

Once Again 71

Chapter 71

After Soyeon wrote her notes, she slouched a little and pretended to shove something in her mouth.

“That’s when Geunseok turns around.”

The two’s eyes met once Geunseok turned around, right after Soyeon yelled at him for passing around cheap rice cakes to the neighbors.

“Right, this is where the audience is supposed to laugh. How do we do this in order to make it look more dramatic?”

“I think it’d be good to exaggerate as much as possible. The script says the granny’s supposed to cover her mouth with her hands, but what if her jaw hangs loose enough to make the rice cake in her mouth drop on the floor?”

Soyeon immediately dropped her jaw in response.

“Good. What about you, Geunseok?”

“I think I’d be a little shocked, since I don’t know much about the granny just yet. Maybe I’d smile awkwardly.”

“Good. That’s when Taejoon appears.”

Taejoon peeked out from where the little store was supposed to be. Of course, this was another instance where he is caught eating Geunseok’s rice cake.

“Ugh, damn it!”

He made a face, as if he just saw something he shouldn’t have seen. He pretended to spit the rice cake out of his mouth, and went back inside.

Huh, this is pretty funny.

Maru found himself smiling almost instinctively. This wasn’t enough to make him roll on the floor with laughter, but it did set the mood very nicely. Some of the audience might actually laugh with some proper makeup.

“Good. You guys should figure out the rest from here on. If this gets too emotional, you guys will just look like you’re fighting, so be very careful of that. Also, Taejoon, that expression was very good just now. Try to see if you can exaggerate it some more. Next!”

Miso stepped into the green tape with her script. This was where Daemyung and Geunseok would meet for the first time, and also where Daemyung’s monologue was. The nonsensical monologue was supposed to be the humorous point in this scene. The scene’s success or failure was depending on how Daemyung acted.

“Come here, Daemyung.”

Daemyung stumbled into the scene with a tired look. His hands were in his pockets, his legs stood with no energy, and his lips twitched like he wanted to start blabbering. The thirty-year old student was very much ready to start complaining about the world.

“Alright, start talking.”

As soon as Miso got back to her seat, Daemyung started talking. His voice exploded outwards very clearly. All those hours of practice at class were really beginning to shine now. On top of that voice, he started layering emotions. Daemyung started listing the reasons why he couldn't pass the college entrance exams.

This was the turning point for the character, who's been saying pretty logical stuff all this time.

“No matter how much I study, I can't pass if I'm unlucky! Society is incredibly unfair!”

Geunseok pretended to hand Daemyung a rice cake as he spoke.

“I don't think you can blame society for that though...”

“What? How old are you?”

“Me? I'm twenty-eight.”

“Clearly, you lived a failed life. Do you even know what Madam Smith's invisible hand is?”

“Madam?”

“Yes!”

“.....”

“I knew it. To think you don't even know who the famous Madam Smith was. This is exactly why people should study. But, no matter how much you study, you're bound to fail if you're unlucky! Ugh, this world is so unfair! It can't even recognize a genius like me!”

Daemyung started pointing at the audience seats, as if he was shifting the blame on them, too. Maybe it was because of Daemyung's kind-looking face, but the boy only managed to attach a dumb and comical personality onto his character. After a bit more of his monologue, Daemyung pulled out a phone from his pocket. And...

“What? A meeting? Of course I'm coming! Study? Haha, I'll pass as long as I'm lucky!”

As soon as Daemyung's words turned out to be a lie, Geunseok cleared his throat a bit awkwardly.

“You just said you studied three years straight...”

Geunseok scanned Daemyung up and down. Daemyung closed his phone before saying,

“We're short by one dude.”

“.....”

“The girls are pretty.”

“...Let’s go.”

The two exit the stage each with an arm around the other’s shoulders.

“The lights go out, and the sounds of a club starts playing. After a few more seconds, the lights turn on again.”

Joonghyuk and Danmi stepped into the stage after Miso gave the directions. Joonghyuk played the character of the weak husband, and Danmi, his wife. The characters stood in front of the little store as they spoke. Joonghyuk’s shoulders drooped more and more, managing to make himself look like a sad, wet dog in the process. Danmi, on the other hand, started making her husband suddenly look a lot better once Soyeon came onto the stage.

“Honey...”

“Be quiet for a bit.”

“I’m tired. I worked out too much at the pool today.”

“Please!”

“Can we go back ho...”

“Shut your mouth, if you don’t want to swim in the Jordan river!”

When Danmi shouted, Taejoon ran out from the store shouting, ‘It’s not my time yet! I’m only a hundred years old!’

“Hey! You came out too fast! You have to come out immediately after the line ends!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Remember it next time.”

“Yes!”

“Also, Soyeon.”

“Yes.”

“Why are you smiling? You can’t let yourself show when you’re acting. You can’t show that kind of stuff to the audience!”

“...I’m sorry.”

“I told you that comedies are hard, didn’t I? How many times do I need to tell you, making people laugh is harder than making people cry! Focus. There needs to be a reason behind every single movement on stage, unprepared laughter on the stage is nothing but a mistake. Only when you complete the play can you even start to think about doing improv. Remember that.”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to take a short break before moving on. Think about the criticisms I gave you so far, and try to improve where you think you failed. I can’t help you much more after that. Got it?”

The air in the auditorium loosened a lot more once Miso clapped. The whole club dropped down onto the floor with a sigh. Once practice started, Miso turned into a completely different person. She shouted a lot outside of practice, of course, but everyone knew that was her playing around. But once practice started... She truly looked angry. Well, at least everyone was used to it now.

The club members formed their little groups. They got together in groups of two or three, and practiced their lines with each other. Maru just watched all of this from a step away. His character didn't have any lines he exchanged with others. He would just step in every once in a while after a scene ended, saying 'I knew that would happen' before exiting. There were a few instances where he would interact with other characters, but it was so short that he honestly had to wonder if he even needed practice.

"So, how's practice?" Miso asked.

She had dyed her hair from blonde to black. Maru didn't know if she did this for herself, or because of Taesik, but he had to admit, black did look better on her.

"It's as hard as I imagined."

"Really? Not worse than you thought?"

"They say even a dog in a school would be able to read after three years. I've observed for a long time, so it's a given I'd have decent expectations of what I would have coming to myself."

"That's three years, though. Well, not like I don't believe you."

Miso sat down next to Maru after looking at the clock. The club members in front of them looked like they were ready to practice until the sun went down.

"They're pretty passionate, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you join them?"

"What use would any of them have in having a character like mine join their practice? I can just join in when we're just about done with the planning. Isn't that the sort of the character this is?"

"You're right. Your character's a bit of a strange one in a small play like this. After all, there are multiple comedic instances he has to handle by himself."

"His lines are short, though."

"Oh? And how many times have you spoken those 'short' lines?"

Miso looked at Maru mockingly. Maru thought for a second. How many times did he practice his lines again?

"Around thirty times. That's about how many times I read them to memorize it."

"Are you satisfied with that number?"

"I'm not sure. I don't even know when I should be satisfied to begin with. All I want right now is to not make mistakes."

“That’s important, yeah. But... Don’t you have any greed for acting?”

“Greed?”

Greed. Maru took a look at the club members. These were the people who had the right to stand on the stage, and decorate it. One could only be incensed by greed through hard work, and that greed could only be satisfied by the talented. Maru didn’t belong to either of the two.

“The people who should really be greedy are in front of me.”

“Of course these guys are greedy. They don’t want to repeat their past mistakes. I’m just curious what you think.”

“I just want to work hard. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“There’s a cash prize of a million won in cash if you get awarded the best actor prize at the winter nationals. What do you think about that?”

“That I’m a little greedy for.”

“You’re incredibly materialistic, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I love money.”

“Why don’t you go for it, then?”

“The best actor prize?”

“Yes.”

“As an extra?”

“Scene stealers are always short, but they still leave a big impact.”

Maru watched as Miso smiled playfully, he naturally found himself looking into her eyes for a second.

[Did you think I gave that role to you for nothing?]

“Is there something different about my character?”

“You must’ve had a reason for giving it to me.”

For a brief second, Miso’s face was overtaken by a color of surprise. Maru laughed a little. So even the headstrong Miso could look like this, huh. He turned back to look at the students again. They were moving around in different poses as they practiced. They were all trying to make everything natural.

“Why me?” Maru asked.

