

## Once Again 61

### Chapter 61

He woke up in his room, the room that was familiar enough for him to just conjure it from memory alone. Today, this room felt especially alien to him. Maru stroked his hand over the floor. The wooden floor gave that would give with just a little push. After pushing on it a few more times, Maru sighed.

“A... dream? Or...”

Last night, Maru saw two women on the street. The mother and daughter couple going through a crowd hand-in-hand. Maru swallowed the sadness that welled up inside of him, and walked up to the two of them. They looked at him with a surprised expression before giving him a hug. They felt warm, soft, and incredibly comforting to him. Little teardrops started to well from the couple’s face. Each time a teardrop hit Maru’s shoulder, it felt like he was getting hit by a hammer.

Maru almost let out a scream of sorrow, but by then, Maru became aware that his time here was coming to an end. Instead of crying, he told the two of them what he wanted to say.

Thank goodness he was able to wish them good health with his own mouth. And thank goodness his family looked healthy in his dream. He wouldn’t have known what to do if they looked starved and depressed.

His daughter had grown by a fair amount after six months. Or maybe not. He didn’t get too much time to look at her. But he was able to tell that his little girl had matured a little bit through his death. Thank goodness, at least there was a silver lining for her.

His wife was... still wearing the cheap wedding ring that he had given her. How foolish of her. She wouldn’t be able to meet anyone new if she kept that on. Even at the age of forty-five, she looked as young as ever. To think such a beautiful woman would have to suffer like this because of someone like him...

Maru took his hand off of the floor to rub his eyes a little bit. He could feel little sandy particles coming off from around his eyes. He probably looked like a complete mess right now.

‘Thank goodness... I got to meet them.’

His wife might simply forget that she saw him when she wakes up. After all, that’s what most dreams are like. They simply fade out of existence the moment you wake up. Maru actually hoped his wife would forget. He didn’t want her sadness to return because of a dream. All he wanted was one thing, someone who could replace him.

At the same time, a part of him screamed to never be forgotten. A part of him wanted to be a nail that’s embedded deep into the two people’s memories. Perhaps he was being greedy, cruel even.

Maru took a shower, trying to wash away those thoughts with the flowing water. He looked at himself in the mirror afterwards. Only then did he finally come to terms with the fact that in their world, Han Maru no longer existed.

“Well, at least I got myself one hell of a life insurance,” said the young man in the mirror, with tears still streaming down his face.

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Dojin decided not to talk to Maru, just for today. The boy just felt so different today. Dojin tried to talk to the boy a few times, but all he could do was stare.

“...Something’s happened to him, right?”

“Definitely.”

Daemyung was looking quite troubled himself. Dojin shook his head, he had no idea how to handle this either. The one friend who was always calm and happy was sighing like the world was ending.

Right then, Dojin noticed Dowook step out of the class through the back door. The boy glanced at Maru before leaving.

To be truthful, Dojin wasn’t a great fan of Dowook. He saw his past self in the other boy. Dojin stopped glaring ever since the other boy stopped his bullying, but they weren’t really friends.

‘Why is that guy...’

Dowook surely had something in mind when he stared at Maru. Was he looking for a fight?

“I wonder if something’s up with Dowook, too,” Daemyung noted.

Did this guy forget that Dowook used to bully him? Why was he so nice? Then again, being nice was what made Daemyung pretty charming.

A few moments later, Dowook stepped back into the class with a paper cup in hand. He must’ve gotten himself a drink from the vending machine downstairs. There were two cups, actually.

The boy stepped up behind Maru. He mumbled to himself with an annoyed look for a second, before stepping up in front of Maru and setting the cup down on Maru’s table.

“Cheer up, you bastard. And... ugh, it’s nothing.”

With that, Dowook went back to his seat.

Dojin was incredibly confused. Did that guy just try to cheer Maru up? Maru looked a little confused himself. After a few seconds, Maru smiled and thanked him.

“Were they close?”

“Dunno.”

Dojin looked at Maru and Dowook repeatedly for a few seconds.

“The hell was that?”

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Maru looked at Dowook as he drank his iced tea. Since when did Dowook care about him so much? As far as he was aware, they greeted one another every once in a while, but not much more than that.

“Dude, are you okay? I’ve wanted to ask you since a while back, but you just looked so sad... Did something happen?” Dojin asked.

Did Maru really look that bad? Bad enough to make even Dojin hesitate? Maru stared at his reflection on a mirror hanging on the wall behind him.

‘I guess it’s pretty bad.’

There were all sorts of emotions flowing across his young face. Maru put a hand over it for a second. The memories from last night were still hitting him like a truck. He told himself he was fine this morning, but clearly he wasn’t.

“It was just a bad dream,” he decided to tell them.

“Was it a nightmare? Or did you get caught by your mom while masturbating or something?”

“No, it was a really good dream.”

“Then what’s up?”

“It was too good of a dream... One that I didn’t want to wake up from.”

What if he was still alive in that timeline? Thinking of that made him feel anxious again.

‘The big events of this life haven’t changed at all.’

There was the world cup in 2002, and before that, the IMF. Would things change much in the future? Unlikely. No matter what he did, there would be events in the future that will remain unchangeable.

What if his death was also inevitable? Would Maru be able to try to change that?

‘No, besides that...’

He’s become even more desperate to meet his wife and daughter after his dream. He believed that he would be able to meet his daughter. She would be his little angel that arrives after he marries his wife.

But what about his wife? What would he need to do to meet her?

‘What would... What would happen to our meeting if I live a life that’s very different compared to my past one?’

His past life was like a train track. As long as he rode on this track, like it or not, he would be able to stop at set stations. But right now in this life, there wasn’t just one train track he could ride on. There were countless tracks that he could create himself. In that case...

How many of these tracks would lead him back to his wife?

Maru subconsciously ended up turning to a rusty train track in his head. He knew how this particular train track ended. If he got on this one, he would repeat his previous life all over again. That is, he would be able to meet his wife again.

‘Where did I meet my wife again?’

He needed to remember. He had to remember.

Bang. Maru punched his table lightly. Since the class was full of students talking to each other, not many people heard him. Dojin and Daemyung were looking at him with a surprised expression, though.

"I can't... remember."

"M-Mar, what's up?"

"Maru..."

Maru could hear his two friends, but he didn't understand them. Right now, Maru was entirely focused on trying to remember.

'Just yesterday... No, just this morning...'

His other memories had all disappeared, save for that of his family's faces. The memory itself wasn't perfect, but just the fact that he could vaguely recall them gave him relief.

Right now, he wasn't able to remember any of it. He recalled what the woman had said yesterday. Something about this being their last meeting. Was this what she meant?

'That can't be it. She said I would be able to recognize my wife.'

Surely the woman wasn't lying. She was supposed to be a representative for god. Surely he would be able to recognize his wife when they meet.

"So I need to meet her?"

"Maru?"

"What's up with him?"

Maru raised his hand to silence his friends. He thought back on his previous life again.

'My... My daughter's age was...'

He couldn't remember.

'My marriage. What was my marriage like?'

Again, he couldn't remember.

'...Where did we go for our first date?'

Absolutely blank.

'My wife's... name...'

Nothing. The train tracks in his mind's eye started to disappear one by one. In the end, there was just one train track left in front of him.

One that he knew all too well already. One that... would eventually lead to his wife.

"Hahh."

God was fair. At the same time, that's what makes him so cruel.

Maru put his hands through his hair, and gripped tightly. The pain didn't help at all with his memories.

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Dowook observed Maru from his seat. It was kind of worrying watching the boy punch the table like that. Did something happen?

'Ugh.'

Why did he have to get help from someone like him? Of course, Dowook felt pretty thankful about it, but Maru was just so difficult to approach.

Plus, as a person who's never said thank you to a friend before... he had no idea what to say.

'Maybe... Maybe when he's calmed down a little more.'

For now, Dowook decided to leave it to his future self.

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Geunseok gave Yurim a little glance from the side. The girl looked very cute with her brown eyes. She was a girl who comforted him during hard times, a girl he was very thankful to have.

As a matter of fact, recently the girl's become his sole reason to go to school. As they decided together where to go for tomorrow, his phone rang. It was his brother.

"Who is it?"

"My brother."

Geunseok responded a little annoyedly. His brother wasn't his idol anymore. As a matter of fact, his brother was just a weirdo who wasn't there to comfort him when he needed it the most.

Thank goodness he had Yurim now.

"Yeah, bro."

- You sound good. How are you?

"I'm doing fine. What about you?"

- You know, same old, same old. How's acting been?

"Acting? Did I not tell you last time? We won at the college competition last time. It was pretty easy once my mind was set. It's kind of like studying."

- That's good. Did you tell dad?

"No, I'm going to wait a little bit."

- Wouldn't it be better to tell him soon?

"I said I'm going to wait. I'm going to get scolded if I tell him."

- Well, obviously. But didn't you join the club knowing that in the first place?

“Whatever. I’ll do it in my own time. You should just focus on your stuff. It’s not like you really ever helped me before. And don’t worry, I’ll get better than you at this sooner or later.”

Maybe he shouldn’t have said that last sentence? Geunseok thought back to the time when he saw his older brother eat instant noodles by himself in the corner.

Well, that was pretty much all his brother was worth, wasn’t it? It felt like Geunseok used to have a reason why he looked up to his brother in the past, but he couldn’t remember it anymore.

“Geunseok, it’s a green light.”

“Ok, I’m hanging up, bro.”

Geunseok hung up his phone and turned to look at Yurim. The one girl who understood him best, and judged him fairly. He was so lucky to have a girl like her in his life.

“Yurim.”

“Yeah?”

“How was my acting yesterday?”

Yurim responded with a bright expression.

“It was the best.”

The best. The word alone made Geunseok’s heart flare up in pride. It felt like it’s been ages since he’s been complimented like this.

“Really?”

“Really. You’re the best. Better than the second years.”

“Boo, no way.”

“Yes way.”

Yurim hugged his arm, which caused the boy to drag her closer towards him. If she was with him, he wouldn’t feel nervous. She was the person who convinced him that Hong Geunseok was worth something.

“You’re amazing.”

Geunseok was becoming drunk in her sweet words. There was a need for him to work harder if he wanted to keep hearing these compliments.

## **Chapter 62**

The feeling of déjà vu, and the feeling of unease. Maru decided that these two feelings would be the compass to his wife. With his memories having completely disappeared, the only thing he had left in his head were just ideas. That is, it almost felt like he was just staring at the table of contents for his life.

He only knew of the big events that happened in his life, and nothing else. He could remember some small things, but they weren’t important at all.

The only thing he needed was to meet his wife. To do this, Maru started fumbling at what was left of his memories. He died at the age of 45 as a bus driver. Before that, he worked at a company. Before that, as a road manager. Before that, he was doing part-time jobs. Before that, he was a college student, and before that...

“A high schooler.”

He had no idea where he met his wife at any of these milestone events. Maybe they knew each other starting from high school?

‘Maybe one of the acting club members...’

That couldn’t be it. He didn’t join the acting club in his previous life. The girls in that club probably had nothing to do with his wife. There weren’t any girls in his class either. That probably meant that he met his wife after high school.

“So, college?”

That was the most likely assumption. Maru decided to take a look at his personality for a second. There would be value in trying to look at himself at face value.

First of all, there was how he treated his relationships. He could say something about this pretty easily. He trusted his friends to the end. But if there was evidence against them, he would quickly resolve the situation in his own manner. In addition to his introverted personality, the 45 year old Maru didn’t have many friends.

Maru didn’t think he was that unreasonable of a person, but in some aspects, he was just too stubborn. Just taking a look at the reason why he quit his company was a good example. The real reason why he quit, even when he was able to endure through his boss’ violent actions.

‘Once I make up my mind, I just don’t change it.’

Once Maru learned the reason why his promotion was given to the boss’ son, he started collecting all the evidence he could. Then, he managed to prove it. He proved the injustice against him, and proved how corrupt the boss’ son really was. He uploaded all of this in the company forums.

Of course, those around him tried to stop him. They told him he wouldn’t be able to work in this industry ever again.

Maru knew this, too. If he stayed quiet, he probably could’ve transferred elsewhere. But Maru didn’t want to do that. Once he started anything, he had to see it to the end. As a result, the company fired the boss’ son to save face. They also didn’t take Maru’s resignation letter either. Maru still stopped working for them regardless. He had no intention of going back on his decisions, and he didn’t want to endure having to deal with his coworkers again.

Plus, his friend introduced him to a bus driving job. He was set. After getting himself a driving license, he officially began his job as a driver.

‘I’m the type that goes with the flow. Of course, if someone crosses a line, I’ll settle things with them no matter what happens. But as long as they don’t, I can endure anything. That’s the type of person Han Maru is.’

