me.

"Sorry. I forgot."

- ...You've been forgetting a lot.

"Mm?"

- It's nothing. Have fun. But don't show off too much in front of me, you hear? I don't want to die of jealousy just yet.

Soyeon hung up with a small laughter. Yurim felt even better after her best friend's call.

'She must be a bit jealous.'

Then again, anyone would be jealous of having Geunseok as a boyfriend. He was good at studying, good looking, and he was good at acting. The boy was just good at everything.

"Want to go to a karaoke?" Yurim asked, shaking her hand.

"I can't sing though," Geunseok smiled nervously in response.

How cute. Yurim could easily tell that despite looking so reliable, Geunseok was actually a little child inside.

'I'll take care of Geunseok.'

Yurim relied on Geunseok. She could also tell that the boy was relying on her as well. Geunseok only managed to look so firm and upstanding because of her. What an amazing relationship. Geunseok meant the world to her, and she must mean the world to Geunseok as well.

After the day she almost got kidnapped, Yurim started relying on different things for her survival. At first, it was her phone. After she entered high school, it was Soyeon. But things were different now. Geunseok needed her. She was no longer someone who needed to rely on something else to survive. She was a reliable tree that others could lean on.

Yurim grasped Geunseok's hand even harder out of pride.

"I'll teach you, don't worry."

"You better. I really can't sing."

"No worries."

Yurim grinned. She could feel Geunseok's warm gaze on her face.

"I'm so happy," Geunseok said.

"Of what?"

"Of the fact that I met you."

"Psh, you just realized?"

That day when Maru messed up the club, Yurim chased after Geunseok as if she was possessed by something. Then, she hugged him. She didn't know where that courage came from. But she somehow knew that Geunseok would look at her if she did so.

The result? They ended up becoming a great couple. In that sense, Yurim was a little thankful towards Maru. If he didn't do what he did that day, they wouldn't be couples now.

'I guess I'll be a little nicer to him next time we meet.'

Yurim started walking with Geunseok's hand in hand. Under the dark blue sky, the two didn't seem to have a single worry in the world.

\* \* \*

Soyeon put her phone back in her pocket. If she remembered correctly, Yurim was the one who asked to go back together to begin with. She forgot that? It was a bit disappointing to hear, but the girl wanted to go back with her boyfriend. There wasn't much Soyeon could do about that.

"What are you doing here?"

Soyeon heard a voice from behind her. It was Dojin and Daemyung.

"What, you're still here?" Soyeon asked.

"Yeah. Well, it's still vacation, after all. I told my mom I'd be coming in late already."

Dojin responded with the ever-happy face he always put on.

"Um, Soyeon. Are you going home?" Daemyung asked.

It'd be nice if this guy could show some confidence. It was pretty weird how skilled he became on stage.

"I was thinking of going home, yeah. Why?"

"Well, if you aren't in a hurry, I was wondering if you would like to join us for karaoke. Ah, there's a senior joining us as well."

"Senior?"

Soyeon looked behind the two of them in curiosity. She could see Danmi coming out of the convenience store. Joonghyuk, Yoonjung and Minsung were elsewhere.

"Ah, Soyeon!"

Danmi came running towards them, frantically waving her hand. To be honest, Soyeon was a pretty big fan of Danmi. Yoonjung was too energetic to deal with, and the two male second years were a little

difficult to deal with. Out of everyone, Danmi seemed to be the most casual out of all of the second years.

“You’re coming too?”

“Yeah. Let’s go. I don’t want our meeting to end on a weird note just yet.”

Soyeon found herself nodding. Thank goodness she wasn’t the only one who thought that.

“Maru... I wonder if he’s ok.”

Perhaps she shouldn’t have opened her mouth about the subject, but she was worried.

“Don’t know. I actually don’t know much about Maru. Don’t know what he thinks, don’t know what he wants.”

“Agreed.”

“Yeah.”

Dojin and Daemyung agreed pretty much instantly. The three of them said Maru was ‘definitely a good guy, but hard to predict’, before moving onto instructor Miso for a bit.

“Well, in any case, we should really be going to that karaoke. You coming, Soyeon?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Let’s go sing our hearts out. Also, Soyeon, you need to go on a diet with me.”

“Come on, I told you I don’t really care about weight.”

“No. I don’t want to diet by myself, so I want you to join me. Yoonjung just doesn’t get fat to begin with, it’s frustrating.”

“That’s true. Yoonjung doesn’t gain weight at all. She eats more than me, too.”

“Seriously! God is so unfair.”

“Yeah. Wait, I don’t care about my weight, so I don’t want to diet.”

“You look cute that way, but I totally look ugly if I gain weight.”

Danmi dragged Soyeon away, blabbering away as she went. Soyeon realized that Danmi was being a little unnatural. Almost as if the girl was trying her best to clear out the awkward air that Maru created.

“Fine, I’ll go, I’ll go!”

Soyeon stepped out to the front of the group with Danmi, trying to stop thinking about Maru and Yurim for a little bit.

## **Chapter 57**

Maru looked sideways for a second. It’s been thirty minutes since he gave Miso some medicine. It was about time the woman started recovering. Right as he thought so, the woman’s eyes started to open slowly.

“Hah.”

Miso sat up, letting out a very drunk sigh.

“Are you okay?”

“Nope, I want to hurl.”

“Okay. Can you do it over there in the corner, then?”

“.....”

“Please don’t look this way. No, seriously.”

“Why are you always so cold... Uurp.”

Miso put a hand over her mouth and rushed over to the corner. Maru noticed the people in the vicinity slowly leaving the area. After hearing the disgusting noises Miso was making, Maru put a finger into his ears to stop some of the noise.

“Hah. I feel so much more alive.”

She came back with a much brighter expression than before.

“I gave them pigeons some food. I did good, right?”

“.....”

“That was a joke. Come on, can’t you at least fake a smile?”

“Well, you DID feed them after all.”

“Wow, that’s rude.”

“You just realized? Well, I’m leaving now.”