“Why you?”

“Yes. There’s a lot of other kids who want to get into acting over there. The second years are already very passionate, and a lot of the first years became passionate recently as well. You told me before, didn’t you? You were giving me a chance because I wasn’t desperate. That doesn’t make sense now, does it? Shouldn’t instructors give chances to people who are desperate?”

Miso looked up with a thoughtful face before sighing.

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s more fair for me to give chances to the desperate. But the world isn’t very fair, is it? Remember what Geunsoo told you? The monster of acting chooses its own people. All that means is that in this business, it all comes down to talent. You might not understand this, but once you become a teacher, you become greedy. You want to create someone who can go into uncharted territory.”

Miso looked happier than she has ever been. Was that what artists were like? Maru never felt this kind of greed when he worked in an office. As a matter of fact, he only felt jealous and angry. To be more honest... He kind of wanted his talented juniors to fail. He knew that was the wrong mindset to have, but that was just reality. But this woman was telling him that she wanted to raise someone who could surpass her.

“Wouldn’t you feel annoyed if a talented junior was getting all of the spotlight on the same stage as you?”

“Of course I would. I might even regret my own actions of raising him that much.”

“So why?”

“I told you before, didn’t I? I have a very good eye for people. I take great pride in this ability as well. Thanks to it, I know pretty well how far I’m going to get. I’ve kind of hit my limit at teaching students, I don’t think I can go any further. Remember what I said about the play I was in? About how it failed in the middle, and I decided to come here?”

Maru remembered. That was the first thing she said after coming back to the school.

“That was all a lie. I dyed my hair and auditioned for a role I wanted, and I didn’t get it. I knew the director and everything, but man. It was bad.”

“I see.”

“I mean, I didn’t want you guys getting all depressed just because of me. Plus, despite all this, I’m actually really good at teaching. I’m decent at acting, too. I just can’t go above and beyond. Maybe that’s why I’ve kind of given up on bettering myself. Sometimes I wonder if I would bother to raise students if I was as skilled as Geunsoo.”

“Why don’t you practice more?”

“Of course I practice. I can land a role as a small character any time I want. But I could never take the center stage.”

Her smile didn’t seem very happy.

“You’re living a very complicated life too, huh. That’s a surprise.”

“What?”

“I kind of thought you were a single-celled organism.”

“...Do you have a death wish?”

"I still don't understand, though. You can just push people relying on your instinct?"

"You still don't realize that half of this world is pretty much based upon amazing accidents, do you?"

"If you're trying to reference penicillin, I caught on already. You don't have to."

"...You notice things way too quick. Anyway, I just think this is one step into an amazing accident."

"I sometimes think this, but it really feels like you have a talent for speaking like a character in a play. You're very thick-faced. I wouldn't be able to say a line like that from pure embarrassment."

"I'm embarrassed, too! But that's the kind of stuff I need to say to move you."

"....."

Maru could only shake his head, 'What an extraordinary person'. She was incredibly persistent. Problem was... She was actually getting him kind of excited. That expectation of hers, to be specific. Receiving high expectations from others tended to be either extremely stressful, or pleasant. Thankfully, the way Miso conducted herself didn't make Maru stressed at all.

"Oh, and one more thing."

"What is it?"

"You said money was why you didn't want to go into acting, right?"

"It's not just because of that."

"It's one of the big reasons though, right?"

"Well, yes."

"Let's make a deal."

"Deal?"

"You just have to meet someone I know."

Maru looked up at Miso. Meet someone she knows? What did she mean? The woman was smiling joyfully at him at the moment.

Ah, no. He had to retract that statement.

She was smiling like a wily fox.

Chapter 72

"Things are starting to look red."

"Dang, so it's autumn already."

Daemyung and Dojin spoke as they walked in front of the school. It was a Sunday. While other students were just messing around in school, the acting club came to school for practice.

"The competition isn't very far away now."

Dojin sighed at Daemyung's words. It was October 27th. 2 weeks away from the competition. Despite this, Dojin felt like his acting was stagnant.

"God, feel like I'm going crazy. I got criticized yesterday, too."

"You'll get better."

"Oh, and you must be feeling very relaxed, huh? Because you passed?"

"I-I guess?"

Two days ago, the club went through three full runs after school. Repeating an hour long play over and over again three times in a row was very tiring for the students. Plus, every time they finished a run, Miso's criticism would ring upon their ears. It was enough to give some of the students a stomach ache from the stress.

"I don't even get stressed from studying, Jesus."

"Just means you're working that hard."

"True enough, hah. But you kept passing and I keep failing."

Dojin was kind of jealous of his friend's ability to maintain his smile, as it was a common occurrence to receive a scolding in the club. He actually kind of felt bad when he didn't get scolded. There were actually only three students that never got scolded by Miso during practice.

First off, there was Daemyung. The kid just completely changed character as soon as he got on stage. The guy actually kind of looked savage on there.

Second off, Joonghyuk. His acting was good enough for Miso to let him off the hook. The dude managed to play his role very well, as a weak husband in the play. He looked like he's been practicing for months, as a matter of fact.

'Well, I guess his personality was similar to his character to begin with.'

And last up,

"We're late, might have to run."

Dojin saw Maru waving at the two of them from the entrance. The two of them started making a run for it.

'He's the most mysterious one of them all.'

Maru was also one of the three that never got scolded. He was only in a few scenes with a few lines, but Dojin's impression of Maru's character had completely changed in the last few days. Most of the club probably thought the same, as a matter of fact.

"What time is it?"

"8:57."

"Oh crap, run!"

Dojin ran into the school building with his outdoor shoes still on. Daemyung and Maru followed close behind him, Miso was not a fan of tardiness. Last time, the woman made them duck walk around the field ten times just for being a minute late. The group ran up the stairs as fast as they could, making the halls echo with their footsteps.

Finally, they managed to reach the 5th floor. Dojin ended up clenching his eyes as soon as he opened the doors to the auditorium.

“Oh, nice. Late yet again. The three of you over there, ten laps around the field. No duck walking this time, we don’t have time.”

Hah... At least this wasn’t a duck walk this time.

“What are you doing? Run!”

“Yes!”

As they ran down the stairs, they found Yoonjung and Danmi coming up with a stiff face.

“...Is she there?”

“Did you ever find her coming late? I think she might be coming down looking for you.”

“Agghh! We’re screwed!”

Yoonjung and Danmi ran up hurriedly, Dojin shook his head looking at the two. Miso was even more torturous and cruel towards the second years when it came to punishment.

“Come on, let’s run.”

Maru jumped down the stairs, making Dojin follow behind him.

* * *

Practice began at 11 am. Miso decided to dedicate an hour for physical training, saying that the club was being too lazy. As a result, Maru was leaning on the walls huffing madly.

‘This feels like I’m back in the military...’

He could almost hear the faint sounds of whistles blowing in the background.

“Get ready!”

“Yes.”

The club members stood up immediately. Miso would only work them harder if they looked tired, so they needed to move it. Miso opened her steel chair in the middle of the auditorium, and the club members lined up outside the green tape.

Maru was on the left side of the tape. Some things had changed since they started practicing three weeks ago. One of them was when Maru started, he would appear in the very first scene. Of course, he still didn’t have many lines at all.

“We’re doing this from start to finish with no breaks. If you make a mistake on stage... Well, I trust you’ll be able to handle it. We have two weeks left until we get on stage for real. Making a mistake should be impossible. If you do so regardless, you’ll have a lovey-dovey time with me, so be prepared, got it?”

Maru heard someone swallow right behind him. A one on one with Miso? Just thinking about it was terrifying. The woman was becoming more and more hysteric as time went on. They couldn’t even joke with her at this point, it only goes to show just how much this play meant to her.

Miso was the captain, the captain of a ship called Blue Sky. On its first voyage, the ship was stopped right at the docks. That must’ve hurt her pride a lot, enough to make her cry like a baby in front of Taesik. This was to be Blue Sky’s second voyage, she probably wanted the crew to be ready enough to weather any kind of storm.

“Geunseok!”

“Yes.”

“You know what I’ll do if you make a mistake again, right? We’ll abandon you. I’m not joking.”

“I’ll do well.”

Miso was especially vicious towards Geunseok. She probably wanted to make the boy as strong as he could get during this practice. She would cut out any praise, and beat the boy as much as she could.