This personality trait is what compelled him to do what he did at the acting club, too. Maru was pretty cold when it came to certain things about human relationships. He likes to get involved in certain situations, but many times, he doesn't interfere deeply. But if he decides to resolve a problem, he does everything in his power to get to the conclusion he wants.

Perhaps that was why people thought of him to be kind and reserved, because he liked to extend a certain amount of politeness to everyone. Of course, he puts time and effort into the relationships that really matter to him, but he didn't have many of those to begin with.

It was the same for the aunty who gave him the chance to start his life again. Besides being a person to talk to, Maru hadn't done much else. He's helped her push her cart every once in a while, but anyone could've done that.

That was why he rejected the grandma's first offer. To others, Maru's actions might've seemed kind, but that wasn't the case for him.

'My high school life back then was like this, too.'

Of course, Maru was far more immature back then, but the fact that his relationships were simple did not change.

'I don't make many real friends. I also don't like to act unless the person in question is important to me. I like to be polite, and do nice things, but as soon as things start going south, then I become a spectator. If something happens to a person who's important to me, or if something happens to me, I have to see through to the end of it.'

That was the conclusion Maru came to. As soon as he thought this, a strange sense of nervousness hit him. Somewhere in his past life... He did something that didn't fit his personality at all. Where?

Maru started thinking again.

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'The People of Dalseok-dong' was a fun play. What drove the play wasn't the tension between the characters. The driving point of the play was rather how different they reacted to the new arrivals in their town. The comedic reactions of the characters were what moved the play.

That was why a lot of the play looked like a stand-up comedy. The goal of the play was to make the audience laugh with little jokes here and there.

"And that's why you need good acting for a successful play. You've heard of this line before, right? Actors don't cry, they make people cry. It's like that for this play, too. To the people in the play, the entire situation isn't funny at all. But it needs to look hilarious to the audience. That's what makes comedies hard."

Miso scanned the club once.

"It's pretty easy to make people sad. Doing the opposite is a little bit different. Everyone has their own sense of humor. That's where acting comes in. It's up to you whether or not you can make the audience laugh."



Comedies need to follow a set code, but also needs to have a special comedic element. That special factor can't be annoying or intrusive either. In a comedic play, the expressions of the actors mattered before all else.

This was a teen play. For teenagers who only do acting in their free time, making the audience laugh with their acting was a very difficult thing. Despite this, Miso didn't discourage the kids from doing it. As a matter of fact, Miso came to the club, with the intent of making the kids do comedy.

What the club needed was impact. They would prepare as much as they could, and show those judges from spring what was up. But to do that, she needed the kids' cooperation.

"This'll be harder than June. Are you guys ready?"

"Yes!"

"This time, we'll even record our runs and review it. I'm serious about this. We're going to win, we're going to get money, and we're going to sweep all of the awards at that competition. And then we'll go for sashimi with that prize money. How does tuna sound?"

Miso motioned the group closer to her with a clap. It was September now. They needed to prepare with the competition in late October in mind. That is, the teen acting competition at the Anyang Art Festival. Other cities could join the festival, which was exactly what Miso had in mind.

"Maru," she called out. The boy's been just staring dumbly at the air since morning.

She's never seen him like this. Maru just came to the club today like a person who left his consciousness back home. It wasn't like she could ask him if anything happened, given his state.

[I don't know what happened.]

[He's been like this all week.]

Miso asked Dojin and Daemyung if anything was wrong, but they were just as confused as her. Miso walked up towards him.

"Did anything happen?" she asked carefully.

"No. I was just thinking."

"Thinking?"

Maru nodded, gesturing at her to stop trying to pry further.

"You're alright?"

"Yes."

"If you happen to need help..."

Right then, Maru looked up to stare at Miso.

"This is my business."

Miso wasn't able to say anything. Looking at Maru's crestfallen face made her realize how rude she sounded when she offered her help. Right then, she got annoyed at the fact that she just got intimidated by a kid and tried to say something. She immediately felt bad about how crestfallen he was though, and closed her mouth.

'Surely this kid is older than my dad or something. Surely.'

But the same quality was what made the boy so tempting for her. Well, she was an adult. She needed to give him some advice regardless.

"If you need to think, try going somewhere with a good view. For me, that would be Hyehwa station."

"Hyehwa station?"

That's when Maru's expression changed a little bit. Almost as if he realized something he didn't even think of before. How interesting.

'Maybe I can use this...'

"Instructor."

As she started thinking to herself, Maru spoke out.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"W-what?"

"Hyehwa station."

"Ehh?"

Miso was clueless, but it looked like Maru had resolved himself somewhat. His expression had relaxed a lot more to return to his normal self. Was there something up with him and Hyehwa station? Miso decided not to think about it, and turned back to look at the club.

'Good.'

Miso decided to change the schedule.

"Everyone, change your clothes. It's time for a field trip."

"Field trip?"

"We're going to the sanctuary of all actors, Hyehwa station."

\* \* \*

"Wow."

"So this is Hyehwa station."

"Where's Marronnier park?"

Even the second years seemed amazed by the atmosphere for their first visit. Everyone was looking around with curious eyes. The first years, too, were already taken aback by the pantomime show at the entrance to the station. Maru stepped back from the group and stepped into the streets. When Miso mentioned Hyehwa station, he had remembered something unusual about himself.

‘It’s when I met that ticketing man.’

The high school girls who were pressured into buying tickets from an intimidating man. At that time, Maru decided to involve himself into the situation, which was fairly unusual.

‘I normally wouldn’t have done that.’

He could’ve just told the girls about the tickets and left. But that day, he decided to involve himself further than necessary. Was it because he didn’t like the man? Maybe. But that didn’t explain his agitation.

The only explanation for that were the high schooler girls...

‘Why?’

What made him care so much? Why did he get himself involved? As he thought, he noticed a group of high school girls stepping up the stairs towards him. They were all wearing red jackets over their uniforms. Maru found him naturally starting to focus on one of the girls in the group.

“Ah.”

Maru realized why he got angry at that place, why he helped the girls, and why he was still in the acting club to begin with. It was obvious.

Even if his memories were sealed, his soul still remembered. And it whispered to him to stay in the acting club. It told him that if he did...

“Look at him, I think he’s looking at you?”

“Eh? No way.”

“No, really.”

Maru continued staring at the group, particularly focusing on the girl in the group in front of him. Focusing on a name he couldn’t remember, and a face he couldn’t remember... It all came back to him. The woman in the white suit was right. Maru did recognize her.

She was...

“Stop it, he’s probably looking somewhere else.”

She, who was smiling shyly, was...

[Giving up acting is a little saddening, but at least I can be with you.]

Still...

[We're not just two people anymore, we're three. We need to earn a lot of money from now on. For our child.]

Charming.

Her eyes so fragile it looked ready to tear up with just a touch, her nose reddened slightly into a hue resembling a strawberry, and her lips that were colored like a ripe peach.

Everything about her was still the same.

### **Chapter 63**

"Um, would you be Mr. Han Maru?"

It was a voice that came piercing through the cold dawn air. Maru looked back towards the woman standing behind him. She wore a thin jacket, despite the cold weather. Her black leggings and khaki jacket was the first thing he noticed.

"Ah, yes."

"I'm sorry, I'm late."

"No, you came just in time. It takes a bit of time to get to the set, so please get on."

"Yes."

Maru opened the door to the back seats, but quickly closed it with a bitter smile. There were too many costumes and makeup littering the back of the car.

"You'll have to sit in the front seat. I'm sorry. I forgot to clean up the car."

"It's ok. Back seat front seat, they're both the same thing."

The woman hopped over to the other side of the car and stepped inside. Maru got in as well, and started up the car.

"Do you want me to turn on the heater?"

"Yes. I thought it wouldn't be very cold, but it's so cold."

"Well, that's just dawn for you. It takes three hours to get to the set, so please sleep if you need it. The director will give you further directions once you arrive. Your manager... you don't have one?"

"Hehe, yes."

"Is this your first time in a drama?"

"Yes, it is. I'm actually a replacement for a different actor."

"Ah, I see."

Maru already had a gist of what was going on. If he was called out to do the driving, it usually meant the actor in question wasn't very popular. Plus, this was HyeHwa station. The only actors that really got called in the mornings here were replacements for side characters.

“You must be nervous.”

“No.”

The woman said her response pretty firmly. Maru turned to look at the woman. Her eyes were shining, as if someone sprinkled silver powder on them. They fit the dawn air very nicely.

She didn't look nervous at all. As a matter of fact, she even looked excited.

“To think I would be on TV... I'm excited. Well, unless I just get completely edited out.”

“If they're trying to find a side character last minute, they probably can't afford to edit it out. Do your best. Who knows? You might be a star thanks to this.”

“Boo, no way.”

“Well, who knows.”

Of course, he was saying all of this only out of politeness. There were thousands of actor wannabes out there. Out of them, there were many who spent their lives unable to reach the screens.

Stars.

Stars were created when skilled people managed to get lucky. Will this woman manage to get lucky on today's set? Probably not.

“Liar.”

“W-what?”

Maru was a little surprised by the woman's sudden words.

“You're lying.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Hmm, I'm actually really good at detecting those kinds of stuff. Well, thank you anyway. That lie wasn't unpleasant.”

With that, the woman closed her eyes. Hm hm hm, a humming noise started to come out of her nose. She was flicking her fingers as she rhythmically shook her head as well.

Looking at that made Maru laugh a little. He couldn't help it, she looked so happy and at ease. The woman seemed to have noticed him.

“What is it?” she asked.

“No, it's nothing.”

“Are you surprised that a person you met for the first time is humming to herself so comfortably?”

“Can you read minds or something?”

“I'm good at reading people. But did you want me to stop?”

“Not at all. That was good to hear.”

“Well, I’ll keep going, then.”

The woman hummed to herself after a deep breath. At that moment, the car felt like a carriage running through a golden field. It felt like the view outside the car was warm and beautiful as it could ever be.

The woman was drawing lines in the air with her finger as she hummed, almost as if she was conducting an orchestra. She looked adorable, but the woman was as serious as ever. A frown would occasionally surface, almost as if there was a problem in her imaginary orchestra.

“Did something go wrong?”

“Yes. I can’t remember my line all that well. I don’t think it’s mine just yet.”

“What is it?”

“This is too expensive.”

“Is that it?”

“Mm, there’s one more. Can I get this for cheaper? I’m supposed to be a newlywed lady who’s out for blood in the market. 15 seconds on screen. That’s pretty long, right?”

“Hahaha.”

The woman started flicking her finger around again. Hm hm hm. Her hums sounded like a songbird. Before he even realized it, Maru found himself humming along with her.

\* \* \*

“Yo, Maru.”

Someone was waving their hand in front of Maru’s face. Only upon realizing that did Maru come back to reality. Dojin and Daemyung were looking at him worriedly.

“Dude, are you really ok? You’ve been weird all week. Is there something wrong?”

“You’re making us worried. Did something happen?”

Maru shook his head. He pointed at his grinning face in response.

“Does it look like something bad happened?”

“No, but you’ve been in a daze for like, god knows how long. You were like this after the play, too.”

“I just had something to think about. No problems.”

“Really? Good to hear. Here’s your food. Shrimp burger.”

“Thanks.”

Dojin and Daemyung sat down next to him. They were at Marronnier park. Thanks to the warm weather, there were a lot of people performing on the streets. Some people were from theaters, while others

were completely independent. There were countless buskers outside with their guitars, and there were even some people with very strange looking instruments.

They even found a group of middle schoolers out on a field trip. Around half of them were looking at just one person. A man who was standing still in the middle of the park, in a clown makeup. The man only moved when money entered his pockets.

Whenever the middle schoolers put 500 won bills into his pockets, he would sometimes move very naturally, or sometimes very stiffly to indicate some sort of a reaction. The kids kept putting more money in, seemingly very amused by the man's movements.

"Earning money's hard, huh?" Dojin commented.

Maru could only nod with a smile.

"By the way, what did you talk about with the girls earlier?" Dojin asked with a grin.

"I was just curious about something."

"Ohh! Maru, you're a man, aren'tcha? Did you like one of them?"

"I just wanted to confirm something."

"Confirm? Confirm what?"

"You kids wouldn't know."

"The hell? Just introduce me bro. Come to think of, they had pretty weird uniforms on. Don't think I saw them around before."

"Yeah."

Daemyung butted into the conversation right then.

"They're from Myunghwa high."

"Myunghwa high?"

It was the first Maru's heard of them. Dojin seemed to know who they were, though. He pouted a little bit in annoyance.

"Oh, so it was them."

"Yeah, I searched them up because I got curious."

The two seemed to know something. Did something happen?

"What about Myunghwa high?"

"Oh, right. You wouldn't know, huh?"

Daemyung started speaking as he folded up his burger wrapper.

“They’re the ones who won the nationals this year. I tried not to think about it since we lost, but I kind of couldn’t. I found them when I searched for them online. They even have a video of their winning play. The one they performed at the Seoul Arts Center.”