For sure, he would leave this time. Maru stood up from the bench like an athlete about to take off. But this time as well, Miso pulled him back.

“I told you, we need to talk.”

“It’s been 30 minutes.”

“I’m sorry about that. I’m much better now, so just sit down for a bit.”

She smiled, feigning complete innocence. Yup, that just told Maru that she was still drunk.

“Hah. Was this how you treated Taesik as well?”

“Why are you talking about that now?”

“Well, you know. I can kind of see why he doesn’t see you as a woman.”

“...You...!”

Maru sat back down on the bench. The air was cooling down even more. The moon was up in the sky. He could see people enjoying the night air in the streets, while a very energetic, emotional woman sat next to him. What an odd situation he was in.

"I'm sorry."

Right then, he heard a small voice. Maru turned around, sensing how delicate the voice was. Miso was looking at him with pouty lips.

"I heard from Taesik about what happened."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know what made you say those words. So... I'm sorry. That should've been my job. It should've been... an adult's job."

"Oh, just that? That was why you were crying?"

"I wasn't crying."

"Wipe those tears before you say that."

"....."

Miso wiped away her tears without saying another word. What a nice lady. She was incredibly honest, especially for her age. By that age, most people realized how much of an impact words could have on other people. So most of them would use nice words or speak in roundabout ways. Because the truth always hurts, and no one enjoys feeling hurt; that's why the truth is never spoken directly.

'I was the same.'

Several times in the day, to his wife, to his daughter, to his friends, to his boss, to his customers, he would say meaningless 'feel-good' words. He ground away the sharp edges of his speech until it looked like blooming flowers.

Perhaps he was afraid. Afraid of the looks he would get by saying the truth.

"So..."

Maru cut the woman off.

"I'm fine."

"Eh?"

"I'm fine. I didn't do anything that would require me to apologize or receive an apology for. It just happened because it had to, you don't need to worry about it."

"But..."

"It's all in the past. Plus, the club's doing much better now. No problems, and everyone's happy. Isn't that right?"

Right. Everyone was happy.

“But what about you?”

Maru scratched his eyebrows.

“Well, you know I’m always fine. No matter the season or the weather.”

“Maru.”

“I really need to go now. I want to spend the last two days of my break well.”

Maru stood up from the bench. Nothing changed for him. He would still help out the club here and there after school started. It was within the rights of children to be easily angered. It was also an ability of the children to easily get rid of their anger. After school starts, Maru should be able to do just fine in one corner of the club.

“You... You really don’t want to go into acting seriously?”

“You’re pretty stubborn, aren’t you, instructor.”

“Answer me.”

“Remember what Geunsoo told me? The monster of acting chooses its victims. It doesn’t look like I was chosen, unfortunately. I definitely do enjoy it. I’m going to follow big sis Soojin after school starts to help her whenever I have the time. But no more than that.”

Maru didn’t know what he wanted to do just yet, but acting definitely didn’t seem to be a safe option to him at the moment. If he really wanted to go down that route, he’d have to be as insane as Miso. But honestly, right now he held only a little interest in acting. He wouldn’t particularly care if he stopped now.

“I’m going to study as much as I can right now. Safety first.”

“Is it because of money?”

“Yes. I want to earn money safely.”

“But you’re still young.”

“Age doesn’t equate to wealth. Just because I’m young, doesn’t make failure a good option. People often say suffering is good when you’re young, but maybe success at a young age is even better?”

“You can succeed with acting.”

“At the same time, I can become a meaningless part-timer by the age of thirty as well.”

“That’s the same even if you decide to become a salaryman.”

“Let’s just say it has more to do with probability.”

“You’re basically an iron fortress, aren’t you? I saw a tiny crack before the break. As I thought, the event at the club...”

“That has nothing to do with it. I’m young enough not to be affected by something so small. I just realized something as I was working in my part time job. Earning money is difficult. I shouldn’t try to bet my life on luck.”

“You’re just seventeen...”

“I might as well be a great seventeen year old.”

Maru stuck his hands into his pockets.

“I’ll be leaving. Please take care. Ah, also. If you’re trying to really get together with Taesik, you need to stop approaching him in such an iffy manner. That guy’s denser than a rock in that department. You just need to go right into it.”

Miso’s face reddened significantly. It seemed that the word Taesik was a magical word that just shut her right up. Maru turned around after saying his goodbyes. Right then, Miso stood up from her seat.

“What if you could do acting, not worrying about money at all?”

“Is that possible?”

“What if it is? Would you do it then?”

“They said pipe dreams are no good for you.”

“Don’t avoid the question!”

Maru thought for a little bit. Acting without worrying about money. That was definitely a charming idea.

“I wouldn’t hesitate.”

“Alright.”

She seemed to have made up her mind about something. Maru didn’t understand. Why was she so attached to him? Just what about him made her want him so much?

“Instructor.”

“What?”

“Why are you giving me so many chances? I’m not that motivated or desperate to go into acting.”

“That’s exactly why.”

“What?”

“It’s exactly because you’re not desperate.”

“.....”

“And the monster inside me is whispering. It wants me to catch you. Geunsoo told you, right? That acting chooses its own victims.”

Miso grinned deviously.

"I think my eyes are pretty good at judging people, and you just happened to get caught up in it. You need to be on the stage. You need to do acting. Trying something for the first time is incredibly different from not trying it at all. I'm going to put you up on the stage, even if it becomes the last thing I do."

Was she just saying that in her drunken stupor, or did she actually prepare those words beforehand? Maru had no way of knowing, but he could easily tell Miso was being dead serious here.

"Well... do what you want, I guess."

Maru turned around. As far as he was aware, Miso might just forget about this entire conversation after sleep. Maybe she was saying all this just to make Maru confused.

Vuun, his phone started ringing.

"Yes, mom. No, I'm coming back now. Okay, good night."

As Maru thought, he got a call. No matter how old he got, he would always be a child to his parents. Maru quickened his pace, feeling a little sorry about making his parents worry.