Thanks to her tough love, Geunseok had grown pretty vicious himself, in a good way. He was still craving praises, but he wouldn’t overtly ask for it anymore. As soon as he finds another reason to act, surely he would become an amazing actor.

‘That is, only if he finishes his play properly.’

Miso sent them the ready signal as she watched the clock, this was the beginning of the run. Maru’s eyes met with Miso’s briefly. For some reason, looking at them made him think about what happened right before they went into practice.

* * *

Maru carefully observed the man in front of him. He wore a flat cap, sitting with a little poodle on his lap, and looked close to being fifty.

“Senior, you aren’t supposed to bring a dog here.”

“But there’s no one who can take care of it. I asked you, but you refused.”

“We can’t have dogs in our house.”

“Then don’t even complain. You expect me to just leave this little thing alone in my house? Look at it, the poor thing can’t even move properly.”

The man patted the poodle lightly as he spoke.

“He’s always like this, you’ll have to understand.”

Miso shook her head annoyedly.

“So why did I come here again?” Maru asked.

“I told you. I wanted you to meet someone.”

After looking at the poodle for a few more seconds, the man left the puppy to a staff member nearby. As soon as the dog disappeared, his previously tender expression grew serious.

“Name?”

“It’s Han Maru.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Lee Junmin.”

“Nice to meet you.”

The two of them briefly shook hands. Maru noticed that the man had a very thick, vibrant voice. Probably the result of practice.

“You look a little confused.”

“Well, Instructor Miso dragged me here without telling me a thing.”

“Me too. She treats her seniors too badly.”

“I understand that sentiment.”

Junmin smiled happily at that. Seeing how the man still maintained a polite attitude despite speaking to a junior of Maru’s age, he was probably a businessman. Junmin handed Maru his business card.

“JA Productions?”

Maru instinctively reached for his own business card.

‘Oh, right. I don’t have one.’

The business card on the table had two things on it. The name ‘JA Production’, and Junmin’s name. A production company... Seeing as how Miso seemed to be involved, it was likely related to acting. Maybe a management firm?

“I think I deserve an explanation from instructor Miso.”

“No, I can explain it. I’m a bit surprised myself, but I think I know what’s going on.”

Right then, Junmin’s phone rang. The man answered the call with annoyance and spoke angrily. Maru made out a few words about plays, times, and locations. After giving a few instructions, Junmin turned off his phone.

“I apologize.”

“It’s fine.”

“Now, allow me to explain. You performed at a cafe a while back, yes?”

“Yes.”

"I was there that day. I saw you and your friends act, because my little junior here called me out."

"You were there to see us?"

"That's right. Miso told me to help out one of the twelve kids there. She looked very confident."

"Could it be, that one kid was..."

As soon as Maru said that much,

"I said I was surprised before, right? It was because I saw you. I actually had my eyes on two different kids. I was going to tell Miso this today, but it looks like she was in too much of a hurry."

Miso frowned.

"You didn't have your eyes on him, senior?"

"Yeah. I was looking at the others."

"No way."

"I hate to say it, but I didn't feel much from this friend when I saw him the other day. He was neat, but he's still an amateur."

Maru realized this was a meeting made from a mistake.

"So I can leave, then."

"I'm sorry."

"It's alright. I'm actually relieved."

"Relieved?"

"Yes. Chances only belong to the desperate. I'll leave, then. Thank you."

Maru stood up from his seat and left.

* * *

"Senior."

Miso couldn't stop Maru from leaving. Her senior had told her that he had his eyes on two students. She thought one of them would be Maru for sure, but...

"You haven't changed, have you? I was wondering why that kid was here."

"Senior, he's talented."

"I know."

"What?"

He knew, but he still sent Maru back?

"Why?"

“Before that, let me just ask you one thing. Do you think I have an abundance of free time just because I treat you well? Free enough to make time during a weekday, in the morning at that?”

“...I’m sorry.”

“Well, hearing that feels good, at least. You’re forgiven.”

Junmin smiled happily, making Miso sigh.

“Why didn’t you tell him anything, then?”

“I only raise pros. I only work with pros as well. Geunseok and Daemyung, was it? I saw talent in those two. But not him.”

“He has talent, but he also doesn’t?”

“Yes. Right now, at least.”

“Right... now?”

Junmin took a sip of his tea.

“That kid is definitely eye-catching. He was probably born with it, or was gifted that talent by god. When he was talking that day, I noticed the entire cafe looking at him. It was pretty amazing to behold. I almost clapped, actually. If he has enough talent in acting, then... He would really make it big.”

If those words came from anyone else, Miso wouldn’t have believed them. But this was her senior that was talking. The “maestro” as the community called him. Plus, this man was always scouted into judging for auditions whenever the production team needed actors for a massive project.

“So why? Isn’t that enough?”

Junmin laughed at that.

“I became even more confident of my decision after meeting him.”

“Confident?”

“That’s right. That kid, Maru, isn’t desperate for acting. Of course, his freedom is probably what made you greedy, but that kind of personality doesn’t work in the world of the pros. If he isn’t desperate enough to climb the ladder with bleeding fingers, then... I don’t want to work with him. Plus, he didn’t seem to even want to work with me from the start.”

Junmin got back to drinking his tea as Miso looked down with a frustrated sigh.

Chapter 73

In the streets, a cold wind blew. A small store could be seen under the blinking lights. In front of the lights was a small table, and in front of that, a young man passed by.

The young man had one hand in his pocket, and his other fiddling with the phone. Under the blinking lights, the man looked around for a bit before eventually looking at the front.

After staring for about three seconds, the man finally spoke.

“Um, who are you guys looking at?”

After looking around confusedly for a few more seconds, the man eventually pointed at his own face.

“Me?”

The man walked sideways like a crab, after exclaiming with a surprised look. After disappearing from the view, the man’s head poked back out to ask ‘Really? Me?’ one last time before disappearing.

* * *

Maru could only be described as a natural once he was on stage. After exiting the green tape, the boy waited for his next scene very calmly.

‘Hah... How do I get him to be desperate?’

Three weeks ago, Junmin gave her some insight into Maru.

[Maru’s not the type of person who’d move from outside influences. He needs an internal motivator, he’ll only display his true worth when he finds the motivation. So I’d suggest that you stop talking to him for now. Just watch.]

Miso asked what would happen if Maru decided to do something else after that, but the man just responded with a ‘well, that’s just life’.

‘He’s a good guy, but he’s even more stubborn than me when it comes to recruiting actors.’

Maru shone like a star as soon as he started acting. It was hard to see right now, but it still was a very clear difference from the other actors on stage. Then again, even Junmin had recognized Maru’s talent.

‘He said Maru was amazing.’

The weight behind Junmin’s words was different. Just as how a flower described as ‘beautiful’ carried a different weight between a person who saw it for the first time, and a person who saw it for the hundredth time. Junmin praised Maru as ‘amazing’. Just what would Maru look like, then, if he got proper practice?

‘If only something would happen to shake that kid...’

Miso nervously bit her thumb. She found a diamond in the rough, but she couldn’t touch it. It was driving her crazy.

“Next!”

Miso decided to focus on the run for now, they only had two weeks. After that, they needed to act out their play at the festival.

* * *

“Good work. Make sure to stretch before you sleep. Also, gargle with some warm water as well, and try to avoid hot water. It’ll dry your skin too much. We have two weeks left, so maintaining your health is just as important as practice. Got it?”

“Yes!”

“We’re definitely going to the finals in the winter. Alright, off you go.”

Miso put a hand forward saying ‘Blue Sky’, to which everyone else responded with a ‘fighting’. With expressions of having completed another satisfactory day, the club departed one by one.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Maru stepped out first with his bag, Dojin and Daemyung followed him down the stairs.

“Neither of you got scolded today, huh?” Dojin said with jealousy.

Today, Dojin managed to do his hundred pushups. Fifty for every time he made a mistake. It wasn’t such a horrible day for him in that regard, actually.

“Well, Daemyung aside... Maru, are you getting tutored or something?”

“No way, my character is just easy.”

“Heh... That character definitely isn’t easy, the way I see it. Right, Daemyung?”

Maru waved away the two’s curious looks.

“You’d be better than me if you took my character.”

“No way.”

The three of them said their goodbyes to their seniors as they left, leaving the school grounds. Dojin and Daemyung turned left here, to get to the bus station. Maru was just about to head off to the right on his bike.