Seoul Arts Center. It was the place the students got to perform at, once they got up to nationals. They could only perform at the smaller theaters in the center, but being able to perform in the Seoul Arts Center was a great honor to begin with.

‘So she started acting around now.’

He remembered the time they first met, almost as if he managed to find something he lost a long time ago inside a box. She used to be an actor of a certain theater, and he was a road manager constantly on the lookout for new jobs. His memories of the events that transpired afterwards were a little faint, but just having memories of her face, name and voice was enough to make him happy.

As a matter of fact, he felt like he was being saved by someone. Just being able to see her again made him happy again. Just today, his worries about the future wouldn’t bother him anymore.

“Man you seem happy now. What’s up with that?”

Dojin whispered ‘I almost feel bad for worrying about you’ under his breath, as he put a hand over Maru’s shoulder.

“So, you get her number?”

Maru turned away from Dojin with an exasperated face, but he ended up being greeted with an even more expectant Daemyung.

‘Look at these kids.’

He understood why Dojin would be curious, but even Daemyung?

“T-the girl at the end was cute.”

“Good job, Daemyung! Yes, if you’re a man, you must have a right mindset like that. You go for the girl at the end. I’ll go with the one in the mid-”

That’s where Maru put a hand over Dojin’s mouth. The one in the middle? Whose wife do you think you’re trying to steal over here?

“Shush. Don’t even think about it.”

“.....”

Dojin scanned Maru with narrowed eyes.

“Oho oho, Mr. Han Maru. You’re worse than me, huh? You already have her marked down as your girlfriend? Or... Did you get her number already? Huh?”

“No, I just wanted to ask her something.”

“Ask her what?”



“Her name.”

“Name? Just her name? Really? What about her number?”

“Well... I’ll get that next time.”

“Ugh.”

Maru was content with just seeing her. He didn’t want to mess things up by rushing into things. Surely, they would meet again some time again in the future. He shouldn’t try to hurry, if anything, he needs to act like a gentleman.

‘I wonder if she’d accept my proposal again?’

Wait. Did he go too far?

“Dude, no matter how much you like her, if she doesn’t like you, it’s over.”

Dojin’s playful words hit Maru like a hammer.

“Y-you’re right.”

“Hey, Maru.”

“You’re right. What do I do?”

“W-what the hell? Dude, Daemyung! This guy’s getting weird!”

“Ahh. How did I not even think about that? Hold on, what did my wife like again?”

“Wife?”

Dojin and Daemyung exchanged their confused looks with one another. In the meantime, Maru...

‘This isn’t easy at all.’

Maru had turned very serious.

## **Chapter 64**

Maru didn’t believe in soulmates. He had believed that relationships always came to an end. If a couple couldn’t release the stress and anger building up between them, their relationship is doomed to collapse.

That was... until he met her.

\* \* \*

“What’s up with him recently? Is he in love? Is that it?!”

Daemyung shook his head as he looked at Dojin. Clearly, Maru was acting strangely today, but he didn’t think it was because of love.

‘Then again, Maru definitely looked odd this morning talking to those girls.’

The first thing Maru did after coming to Hye-hwa station was to go talk to those girls. Daemyung had no idea what the other boy talked about, but he did notice that the boy was incredibly agitated for some reason.

“We should visit Blue Sky now,” Miso said, gathering all the club members together.

Blue Sky?

Daemyung looked down at his jersey. Did she mean the place where the jersey was made or something?

A few moments later, Daemyung learned that a theater called Blue Sky existed near the station. He even got to exchange a few words with the actors. The words from actual pro actors spoke pretty deeply to Daemyung. At some point, he stopped treating acting as a hobby, and started treating it as a real passion.

He didn’t care all that much about being the main character, instead placing his care on the completion of a play. At every chance he got, he started taking notes of what Miso wanted out of the club. Instead of acting, what he wanted to work on was staging a play.

‘It’s not like I want to stop acting, but...’

Main characters were amazing for sure. They managed to enthrall an entire audience when they did their job well. But at the same time, Daemyung found himself developing respect for stage managers who managed to actually “make it all happen”. Like the audio and lighting technician who managed everything from the operating room. Daemyung had a certain respect for the man capable of enhancing the quality of the play without even being on stage.

‘Some day, at the Seoul Arts Center...’

Once again, the desire to stand at the nationals started flickering brightly inside Daemyung’s chest.

\* \* \*

“This is our new script. We’ll be practicing with these from now.”

Miso handed out the new scripts first thing after coming back to school. Maru glanced over at the new script in his hand. In the past, he would’ve just skimmed the entire thing before closing it. Because he didn’t need it. Because it wasn’t important at all. Not anymore. This time, he read each and every line with more focus than before. Not because he was coming out on the play.

Meeting her... made Maru think about a problem. He decided that the best way to solve this problem was to take up acting.

‘My path has changed.’

The first time he met her was after he graduated college. As a failing road manager and a failing actor. The odds of it were incredibly low. As a matter of fact, it was practically a miracle. He managed to meet his wife amongst countless other actors, even falling in love. What else could that be other than a miracle?

In this life, though, things were a little bit different. He did manage to meet her. In high school, no less. Was this simply by chance?

No, Maru didn't think so. He believed it to be the result of his brain working overtime to make a certain possibility into a certainty.

He may have forgotten about her, but his heart told him to join the acting club. His heart told him to stay despite all that's happened, and thanks to it, he managed to meet her. Not as a road manager or an actor, but as two actors stepping into the world of acting.

Things were different now. Due to that, he would have to make several new arrangements. Maru didn't want to let her go. He wanted to start a family with her again, make love with her again, and meet their daughter again.

What would he need to do for that to happen?

'Rather than try to chase after money, I'd have to win over her heart. Well, if I can achieve both, that would be ideal.'

He would throw away his bus driver life to the side, and start up an entirely new life. He needed to prepare for a new life where he still maintained good relationships with her. At this point, acting was pretty much a requirement for Maru's life.

'My wife is an actor to the core.'

She is an actor now, and she will still be an actor at the age of 26 when they'd meet for the first time. Right now, in high school, she is still an actor. In that case, what would be the easiest way for him to approach her?

To do acting.

The more points in common they had, the closer they would be able to get.

'...It's pretty creepy, isn't it.'

For a second, he remembered what his first love felt like, but as a forty-five year old man... It was a bit difficult for him to try to fall in love like a normal teenager. Especially when he thought of the concept 'platonic love' as something nonexistent. But it wasn't like he didn't love her despite this. It was just that he wanted her more than ever.

'Come to think of, she still looks as pretty as ever.'

Being able to see his love's face at two points in time at once was the greatest gift to him. Maru had worried about many things as he started his life anew, but as soon as he saw her little face, all those worries melted away.

Just thinking about her made him smile. He couldn't help it, it was pretty much biological. Kind of like how people laugh when tickled. To him, just thinking about her made him smile.

"Han Maru!"

"Yes, yes?"

“I’m a bit happy I managed to finally catch you daydreaming, but can we focus, please?”

Maru scratched his eyebrows. Miso must’ve been explaining something while he was thinking. Maru stepped into the group of club members quickly.

“I’m sorry.”

“Looks like something good happened recently. Why don’t you spill the beans? I, for one, want to know what made you smile like an idiot over there.”

“It’s nothing.”

Right then, Dojin raised his arm with a shout.

“He’s got a crush on a girl!”

“He asked a girl for her name this morning.”

Even Daemyung was butting in.

“Oho.... teenage romance, is it?”

“Haha. Ha. Haha.”

Maru could only laugh in response.

“Good times. Right. At your age, you guys really need to try loving, and get your hearts broken. That’s how you get hurt less by love when you become adults. But for now, let’s focus on the lecture, okay?”

“Yes ma’am!”

Miso waved her hand in satisfaction, and opened the script in her other hand.

“As you saw this morning, the biggest difference between pros and amateurs are their reaction times. You saw how quickly the actor on stage changed his line as soon as one of the audience members sneezed, right? That kind of improv can only come from immense amounts of practice. It’s not at all something unprepared the actor just spit out. Improv is an incredibly difficult skill that can only come with experience. If you want to improv like that, you need to know the play pretty much in full. You need to know beforehand how your improv will change the play. How it would connect with the next scene, and if your fellow actor can even follow up on it at all.”

Maru thought back to the play in the morning. Someone in the seats sneezed loud enough to make his ears ring there. In that situation, the actor managed to incorporate even that sneeze into the part of the play and continued on. Almost as if the sneeze was a part of the play to start with.

“Of course, I’m not expecting something like that from you kids. You just need to be able to perform your play pretty well. I’m not expecting much more than that. No matter what the audience does, just ignore it. You can’t think about improv. Ignoring the audience is the best thing you can do right now.”

Ignore the audience. It was the biggest no-no for any pro, but for amateurs, it was a pretty perfect suggestion.

“And so,” Miso grinned.

Maru rolled his eyes a little. He knew what would be coming after that smile at this point. Even the club members were stiffening a little bit, trying to ready themselves for what would come.

“We need to throw away our shame.”

\* \* \*

Throw away shame. Maru didn't quite understand what that meant at first. Well, he had an idea, but this was far from what he had in mind.

“D-do I really?”

“Of course.”

Yoonjung looked in front of her. They were standing at an alleyway full of cafes, at dinnertime. There were tons of people walking in the alleyway, trying to enjoy the night air.

Currently, Yoonjung was standing in front of one of the cafes within the alleyway. There was an outdoor terrace with six tables laid out in front of her. The girl swallowed her saliva. Right now, no one was paying attention to her. They were all busy talking about their own lives.

But...

What if she starts saying her lines loudly in front of them?

‘Ahhh, what do I do?!’

She had just received her lines, without any chance to practice a single word. Trying to say lines that she had practiced was infinitely different compared to trying to say lines she's never seen before. On a stage, an actor was in a contract with the audience.

The actor would perform, and the audience would watch. But this was a cafe. There was no such social contract present with the couples, salarymen, and the students there. Without such, Yoonjung couldn't help but become nervous.

Her heart was starting to race. All she had to do was just spit out her lines, so why?

‘I'm scared.’

What if they decide to ignore her? Just that thought was enough to make her spiral into darkness. She knew that she just had to say her lines, but...

Gulp, Yoonjung swallowed her saliva.

Doing and knowing were two very different things, she realized.

\* \* \*

He had to say, this was very much a Miso thing to do.

“They're cute kids, aren't they?”

“What the hell do you think you're doing at my store?”

“Hey, don’t be like that. It’s a nice event. I’ll pay for the customers’ coffee too, so don’t worry about it.”

“God, you’re just... well, I guess the customers wouldn’t mind all that much. We’re stopping as soon as they become uncomfortable though. Got it?”

“Don’t worry. That’s never happened so far, you should know that.”

“That’s true.”

Miso was currently chatting away with the owner of the cafe happily at the counter. The club members all looked at Yoonjung, who wasn’t really able to do much outside.

The cafe was getting strangely nervous inside. Maru took a look at the other kids. They were all glaring at Miso woefully.

“...Man, how do people even do street performances?”

“That clown guy from a few days ago seems a whole lot more respectable to me now.”

Dojin and Daemyung noted. It was decided that the second years would be the first to go. It would’ve been less nerve-wracking if they went in pairs, but Miso forbid it completely.

Yoonjung, as the president, volunteered to go first, but... The result was as plain as day. She wasn’t even able to speak after five minutes. It was pretty understandable, considering the number of people sitting at the terrace and the number of people walking in the alleyway.

‘It’d definitely help her, though.’

Maru opened up a magazine as he ate some of the cake rolls the owner gave him. He didn’t feel nervous, for whatever reason. Going out to speak to strangers didn’t seem all that foreign to him, despite him never really doing it in the past.

As a matter of fact, he felt somewhat comfortable. Maybe this came from the time he worked as a bus driver in the past?

‘Whatever it is, it’s nice.’

He was able to enjoy all this in peace thanks to it.

Of course... the other kids all looked like they were about to die.

\* \* \*

Miso glanced at Maru shortly. The boy was enjoying his coffee and cake like a normal customer. Very different compared to the other club members around him, or Yoonjung outside.

‘He was born talented.’

Nervousness wasn’t something a person could hide. Even experienced actors felt nervous from time to time. Why wouldn’t they? Especially with thousands of pairs of eyes staring at them.

But the actors were able to enjoy that nervousness. They were able to use that nervousness to fuel the performance of their play.

Miso often classified actors as people who were able to channel nervousness into raw energy. That was why she believed every actor needed to be able to handle nervousness to become the real deal.

"Is he a senior?" Miso's friend asked.

She was thankful to know her. The woman always helped Miso out whenever she needed it. Miso shook her head in response.

"Nope, a total beginner."

"But he's still that calm?"

"That's why I've kept my eyes on him."

"...Think of the age difference, you goddamned cradle robber."