\* \* \*

Taesik got out immediately after receiving the call. He saw Miso sitting at the bar that was playing light jazz. Since he knew the bartender, he gave the man a curt nod.

"You're here?"

Miso waved. Surprisingly, she wasn't drunk just yet. Taesik sat down next to the woman. The bartender slid him a Jack Coke and some canapes. 'It's on the house', the man whispered.

"I met the kids today."

"The acting club?"

"Yes."

"How were they?"

"Well, you know."

Miso's pouty face turned into a smile. Taesik retracted his previous statement. The woman was a little drunk. Thank goodness she wasn't completely hammered, though.

"Teacher."

"What is it?"

"Maru... said he was fine."

"....."

That must be why the woman seemed so sad and lonely when he entered. Taesik took a sip of his Jack Coke. He wasn't a fan of drinking, but he felt like he had to today.

"It's all my fault. I looked down on him."



“Looked down on him?”

“It’s a strange way of putting it, but I don’t know how else to explain it.”

Miso’s eyes glimmered under the bar’s moody lights. Taesik looked forward, trying to ignore those eyes.

“When I asked Maru to handle the acting club’s problems, I didn’t expect him to do such a thing. I just wanted him to make them be a little more aware. You know, to say stuff like, ‘you need to practice’, or ‘this isn’t right’, or something. Saying that is more than enough. Especially out of a high schooler. After all, stuff like that isn’t easy to say at all.”

“You thought that Maru would stop after presenting the problem to them?”

Taesik nodded.

“That’s right. I asked him to fix it, but I didn’t expect him to restore it. I expected him to stop after making the club start to fall apart faster and I’d step in to help. Before that, I couldn’t step in at all. If I tried to mess with the club without even knowing what was happening with the kids... They would stop caring about the club altogether.”

Taesik shrugged at Miso.

“But look at what happened. Maru was even more aware of what was happening than I thought. He knew how to fix it, too. He resolved the situation like an adult.”

“...To become an object of hatred.”

“That’s right. The club needed a reason to stay together. Back then, they were together, but they had no reason to be together. Maru decided to provide them a reason in the simplest form possible.”

“Why would he!”

Miso angrily snatched Taesik’s drink to take a sip from it.

“Why does he always try to solve everything by himself? Why? Does he know he’s going to become a loner if he does that? Does he want to play the hero role? He has to be feeling lonely.”

Taesik shook his head.

“That’s what I thought too. I thought he’d be lonely. But after I talked to him last time, I learned something. Maru never sacrificed himself. To begin with, he never felt lonely.”

“What are you talking about? I saw everything. The kids just stopped talking when Maru came. I know it’s not their fault, and I know kids are all like that in their age, but...”

Taesik told Miso to calm down, causing her to pout again. She looked like she was about to cry. Taesik was used to the situation. He just patted the woman’s shoulders lightly.

“Maru was even more mature than I thought. He might even be more of an adult than me.”

“....Did he really say he wasn’t lonely?”

"I told you, didn't I? I talked to him. He told me that loneliness was only felt by people who weren't alone from the start."

"What in the world..."

Taesik sighed.

"You knew Maru always drew a line with the club, right?"

"Of course."

"Maru... never felt attached to the club."

"....."

"He also told me that playing a villain wasn't really a bad thing. Someone had to do it, so it might as well be him, he said. He was actually feeling a little apologetic for going overboard in the situation."

Taesik's shock from hearing that still hasn't left him. Maru told him those words without a single hesitation in his voice. The boy actually looked incredibly calm when he said it. Almost like there was... not just a mature person, but a fully grown adult who has already walked down the path of life before, dwelling inside the boy.

"He was worried for me and you as well, by the way."

"What?"

"He was worried we might start blaming ourselves. You in particular, he thought would feel sorry about pushing what you thought was your job to him."

"Ugh, he should worry more about himself."

Miso took a fresh sip of the Jack Coke with a confused look on her face. Taesik ordered some juice from the bartender. He didn't want Miso drinking any more than this.

Miso downed the entire glass of juice in one shot before shaking her head.

"Alright, screw it. I take back what I said about being sorry. I'm really going to go for it now."

"Instructor Miso?"

"Never felt like he belonged in the club? So he really drew a line right there, huh?"

Miso started spitting out words into the air. Taesik could only smile awkwardly looking at her eyes. They seemed pretty dangerous.

"I'm going to put you on the stage, just you watch! Ugh, so you think you're the only person who can act like an adult?! Do you even know how sorry I was?! Ugh, give me back my feelings!"

Miso seemed like an iron fortress when she was teaching, but in her private life, she was nothing more than an overgrown version of her high school self. Without realizing it, Taesik put a hand over Miso's round head and started patting her. Like he would a dog.

The woman immediately calmed down. Her reddened face turned to look at him. Taesik coughed awkwardly and tried to take his hand off, but Miso was a step faster.

His hand was caught in hers.

“Teacher.”

“Ye-yes?”

“No more trying to be so formal.”

“...Instructor Miso?”

“You know, today... Maru told me one thing.”

“W-what did he tell you?”

Without saying another word, Miso put her lips straight over Taesik’s.

“Flipping finally. It’s been way too long,” the bartender let out.

Taesik was as confused as he could be. All he could see was Miso’s smiling face in his vision.

“He told me to just go for it. I did well, right? Hehe.”

And then she collapsed into his arms. All Taesik could do at this point was look at the grinning bartender with a confused face.

\* \* \*

Later that night, Maru got woken up by the multiple notifications coming from his phone. They were all messages from Miso.

[I always get what I want.]

And.

[I followed your advice, so you follow mine too.]

Which turned into.

[By the way, isn’t Taesik oppa so cool?]

Lastly.

[Hahahahahahaha.]

“What the hell?”

Maru turned off his phone and got back into his bed. Exactly ten seconds later,

“Wait, oppa?”

He couldn’t help but laugh a little.

**Chapter 58**

Going to work and going to school. The one thing that doesn't change about life is how bothersome both of these things are.