“Maru.”

Maru got off the bike after hearing someone call for him. It was Joonghyuk. Did something happen? The boy clearly ran over here to speak to him.

“Let’s talk.”

“Sure.”

“We can do it while we walk. Do you live this way?”

“Yes. What about you?”

“Me too.”

The two of them walked next to each other. Maru looked at Joonghyuk as he pushed his bike with one hand. The two stopped talking to each other one on one after their conversation about what happened at the beginning of the last semester. After walking silent for a few minutes, Joonghyuk finally opened his mouth at a red light.

“Acting... Are you okay with it?”

“I’m trying my best not to be a drag.”

“Drag? No way.”

Joonghyuk looked up at the sky for a second, making Maru look up as well. The moon was shining brightly. Maybe it was a super moon? They could even spot the craters on it.

“A year ago, when we weren’t even able to participate in the competition due to the fire... Yoonjung and Danmi cried a lot.”

“I’m surprised to hear that even Danmi cried.”

“Right, I was surprised too.”

The light turned green.

“I thought a lot back then. Props are just as important as the acting. That’s why I tried to be a stage manager when I went into my second year. Though that idea obviously failed thanks to instructor Miso. In any case, I made up my mind to help these friends not cry next time. No matter what happens, I’d take them to the finals.”

“But it didn’t work out.”

“That’s right. Well, at least we got to the prelims, so it’s a lot better than last year. Honestly, if Geunseok didn’t cry that day, Yoonjung and Danmi would’ve. They were holding back trying to cheer Geunseok up.”

Maru smiled awkwardly, imagining his two seniors crying in his head.

“Once we become seniors, we won’t be able to focus on plays anymore. Everyone wants to stay in the club, sure, but we wouldn’t be able to invest as much of our time anymore. We need to start getting licenses and look for jobs. Plus, three of us are looking to get into college. This is probably our last chance at fully immersing ourselves in the club.”

“What about you?”

“Me? Well, our family runs a store, so I’ll just take over. Iseul is probably thinking the same, right?”

“Yes. Iseul wants to take over her parents’ restaurant.”

“Honestly, I couldn’t imagine her doing that for my life.”

“I agree.”

Iseul was pretty enough to look like a movie actor. To think she would don an apron and work in a restaurant...

‘Wait, maybe this could work.’

A restaurant with a pretty woman running it... It sounded like a great opportunity to make money. Maybe Maru could ask to work together in the future? As he was thinking about such things, Joonghyuk suddenly stopped walking.

“I want you to be the club president next year.”

Maru stopped his bike to look at Joonghyuk. In truth, Joonghyuk had hesitated for a long time before he could say these words. It wasn't a particularly difficult thing to say, but in front of Maru, he hesitated.

"I thought of this for a long while. It's not something that I just came up with either. All of us second years think you should be the president. We wouldn't have said a thing if you kept being on the sidelines, but... Now that you're participating, I think you should be the one taking over."

"I'd recommend that you ask some..."

"Of course, if you refuse, I'll ask someone else. We aren't forcing this on you."

"Why me, then?"

"Because you were the only one who could say the right words for the club."

"I was just being arrogant back then."

"I heard what happened from Taesik. Oh, of course, I pressured him until he told me. He wanted to keep it a secret."

Joonghyuk overheard Taesik talking about Maru at some point. Afterward, he kept trying to get information from the man. In the end, he discovered how Maru took on the role of a villain for the club. Of course, he had an idea that this was the case from the beginning, but he only realized that this was the truth thanks to talking with the advisor. Joonghyuk told the rest of the second years about this, he thought they deserved to hear about this.

As a result of his actions, they had the idea of making Maru the president for next year. Once they become third years, they wouldn't be able to work with the club anymore, so it has become a tradition for the club to choose a new president around this time.

"...You should definitely recommend the position to someone else, then," Maru said.

Joonghyuk shook his head.

"If it was in the past, I definitely would've. Since you were always the spectator. But that's not the case anymore. Aren't you getting more serious about acting?"

Just before summer, Maru was more like an audience member in the club. Someone who did participate, but not by much. All of that changed in the fall. At some point, Maru started acting himself, and involved himself pretty deeply within the club as well. He had changed. Sure, Geunseok and Daemyung showed talent as actors, but Maru far outclassed the two in pretty much everything else. The boy even reminded Joonghyuk of his elder brother at times.

'No, Maru's pretty comparable to those two in terms of acting as well.'

Just looking at Maru's performance would set the scene for the play splendidly. Plus, the way he was so natural on the stage allowed even the actors to become engrossed into the play. There was something about him that attracted attention.

Maru was mature, good at acting, and his words often carried weight. Who could be better at assuming the role of a president than him?

“I’m not telling you to make your decision right now. I just wanted to let you know that this is what the club is thinking.”

Joonghyuk pat Maru’s shoulders a few times before turning away. He wanted Maru to be president, but who knows what might happen? All he could do now was wait.

* * *

“President, huh.”

The one thing Maru wanted to become in his previous life, just thinking about it made him laugh a little bit. Maru shook off the excess water from his hair and sat down on a chair. Any other time, he would’ve just refused Joonghyuk right there and then, but he couldn’t do that today.

“Talent...”

Three weeks ago, Maru ended up seeing inside Junmin’s mind.

[This guy has talent. Enough to make me want to raise him. But he has no interest himself.]

Three weeks ago, Maru tried searching for Lee Junmin on the internet to no avail. Same with JA Production as well. To begin with, searching for Lee Junmin only gave him results about an idol with the same name. But once he dug a little bit further, he could find the man in certain celebrity articles. He wasn’t mentioned a lot, but whenever he was, the nickname ‘maestro’ always followed.

Maru realized that this man was much more famous than he initially thought. The man was a producer, one that dug up famous newbies all the time. One of the articles even mentioned that the female lead of the most popular drama on TV right now was raised by him.

The man wasn’t very famous amongst civilians, but in the acting scene, he was pretty much Midas. That very man thought Maru was talented. Thanks to that, Maru ended up thinking and thinking for the past three weeks. He was given a choice. A choice he didn’t have in his previous life.

“What happens to my future if I choose this path?”

He wouldn’t be a road manager or an office worker, that much was certain. There was merit in becoming an actor, yes. But at the same time, he was nervous. He already experienced failure many times in life.

“I guess I’m just old, huh.”

And one more thing.

“I should’ve asked her for her phone number.”

He didn’t know what would happen to his and her future if he made this decision. These were the two things he was nervous about. He couldn’t take care of his nervousness just yet, obviously, but he could somewhat make do with what would happen between him and her. As long as he could come to meet her earlier this time...

‘I’ll make you happy this time.’

Maru wanted to give her the gift of a bright life. Especially because of the dreams she had to give up on in the previous life for their family. In that case... In this life... Maru wanted to give her the world that she wanted, a world where she could do anything she desires.

“I should meet her first, though.”

He needed to show the others she was taken before anything else.

“She’s way too pretty for her own good.”

Maru realized right then, that the ship that was his life just took a slight turn.

Chapter 74

She opened her eyes as she fumbled her toes that snuck outside her blankets. Grabbing her phone to notice that it was only 8AM, still 3 hours away from her meeting time.

“Ugh, so cold.”

Maybe it was time for her to get a new blanket. This summer was way too short, as always. After five more minutes of fumbling around in bed, she started humming to herself a tune that her dad frequently used. Thanks to that, she found herself humming it quite often as well.

She made sure not to do it in front of mom, though. Her mom always made a sad expression whenever she hummed. After a few more minutes of rolling around in bed, she stood up with a groan. It was 8:20AM now. She took the leftovers from yesterday and put it in the microwave. Mom seemed to be sleeping still, so she had to take out her food seconds before the microwave dinged. She snuck back up to her room afterwards and found herself a few acting videos that she saved from yesterday, turning them on.

She directed her attention to her monitor as she ate. Watching people act was always fun, even if it was a play done by students. After about thirty minutes, the play ended. She put down her food and clapped lightly.

“They’re good.”

But we’re better. She closed the window with a grin, before turning on her own blog. All the other kids asked her to use Cyland, but that just didn’t fit her tastes very well. Instead of looking at walls of text that were glowing from the stickers decorating it, she was a bigger fan of normal blogs. Plus, normal blogs were where most professional actors gathered to begin with. There were a surprising number of blogs run by them.