"You!"

Her friend walked away with a grin while Miso turned to look at Yoonjung; she needed to focus on the girl right now.

"You better start as soon as possible. Trying to delay it is only going to make it harder."

Opening your mouth, and finishing what you had to say. It sounds easy on paper. Not so much in real life. Miso glared at Yoonjung sharply.

"Let's hope you don't put your title as president to shame."

## **Chapter 65**

Saying the actual lines shouldn't take more than three minutes. She just needed to imagine that there was a fellow actor next to her, there to respond to her lines. Right, she needed to imagine. This wasn't a cafe, but a stage. There's a spotlight above shining directly onto her. The doors to the auditorium opens, with the audience coming in one by one. Right now, they were still preparing. Not many people cared about her on the stage.

Right, there was no need to be nervous. Everyone was looking at the pamphlet right now. She could see the children as well as the adults. Let's breathe a little bit.

Wait, the air smells like coffee?

No, start over, start over.

This is a stage. The people in front of her were here to watch her act. She couldn't afford to disappoint them. She's already practiced, so she just needs to act it out now.

'Wait, did I even practice?'

Yoonjung sighed. She could feel a few people glancing at her. Then again, all she did till now was stare at the cafe for five straight minutes. If she delayed any more, she really wouldn't be able to do it. Yoonjung bit her lips before saying her first line.

"S-shouldn't you at least try to introduce yourself if you move into the neighborhood?"

She needed to become a mean old lady who lives downstairs. She needed to become annoying and grouchy. A conceited lady that has no filters on her words.

But by the time Yoonjung's voice reached her ears, she could only swallow nervously.

She was too quiet.

Too quiet to even be heard. When she turned around, only the man right next to her was staring at her with a 'what?' face. She didn't even manage to grab people's attention. As soon as that thought hit her, she felt the blood drain from her face.

Why? Why was she like this? She couldn't understand it. She's already performed in front of people several times. Not much had changed, so why did this take so much effort?

Her voice was getting buried. Buried by the air, the footsteps, and the voices around her. She wasn't able to reach out and speak to the people in front of her.

For now, she finished her lines. She finished them, but... She didn't feel good at all. It felt like she was just talking to herself. People were looking at her, sure, but they all looked confused.

She wanted to explain this was a play. She wanted to explain her role, and what type of a personality her character had.

'This isn't right.'

This wasn't right at all.

\* \* \*

Yoonjung came back inside. She looked far less energetic than usual, which only managed to worry the club members more.

"How was it?" Miso asked.

The instructor looked like a mean boss, especially with that beige mug in hand.

"I was just... disappointed."

"At what?"

"At myself."

Yoonjung hunched her neck as she spoke. After sighing deeply, the girl flopped over the table.

"You couldn't make yourself heard, right?"

"Yes. I tried to perform like normal, but no one bothered to listen. No, I don't think they could hear me to begin with. Some of the people right next to me responded, but most people just glanced for a second and looked away. Man, it felt awful."

Yoonjung frowned.



“You learned well, Ms. president. This isn’t a stage. There’s no microphone or anything to help you here. Here, your voice is very small. As a matter of fact, it can become even smaller depending on how strong the wind is. This place is very, very unsuited for performances.”

After speaking, Miso pointed at the next person. It was Dojin.

“I tried to get the first years going after all the second years, but that’s a little unfair, isn’t it? Let’s switch it up. Dojin, you looked a little too relaxed just now. You didn’t think you’d go next, did you?”

Maru had to say... The woman was really good at mind games. Dojin stood up from his face with a dumb look. He ran outside with his script in hand, but he didn’t look good at all.

“Watch. This time, he’s going to start shouting as much as he can, and run out of breath in the middle.”

Miso was a prophet, predicting precisely how Dojin would perform.

\* \* \*

“Huff, huff.”

Dojin bowed, feeling the people in the cafe glaring at him.

‘God, this is so embarrassing. So embarrassing!’

His face felt like it was burning. He started off pretty well, raising his voice like Miso told them to. He managed to grab the audience’s attention.

The problem came afterward.

Breathing.

Normally, he would be able to say ten words in one breath. But right now, each breath was only able to give him around 3 words. He felt for the first time the feeling of one’s lungs shriveling up as it gasped for air. The air felt incredibly heavy around him.

Eventually, his head started spinning from the lack of air. He couldn’t even pay attention to the audience any more. All that he could think of was to finish his lines as fast as possible, and go back to his seat.

“This time, we managed to see two instances of what not to do. At first, Dojin didn’t even think about the volume of his voice, and ended up speaking like a little mosquito. Next, Dojin didn’t even bother controlling his breathing, and gifted his audience with disgustingly bad breathing rhythm and an incredibly loud voice.”

Dojin sat down next to Yoonjung silently. The girl looked at him warmly. It almost looked like she was telling him ‘you’re just like me, aren’t you?’.

“Now, next up...”

Miso ignored the two fallen soldiers next to her, and pointed at her next target: Geunseok.

\* \* \*

By this time, the customers started to notice that something was up. Some of them were even heading out to the terrace to get a good view of what was happening.

Geunseok happened to be the one to go as they gathered on the terrace. He stood up from his seat confidently, and walked outside. Maru stared at the boy for a little bit, before taking his coffee cup back to the counter. He handed the cup to the owner of the shop before asking, "Can I order some lemon tea?"

"Hm?"

The owner took the cup from Maru's hand. Right then, Miso walked up to him from the back.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, this kid was just asking for some lemon tea."

"What?"

Maru grinned at Miso.

"I'm just trying to help people out. You must be feeling good after paying for everyone's drinks, and the owner must feel good about selling a lot of drinks. Ah, the coffee was good. That's why I wanted to try the tea this time."

Miso sighed, and responded with a 'do whatever you want'. The owner poured hot water into the mug with a grin.

"You're pretty good, kid. It's been a while since I've seen such an expression from Miso."

"Thank you. By the way, when does this cafe close?"

"Usually by 10pm. Sometimes until 11pm, if regulars decide they want to talk with me for a bit. Occasionally until dawn if I don't want to go back home?"

"Aha."

"Why do you ask?"

"I wanted to come some time. It's a nice cafe."

"With your girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"You better be holding hands by then. I'll give you two a slice of cake as a gift."

The owner smiled brightly before leaving. In the meantime, Maru took a look at the terrace from the counter. Geunseok was speaking outside. He was doing pretty well, actually. Well enough to make some of the audience take pictures.

"Here's your lemon tea."

"Thank you."

“Oh, he’s doing pretty well.”

“Yeap.”

“You aren’t nervous?”

“Not really.”

“That’s good.”

The owner turned back after telling him a few words of encouragement. With that, Maru returned to his seat with his tea.

“You really feel comfortable enough to get that stuff?” Dojin asked dejectedly. Maru nodded.

“It’s free. You should get some too.”

“I might throw up if I drink anything now. Ugh, I’m so embarrassed.”

“Me too.”

It almost felt like he was looking at a pair of zombies. After observing the two for a moment, Maru started hearing a weak applause from the crowd. When he turned around, he could see Geunseok step back into the cafe with a weak huff. Quite a few people on the terrace were giving him applause.

“How was it?” Miso asked.

“I was nervous, but I don’t think I made mistakes. I threw away my nervousness and said my lines. I lacked air a little bit, but I think I finished well.”

“You got applause, so you did well. For your first time, that’s pretty good.”

Geunseok clenched his fist when Miso gave him her praise. Maru could easily spot it. It seemed that for this kid, praises were what gave him meaning in life. Nothing else would be able to satisfy him.

Some would call that unconfident, others would say the boy was incapable of self-love. He was just the type of person who would rot away in the corner alone without any praise.

Of course, this wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. There was never a good or bad in how a person chose to live their life. Geunseok would, as a matter of fact, shine like a star as long as someone supported him. Of course, this only meant that he would have to work hard at maintaining his relationships.

Maru chewed on some of the bread on the table that no one’s touched.

“You did well, it was the best.”

Yurim gave Geunseok a thumbs up, further brightening the boy’s mood. On the other hand, Dojin and Yoonjung’s face only fell further. Yoonjung put up an awkward smile, and Dojin clawed away at his hair after glaring at Geunseok for a second. Right then...

“But... Do you think the people over there understood you?” Miso asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Being able to make yourself heard, and actually making the audience understand what you said are two different things. Geunseok, go ask that lady over there what she felt from your performance.”

“.....”

Geunseok’s face immediately stiffened as he stood up. Miso gave him a strawberry tart, presumably to give to the woman. He walked outside with it, talked with the woman for a moment, and came back. Unlike before, he looked like he ate dirt.

“She said she didn’t really know. She forgot very quickly after hearing what I said.”

“Exactly. You didn’t make an impression at all. Don’t get too confident. The only thing you did up there was make an interesting speech, rather than actually act.”

“...I don’t think I can act without having done any sort of practice.”

That made Miso laugh.

“It’s been a full week since I gave you your scripts. Are you the type of idiot who doesn’t even look at the script if I don’t tell you to?”

“.....”

“Do you think a full run is the only type of practice you can do? No, your practice should’ve begun the moment you received your scripts. Did you guys really think I gave you your scripts to use as decoration? Or are you going to tell me that you couldn’t practice because of the revised script I gave you? The only thing the revision changed was like one or two lines, and the order in which the characters appear. The main branch of the story is untouched. As a matter of fact, I didn’t even touch up your character at all, Geunseok. But you say you didn’t practice? Are you serious right now?”

“...I’m sorry.”

“You can have confidence, as long as you practice.”

The air in the cafe dropped by a degree. Dojin and Yoonjung straightened up on their seats as well. What seemed like a simple field trip was starting to change into something else.

‘That’s what I thought.’

Maru took a sip of his lemon tea. There was no way Miso brought the group here to simply play for a bit. The woman picked out her next victim with a glare.

“Daemyung.”

“Y-yes!”

“Try to do well.”

“.....”

Daemyung stepped out to the terrace with a pale expression.

## Chapter 66

Daemyung knew what he was getting himself into. He knew what this would be like, but he couldn't help but be nervous regardless. The boy felt himself become a little lightheaded from all the eyes that were on him.

It was transitioning to six in the evening now. The sun was starting to set, and the shadows were lengthening around him. The ground around him reddened up a bit, making it feel like he was actually standing under a light.

"Good luck."

"You can do it," some of the audience said.

Thank goodness they weren't being so cold. He would've just frozen up if they were telling him to be quiet. Daemyung looked at his script a little bit. He had a lot of lines. Daemyung's character went by the name of Baksik. A student who lived on the rooftop, full of anger and resentment towards the world.

Since the day he received his script, Daemyung has been doing nothing but flesh out the character in his head.

'The guy is a student who doesn't even earn money. Is he thin? No, he must live on instant foods, so he's gotta be fat. Like me. He's angry at the world, so he better be frowning all the time, too.'

Daemyung stood in front of his audience. He frowned like he was annoyed at something, and he drooped his shoulders as well. He tried to take away as much energy as he could from his body, almost pretending to be a jellyfish or something. He put a bit more air into his stomach to make himself look a bit fatter.

'Around thirty years old, watches TV a lot. Knows a lot about society, since that's what he likes to complain about all the time. The character loves correcting people, and complaining about them. I guess it would be good to pout a bit too?'

Focusing on the character made him feel a little less nervous. He was starting to get his breath back too. The nervousness he felt now was actually starting to make him a little bit excited.

'I'm nothing.'

That was true. Nothing about him really stood out to the crowd. But this wasn't a place to showcase Park Daemyung as a person. There was no need to show the audience who he was.

So what if he was ugly? What if he was unconfident?

Sure, those were the right descriptors of him. But that didn't matter at all. The main character of this show wasn't Daemyung, but Baksik, his character. There was no need to be intimidated. He was on a stage. All he needs to do is to show his character. Not Daemyung, but Baksik.

Daemyung took a short breath and raised his hand. Scene one, line one.

"Man you people are loud. Do you think you bought out the entire building or what?"

Let's try being mean.

\* \* \*

Baksik actually had quite a lot of lines. Enough to make Daemyung run out of breath in the middle. The character was in a lot of scenes, and had weight in the entire play. Almost enough weight as the main character.

When Daemyung was first assigned this character, the only thing the club could think was “why”? But right now, not a single one of them was able to doubt Miso’s decision.

Maru took a look at his friend with his chin resting on one hand. He, too, was a little surprised by Miso’s initial decision, but he finally understood why she made that decision. In the last play, Daemyung performed his role of a 40 year old salaryman pretty well. He seemed like the perfect 40 year old, as a matter of fact. Now that Maru thought back on it, Daemyung had done a pretty tremendous job back then.

He could hear his friend’s voice coming through the terrace doors. The boy was running out of breath, making his execution speed up, but they still felt good to hear. Actually, his speech didn’t matter much at all. What really stood out in his performance were his expressions and movements. Watching him complain under his breath, pout, and kick the floor every once in a while was quite comical.