"So hot," Maru noted to himself.

There wasn't any wind today, but the air felt hot enough to melt the tires already.

'You are working way too hard,' Maru thought, looking up at the sun.

Maru pedalled harder, cursing the August sun as much as he could. Suddenly, he had to squeeze the brakes when he saw something on the road, a roadbike.

After waiting for a few more seconds, he saw Dowook step out of a nearby shop with a drink.

"It's hot."

"....."

Dowook stared at Maru for a few seconds before stepping back into the shop. After a few seconds, he stepped back out with two drinks. Maru caught the flying can with his hand.

"Yeah, it's hot," Dowook responded, and started walking his bike.

Maru caught up to him with a grin.

"Thanks for the drink."

"You weren't looking at me asking me to buy it?"

"Oh, you buy people things when they look at you? Learn something new every day. I'll be staring at you a lot buddy."

"...Idiot."

Unlike in the past, Dowook wasn't sizing Maru up and down in an annoying manner. Maru was actually a pretty big fan of Dowook. At their age, it wasn't uncommon for students like them to try to step into delinquency to escape their routine life.

As a matter of fact, Maru had a good mind to assume that everyone must've done something similar at some point in their lives. The real problem laid in the question if these people ever got back to their normal lives afterwards.

Before summer break started, Maru noticed Dowook apologize to some of the kids he bullied during the semester. Watching the boy apologize by himself where no one else could see him left a bit of an impact on Maru. Not even adults could apologize easily. To adults, apologies were just a way of trying to save face.

Adults would apologize without a moment's hesitation when there was an audience. Without one, they would become arrogant and haughty.

In that sense, Maru could tell that Dowook wasn't all that bad of a person on the inside. They don't interact much, but Maru still felt a good vibe from him.

Right then, Maru's eyes drifted over to Dowook's bike. For some reason, he started thinking of the gas station manager he worked for. Now that he looked at him... their faces were similar, too.

"Do you have an older sister, by any chance?"

"Why?"

"Just curious."

"...I don't. Have one."

For a second, Maru noticed a twinge of sadness, anger and nostalgia on his face. It surfaced so quickly that Maru almost didn't catch it. As he looked into the boy's eyes.

[Why's this guy asking about my damn sister?]

"Oh, I see. By the way, did you do the homework?"

Maru changed the topic. Dowook had a sister. He knew that for sure now. But the boy didn't want to talk about it, looking at his expression and his manner of speech.

'So he has issues with his sister, too.'

Maru could somewhat tell why Dowook was being so rough just then.

"I did. Why?"

"I did it too. Nice."

"What the hell? Are you trying to go anywhere with this?"

"Me? I just want to talk to you."

"Ugh. I'm going first. Don't talk to me."

"Sure, sure."

Dowook pedalled forward after looking at Maru like some sort of an alien creature. Maru followed after a small shrug.

\* \* \*

"Lord, why is it so hot already? It's just morning."

"Oh, welcome!"

Maru sat down on his seat after catching Dojin's happy greeting, along with his flying candy.

"Dude, were you okay back there?" Dojin asked.

"Back there?"

"Back when you went somewhere else with instructor Miso."

"Oh, yeah, I was totally fine."

“...Really?”

Maru nodded with a grin. He knew why Dojin was so worried. For now, Maru was basically excluded from the club. He did what he did knowing fully that this would happen though, so he was fine.

To begin with, he was never that deep in with the club anyway.

“I’ll just have to be quiet for a while, if I don’t want to be hated that is.”

“Wow, you’re quite something.”

Daemyung walked over to the two of them from his seat as well.

“Sorry, Maru. I should’ve been on your side back then.”

“Come on, guys. Why so sad in the morning? There’s nothing wrong, and there’s going to be nothing wrong, so it’s all good. Don’t try to make things even more awkward by playing sides. You guys just focus on making a decent play, ok?”

“S-sure.”

Maru gave Daemyung’s belly a light slap. They were definitely good friends, seeing how they took the time to ask him if he really was okay. That was probably why people said high school friends last a lifetime. Because they truly cared.

“Sit down, you asses!”

The homeroom teacher burst through the door, making Daemyung run over to his seat hurriedly. The teacher began the class by saying a string of useless, predictable words.

Ah, summer break was truly over.

\* \* \*

“Maru.”

Taesik called Maru as he was headed to the cafeteria. It was lunch time. Maru told his friends to go without him, and walked outside the campus with Taesik. The teacher asked Maru if he wanted to eat anything as they entered a restaurant.

“I’d prefer to hear about what you have to say, rather than talk about what I want to order.”

“Can we order first, though? I’m hungry. You should eat too. I’ll be paying, so order however much you want.”

“That last line’s really only reserved for barbeques, isn’t it?”

“Hmm, is it?”

Maru ordered a tuna kimchi stew with a slight grin. Taesik ordered the same thing.

“I wanted to say thank you for now, Maru.”

“Is that about instructor Miso?”

“Ah... well, there’s that too.”

Taesik’s cheeks turned slightly pink. Maru smiled proudly.

‘They are definitely a couple now.’

Though Maru had no idea how far along they are in their relationship just yet.

As they talked about Miso for a few moments, the stew they ordered came out. Maru dumped his bowl of rice into it before talking again.

“Good to hear. But you’re not here to just show off, are you?”

Taesik nodded.

“I wanted to properly apologize. I’m bribing you a little as well, so I’m hoping you’d accept it.”

“Bribing with just stew? That’s a little cheap, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“Haha, that was just a joke. But like I said, you don’t have to worry about it. I did that because I wanted to. I’m not pathetic enough to shift the blame elsewhere.”

“I honestly didn’t think you’d go this far. I’m both thankful and a little ashamed as a teacher.”

“Well, things would’ve been different if I knew them better, but... to be honest, I don’t know them all that well. It’s really the difference of being one and two steps away.”

“Was... it really that easy?”

Maru took a bite of his food.