The girl browsed stories about reviews, what happened during prep time, and what happened with the audience as she drew out her own dream in her mind. She, too, would eventually become someone else’s role model, just like them. Click, click. As she clicked her way across other blogs, her eyes eventually settled on a familiar one ran by a familiar ID.

Maru.

“Ah.”

It's that blog from before, isn't it? The blog titled, "Life, Once Again". She left a comment there before, perhaps there was a response waiting for her? When she opened the blog, she realized that she did indeed get a reply back.

- We decided to compete in the winter competition as well. Maybe we can meet there, if we get past the prelims? Good luck, Black Swan.

The girl smiled happily. She also noticed that there were a few more blog posts here. Whoever ran the website must be a diligent person, taking into consideration the consistency of posts.

- Good luck. But we'll get first place for the winter competition as well.

Just as she was about to submit, she stopped herself. She sighed once before putting her hands back on her keyboard.

"I sound too rude."

- Good luck. Hopefully, we can meet at the finals!

She didn't want to antagonize her first blogging 'neighbor' right off the bat. After posting her comment, she stood up from her seat. It was about time for her to go out.

* * *

Junmin asked a friend of his to watch his house. His friend liked dogs a lot, so he trusted the person to treat them safely. Junmin had a dream of retiring in the countryside where he could live completely free with his dogs. He had the money to make his dream come true, but for now, he had too much greed for his job.

It was a Sunday morning. Normally, he'd spend the day doing nothing with his dogs, but today was different. He put an earphone in one ear as he got on the subway. He had an old notebook in one hand, and a custom-made pen on the other as he started observing the people around him.

If he was told to pick one place in South Korea where the 'faster faster' culture was at its bottom, he would pick the subway running at 11am Sunday on line 3. It felt like there were some people in the subway, but reality proved otherwise. Everyone moved at a crawling pace like a bale of turtles. For example, just look at that woman standing in front of the subway door right there. Her neck refused to move for five straight minutes now. The teen sitting next to her was reading a novel very diligently. He too, barely moved.

On the other side of the subway was a female college student, who was sleeping while grasping the pole next to her tightly; no movement from her either. It was odd. Inside the fast-moving subway was nothing but silence.

Rumble rumble. The sound of the subway wheels rolling across the steel tracks sounded almost like a person's heartbeat. Hearing it comforted Junmin very much. He was a big fan of this moment, actually. Whenever he needed to think, he always rode on this subway on line 3 around this time on Sundays.

He opened his notebook, the one he carried since the first day he joined the world of acting. He's changed out the paper in this notebook countless times already. In fact, one of his cabinets at his house was filled with these papers. They were essentially a pure distillation of all his thoughts.

Today, Junmin got on the subway because of a certain problem. It wasn't anything important. As a matter of fact, he could just make the decision right then and there. But instead of doing so, he decided to get on the subway.

'He was pretty bold.'

Junmin thought back to a meeting from yesterday.

A call came through his private phone, not his work phone. It was Miso. When he picked it up, Miso asked him if it was alright if she gave his phone number to that kid. She sounded just as confused as he was.

That kid.

Junmin thought of Han Maru immediately and said it was alright. Shortly after, he got a call. From Maru, obviously. The student asked him if he could spare some time for a meeting. He allowed it. He was rather curious about what the boy had to say after a full month. Did something change?

They decided to meet at the cafe where they first met. When he arrived at around 3pm, he found the student seated.

"It's been a month."

"Yes. I'll introduce myself again, since I didn't introduce myself properly then. I'm Han Maru."

Right then, Junmin got a very odd feeling. It didn't feel like he was talking to an immature student, but rather a very experienced businessman. Maru sat back down after a curt bow. Junmin, for some reason, felt like he needed to prepare some documents for this meeting.

"We could've just done this through a call. I'm very grateful you decided to meet up in person."

"No, it's fine. I usually talk about important things in person. Plus... I was interested in seeing you again."

"Is that so. That's good to hear."

"Would you like some tea?"

"I'll get some after we finish talking."

The boy wasn't stiff when he talked. His way of speech was borderline rude, but he managed to circumvent that with his expressions and gestures. Was he born with this, or did he learn to talk like this from someone else? In any case, this wasn't how most high schoolers talked. Two weeks ago, after meeting Maru, Junmin met Daemyung and Geunseok separately.

He was interested in those two students as well. After all, he didn't dig up talented newbies just for money. At this point, he didn't even need money anymore. There were two reasons why he didn't stop raising newbies. First, it was because he enjoyed the work. He thought it was a blessing for him to be able to enjoy it. As a person who thought work was what made humans human, Junmin didn't want to stop working until his body couldn't hold up anymore. Second, he did this because he wanted to prove himself. Junmin was a fan of being looked up to. That was why he always described himself to be 'greedy' to others.

He had no intention of wanting to be seen as noble or humble. No, he just wanted to be respected for his talent. Junmin loved his nickname as the maestro. He didn't want to give that up just yet.

At one point, he visited nearly every theater company across the nation in his search for newbies. He's toned it down a notch with his age now and all, but that didn't mean his passion waned. He was still very much willing to show his abilities when the opportunity presented itself. Therefore, it was inevitable for him to meet with Geunseok and Daemyung. Of course, the fact that these were Miso's students also had a lot to do with why he met them. Miso was similar to him, and he trusted her judgment due to that.

In any case, his meeting with those two students went fairly well. They were incredibly happy to find out that he was giving them a chance. They said they would try their best when he asked for a small display of their talent. They would try their best as long as they were given the chance.

On the other hand... The student in front of him now was a little bit different.

"I want to know if you're capable of handling the risk of me jumping into the world of acting because of you. If you can, I'd like to sell my youth to you."

That was an interesting suggestion. At first, Junmin could only laugh at the boy. Whenever he talked to a newbie actor, they all said the same thing.

Please, give me a chance.

That was exactly what Junmin provided. He gave them a chance, looked at their talent, and then led them on wherever they belonged. If they didn't have that talent? Well, unfortunately, he would have to let them go. What this kid was saying though... was very different. If he were to interpret it differently, the boy was basically saying this:

I'll make use of that chance you give me, so you should take responsibility.

"Haha..."

Junmin stroked his chin, the back of his neck was tingling. This was a good sign. It was a sign of something new. Something to break the dull repetitive cycle in his life. Repetition, to him, was equivalent to death in life. After all, what use was life when tomorrow looked exactly the same as today? In that sense, Maru's suggestion was incredibly fresh to him. It was the type of suggestion that would make his today, and his tomorrow different. That was also the reason why he was unable to refuse Maru outright.

"You want me to buy your time."

"Would that be possible?"

"What's making you this arrogant, to begin with?"

Junmin decided to abandon his manners for a second, since he had the advantage in this situation. After all, they weren't speaking to each other as equals right now.

"Don't you want me? If that's just an assumption of mine, I'll apologize right now and leave."

"....."

"If that isn't the case, and if you're really tempted to take me in, I'd like you to buy me with a fairly high price."

"High price?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"I won't ask you to take care of me until the end of my life or anything. I just want you to give me enough money to have a three-person family settle in. Ah, of course, this is only if I fail in this acting business."

"Be more specific."

"2 billion won."

"Hah!"

Junmin could only laugh at that number. Well, it wasn't like he is incapable of giving it. He could easily get that much money if he sold one of his buildings right now. He could even make that money back right away if he introduced a decent actor to a big management company right now.

"Billion, billion. Do you think that amount of money is a joke? Did you watch too much TV?"

"No. I'm well aware that it's a ridiculous amount of money. After all. 99% of our population dies without ever earning that much money."

"But you still want it?"

"Yes. Only if you value my youth that much."

"Hah, and you think I'd actually take you up on that offer?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you're still here."

Junmin could only laugh.

- This station is Chungmuro. The doors are on your...

Junmin came back to reality as he looked down at his notebook. Inside it, he wrote a single name: Maru.

"Han Maru, huh."

Junmin got off the subway with a nod. He's finished thinking. He just needed to tell the boy his decision.

Chapter 75

Refusal. That was the answer Junmin had in mind. He did like how bold the boy was. But that boldness needs a reason.

2 billion won. He could give up that money if someone he knew really needed it. He had that much money. But this was an investment, which was an entirely different story. Junmin saw talent in Maru. The boy would shine like a star as long as he invested time.