“Good. I was right in making him do Baksik,” Miso noted.

Sometimes the flow of his performance was cut by him looking at his lines, but at least whenever he spoke, he really did look like his character. Soon, after he finished his lines, Daemyung bowed with an embarrassed expression. The audience gave him a pretty big applause.

Daemyung raised his head. He bowed again with a nervous smile before walking back into the cafe.

“Phew. D-d-did I do well?”

Miso gave a thumbs up to the reddened boy. Daemyung sighed deeply before sitting down on his chair.

“How do you feel?”

“...I didn’t think much before I got the applause, but after getting them, I felt really good. This is a lot different from curtain calls.”

“Of course. Those applauses were directed towards you. Congratulations. That was a very good solo performance. More than I had hoped. Just keep doing around that much from now on, and you’ll be just fine. You might get the acting award come this competition.... Well... never mind. That’s good enough.”

Miso glanced at Geunseok as she spoke.

‘The carrot and the stick, huh.’

Maru almost wanted to call Miso a human tamer. As a matter of fact, Geunseok was looking at Daemyung with a very bitter look. The boy moved exactly as Miso wanted him to.

‘Good enough, huh.’

Miso must’ve wanted something more out of Daemyung.

“Good job!” “You did well!”

Daemyung received praises from the rest of the members around him. The nervousness must've disappeared, too, seeing as to how he started eating the bread on the table as well. That made Maru laugh a little inside.

"Now, let's get on with this."

Iseul was the next to go. She instantly grabbed attention from the crowd with her face. She didn't get too into it like Daemyung did, but she still managed to get applause from the crowd with her voice and breathing technique.

"You did pretty well, but you would've been better if you were more engrossed with your character."

"I was embarrassed, hehe."

Iseul trembled a little bit after she came back to her seat. She must've been very nervous, despite her calm expression.

"How was it?"

"Mm... I realized how difficult it was to actually say my lines without context. I was also embarrassed since I was in such close proximity to the audience. I could hear everything from them, which made it hard to focus. All in all, I think I just realized just how difficult street performances are."

"Anything else?"

"Trying to show without telling is very difficult." "Good, but is that all?"

"Ah, yes."

"Good, that's enough."

Iseul was the second to pass without much criticism.

"Let's keep going."

Miso pointed at the second years. Joonghyuk, Minsung, and Danmi all went one by one. Since they had some time to calm down, they didn't make mistakes like Yoonjung did. The audience must've gotten used to this as well, seeing as to how they were waiting for the next student up.

"We should go with the kids with the shorter lines, now."

Miso looked at Maru.

"You're up."

Maru stood up with the cake still in his mouth.

"Wouldn't this be pretty difficult for Maru?"

"Yeah."

Daemyung watched Maru exit the cafe, feeling his excited heart starting to calm down. Dojin was right. This would be pretty difficult for Maru, especially since the boy didn't have that many lines to begin with.

'A little more than three lines?'

It didn't even amount to four, when printed on an A4 paper. Plus, a lot of them were just exclamations, not actual lines. Maru's role in the play was a 'teenager'. A role that didn't even have a name. The character had a lot of places where he appeared, but he didn't actually have any real lines at all.

"Did you also feel pretty awkward out there, by the way? Plays start at act one so that people can understand what's going on, but we had to go out there and cut everything out except our lines. It felt really weird," Dojin commented.

Daemyung found himself nodding vigorously, he could totally relate. Not having someone there to support you was bad enough, but the worst problem was that the audience had no idea what the play was about. Instructor Miso had just told them to go out and say their lines, but Daemyung knew that wasn't all there was to it. The others probably noticed as well.

"The instructor said a while ago that this was a one-man play, right?"

"Yeah."

"So we probably aren't just supposed to go there and say our line, right?"

"I mean, just look at what she said to Geunseok. She probably wants us to make the audience understand what our characters are about. Oh, by the way, Daemyung, you were amazing back there. Since when were you so good at acting?"

Dojin nudged Daemyung with his elbow. Daemyung grinned embarrassedly. Being told that his acting improved felt better than being told he was good at studying. At some point in time, acting became the center of who he was as a person. He didn't know what exactly he wanted to do after high school still, but suddenly, acting didn't seem like that bad of an idea. "Maybe you might even get the main role next year, if you keep this up," Dojin said, looking at Geunseok.

Daemyung quickly tried to stop Dojin, but Geunseok had already reacted by this point. Plus...

"Well, it could be possible, as long as he gets skilled enough," Instructor Miso poured oil into the fire.

Daemyung could only smile nervously between Geunseok, Dojin, and Miso.

'I might honestly feel better out there instead,' Daemyung thought, looking out into the terrace.

By this point, Maru had finished positioning himself outside.

"Hey now, look outside everyone," Miso gestured.

The club members all looked towards Maru. Daemyung turned to look as well.

'Maru should be fine with his lines.'

His lines were short, so he should come back quick. Plus, he'd never seen the boy embarrassed by anything, so things might end very quickly.

"Hm, hm."



Maru coughed a few times loudly. Loud enough to be heard indoors. After receiving the attention of the entire cafe, Maru raised his script.

“It’s dinnertime already. Did you all have your meals yet?”

The boy started off with a greeting, instilling a bit of confusion from Daemyung.

“What’s he doing?”

“That’s not his line.”

He could hear the others say. They were right. Maru didn’t have such a line in his script. What was the boy trying to do?

“My name is Han Maru. The play the others from my club performed just now is called The People of Dalseok-dong, a comedy. It’s about a man who moves into Dalseok-dong, and the events that ensue from it.”

Eh? Daemyung bit his lips lightly. This wasn’t right.

“He’s explaining the play?”

“What the heck?”

“Is he nervous?”

Daemyung gripped his fist lightly. An actor, trying to explain what he was acting verbally? Nonsense. An actor’s job is to show, not tell. Trying to tell the story through words... That wasn’t right at all.

Maru continued explaining the story with his normal, everyday voice. He explained what the story of the play was about, and what characters had appeared before him so far. After explaining most of it, Maru stepped forward by one step.

“I have the role of a young man in this play. I don’t have that many lines, actually. Personally, I think my character’s role is kind of like msg, if I were to put it in terms of food. Kind of like this.”

Maru walked sideways for a second before turning to the crowd to exclaim, “what the?” His comic expression made some of the audience laugh.

“These are what all of my lines are like. Here, let me read some of my script to you so that you have a better idea.”

Maru explained everything about what was happening from one to ten, almost like he was explaining something to a child. The audience members started nodding in understanding. They seemed to be making a connection between all the students that came so far, finally.

Daemyung understood what Maru was trying to do here. Still, he thought this was wrong. This wasn’t acting.

“We told him to act, but he’s commentating instead,” Taejoon noted annoyedly. Daemyung had to agree.

It wasn't like the students before Maru did a bad job because they didn't know how to explain. They were just trying their best not to explain their roles to the audience.

Because they were actors.

Daemyung scanned the second years very quickly. They didn't seem very happy either. Next, he turned to look at Miso. Sure enough, her eyebrows were pointed up straight up into the sky.

After a little more time, Maru finished his last line. He ended his little monologue with, 'thank you for allowing me some of your time', and stepped back inside. Daemyung found himself becoming very nervous inside. He could just see Miso shouting angrily at Maru the moment the boy came to their table.

Strangely, though, Miso didn't say anything. So Yoonjung took the initiative to speak instead.

"Han Maru."

"Yes?"

"What did you do?"

"The instructor told me to say my lines, so I did."

"With plenty of explanation to go with it?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Of course there is. Instructor Miso told us to act, not explain."

"Did she? I don't recall her ever saying that."

"Eh?" Daemyung found himself exclaiming. Maru was right. Instructor Miso only told the club to say their lines to the audience, and nothing else.

"But if you're an actor, you should do your best to make the audience understand through your acting."

Most of the club nodded at Yoonjung's words. The girl was right. But Maru's response was that of confusion.

"I don't know. I don't think I'm that good of an actor. Of course, that might be possible for you seniors and the rest of the club. Since you all practiced a lot. But such a thing isn't possible for me."

"Do you think we don't know that? We know we can't do it either. I made a mistake too, but at least I..."

When Yoonjung paused for a second, Maru butted in.

"You shouldn't do that if you know you can't do it. The audience is taking some of their time in the day to look at what we're doing. We can't let these people down with subpar performance. If you know you can't do something, you should try something new that actually works."

"....."

"I don't understand what exactly acting is. I've never thought of myself as an actor, and I don't want to describe myself as one either. I'm just a student in the acting club, here to learn a little bit about what acting is."

Maru sounded confident. Daemyung found himself getting embarrassed. It felt like his lie was getting exposed. Why? Daemyung turned to look at Dojin for a second. The other boy seemed to be thinking as well.

"I know very well that I can't let the audience understand what I'm doing through acting. When I went out to the terrace, I noticed some of the people saying, 'what are these kids doing?' So I asked them if they were curious. A lot of them told me to explain what was going on. So I did my best to do exactly that."

Maru sat down on his seat as he continued talking.

"If I was a pro, I would try to solve everything by acting alone. I know that's the best way to do things as well. But I'm an amateur. Amateurs have their own method of doing things. Pros need to do things their way, and amateurs need to do things their way. That's what I think."

A pro's method, and an amateur's method. Daemyung turned to look at the other customers in the cafe. They weren't at a stage right now. They were in a cafe. So are those people out on the terrace not audience members?

No, they were the audience for sure. Audience members who were allotting some of their time to look at bad acting from students. Did Daemyung manage to satisfy these people, in that case?

Daemyung shook his head. He only got into his acting to get over his nervousness. Thinking back on it, he never actually looked at the audience either. All he did was spit out a few of his lines, and come back. Was that enough? Was that what instructor Miso wanted?

Once again, his mind went back to the phrase, 'one-man play'. Daemyung felt his cheeks redden in embarrassment. He finally realized why he felt embarrassed. It was because he got praised.

He was embarrassed at himself for feeling happy that he got praised for doing something so trivial. Instructor Miso told him he did a good job. But then again, praises only came towards you when you exceeded a person's expectations.

'Perhaps my standards were low to begin with.'

Perhaps instructor Miso didn't even expect them to communicate with the audience? Perhaps she was just satisfied with having the students say their lines well enough?

[Well... never mind. That's good enough.]

Perhaps that wasn't what instructor Miso wanted? After all, all Daemyung had done was to express his emotions to the audience without expecting a single response. Was he being too overconfident, thinking of himself as a good actor just because he said his lines without stuttering?

The word 'actor'... Daemyung started using it to define himself without really thinking about it at some point. He thought about the actors he saw at Hyeonwa station a while back. One of them even managed to incorporate noises from the audience into the play.

There, the audience and the actors were completely in sync, conversing with each other.

Pros have their own method, and amateurs have their own...

'Maybe I was unable to even do something that I *could* do?'

Daemyung took a look at Maru. The other boy seemed very confident that what he did wasn't wrong. It wasn't overconfidence. It was an expression of a person who did something right.

"It's a little disrespectful to the audience if we just ignore them, I think."

Maru grabbed his cup to drink, almost as if he was finished talking. He realized his cup was empty, and walked up to the counter as if nothing was wrong. Right then, Daemyung could hear Miso mutter to herself very quietly.

"At least one guy in this club knows what a real play is."

Daemyung felt his neck itch a little as soon as he heard that.

'Ah.'

The three things that constituted a play. The stage, the actor, and...

'The audience.'

Who was Daemyung's lines directed at? For who did Daemyung act for? Daemyung chewed his lips nervously.

## **Chapter 67**

"Be careful going in!"

"Yes!"

The kids went back inside with a bow. Miso stepped back inside the cafe with a sigh.

"They're gone?"

"Yeah. Thanks for today."

"I mean, this isn't the first time. Here, have some dinner while you're still here. I want to talk to you for a bit, too."

"Of course, but before that."

Miso stepped out onto the terrace for a moment. The sun had set, and the terrace was painted by a variety of colorful lightings from signboards of nearby stores.

The wind was a bit cold, it was truly the beginning of autumn. There weren't that many people left in the terrace, either. They must've left to find some place to eat. Miso turned to look at the table at one corner of the terrace, there was a man in his fifties watching the people on the streets with a slight smile. The only thing he had on his table was a cold coffee, an old notebook, and a custom cigarette box made out of wood.

“How was it?” Miso asked.

She couldn't see the man's expression due to his hat. Was he satisfied by them, or not?

“Reminded me of the old days. It was nice. We used to do the same thing at subways. More often than not, people used to look at us very weirdly. There's a higher risk of doing it in a subway, actually. After all, if you do it well, you'll feel happy until you get to the destination, but... If you make a mistake, you'll have to deal with it and the audience to the end. It's incredibly torturous.”