“Well, that was exactly why I did it. Because it really was that easy.”

At the same time, Maru remembered something. It was back when he was told that his paycheck would depend completely on how servile he was towards his boss. When he almost quit out of sheer rage, the faces of his wife and daughter floated into his vision. At that moment all the anger inside him dissipated, and his brain immediately started to calm down.

Compared to the humiliation, anger, resentment and desperation he felt back then, this was nothing more than a joke. It wasn’t like antagonizing the entire club was going to endanger his livelihood. This was just a minor event.

“You didn’t feel disappointed?”

“When my friends didn’t side with me?”

“Yes.”

“Teacher, do you decide if someone’s your friend solely based on whether or not they take your side?”

“...I asked you a stupid question.”

Maru had to admit, Taesik was a good teacher. The man didn't take his students' words lightly, instead using it as an opportunity to learn. It was something that only teachers who respected their students could have.

"You really are a teacher, teacher."

"Haha."

"If I ever get a daughter, I'd love to leave her in your hands. You'd listen to her words at face value."

"That was a pretty decent compliment, I'll have to admit. Do you want to eat anything else?"

"I did notice that a restaurant next to this place sells really good beef."

"That's... a little too much for my wallet, I'm afraid."

Taesik smiled awkwardly in response.

\* \* \*

Nothing changed. School food was still alright most of the time, except when potatoes were on the menu again. The old man at the school store would still throw you a burger with incredible accuracy after taking the payment. The floor of his class was still cold, the air hot and filled with sweaty smells. Students still rushed to the cafeteria come lunchtime, and come break time they would all rush over to the school field. By the time the last class came around, everyone struggled to stay awake, almost as if they simultaneously took a dose of melatonin.

There were a few things different, of course. The greenery outside the class was starting to turn brown. The gym that was under construction was finally opened, but use of it was still prohibited for students. The yellowed curtains of the class were finally washed for once. The fact that this would be the English teacher's final year teaching after getting her second kid was a change as well.

"Hey, Dowook! Let's go to the store!"

"Sure."

And there was the fact that Dowook started getting along with the rest of the class as well.

"Yo, guy with the big head, can I borrow a thousand from you?"

The fact that Changhu, the class bully, started to become more overbearing was another change as well. Maru looked out the window with his chin resting on one hand. It was the last day of August. A Saturday.

"Let's go, Maru," Daemyung said, pulling on his arm.

Maru followed his two friends with a yawn. He cursed the heat for not leaving despite it being so close to September as he stepped up to the fifth floor.

"It's hot."

"For real, so hot."



The trio greeted the first years they ran into at the entrance, and entered the auditorium. The second years were standing next to the windows in their gym clothes. The first years stretched gently as they made their way over to the group. Maru joined in.

“Be sure to drink a lot of water as we train, alright? We don’t want any of you getting too dehydrated,” Yoonjung said with a clap, making the first years respond with an enthusiastic shout.

Maru responded quietly before making his way over to the audience seat. Like always, he picked up a book he had been reading and opened the page he was on last time.

Nothing changed.

And nothing will change.

Things will continue to move, calmly and peacefully. He occasionally noticed Geunseok and Yurim stare at him, but he could easily ignore that. Or just smile back in response.

Grin.

The couple turned away their heads. Nothing special.

“The instructor’s coming today, to help us prepare for the nationals in winter.”

If the national competition held in August by the national theater association was the biggest competition for acting held all year, then the one held in winter was the follow-up. It wasn’t all that different from the August one in the sense that it was also funded by the government. As a matter of fact, the payout from this one was actually bigger due to the involvement of various companies.

If the fall national competition was about honor, the winter one was about money.

The club members began practice. They were nothing like their former selves during the regionals. Everyone was going about their duties with passion and energy. The lot of them suggested switching things up to doing a different play for the winter competition. They’d have to talk it out with the instructor, but the idea of doing a different play pretty much seemed like a fact at this point.

Maru turned the page of his book. Before they started making props, there wasn’t much for him to do, save for reading his book and pondering by himself.

‘This is pretty nice.’

Recently, Maru started gaining an interest in reading classics. He read a lot of books in his past life, but they were mostly about self-improvement. From the time when all he wanted to do was follow the recipes for success given to him by other people.

‘Well, now I have all the time in the world.’

Maru wasn’t that interested in self-improvement books anymore. He’s realized how pointless they were. Instead, he decided to try and get a glimpse at the lives of his ancestors. The reason behind classics were their unchanging values and rules about the world, after all. There was value in reading it.

As Maru turned another page, with the club members acting as his background music, his phone dinged. When he flipped his phone open, he found that the message was from a person he had been expecting all along.

[I'm coming!!]

It was a short message.

"As I thought..."

Maru shook his head, thinking of the blonde lady who would soon come open the door to the auditorium with a bang.

## Chapter 59

When Miso entered the auditorium, the club members all held conflicted expressions. They looked like they were excited to see the lady again, but at the same time, they looked scared of what they had coming for them.

"Instructor!"

"We thought you were busy with plays."

They seemed more excited than anything though, seeing how they rushed over to see her. Miso grinned, explaining how the play she got involved in spiraled into a complete mess.

"And that's why I came here to torture you kids for another half year. Nice, right?"

"Yes!"

"Wait, did you dye your hair, instructor?"

Miso's previously blonde hair was now black.

"Well, just because."

Miso answered the question passively, completely disregarding its relevance.

"Now now, we're going to practice pretty much immediately, so you better be ready. I heard from Taesik that you're going to change the play for this competition?"

"Yes. We wanted to try something new," Yoonjung answered.

"Up for a challenge, huh? Nice. Was there a genre you were thinking of?"

"A comedy. We thought there'd be a lot to learn, since we didn't even touch comedy the last time."

"Comedy, huh? Those are usually challenging. Fine, there are a few of those for teenagers, so we might as well go with that."

The atmosphere of the club came together once Miso appeared. Her loud voice had a power to gather people. Mesmerized by that voice, the passion and energy for acting came back to their eyes.