Junmin arrived first at the cafe, 30 minutes before the promised time.

“Oh, you’re here again.”

“The tea here tasted good, that’s why.”

“Thank you.”

Miso’s friend, was it? Junmin took his seat as he exchanged a smile with the female owner. Across the street from where the cafe was, he could see a pet shop. Two baby beagles were scratching the display window furiously.

Junmin liked dogs. To him, they symbolized eternal, innocent love. The poor things loved their owners no matter what. Every time Junmin stepped into his home, his heart would calm down upon being greeted by their tail shakes.

“Here is your coffee, and this is a cupcake that I tried making recently. I’d love it if you could give me some feedback.”

“Thank you.”

Free food was always welcome, no matter when he got it. Junmin drank a little bit of his bitter coffee and looked down at his cupcake. It was topped with a mango mousse.

“If only he had the motivation.”

The kid that asked for the money didn’t seem at all desperate. He was probably interested in acting, that must be why he was in the club. But if Junmin were to ask him if he would throw his entire life into acting, the boy would surely answer ‘no’. Maru seemed to be thinking about many things. Junmin had no idea what the boy was thinking of, but he knew for sure his thoughts were far different from others his own age.

Of all the thoughts that the boy had, what percentage of it was about acting? So far in his life, Junmin’s managed to excavate many stars. He could even brag about it if he wanted. Right now, if you turned on the TV, at least one out of the ten stars that appear in advertisements would be someone Junmin found.

The world of acting was all about feeling. It was impossible to become confident about anything in this business through numbers alone. Do handsome people become stars? Do talented people become stars? No. Even if you had both, you were more likely to disappear as nothing but an extra. It was impossible to predict or measure anything in the world of acting. In this world, Junmin wanted to become a standard.

- The actors who go through Junmin become a star.

Hearing that line was pretty much the single reason Junmin was alive. Hearing that line felt better than anything to him. After all, hearing it validated the entirety of his life. It made his hard work worth something.

'The boy's talent is a pass, at least according to my standards.'

That alone was reason enough for investing in Maru.

'But it doesn't seem like acting is everything for him.'

Geunseok and Daemyung felt like they were willing to throw their lives into acting. Geunseok was a little bit unstable, but that could easily be fixed with time.

'If only I could get some of Daemyung's passion and stick it into Maru.'

If he could do that, Junmin would've accepted Maru's offer in a heartbeat. That was just how talented Maru was in his eyes. Every fiber of his being was screaming that Maru was going to be a star. But logic told him to reject the boy. Junmin trusted his head as much as he trusted his feelings, so he decided to think for now.

About halfway through his cupcake, Maru arrived.

"I thought I was late after seeing you in the cafe."

"I was just thinking about something. Sit."

"Yes."

Maru sat on the other side. It's only been a day since the last time they talked.

"About yesterday, my answer is..."

"A rejection."

"So you knew."

"It's probably not a matter of trust or credit, but a matter of passion. Personally, I thought money wouldn't be a problem for you. I thought you just didn't think well of my lack of passion."

Maru spoke as if he knew everything from the beginning. If the boy asked Junmin to reconsider, he would've left immediately. Strangely enough, the boy instead chose to explain Junmin's thought process in great detail. Due to this, he felt compelled to ask Maru a question, despite knowing he would forfeit the lead in the conversation as a result.

"So why did you make that suggestion, in that case?"

"That was just a reason to get us started talking."

"The money, then?"

"Just one of those nice-to-have things."

Maru grinned. Almost as if he didn't want the money to begin with... No, almost as if he wanted the money dearly, but he was willing to give it up just as easily.

"I must've looked like a person with a lot of choices in life to you."

That was correct, it was the single reason why Junmin was ready to reject Maru. Because Maru didn't look desperate at all. Maru seemed ready to move onto things other than acting in an instant if he felt like it. It didn't matter how much talent he had if he had no passion to actually work on it. In that sense, Maru was a failure in Junmin's eyes.

"Don't you think it's good to have a lot of choices, though?"

"It's difficult to succeed in just one field even if you spend all your life in it. Why would I trust a person who's not willing to throw his life into any particular field, and only care about getting insurance instead?"

"You think I won't do anything once I get my insurance."

"Yes. I can throw away my money if I want to. Even most production companies, no, all kinds of groups out there throw their money away to raise individuals. It's like an investment. But in this case, the losses are massive. After all, you don't know what might happen when you raise individuals."

"But if you raise one right, that one person could easily make you an incredible amount of money back."

"That's right. That's why so many places are willing to pour money into raising people."

"But you're not looking to make a profit, are you? I thought you were raising people to prove yourself of your talent. Am I wrong?"

Junmin leaned back on his chair. He was initially planning to leave right away, but the conversation was becoming interesting. A kid who was easily thirty years younger than him was somewhat aware of how he operated.

"I have a question."

"What is it?"

"If you were to be born again, would you live the same life you lived till now?"

"If I was born again?"

"Yes."

It was an odd question, but Junmin started thinking about it. How was his current life? He was satisfied now, but he didn't want to waste away his youth again as he did. It took him 15 years of life as a no-name actor for him to reach where he was now. He didn't want to go through that hell again. If he got born again, he'd use his current talent to...

"But, you won't have any knowledge or information that could better your life when you're born again."

That changed a lot of things, Junmin began thinking again. That notebook of his that carried 55 years of his life... If he were to throw all of that away and start over, what could he do?

"Lottery?"

"Definitely not."

"Stocks?"

“Not possible. The only thing you have in your memory is a rough understanding of how you lived so far, and a few memories about those who were close to you. For example... A forty-year-old man is sent back to the past, only with the personality he’s cultivated to that age. Without any information that could help him.”

“Hm.”

Coming back to the past, only feeling like he succeeded at something by the end...

“I’d feel nervous. Overwhelmed, actually. My head is full of experiences, but I can’t access it.”

“You’re thinking about it seriously, I see.”

“Imagination like this is very important to humans, especially in this field.”

“I’ll be waiting for a response.”

“Drink some coffee or something. This might take a while.”

Junmin crossed his arms. He could pass answering this question with a smile, he could even scold the boy for asking such a useless question; but doing so would make him a hypocrite. If he couldn’t take a boy’s question seriously, what right would he have in accusing the boy of not being serious for acting?

‘What an interesting kid.’

He thought for a few minutes about how he’d choose to live out his past. Eventually, he settled on one answer.

“I’d invest a bit of my time into everything out of nervousness. The life I’ve lived before would only become poison for me.”

Junmin put his arms on the table.

“Let me ask you a question, then. I hope you can be honest with me here. Why are you in the acting club?”

“I have a girl I like who does acting. I’m doing acting because I feel like this would be a nice point of connection. Of course, I actually do have an interest in acting, I just haven’t found a reason to become passionate.”

“How interesting. A girl? Kids nowadays are pretty fast with this stuff.”

“In the medieval era, people married when they were teenagers. Maybe we just became slow?”

“Hahaha, fair enough. Good. I get it. I know what kind of person you are. You don’t want to put all of your eggs in one basket, is that it?”

Maru nodded. The way Junmin saw it, this kid was acting as the example from the question earlier. Filled with nervousness about the future.

“I’m not that smart. I can read books about philosophy and whatnot very easily, but apart from that, there’s not much I can do. I can’t let my family starve, though, so I’m trying to study Chinese. But I don’t think I’ll go anywhere with it in the long run. I don’t think I can succeed with studying either. Just a semi-

average student in the long run? That's why I've been thinking of going to the factory my dad works at. I should be able to work right away in October if I do. I was just planning on settling in as a CAD programmer there after graduating. It's not a life full of excitement, but at least with this, I should be able to feed my children in the future."

"That's pretty detailed."

"As you said, I'm nervous about my life. I tried making preparations with various things in mind, but I have my limits."

Junmin noticed Maru balling up his fists. How interesting. Just where did a creature like this come from? Maru's character was so unique that he was starting to want the boy. Almost enough to pay the boy that 2 billion won.

"What makes you think you'll succeed in acting?"

"I don't think I will."

"What?"

"I'm simply placing my trust in you, and my instructor. In other words, I'm betting my life on you. And in the end, I don't want to risk my entire life on a bet."

"So in the end, everything comes back to that 2 billion."