The man took off his hat. His thick eyebrows, sharp nose, and a very defined jawline made for a very strong expression. Miso smiled, and bowed once again in greeting.

“I see you're still wearing that flat cap.”

“It's basically my trademark. I can't just give it up willy-nilly. But to think you'd call after such a long time just to ask me to take a look at a teen actor... You're a little too much.”

“That's why I said sorry. Do you want me to say it again?”

“Shush. That's enough.”

Miso sat down across from the man. They were long time acquaintances, since Miso's started acting, as a matter of fact. The man was a senior in the acting business, but Miso never thought of the man as something difficult to deal with.

‘Then again, that's what everyone thinks.’

The man had a gentle nature to begin with. It was to the point where his friends often said that if he shaved his head, he'd be just like a typical monk.

“This is a nice place. I can tell the owner put a lot of work into it,” the man said, looking down at the flower pots under him.

Indeed, the flowers were all real, not fake. Miso knew very well that her friend worked very hard every day to keep those flowers healthy. As the man said, there was a lot of work going into this cafe.

“It's a bit cold, would you like to go inside?”

“Mm, I'm fine. This is good for me. It's decently cold, decently loud, and got a decently nice view. Look over there, that puppy is very adorable.”

The man was pointing at a small pet shop from across the street. A small Shih Tzu was leaning with its front paws against the glass with their tongue sticking out. Several passersby on the streets were stopping to take a look at the puppy as well.

“You're not planning on buying a dog again, are you?”

Miso knew very well about how many dogs lived in this man's house. The shock from her first visit was still fresh in her memory. The man's house was... put shortly, a complete mess.

“I'm not buying. I'm going to take it in with love.”

“You look like you're dripping hearts out of your eyes.”

“Hearts? Mm, you must’ve entered a relationship, Miso.”

“W-what?”

“You used to say things that were much more offensive in the past, but since yesterday, your words became more gentle than before. I can say with certainty that you’re seeing someone right now, Miso.”

“.....”

The man was too good at reading people. That’s right. This wasn’t the only reason why people called this man a monk. It was also because of his eye for noticing things.

There were many actors that didn’t know this man. But of the ones that did, there wasn’t a single one of them who were left unnoticed by the big management companies.

As a matter of fact, he was also known as a maestro of finding talented actors.

“We can leave the private stuff for later. Right, so of the twelve kids you’ve shown me, who do you want to introduce me to?”

Lee Junmin. This was the name of the man who Miso invited to this cafe today.

\* \* \*

The first thing Maru got greeted with when he entered the door was the sound of sizzling.

“You’re home, brother?”

Bada stuck her head out from the dining room, holding a piece of lettuce in one hand.

“You’re eating meat?”

“Ya, come eat. It’s super good.”

Maru quickly changed in his room, and headed to the dining room where his family was grilling meat on the table with a gas burner.

“You’re late.”

“Practice got a bit long. What’s up with the beef?”

Maru turned the package of beef around to look at the price tag. It was a grade 1++ beef. The type of stuff that went for 7,000 won per 100g.

“Did something happen, mom? Why’d you buy something so expensive?”

“Why would I buy something like this? It’s a gift.”

“A gift?”

“You didn’t get the call?”

“What call?”

Maru took out his phone, remembering that he put it on silent mode when he was at the cafe. When he opened it, he noticed one missed call on his screen.

“The manager?”

It was from the manager of the gas station. Maru turned to look at his mom.

“Did the manager give us this?”

“Yeah. He asked us for our home address a moment ago. He wanted to say thank you, since he couldn’t contact you.”

“Is that so? I wonder what happened. He didn’t say anything else otherwise?”

“Nope, he just dropped this off to us.”

Maru decided to call the manager for now.

“Hello? Manager?”

- Oh, is this Maru?

“Yes.”

- Did you enjoy the meat?

“We’re just about to start eating. But what’s up with this all of the sudden?”

- I wanted to thank you. I was wondering what I should get you, but I realized there was no greater gift to a teenager than meat. Why do you ask? Do you not like it?

“It’s hanwoo. Of course I’d like it. It just felt weird to eat it without knowing the reason why.”

- Hm? Did my son not tell you anything yet?

“Excuse me?”

When he asked back in surprise, he could hear the other side getting a little noisy in the background. He could somewhat make out the manager calling someone over hurriedly. Soon, he could hear a ‘here, take the call’ from the other side.

- Ugh... seriously.

“Who is this?”

- ...It’s me.

The voice was a little murky, and also pretty rebellious. Maru knew this voice very well.

“Dowook?”

- Yeah.

“Why do you...”

- This is my dad's phone.

Maru understood everything after hearing that one sentence. The manager was having trouble conversing with his son, who liked looking at bikes. He had a pretty good idea that the son in question would be Dowook, and now receiving confirmation from the person in question.

'Looks like things got solved pretty well.'

He remembered the time when Dowook tried to cheer him up with some peach tea in class. Was that how he thanked people? That was pretty cute.

"Did you make up with your dad?"

- Make up? We never fought to begin with.

"You know what I mean. Well, it's good that you made up with him."

- .....

"Did you look at the magazines? They looked expensive."

- I-I saw.

"Damn, I'm jealous. You have a good dad."

- .....

"Treat him well. He probably suffered a lot inside."

- I know, dude. Jeez.

"So long as you do. Ah, I was actually curious about something."

- What?

"Why did you say you didn't have a sister before?"

- ...Because she might as well not exist.

His voice dropped a tone immediately. His family seemed to be going through quite a lot over there. Maybe Maru shouldn't have asked about that to begin with? Maru just thanked him for the meat really quickly.

- Dad wants to talk to you.

"Sure."

The manager started excitedly talking about how his relationship with his son was restored thanks to Maru's advice. Relationships between fathers and sons were strange. As they grew old together, their relationship became somewhat strained. The sons only tried to restore their relationship upon empathizing with their fathers.

- I'll see you next time.

"Yes."



Maru returned to the dining table after finishing his call. Because fathers were often the ones who had to wage war with the outside world, households often relied on mothers for support. That's why some of these men could never manage to become a proper father and were forgotten by their children.

In that sense, the amount of work the manager put into this was incredibly admirable. He managed to achieve a perfect work-life balance. For a moment, Maru wondered what Dowook's mother and sister did in his head, but decided not to think about it. He didn't want to interfere with someone else's family life.

Maru watched the meat cook for a second before standing up again. He took out a single-use plastic wrap from one of the drawers.

"What are you taking that out for?"

"I want to save some for dad."

Mom smiled victoriously.

"I already packed the food. Don't worry about it."

Mom pointed at the little bag of meat lying on the countertop.

'I guess that's why she's the wife.'

Maybe Maru didn't need to worry so much about dad's health. In that case...

"Mom, did you get your results back yet?"

"Why are you so worried, Mr. Maru? The doctor said I have no problems. He said my wrist would get better with rest, too. I'm going to go to work after some more rest, so don't you worry."

"That's good to hear."

"You worry too much. Mom is super healthy!"

Mom flexed her biceps as she said so, which made Maru smile a little bit.

\* \* \*

The girl looked out the window at the bright, shining stars in the night sky. Maybe because all her neighbors decided to turn off their lights tonight?

"It's big."

The news stations all said that Mars would be particularly close to earth today. Indeed, the red dot shined particularly bright in the sky.

"I wonder if I can take a picture."

She tried taking a picture with her foldable phone. But unfortunately, the camera captured nothing but a blurry brown sky. She wanted a closer picture. The girl looked up at the sky for a second before turning on her computer.

While it booted, she grabbed her script to take a look at it. She could pretty much recite all of her lines in one go now, but she still looked at her script whenever she could.

“Hm, hm hm.”

The girl flipped through the pages humming as her computer booted up. She redirected her attention to her monitor after the wait and clicked around a few times to find acting related blogs before finding a new blog on her screen.

The blog in question was titled ‘Life, Once Again’ loaded on the top of the screen. It was filled with diary-like posts that were updated every day or two. After clicking one of them in curiosity, the girl exclaimed to herself in pleasant surprise.

“He’s in the acting club as well.”

Occasionally, he was uploading writing about his acting club. That was a pleasant surprise for the girl.

“Hello, I’m in an acting club as well. Let’s meet in the Seoul Arts Center in the future!”

She left a comment in the form of a greeting before closing the tab, and turning on some music. She grabbed her script, and pushed her chair to the corner.

“Hm hm. Ah ah!”

After loosening her voice a little bit, the girl walked around in her room, treating it like a stage. The girl looked as happy as she could be, performing her own little play in her room.

\* \* \*

Maru noticed a comment on his blog when he came back to his room after dinner. A comment... on a personal blog like this?

“Is this an ad?”

He clicked the comment thinking this.

- Hello, I’m in an acting club as well. Let’s meet in the Seoul Arts Center in the future!

A normal comment? That was surprising. How did she manage to find this blog? The user’s id was Black Swan. He did feel thankful that this person spent some time on this site.

“Let’s work hard.”

Maru closed the window and pulled out his math textbook. He did make up his mind to do acting, but this was only to meet her. He couldn’t just leave normal studying in the dust.

“...Why couldn’t god give me an ability to be good at studying? I wonder why I can’t understand a thing when it comes to this...”

What’s black are the letters, and what’s white is paper. Maru understood very little apart from that. He picked up his pen with a deep frown on his face.

## Chapter 68

Maru felt pretty odd. It was like feeling the reminiscent of meeting a friend he knew on the street, but he was unable to remember the friend's name.

"...Hey."

Dwook greeted him on the street awkwardly, Maru blinked a few times in confusion before passing by. He heard a 'hey!' come from behind him, but he decided to ignore it. Watching a guy who was always annoyed with him suddenly smile at him just felt way too weird. It felt like someone was tickling his nose with a feather.

He parked his bike and tried to dash inside, but Dwook caught up faster than he thought.

"You're just running?"

"The Dwook I know isn't the type to greet me with a weird smile like that."

"...Ugh, fuck."

"Yeah. Just swear instead. That's a lot better."

Maru changed his shoes into the indoor ones with a smile. The two of them merged with the massive crowd of students to go up the stairs. Their class was, as always, right next to the stairs on the second floor. Maru stepped towards the door, wishing for another good day, but a group across the hall caught his attention.

The kids who were grinning at each other, spitting out the window. It was Changhu, the delinquent of his class, with the other delinquents from other classes. Dwook frowned as he noticed them, too. Changhu turned to look at the two of them.

The boy's mouth moved a little. Maru couldn't hear the him, but the boy was probably telling them to fuck off. Maru stopped Dwook from stepping forward.

"Pigeons don't belong where crows hang."

"....."

"Didn't you say you were done with the childish stuff? Just ignore them. It's not like him staring at you is going to do anything."

Maru waved his hand with a grin at the Changhu gang as he said this. The kids on the window looked away, with ridiculing smiles on their faces.

"Doesn't your pride get hurt when they do that?" Dwook asked, after they entered class.

"Your pride isn't something so easily wounded. It isn't even worth having if even kids can trample it."

Dwook clicked his tongue in annoyance and went to his seat. The boy didn't get as annoyed as he did in the past, probably a sign of maturity.

"What happened?" Dojin asked.

"Nothing special. Did you memorize your lines, by the way?"

“Of course I did. I don’t want to die, you know. What about you?”

“I don’t have anything to memorize, dude. It’s just three lines.”

“True that.”

The club members became even more serious with acting after their evening in the cafe. Their method of practice had changed as well.

Maru looked at Daemyung, who was speaking his lines out loud from his seat. His friends were all listening to him. Maru and Dojin decided to move up to watch as well. Daemyung’s small voice started getting louder in response.

“What did I tell you? I told you that the new guy was really strange. Just you watch. That guy’s definitely going to cause trouble for himself. By the way... Are you really going to finish all that food by yourself?”

Daemyung turned to look at his friends after speaking about this much.

“It’s good, but...”

“Is there something off?”

“Your expression is a bit too strong, I guess? I can focus, but it’s not funny.”

“Really? How about this?”

Daemyung changed his expression a little bit, earning approval from his friends.

“Well, you’re working hard,” Maru greeted.

Only then did the boy respond to the two of them with a greeting on his own. He seemed way too engrossed in his practice to even notice. What amazing focus.

After the cafe test, it became standard for the club to practice in front of an audience. Daemyung, in particular, was asking his friends to help both in the morning and lunch. It was a good way of getting pretty direct feedback, Maru had to admit.

‘He’s really focused when it comes to acting.’

Since the boy started taking practice so seriously, his friends were taking it seriously with him. Thanks to media nowadays streaming movies and dramas left and right, these kids had an eye for decent acting. They could easily catch if something was awkward or if something was good. Sure, they weren’t professional critics or anything, but they had no trouble pointing out basic mistakes.

It was like how someone said the line between porn and art was clear once you actually saw it. It was the same with these kids.

“I-is that so?”