"You weren't just playing around, were you?"

“Of course not.”

“We worked hard!”

Miso stepped into the middle of the auditorium with the students. The kids followed her like a bunch of baby ducks following their mother. Miso made a great center for the club.

Maru gave them a nod from the side. He was standing at a sweet spot where he couldn't be seen, but still could hear everything clearly. A perfect spot. He glanced at Miso from behind Geunseok, and shot her a smile when their eyes met.

For a brief second, he saw Miso's mouth curl up into a smile. She seemed to be telling him that she would get him this time around.

“Wait just a second. I have a few scripts for comedic plays in my car. You guys listen to the basic story and tell me which one you want. Maru, follow me.”

“Yes.”

Even before the break, Maru's job was to lug things around every once in a while. The moment they stepped outside the auditorium, Miso started talking.

“What are you going to do? Planning on being the spectator this time, too?”

Maru nodded.

“Things are going to get awkward if I join in. I'll just stay in the side making props or something.”

“Oh, so that's how you're going to do this, huh?”

Miso stepped down the stairs without saying another word. When they stepped out into the parking lot, they were greeted with Miso's foreign car. Miso opened the trunk, revealing a cardboard box inside.

“What's this?”

“Shirts.”

“Shirts?”

Maru opened the box, which was filled with black hoodies. The left breast of which had the words 'Blue Sky' embroidered in Chinese characters.

“I got inspiration from my theater's shirts.”

Maru thought back at the black shirts the actors were wearing back at the Blue Sky theater.

“You basically just copied it.”

“Eh, copy, inspiration, same thing. It's good though, right?”

“It's nice. The kids should like this.”

“You?”

“Another casual clothing for my collection. This'll be nice.”

"It's expensive, don't just treat it like something casual. Now, now, you go up first. I have to find the scripts."

"Yes."

Maru stepped up to the fifth floor with the box. Were these shirts were Miso's way of apologizing to the club? After all, she thought the club failing in their first competition was her fault. He had heard something about her apologizing to the club last time they met, but perhaps she still felt a bit sorry inside.

"Take whichever one that fits you."

Maru put the box in front of Joonghyuk. The club members all shouted in excitement when they noticed what was inside. They all took off their old gym clothes and put on their new uniforms.

"Wow, fits perfectly."

"Mine's a bit loose, I think I like this better."

"Same."

"It even has words on the back!"

The twelve of them all found shirts that fit them. They fit pretty well.

"They look good on you," Miso noted, stepping into the auditorium.

"Thank you!"

"We'll treasure it!"

The club members answered, still fixated on their new clothes. Maru put a hand over his jersey. It had a decent thickness to it. The material was high quality, and the embroidery looked pretty beautiful. This had to be expensive.

"Nice, you look good in those uniforms. Don't cause any accidents while wearing those, though, you hear?"

"Yes!"

"Now now, get over here. If we want to participate in the October competition and then the December one, we need to work really hard."

"October?"

"We're going to participate at the one hosted by Gyeonggi province. And then we can participate in the winter one. We didn't get anything for the competition in spring, so might as well try everything we can get our hands on during this semester. Understood?"

She didn't look like she was open to any opposition. A competition in October, and then one in December... It didn't look too bad on paper. Maru nodded to himself. This was very much like Miso.

Miso threw two scripts down on the floor.

'Critical Mass' and 'The People of Dalseok-dong'.

"Choose one you want to do. Critical Mass is about what would happen if someone wins it big-time in a lottery, and The People of Dalseok-dong is about what happens when a strange family moves into Dalseok-dong. They're both fun, but remember. Comedies are hard. The entire mood of the audience can change with a snap of a finger. A lot of the plays heavily depend on an actor's skill. I mean, there's a reason why comedies don't do all that well in teen competitions."

Miso's voice fell heavily. A few of the members even moaned a little after hearing about the reason why comedies flopped. They must be thinking of the past.

"What the hell's up with those faces? Are you scared?"

"....."

"I was the one at fault last time. You guys didn't do anything wrong. You know, I was so mad that time that I couldn't even sleep. How were you guys? Did you sleep well after that?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"That's why we're going to really show it to those judges this time. We're going to show them how great we are. If you think about it a little differently, a comedy is a great opportunity to just crush everyone else. That's exactly what's going to happen this time."

Miso gave the two scripts over to the group. The person who grabbed hold of it was Yoonjung. The play she grabbed was Critical Mass. Joonghyuk stepped forward to grab The People of Dalseok-dong.

After scanning the script, the two of them exchanged it. The auditorium was filled with the noise of flipping paper. The two club leaders never looked more serious than this moment. They then handed off their scripts over to the rest of the club, who started reading the script as well.

Soon, the scripts came over to Maru. Maru felt the gaze of Miso on him, along with the gazes of the club members. He brought the script over to Miso.

"Looks like they made their decision."

"Aren't you going to read it?"

"Is there really a need?"

"I think you'll have to."

"What?"

Miso looked like she just fished something big out of the waters. Maru turned the page of the two scripts. He saw the titles, the synopsis that Miso wrote, and...

The characters.

"Fifteen, sixteen..."

There were a total of twelve members in the club. Significantly less than the number of characters in the play.

“You can at least play the role of a passerby, can’t you?”

“So this is how you’re going to do this?”

“What, you can’t? This isn’t going to take much time. Come on, just a few lines?”

“You know I can’t invest that much time into the club.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’ll get it quick.”

Maru glanced behind him. A few of the students looked excited, a few annoyed, and a few disinterested.

“Can I join?”

The question was directed at the members.

“Of course! We’d be happy!”

Yoonjung was the first to answer. As a matter of fact, all of the second years seemed pretty excited about the prospect. Maru turned to the first years.

“Do what you want. I don’t care.”

“Don’t care!”

Taejoon and Iseul seemed to be neutral.

“Well... I’m sure he’ll make a good decision.”

“Hmph!”

Geunseok and Yurim were sending signals for him to not participate. And...