Junmin took out a napkin from the table. He wrote a very rudimentary contract on it with his pen.

"From what you've said about your factory plans, can I assume that you're not thinking of college at all?"

"That's right."

"So the third year of your high school must be very free."

"I'll have a lot of time to invest in things."

"Don't you have to prepare for working in the factory?"

"No, that won't take long at all."

"Sounds like you've tried it before."

"I haven't, but I have a feeling that I can get used to the work fairly quickly."

Maru grinned. Junmin stopped writing and handed the napkin to Maru.

"You aren't annoyed by the medium of the contract or anything, are you?"

"The physical contract doesn't matter, what I trust is your name."

"You're surprisingly good at flattery. Not at all like a normal high schooler."

As Maru read the contract, Junmin sipped his coffee. His offer shouldn't be too bad. After all, he would be paying for the boy's time for the next three years.

“We can come up with a secondary one next time.”

“This sounds good.”

Maru folded the napkin and gently tucked it into his pocket.

“When I was speaking with your friends, I told them this. I’ll support you, so try your best. I said this because they were still amateurs. But you’re different. I see you as a pro. So...”

Junmin finished his coffee before continuing.

“Raise your price. Enough to make me want to buy you.”

Junmin stood up from his seat. He felt good. It felt as though there was a rush of adrenaline whirring his brain vigorously. He hadn’t felt that in a very long time.

“That should be good enough to make you care about acting, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“You’re materialistic.”

“Yes, I am.”

Materialistic. Junmin smiled internally. He didn’t hate that word. In fact, he kind of liked it.

“Are you familiar with Confucius’ sayings?”

“Of course.”

“Yes. I used to be a fan of a lot of his sayings. Especially the one about winning against yourself, and targeting something greater. It’s something that many adults like to talk about.”

“Right.”

“But recently, I started identifying with a different saying, “To hold close the reality, and further from yourself the ideals.” That sentence probably isn’t supposed to be very materialistic, but it is to me. I like chasing after money. That’s why I don’t feel bad when people call me materialistic.”

Maru smiled brightly, making Junmin shake his head.

“I can’t wait until the three years pass. Show me how much you’re capable of growing. If you’re capable, I’ll write you that secondary contract on the other side of the napkin. Otherwise, it would all end there.”

“I’m satisfied, since I’m not losing out on anything. It does make me somewhat greedy, though. Are successful actors all capable of using this much money at once?”

“Think of me as the odd one out. You probably won’t find many people like me in the whole of this country.”

“So I guess I’m pretty lucky, then?”

“Lucky?”

Junmin laughed.

“We can see if that’s really the case in three years. You better use those years wisely. After all, I did buy them.”

Junmin stepped out of the cafe with a grin. The autumn air felt very fresh to him, especially today.

Chapter 76

“This might not be it.”

Miso thought as she looked down at the packed lunch she made. She made it for Taesik, but it somehow didn’t fit her. She tried making it after seeing a couple do it in a TV show, but after actually making it, she realized she was too embarrassed to actually give it to the man. Plus...

“I wonder if it’d taste good to him.”

Miso stepped out of her house with the lunch in her hand. On her way over to the car, she sent a quick text message to Soojin.

[I tried making it the way you told me yesterday. Tastes nice. Thanks.]

When she got in her car and revved up the engine, she got a call from Geunsoo. What did he want so early in the morning?

- Is practice for the club going well?

“No problems here. Why? You worried for your brother?”

- ...How is that kid, anyway? Is he focusing well?

“He’s doing well, thanks to the new competition. He’s pretty soft on the inside though, it really surprised me.”

- Please take care of him. He’s never done anything by himself before, he’s going to need all the help he can get.

“You worry too much. Why don’t you just call him?”

- I already have too much on my plate as it is, you know. Plus... I don’t think I can be a good support for my brother anymore.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

- Don’t worry about it. In any case, scold him when he deserves it, and make sure to praise him too. He really needs it.

“Don’t wanna. I’m just gonna scold him all day because of you.”

- That honestly doesn’t sound half bad either.

“Well, I’m hanging up now. I have to drive.”

Miso revved up her car after hanging up. The trees outside were starting to wither in preparation for the winter, quite a lot of them were already completely bare.

“Machines fueled by praise are kind of hard to deal with.”

Miso knew very well what Geunsoo worried about. After all, she’s almost spent a full year with the kids at this point. Geunsook was a smart kid. He knew exactly what to do at a given moment, and he always managed to please. That sounded good and all, but there was a problem.

“He doesn’t have a sense of self.”

The boy only lived through the eyes of the others. Miso personally wanted to completely fix up the boy’s personality, but she couldn’t do that. That was a problem for Geunsook himself.

‘His pride is the issue.’

How could these two brothers born from the same parents turn out so different? That was a huge mystery to Miso. Geunsoo’s personality was very well developed from a young age, to the point where people called him a lunatic at school. The guy did as he pleased, while Geunsook, on the other hand, seemed calm and well-mannered. But on the inside, the boy was completely empty. A common trait seen in kids who got raised on attention.

Geunsook probably didn’t even know what he really wanted to do. After all, the boy only lived to satisfy his parents.

“Maybe it was because of Geunsoo.”

Perhaps the parents raised Geunsook like a puppet, after seeing how Geunsoo turned out. The boy was probably brainwashed with his parent’s sweet talk. It was a little sad to think about, but Miso had no intention of sympathizing with the boy.

‘You’ll have to find a good motivation for yourself if you want to keep acting.’

Junmin decided to give Geunsook a chance. After all, the boy had talent. But as soon as Junmin realizes that the boy is nothing but an empty can incapable of finding motivation, he would abandon ship. If Geunsook wants to become a true actor, he’d first have to work on finding motivation for himself.

“Well, at least he’s talented.”

But that talent is useless without real motivation. They were fine for the next competition, but Geunsook would have to start working hard by the one after that.

“What the hell happened with that kid, though?”

Miso took out her phone as soon as she reached a red light to send a message to Maru. The boy asked her for Junmin’s number two months ago. What in the world did the two talk about? She was curious as hell, but the only response she received from Junmin was to “ask the boy himself”, while Maru just refused to say anything.

“Ugh. What the hell are the two doing together?”

As she thought, the car behind her started blaring its horns. Miso threw her phone to the seat next to her and pressed the pedal.

* * *

Soojin stood up after lying down in a daze for a while. Her body felt heavy, almost as if she was sinking in a swamp. She couldn't just keep sleeping though, so she decided to take a shower for now. Soojin avoided the little dolls she started making last night to enter the bathroom.

She turned on the showerhead to max heat, and threw her body in. After a while, she exited the bathroom wiping her reddened skin with a towel, and looked down at the phone next to her notebook. Her phone was blinking, showing her a new message arrived. Soojin tied up her hair with the towel before reaching for it.

The first message was from Miso, thanking her for the recipe from last night. When the woman asked her for it last night, Soojin started wondering if Miso got a boyfriend. She didn't want to make Miso angry with that question though, so she just gave away a decent recipe she had. Soojin flipped to the next message with a small smile.

"....."

Soojin bit her lips as she read the words on the screen: 'Are you doing well?' She tried to write a message in response, but she kept making typos. It made her pretty annoyed for a brief second, but she managed to finish her sentence regardless.

[I'm doing fine.]

A new message came a few minutes after her response.

[Why don't you come back home? We miss you.]

Soojin stared at her screen for a few long minutes before moving her fingers again.

[I'm busy. I'm sorry.]

And a new response.

[I see. Stay healthy.]

Soojin threw her phone on her bed. The phone bounced, landing straight on the floor. Soojin's body felt heavy again. The shower she took had no effect on her. Soojin kneeled and hugged her knees. Her dad probably wanted to say a few more things to her. She could just feel his emotions emanating from his texts.

"Hah."

Soojin felt awful. She felt mad at herself, because she knew she was at fault for feeling awful to begin with. She wouldn't feel so bad if she received a response for the mail she sent a while back. She knew she shouldn't feel like this, but she just couldn't help it. Soojin put on her clothes almost as if she was controlled, and picked up her dolls.

"I should... play with the kids."

Today, she once again filled her car with dolls and headed to the kindergarten. That was one of the few places where she could feel safe, and at the same time, repent.

She should smile.

Soojin smiled. She smiled as brightly as she could. Surely the kids would like it. Right as she entered her car, she got a message from Maru.