Daemyung quickly jotted a few things down on his script. At moments like these, he really seemed like a pro actor.

'Most people just end up confusing themselves when they get so many different opinions thrown at them, but it doesn't look like Daemyung would do that to himself.'

If you really wanted to improve, you had to first filter opinions and reviews to find the truly useful ones. Otherwise you'd end up straining your body too much and end up self-destructing.

"Thanks. Can you help me again at lunchtime?"

"Any time."

Maru noticed that Daemyung's friends were starting to feel a little proud of what they were doing. After all, being put in a position to be able to judge was pretty satisfying. Since the right to judge was usually granted to those in positions of power.

Of course, these kids probably didn't even realize that.

"You might actually get that main role when you're in second year," Dojin commented.

Maru peeked a little at Daemyung's notes. Indeed, the entire script was filled to the absolute brim with notes.

"It's fine if I don't get to the Seoul Arts Center, but I do want to go to Dream Hall, after all."

The nationals in summer were held in the Seoul Arts Center, while the winter competition was held in a place called Dream Hall. In terms of size, Dream Hall was much bigger, since the students would perform in a massive theater that could seat more than a thousand.

"Dream Hall... was pretty cool."

Maru had to agree with Dojin. Miso took the lot of them there a few weeks ago to try and give them motivation. The club members spent a few minutes on stage looking down at the audience seats there.

'It did feel pretty electrifying.'

The entire auditorium was split into two floors. The air of the entire auditorium was enough to make even Maru get excited, not to mention the club members. As a matter of fact, Maru did remember seeing a fighting spirit start to burn in their eyes back then.

[We have three months left.]

He recalled Miso saying.

"Three months."

"Yeah, three."

Dojin put down Daemyung's script, and grabbed his own from his seat.

"Daemyung, can you help me practice?"

"Of course."

The two were, as always, very hard at work.

“Work hard.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll do enough to look good, so don’t worry.”

Maru took out his book after returning to his seat. It would be rude for him to just join in casually when the two of them were so serious about this. He would help them out if they needed a practice partner, but for now, it looked like they were doing pretty well by themselves. At times, the two of them were even going as far as to act out other people’s lines.

If the practice for their first play was sort of forced by Miso, this second play was entirely filled with their own motivation and desire.

‘They’re going to improve fast.’

People who were motivated often achieved more than what even they thought they were capable of. Perhaps the club really might be able to perform in Dream Hall this year.

Maru closed his novel with a sigh, and took out his own script. He should at least try to put in an effort. Just because he was only there for the ulterior motive of romance, it didn’t mean he could be lazy.

Just because he couldn’t be a reliable support for the club didn’t mean he had to be a complete letdown. In that case...

‘I should at least be better than average.’

Since the character himself had very few lines, he would probably get by even with little practice.

“Oh, you just moved in? Welcome, welcome.”

Maru went straight into practice, with his pencil tucked a little into his mouth.

\* \* \*

“Did you guys drink together?”

“I made her drink quite a bit, but she was fine. She has a strong tolerance.”

“Dude, I told you. You have to mix coke for it to really work well. Or just make her drink something sweet. It costs a lot, but that’s the way to go.”

“Next time. My wallet isn’t looking so good.”

Changhu split up with his group after checking the time. The lot of them had a party with the girls from the neighboring school yesterday, but no one managed to get anywhere.

“Hah, she was pretty, too.”

“The girl who was smoking that whole pack?”

That was the first thing Changhu heard when he stepped into class. It didn’t sound like any casual talk from a student. Ah, it was the acting club kids practicing again.

“They try so hard,” he commented.

“Maybe I should’ve gone to the acting club. The girls there were pretty.”

“Oh dude, yeah. Pretty sexy.”

“The senior who came to our class last time was super cute, too.”

“Not my type.”

Changhu sat down on his seat with his hands in his pockets. He could feel the two cigarettes he brought from home inside them. Since one of his friends had a lighter, he had to make do by smoking it during lunchtime outside school. There were still fifteen minutes till class started and since he stayed up late playing video games last night, he got ready to nap.

“Hey, be quiet. You’re fucking loud.”

Of course, he didn’t forget to say something to the two kids out in front. Daemyung was a total coward, so he shut himself right up when Changhu just glared. Dojin, though, really needed some verbal communication to understand.

Ah, silence. Very peaceful. Perfect for sleep.

But just as he was about to drift off into dreamland, he started hearing something annoying again. It was Daemyung and Dojin. They were quieter than before, but they were talking.

‘Those bastards...’

Did they really have to annoy him? He was tired. When he raised his head, he could see the two still practicing.

“Hey! Couldn’t you hear me?”

Daemyung flinched and shut his mouth immediately, but Dojin just smiled in annoyance.

“What, did you buy up the entire class or something? We lowered our voice, so just go to sleep, why don’t you?”

“Hah, fuck. Your voice is still loud, so why don’t you shut that stupid mouth of yours?”

“God damn, do you think we’re in a library or something? Just put on your damn headphones if you’re so bothered.”

“You son of a...”

Dojin was an annoyance to Changhu from the start. Changhu tried to go light on the guy since he looked like he was a delinquent in the past, but there was no helping him now. The boy gave a few of his friends around him a quick glance. There were four friends of his in this class. All people he was friends with since middle school.

“You’re acting out too much, especially when you’re smaller than my fucking dick.”

“Hah, are your guys’ dicks a 170cms or something?”

Dojin didn't miss a single beat. Changhu was not a fan. The guy really needed a lesson. Of course, he had no intention of starting a fight in class. This school has too many crazy teachers.

Instead, he would try to annoy the kid a little bit.

His friends all started walking forward with him. The kids around Dojin and Daemyung all stepped back nervously.

"You should speak a little gently, don't you think, Dojin? You're not a delinquent, are you?"

"No, you. Also, what do you think you're doing? You going to hit me? You want to become pandas together? Is that what you want?"

Changhu signalled his friends. Dojin was the type to hit back, so hitting was a no go for now. Daemyung on the other hand, was a perfect target.

"Daemyung... Did I do anything to make you mad before?"

But just before Changhu could get any further,

"Guys, the teacher's coming," someone said.

It was Maru, who was looking outside through the back door.

"I'll have a word with you next time," said Changhu, returning to his seat.

Not even he wanted to go at it with the teacher who always had a PVC pipe handy. But even after a minute of waiting, nothing happened.

What the?

Changhu turned to look at Maru in confusion. Their eyes met. And...

Maru just shrugged with a grin.

"Sorry, think I saw wrong."

Changhu felt his lips twist a little bit. His mood was totally ruined for the day, he just knew it.

## **Chapter 69**

The sound of the bell rang from the ceiling.

"Have a nice lunch."

Once the teacher left the room, the students all bolted for the front and back doors. They shoved each other, moving several times faster than usual.

"Chicken!"

"Let's go!"

Today, the cafeteria served fried chicken. The students all rushed there with as much strength as their legs could muster. Maru only stood up from his seat after some of the students disappeared.



“Well, that was terrifying.”

“It’s not like the fried chicken would stop being fried chicken if you were late. Wonder why they’re in such a hurry.”

Maru motioned Daemyung over, who walked over with a script in hand.

“Planning on practicing on the way over?”

“Yeah. I can’t waste time.”

What a guy. Since when did he become so diligent again?

“Your script is going to fall apart into rags at this rate.”

As he said this, Dojin ran over to grab his own script as well. How troublesome, the two of them made even Maru itching to practice.

“Actor Han, Actor Park, please. Let’s try to focus on food during lunchtime.”

Maru dragged his friends by their shoulders outside. By the time they got to the cafeteria, all the running kids were neatly arranged in a line. Be it the past or present, it appears Koreans really went crazy for fried chicken.

“Hello!”

Someone greeted them from behind, it was Iseul. The people around her were wearing gray shirts from other clubs, while Iseul was wearing Blue Sky’s T-shirt. Just like the three of them.

“Oh, I look better here!” the girl noted, stepping towards them.

Daemyung moved away from her slightly in response. No one noticed because it was so slight, but Maru realized right away, being next to the boy.

‘What a softie.’

It didn’t look like Daemyung was awkward because he liked Iseul, rather his unfamiliarity talking to pretty girls. He was so casual with her when they practiced, too. He was probably just bad with actual social settings.

Maru pushed the boy towards the girl, away from him. Daemyung desperately sent signals for him to stop, but Maru just grinned even more in response.

‘This is all for the future, buddy. Girls aren’t people you should just avoid. They’re supposed to be people to get used to.’

Daemyung’s face reddened almost immediately. Come to think of, it was pretty strange watching this guy become so confident on stage.

“How’s practice going for you guys?” Iseul asked.

“Perfect as always. You?” Dojin responded.

“Same old, same old. I’m just trying to make it fun for myself. And you, Daemyung?”

“M-me? W-well, I think it’s going well. Still need a lot of work, though.”

“Why so humble all of the sudden? You were great last time,” Iseul said, nudging Daemyung a little.

The boy could only laugh saying ‘was I?’ under his breath.

“And Maru... You’re probably doing fine. Right?”

“I’m trying the best I can.”

“Best? Haha. Doesn’t sound like you.”

“What sounds like me, then?”

“Trying as little as possible to get by?”

“You got me.”

The line got shorter while they talked. Once they actually entered the cafeteria, they found another group wearing the same shirt as well. The three guys from the design class, and one more person. Taejoon.

“Hello, men!” Taejoon greeted, getting the attention of everyone around him.

The attention made him silent, as he nursed an embarrassed smile.

‘He’s the type that likes to be loud, but also gets easily embarrassed,’ Maru noted.

“What are you doing here?” Iseul asked.

“What about you, then? What are you doing here?”

“Well... ok, fine. You got me there.”

Maru sat down on the table, greeting the design kids appropriately. Geunseok and Yurim waved back lazily, and Soyeon told him to enjoy his meal. It didn’t look like they were still mad about what he did back then, but they didn’t seem to want to be close with him at all.

Maru was completely fine with that, it would honestly be a bit annoying if they tried to get overly friendly with him instead.

“This feels like I’m chewing on rock,” Dojin commented next to him, biting into his chicken.

‘They had to fry chicken for a thousand people, of course it’s going to be like that.’

Maru was reminded of his times in the military, specifically that time they served fried chicken one day after the news of an avian influenza outbreak. The fact that the flavor of chicken from that time overlapped with the flavor of this chicken probably meant that the food here was really bad.

“This tastes good to me, though.”

Daemyung was pretty much licking the bones completely clean, Maru decided to give his chicken to Daemyung as a result.

The club met outside after lunchtime, every member was holding a cup of hot chocolate in their hands.

“We start blocking today, right?”

It’s already been two weeks since they were given their scripts. By this time, the club members were strictly off book. Today, they would start moving according to the positions Miso assigns them to, and then say their lines.

Standing still and saying your lines was a completely different thing compared to actually moving around saying it. Walking and talking at the same time was a surprisingly difficult task. Maru understood completely, having actually seen the club do it multiple times.

Right then, he could feel the eyes of the club shift over to him.

“Don’t worry, I won’t be a bother.”

He didn’t say he’d try not to be a bother, trying to imply that he wouldn’t fail. At times like these, it was just better for him to say he wouldn’t do something for sure. Plus, Maru had practiced enough to be sure of not making a mistake.

“I’ll see you guys later.”

With that, the club split up. After school, they would meet again in the auditorium.

\* \* \*

Dojin noticed someone annoying once he entered class. It was Changhu and his group of friends, sitting at Maru’s seat. Dojin spoke up first with a frown.

“What do you think you’re doing.”

“Well, I just wanted to talk.”

“Can’t you just fuck off?”

“Can you shut up, Dojin? I’m not trying to talk to you.”

Maru stopped Dojin from stepping forward, Dojin didn’t take too kindly to that.

“Maru, guys like that learn through beatings.”

“Stop it, and go to your seat. You’re not a kid, stop trying to solve things with violence.”

Calm down. Maru pat Dojin’s shoulders a few times, making the guy step back with a glare. Daemyung stood next to Maru with a nervous face. How brave of the boy.

“So, what do you want to tell me?”

“Well, I just wanted to get along, you know?”

“Nice. I hope we can, too.”

Maru extended his hand, catching Changhu off guard.

“What the hell are you?”

“What do you think? I’m Maru.”

Changhu watched Maru's hand and face repeatedly before standing up. Dojin was about to shout again, but was stopped by Maru. Changhu grinned seeing that.

"Good good. Dojin, you should really learn from Maru. You have no sense at all."

Changhu walked back to his seat after giving Maru a few pats on the cheek with the back of his hand. Man, he's learned a thing or two from movies, hasn't he?

How cute.

Maru actually had to stop himself from laughing out too loud. But right then, Dojin grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

"We need to talk."

What was up with this guy, now? Maru stepped out into the hall, scratching his face. Daemyung followed the two of them with a troubled expression. Fifth class had yet to start just yet, so there were a lot of students still outside.