“I’ll teach you acting, son!”

“Join us.”

“Do it.”

Dojin, Daemyung and Soyeon didn’t even hesitate. Maru turned back to look at Miso.

“I know you drew a line, but you can still participate at least a little, can’t you?” Miso whispered with a wink.

She was being persistent, but not enough to be annoying. It was kind of as if she was asking him for a small favor. Maru was sure that even if he refused her here, she wouldn’t be too disappointed. She’d probably find a different way to make him join.

‘Toge...ther.’

Maru had made up his mind to switch clubs after this year. It wasn’t like he was sick of acting, but he wanted to get a different experience altogether. Helping out Soojin was enough in terms of doing acting. He was actually thinking of joining the Chinese Language club, actually. The prospect of learning Chinese sounded pretty good to him.

'I'm going to switch clubs anyway, so...'

Might as well spend the next half year with a little more effort for the club.

"Please treat me well, then."

"No way, I'll flipping murder you if you do badly. I won't hold you for long during practice, though. You're going to be an extra anyway, hehe."

Miso grinned toothily, seeming happy with the fact that she managed to snag him into participating. Maru sighed inwardly in relief. Refusing the woman so much did seem to have a bit of an impact on him. Accepting her request just this once made him feel a whole lot better.

"Alright! The whole club's going to be in on this play! Let's choose which one we want to do then, shall we? Raise your hand if you like the play I call out. We're going to go democratic here. Starting off, Critical Mass!"

Miso's voice seemed to have a little more vibrancy than usual, for some reason.

\* \* \*

Maru took out his script the first thing he came back home. It was The People of Dalseok-dong. Funnily enough, everyone in the club decided to go with this one, including him.

'Maybe Miso had a pretty good grasp on what the other kids liked already.'

Leaders needed to know the people they lead. And according to Miso herself, she had an eye for people. As proof, twelve students in the club all chose one play. This couldn't just be coincidence.

"A teen, huh."

The character had no name and was never called out by anyone else either. He was just... a teenager. That was the character Maru was in charge of. He had very few lines, too. Just three. But he would appear in up to five scenes. He was supposed to be one of those passersby who would look at a situation and shout 'Eh?!' and disappear.

Basically, a part of the environment. A character that wouldn't take anything away from the play even if he was removed completely. At least, that's how Maru saw the character.

\* \* \*

"Yes!"

Miso jumped up with a fist in the sky. Taesik had to ask the woman why she was so happy. Her happiness almost seemed infectious, seeing by the smile on the man's face.

"He took the bait so well."

"Bait?"

"Oh, I'm talking about Maru. He has no idea what kind of a character he's gotten in charge of. Oh boy oh boy, I'm so excited."

“Is it really that exciting?”

“Of course! I bet he thinks his role is completely useless. Alright, step one of my plan is done, and as long as I do this well, then... Hehehe.”

Taesik couldn't help but swallow nervously. Miso was generally a good person, but she did have her devilish moments. When her mind was made up, then she really looked like a determined general.

“By the way, oppa.”

“Y-Yes?”

Taesik stepped back, intimidated by the woman's energy.

“Can't you at least try to be more casual?”

“Ah, yes. Of course.”

“Ugh!”

Taesik hugged Miso, and looked at the bartender with an awkward smile.

“Good times,” the old bartender commented with a hearty laugh.

## **Chapter 60**

“I can love you because I also hate you.”

Maru read the last line of his book out loud. The sentence spoke to him quite strongly. Love and hate were basically like two sides on a coin, but in the end they were just one emotion. After all, real hatred would dismiss any care you had for a person.

“You've been reading a lot.”

Maru jumped up at hearing a voice come from next to him. It was a woman. She was wearing a white suit, taking a look at the child development book Maru borrowed recently.

“You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Please don't worry. Your heart is fairly strong, I assure you. But in any case, it's been half an year. How is it?”

“I'm doing quite well. The past 45 years of my life almost feels like a dream.”

“That's good to hear. Some people had killed themselves because they couldn't get used to their new lives.”

“I see. More importantly though, what brings you here?”

“I came to check up on you. It's one of my duties.”

The woman scanned the book quickly before putting it back in the bookshelf. This time, her curious eyes drifted over to his script.

“Are you satisfied with your new life?”



"I don't know. There's going to be a lot of things happening in the future. Perhaps after that I can say I'd be satisfied."

"You seem quite prepared, though."

"It's the least I can do. I don't know much about the future, but I might as well prepare for whatever might come, don't you think?"

"That's fair."

The woman looked around his room, akin to a renter looking at a potential home. It wouldn't be strange for her to ask him if the sunlight was good in this room, as a matter of fact.

"I'll change the question a little, then. Is life fun?"

Fun... Somehow, to Maru, that was an even more difficult of a question. After a brief pause, he shook his head.

"I can say I'm keeping myself busy, but I don't know if it's fun. There were moments where I've had fun, but overall... Oh, I'm not saying I'm regretting it. I just think the word 'fun' is too vague to begin with."

"That's true. It's a vague word. After all, you might as well say it's everyone's goal in life. It's used to describe simple situations, yet no word is more complicated than it."

The woman turned to look elsewhere. She looked beautiful, too beautiful to be human. On that face of hers, Maru noticed curiosity creeping up on it.

"Speaking of which, Mr. Maru, you're very... Unchanging."

"Me?"

"Yes. I honestly thought you would be a little more selfish in this life."

"Well, I am living pretty selfishly."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm not harming others, nor am I being harmed by others. I'd rather not have to harm others to get what I want, so I think I'm in a good place now."

"I see. But what about at the club?"

"The club?"

"Yes. The club you are in isn't treating you very well. Aren't you being harmed?"

The woman seemed quite curious about this world. Or maybe she was just curious about Maru.

"Are you talking about how the kids are looking at me?"

"That's right. I'm new to my job, so all this is very foreign to me. I've met ten people so far, but you're by far, the most unique. Aren't you bothered by all this?"