Dojin spoke in a hushed tone amongst the other noises around him.

"Have you no pride? Why did you just sit taking it?"

"Why are you getting riled up again? Just endure it."

"No, dude. I can just ignore it if he was just bothering me, but... Ugh, it's so annoying, what he does. Trying to bother literally everyone around him."

Dojin seemed ticked off about what happened this morning, especially from seeing his eyes glance over at Daemyung for a second. He was probably worried about the boy after what Changhu did.

What a nice guy, he had every right to be angry. After all, in terms of the animal kingdom, Changhu wasn't even a hyena. Closer to a wild dog, actually. The type of animal that attacks everything from insects to animals in a pack, but wouldn't dare to approach the real predators. The guy probably didn't even know how to act in front of someone that was actually strong. Guys like them were surprisingly easy to deal with, actually. You just need to bite back a little bit.

Just one fight is enough to solve the issue, but...

"Still, be patient."

"Why? Are you..."

"If you're going to be childish and ask if I'm scared, I'd stop right now."

"Then why?"

"Dojin, we only have three months left."

"What?"

"Don't you want to go to Dream Hall?"

Maru turned to look at Daemyung, to emphasize his point a little bit. The acting club already had a bad track record, especially when taking note of the fire incident in the auditorium. Thankfully, Taesik managed to cover it up as an accident that happened due to an argument between the students at the time. But due to this, the faculty ended up getting a bad opinion of the club. The reduced budget for the club was evidence enough.

What would happen if another fight broke out now? Surely, one of the faculty members would step up to say something. Especially the hanja teacher. After all, he was the person who came to the club room most often to complain. The man would be the first to try to hurt the club when he got an opportunity.

Standing out right now was an especially bad idea, with the competition about to start so soon. Maru would've done something himself if it wasn't for this. But right now, ignoring the group was the best thing he could do.

"You know Changhu tries to look good in front of the teachers too."

"....."

"If things get bad, we're both going to get beat up by the teachers, but the club's going to get hurt as well. The school's going to try and disband us by pointing out our violent tendencies."

"But..."

"No buts. Did you forget that we need the school's permission to go to nationals? Who knows what might happen if you get into a fight? If you can ignore it, just ignore it."

"Hah."

Dojin finally seemed to understand what was happening, the frown on his face melted as well.

"Delinquents would beat up students at school, all the while looking all nice and sheepish in front of teachers. Not even our homeroom teacher thinks well of our club, so just endure it. And..."

Maru glanced at Changhu through the window for a second before lowering his voice.

"If he comes in to hit you, just take it."

"What?"

"The dogs that bite don't bark first, it's the same with delinquents. The guys that are really screwed up wouldn't even say a word, they would just swing the chair at your face. The guys that talk only fight when they really have to, because they're scared. If you just act like you're willing to take the punch, he's going to walk away."

"...Maru, were you a delinquent or something in middle school?"

"I'm a well-mannered citizen. Don't be turning me into something weird now."

You'll understand soon enough how stupid it is to fight with fists later on, buddy. Maru dragged his two friends back into the class.

## **Chapter 70**

“Yo. I went to take a smoke yesterday, and fuck, I saw the gym teacher outside, right? He was beating up the kids behind the building. Shit was insane.”

“That fucker’s crazy. The guy probably comes here just to beat kids up.”

The kids said with a shiver, even Changhu knew the gym teacher. The one teacher whose background was incredibly enigmatic. It’d be more believable if the school told them they just hired a gangster to do some dirty work. After all, the teacher beat up students pretty much whenever he felt like it. Already, many of the first years were sacrificed to the man’s PVC pipe.

“We really have to be careful of that guy. He’s crazy.”

Changhu had to nod in agreement. There was a reason why engineering schools had a bad rep. It was exactly because of teachers like them.

“Ah, I heard Dansu was taking us to karaoke today. You guys coming?”

“Dansu? Him? Why?”

“I heard a kind idiot gave him some money today.”

“Hah, kind idiot? He found himself a nice wallet, didn’t he? Oh, by the way, I saw a lot of middle school kids hanging out near the karaoke. They just spit out money if we talk to them a little.”

“Wow, you’re stooping that low?”

“They have a lot of cash.”“Oh, really? Nice.”

Middle schoolers were quick to part with their money with a little bit of encouragement. They would often even cry if you had a cigarette in your mouth.

“I managed to buy a new MP3 with that money, you know. These kids have a lot of money nowadays, heh.”

Changhu’s friend took out an MP3 that was worth around 300,000 won from his pocket. It actually looked pretty nice. Changhu fiddled with his pretty new MP3 before grinning.

“Huh, I should change mine too.”

Especially if there was such a good fishing spot near school.

“In any case.”

Changhu looked at Maru, who was sleeping at his desk. The guy would often rebel at him, which was pretty annoying at times. Of course, Dojin was the really annoying guy of the two. He wanted to beat both of them pretty badly, but now really didn’t seem like the time. Especially since he knew Dojin would bite back.

“Oh, did you hear?”

“What?”

"I heard this as I was drinking with a second year, but apparently the acting club had a problem last year."

"A problem?"

"Apparently they almost burned down the school, so the teachers all harbor a dislike of the club."

Changhu thought back of an incident that happened a few days ago. The teacher had hit Dojin across the head, muttering 'this is why acting club kids are...' to himself.

"Is that so."

Weren't these guys going to some competition this time? They probably wouldn't be able to go if there happened to be an unfortunate accident. How nice.

"Hey, Dojin," he called out. The boy immediately turned to look at him with a frown.

"Be careful of fires. I heard there was an accident? You have to be careful, don't you?"

"....."

Dojin immediately grit his teeth. Oh? This really must be the other boy's weak point.

"Let's be careful, okay?"

Changhu immediately felt his shoulders loosen up a bit more.

\* \* \*

"You endured well," Maru said, patting Dojin on the back. Dojin looked like he chewed on something bitter.

"How'd he manage to learn about that?"

"He probably heard it somewhere. He has a good head on his shoulders, so he'll probably try to use it against you."

Changhu wasn't like a typical delinquent at all, the boy knew exactly how communities worked. Now that he knew their weak point, he would start trying to test the waters to see how far he could go with this.

"If it wasn't for the competition... Ugh!"

Dojin punched his palm with a fist. He must care about the club a lot, seeing how he managed to endure all of this still.

"You just need to lay low for a bit. He'll grow tired of it soon enough."

"But what about my pride? I can't even dare imagine having to lay low in front of that kid."

"You're really going to be angered by someone like him? You need to get over stuff like this. You're an adult."

"...Well, true."

“That’s enough then, isn’t it?”

Maru dragged Dojin up the stairs. After coming up to the fifth floor, the three of them opened the door to the auditorium where could they see Miso standing amongst all the students.

“Get over here!” Miso shouted.

Maru ran over, thinking that the fun was just about to start.

“We’re going to stretch a bit before going straight in. We’re also going to be making our props and costumes today, so you better be ready.”

“Yes!”

“Alright, mouth muscles, go.”

The students began stretching their mouths individually once Miso gave them the go ahead. Some of them stretched their mouth widely to loosen up the muscles there, and others moved their tongue all over the place to stress that too. Some even worked their lips a little bit.

“Ah! Ahh!”

“Haaah...”

They shouted loudly to open up their vocal cords, and then let out air to open up their nostrils. Maru followed suit. It wasn’t that difficult, since he’d seen them do this many times before. Actually, it almost felt like he learned this in the past. Maybe he attended an acting lesson when he was a road manager? In any case, this definitely didn’t feel like the first time.

Next up, it was time to stretch the rest of their muscles. The club members stood in a circle, and started walking slowly. One step every ten seconds. They were making sure that when they walked, that their balance wasn’t lost, their arms were in the right place, and that their feet were landing in the right places. Unlike what it looked like, this practice actually required a lot of concentration.

The club members returned to their normal pace once Miso clapped.

“Phew.”

The kids sighed in relief, but then.

“Why are you sighing?! Pay attention to your breathing!” Miso immediately shouted.

The air in the auditorium had turned incredibly heavy. After around ten more minutes of this, the club members split up to start stretching on their own.

Oftentimes in small theaters, actors were very close to the audience. But in larger ones, especially the one in Dream Hall, it was difficult to discern the audience’s faces. That’s why actors were often required to make very large movements, have very clear diction, and a very loud voice.

In everyday life, it was possible for people to make out emotions just from the way a person blinked, or the way their lips twitched. But being on a stage made it difficult to make out such expressions.



Oftentimes, overreacting to everything looked just right to the audience from the stage. That was the reason why many actors reached out for the sky or whatnot during their monologues.

Small movements, as a matter of fact, only served to frustrate the audience. No matter what role you were playing, it was essential that you act “big”.

“Come here, we’re going to do one reading before practicing our movement.”

As the club members started doing the readings without their scripts, Miso moved around with her green tape, marking out boundaries on the stage. Of course, the club members knew exactly what she was doing at this point.

“This is the size of the stage in the Ansan Art Hall. The competition will take place there in October. It was built fairly recently, so the stage is pretty big, and they have a lot of tools we can use. But! The big stage will be a minus for you guys. The play will look really bad on stage if your movements are even a little bit off. I’ll take you there next time, so just be aware for now that it’s about this big.”

Last time in the competition, the club competed at the Suwon Art Center. It was not a place designated to house plays, but at an auditorium meant for various events. But this time, things were different. They were performing a play at an actual place meant for plays.

“So it’s bigger than the...”

“College competition? Of course.”

“Hah.”

The club members sighed, looking at the green tape below them.

“It’s now October 18th, we have exactly a month left. I have already registered us for the competitions, and there isn’t going to be a prelim this time around, since this is more of a festival. Most teams are there to have fun. We’re different, though. We’re here to win. We’re going to win over there, and we’re going to win at the winter competition in December. Understood?”

“Yes!”

Miso stretched out her hand with a clap.

“Ok, let’s cheer ourselves up before we actually go into this.”

The club members all stretched out their hands in unison. Maru put his hand on in the middle as well. This was the first time he was taking part in something like this. He didn’t feel anything big rising up in his chest, but he did smile.

Finally, he was a step inside the circle.

“Blue Sky!”

“Yeah!”

Practice began shortly after.

\* \* \*

Dalseok-dong was a fictional town, a suburban town that was right between the farmlands and the city.

“On top of a big hill lies a little town. The road up the hill is littered with the occasional streetlights, with no trees in sight. The old streetlights are leaning a little forward, threatening to snap, while being covered with all sorts of posters stuck on them.”

Maru closed his eyes, listening to Miso talk. He was trying to imagine the setting, trying to immerse himself enough to become one of Dalseok-dong’s residents.

“You’ll be able to see a house next to one of these lights. The glass door that leads inside is so dirty that you actually can’t see in any more. There are small windows for the basement floor next to this glass door, and you notice yellow curtains draped inside. This house has three floors. Basement, first floor, and second floor, its exterior made out of feeble brown bricks that appear ready to crumble. Inside, you hear the scoldings of an overbearing wife, the sighs of a student preparing for college entrance exams, and the embarrassed introductions of a new couple. I hear a dog barking in the background as well. What about cats?”

Yoonjung answered with ‘I think I can hear them too’.

“Well, there must be cats around as well, then. Next to that house is a little store with a blue roof. Inside it, an old couple is arguing with each other yet again today. Granny?”

Soyeon immediately stepped up to speak. She was an old lady that lost her dentures, acting seamlessly in her role, which made Maru laugh a little.

“What about the grandpa?”

“You old hag! You’re spouting bullshit today again!”

It was Taejoon. His voice carried a lot of annoyance. Understandable for someone who received a whack in the back of the head in the midst of a chess game. Again, some laughter.

Miso closed her mouth for a second. In the meantime, Maru worked to clarify the image of Dalseok-dong in his head. The others were probably doing the same. After about five minutes...

“Stop,” Miso said.

“Try to clarify the image of your characters, using the image of the town you have. You need a very clear image in your head.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, let’s go straight in with the movement. We’re going to slowly figure this out from scene one, so make sure to take notes. We’re going to practice this once, and go straight into doing runs.”

They had to finish the play before October. It was understandable that their practices would be rushed. After all, they had only a single month to do this. Just because the Anyang Art Festival was a passing competition did not justify an incomplete play. Plus, Miso wouldn’t accept that for the life of her.

Maru stood outside the green tape with a pen in one hand, and a script in the other.

‘Well, so I really ended up doing this, huh.’

Today especially, that steel chair he used to sit on at the end of the auditorium felt far away from him. Right now, he was a part of the club for real.

'Might as well go to the finals, at the very least.'

He was certain that she would go to the finals. He knew that for sure, somehow. They would meet once again upon the stage.

"Maru! Stop grinning and focus!"

"Yes!"

Maru fixed his expression immediately.