The woman wasn't prodding him in an offensive way or anything, she held a genuine curiosity towards his perspective. Maru was able to finally understand what he found so odd about this woman. It was almost as if she was unable to feel any emotions, almost like a robot.

"Do you have a clear sense of what good and evil is?"

"I suppose you can say so."

"Then I suppose you can also be influenced?"

"That's not a fitting word for us, we are constantly in a satisfied state. As such, we are not affected emotionally."

"I've been curious about this for a while, but... Are you god?"

"I've said this before, but we're closer to what you've historically called angels or demons. Of course, that's what you humans thought of us. We are like secretaries created by 'him'. I don't know if I can give you a straightforward definition of what I am. Angel, demon, reaper... They all sort of fit."

"So a higher being does exist. Well, that's not important, so let's skip over that for now. You asked me before, right? About if I was feeling bothered. Well, I'll raise you a question. You see an immature child. I hope you can answer this question under the assumption that you believe that any immature person deserves a chance to mature and grow as a human being."

"I understand." "If that kid points his finger at you and calls you ugly, what would you do?"

"Ah, that was a good explanation. I see that you have a talent for teaching as well, Mr. Maru."

The woman nodded in understanding. Maru knew better than anyone that Geunseok and Yurim weren't fans of him. Their gazes were offensive from the very beginning. So, how should Maru handle this?

'It's too much work to even try to deal with it.'

Could you really call a person an adult if they were angered over such things? If he did, he would be berated by society for being too immature himself. Of course, Maru's actions, from a high schooler's perspective, would look strange to his friends.

He's not even mad?

Is he scared of Geunseok?

Does he just not care?

Well, as far as Maru was concerned, he had no reason to be interested in what Geunseok did or what Yurim said. It'd be stranger if he was. Things might be different if they were friends, of course. If that was the case, Maru surely would have spoken to them.

"I think I understand your line of thought now, Mr. Maru. It's almost like you're shooting a movie."

"A movie?"

"You're looking at yourself through a camera. You're looking at everything very objectively. I see why you're so logical so much of the time."

Maru looked up at the ceiling almost subconsciously. At that moment, it almost felt like he would find a camera filming him there. A life through a camera... It made sense. Perhaps he felt free in these stressful situations not because he was mature, rather because he didn't treat them as real problems to begin with.

Was that... wrong?

Maru couldn't find a quick answer to that question. It couldn't be good, though.

"Perhaps your clock stopped on the day you died, Mr. Maru. You might be looking elsewhere, even while living here."

"Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all. I am just observing. I'm simply asking you this to satisfy my personal curiosity. It's up to you to decide where you want to take your life. But personally, I do hope that you would become a little bit more greedy in this life."

"I care for myself quite a bit, I believe."

"I think you should care more."

"That feels a bit strange to hear, coming from you."

Maru looked at the woman. She said moments ago that she was completely neutral. So why was she urging him to be more selfish now?

The woman smiled a beautiful smile. When she waved her hand, a silver curtain draped itself in front of Maru. It acted like a mirror, allowing his face to reflect on it.

The face on the curtain changed.

"This is..."

The face on the curtain was that of the old lady who gave Maru the chance to live again. No, she didn't look like an old lady anymore. With her silky hair and fair skin, she looked like a fairy through the mirror. But Maru was able to recognize her despite that.

The old lady was joyously talking with other people around her. When her eyes met with Maru for a brief second, her mouth opened to speak to him. While her voice didn't come through the mirror, Maru could still understand through her lips.

"Are you living well?"

The silver curtain disappeared. The woman in the white suit came back into his vision.

"The lady in the curtain is wishing only for your happiness. What I was telling you was just the message the lady wanted to tell you. I tried to send the message to you through a dream originally, but due to time constraints, here I am."

"By time constraints, do you mean..."

“This is our last meeting. This will probably be the last time we meet. The splitting point has stabilized now.”

“Stabilized?”

“This world isn’t just ‘one’ world. Each and every person is capable of creating little branches of time based on what they do. Just now, your life where you died just managed to stabilize.”

“The life where I died?”

Maru felt a little numb for a second.

“Yes.”

“But I came back to the past.”

“Right. That’s where the split occurred. There’s a timeline for you when you came back from the future, and there’s a timeline where you died.”

“But I died, so how...”

“That’s why the branch was created. Over there in the other branch, the sadness created by your death just ended. It’s actually taken a very long time compared to other people.”

“My wife... My daughter... they’re continuing their lives without me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh dear!”

The hair at the back of his neck stood up in surprise. He had thought all this time that because he came to the past, his family wouldn’t have to suffer. But to think that during all this time, they were living in pain...

“That’s just life. You can’t just make someone’s life vanish. It’s not like the world without Mr. Maru makes everyone else’s life meaningless.”

Maru felt a chill run down his spine. In that case, his family was...

“That’s why I’m telling you. You need to live for yourself. It’d be cruel to make your family experience the same sort of sadness twice.”

“...Is my wife fine?”

“She still misses you. But she isn’t crying anymore. She has someone to protect, after all.”

“...What about my life insurance? Was the payout from that alright?”

“Yes, it was.”

“My daughter...”

“Mr. Maru.”

“Yes.”

“You have no connections to that world anymore.”

“...I'd still like to know. Is my daughter doing fine?”

“There's no way a child without a father would be happy.”

Maru's heart throbbed a little. The fact that the two women who he cared for were hurting all this time, and he was having such a good life over here made him feel very apologetic and ashamed. Tears started trailing down his face.

“Can I... Is there a way I can talk to them?”

“It's possible. As long as you use the medium of a dream. The people you saved are all wishing for your happiness, so this much I should do for you.”

“Thank you.”

Maru thought for a very long time. He thought and thought, enough to start feeling like time was flowing slower than normal. After thinking some more, he finally managed to come up with one sentence he wanted to tell his family.

“Please, stay healthy.”

With that, Maru closed his mouth. The tear running down his cheeks only managed to make his chest hurt a little more.