[I arrived at Suwon station.]

Soojin slapped her cheek to snap herself out of that daze, and looked at the back mirror. She looked a little sadder than usual, but she didn't look all that strange.

[I'll be there soon.]

She started her car as soon as she sent the message.

* * *

"You worked hard."

"You too, Maru. I'll see you next week."

"Sure."

Maru watched Soojin drive off in her red car before turning away. He started doing this to gain an interest in acting, but at this point, it'd become a habit. It was still fun, so he didn't feel like it was a waste of time at all.

'Today was pretty nice.'

Soojin looked quite nervous in the morning, but she calmed down a lot after receiving a message. She should be able to sort out her problems from now on.

It was 2pm. The day ended surprisingly quickly, so Maru decided to buy a toast sandwich from the station before going home. Right then, he noticed two familiar faces in the distance. It was Geunseok and Yurim.

* * *

"Oh, it's Maru," Yurim said.

Geunseok looked at Maru with an uncomfortable expression. The boy was walking towards the two of them with a toast sandwich in hand. Yurim tried to remove her arm from Geunseok's hand, but he tightened his grip.

"Date?" Maru asked.

Maru was a strange kid. The guy complained about the acting club arrogantly, but never actually left. As a matter of fact, he was even attending practice now with a role. Geunseok thought Maru's character was nothing special, but quickly realized that wasn't the case after a while of practice. Instructor Miso gave Maru a difficult character for sure.

Geunseok, for one, couldn't understand what instructor Miso was thinking. Why did she give such an important character to a guy like him?

'Why not me?'

He got the main role just like last time, but he didn't feel good about it at all. Maybe it was because he was only getting criticisms recently. Instructor Miso never complimented him for anything, despite showering everyone else around him with praises. In that sense, Geunseok didn't like Maru. The guy never got scolded.

"Good times. Hope you have fun."

Even those words sounded almost like mocking to Geunseok, which made him twist his lips in annoyance. Geunseok pulled Yurim closer towards him.

"Let's go."

Yurim spoke to him in a sweet manner.

"He's probably like that because he's jealous, right?"

"Probably."

"Of course he would be. You're just too cool, Geunseok."

It was a bit embarrassing to hear, but Geunseok didn't hate hearing that. Yurim looked at him. She only took care of him, not others. Plus, she was pretty cute.

'Big sis Suyeon would probably be better though.'

Geunseok's gotten a little tired of Yurim recently. The girl was just too attached to him. She treated him almost like her phone that she always used to fiddle with. On the other hand, big sis Suyeon takes the lead pretty well. Every second he spent with Suyeon wasn't boring at all.

'Then again, Yurim needs me.'

Geunseok walked towards a popular pizza place nearby, with Yurim still stuck next to him.

* * *

"See you tomorrow."

Yurim headed home after saying her goodbyes to Geunseok. She could head straight home if she went through the alleyway, but she decided to take the long route home using a bigger road. Even now, she was afraid of walking by herself in the dark, especially without Geunseok.

She comforted herself by clutching her phone.

'Geunseok's so helpless. He can't do anything without me.'

Whenever she was with Geunseok, Yurim felt like a mature woman. Someone who could face adversity and actually win against it. Through him, she gained stability as a person. As she passed over a footbridge, she noticed someone underneath.

"Thank you! Come again!"

It was a girl. Iseul, actually.

"Eh?"

“Oh? Yurim!”

Iseul came over first. Yurim was actually a bit uncomfortable around this girl. First off, she was prettier than her, and Geunseok tended to sneak a glance at the girl every once in a while as well. Well, they were still in the same acting club though.

“You live here?”

“Yeah. My parents run a soup place. Smells good, right?”

Yurim wasn't a big fan of how pork stock smelled, but she nodded with a smile for now.

“Want a bowl? The others are all here too.”

“Others?”

Yurim took a small peek inside. There were a few people sitting in the near-empty restaurant eating. That round boy over there was Daemyung, opposite him was Dojin. And...

“Soyeon's... here, too.”

“Yeah. I invited them since they said they like soup. Taejoon's coming, too.”

“I-is that so?”

Suddenly, Yurim felt excluded. It was fine if the other kids were there, but... Soyeon, too? The girl didn't even say anything to her.

Yurim gripped her phone. And here she thought Soyeon was her best friend in school. This was too much...

“I have to go home.”

“Really? You should say hi to them before...”

“No, it's fine. See you tomorrow.”

“Y-yeah. Sure.”

Yurim tried to hide her pout by walking away, she was disappointed. How could Soyeon hang out with the others without even telling her?

“And I thought she was a friend.”

As she thought so, she noticed a phone call she forgot to pick up from this morning. It was from Soyeon. She ignored it because she was busy hanging out with Geunseok at the time.

“...She should've at least texted me. Isn't she just ignoring me at this point?”

Yurim immediately felt worse. She felt like she needed to talk about this to someone. Like always, she started typing Geunseok's phone number on her phone.

Chapter 77

“Did she just leave?”

“Yeah, I invited her, but she just left. Guess she’s busy.”

“Is that so?”

Soyeon responded with a saddened tone. It felt like the distance between her and Yurim was increasing. Yurim didn’t pick up most of Soyeon’s calls, and even if she did, her response centered around her being busy and hanging up.

“She must be on a date with Geunseok.”

“Are they really going out?”

Dojin nodded with an ‘of course’. Soyeon smiled, looking at the two friends next to her. The two of them got along almost like a couple. The thought of Yurim disappeared a little in her head, she should be able to settle the matter later.

“So, how is it? Is it good?”

Iseul asked with expectant eyes. She fit the vibe of the restaurant very well with her white towel around her head. Despite looking so much like a princess, too.

“Amazing.”

“Yeah, amazing.”

Soyeon gave the other girl a thumbs up. Indeed, the soup was delicious. Good enough for seconds. Iseul grinned after hearing the compliment, and shouted into the kitchen, ‘Mom! Dad! They like it!’

“Be sure to come often, okay?”

Iseul was a cute girl. At one point, Soyeon was jealous of the other girl. No, she actually disliked Iseul. She was certain that all cute girls were foxes inside. But contrary to her prejudice, Iseul turned out to be a very relaxed person.

‘She’s pretty, and she has a nice personality. Isn’t that too much?’

Today especially, Soyeon felt a little loathful of her stomach. She never disliked her physique, but she felt embarrassed whenever she was standing next to Iseul. Today was no exception, she felt a sense of shame along with her embarrassment. As she continued talking with the others, the last person arrived.

“I’m here! Hi!”

It was Taejoon. Iseul smiled, giving the boy a light jab at his stomach. She sat Taejoon next to Soyeon, which made Soyeon nervous for no reason.

“Soyeon, it’s me.”

“Ah, hey.”

“How is it? Does it live up to your expectations? Iseul wasn’t hyping it up?”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

Taejoon was nice to everyone. He was giving her attention, as proof of that fact. He probably wants to talk to Iseul more.

‘Come on, Soyeon. Stop overthinking. They’re all nice people.’

Soyeon stopped herself from turning to look at Taejoon. She wanted to keep her crush on Taejoon a secret. What would the other kids think if word got out?

‘They’d make fun of me.’

They’d laugh at her, telling her that he was way out of her league. They might not mean offense when they talk, but hurtful words were still painful. So she removed the possibility to begin with. Taejoon should stop talking to her if she didn’t look at him.

“Did you drop something in that soup? Why are you staring at it?”

“Eh? Ah, it’s nothing.”

Gosh, why was the boy talking so much to her? She looked up to try and change the topic, but... she noticed Dojin and Daemyung exchanging looks with a grin.

‘Could it be...’

Did it already begin? She felt embarrassed. Was she being too obvious? She tried to act normal, but it wasn’t easy.

“Tasty, right?” She found herself asking.

Dojin nodded with a smile, and that was it. She turned to look at Daemyung out of sheer awkwardness, but the boy was getting ready to leave for some reason.

“We need to make a call real quick. I think we might be able to call Maru here.”

“Take me with you.”

Dojin and Daemyung took off together. Soyeon couldn’t even say anything. Taejoon was still next to her, and her soup was disappearing quickly. What should she do? Should she just order more soup and stuff it down her gullet?

About when she thought this much, Taejoon became quiet.

‘.....’

Things only grew more awkward between each other. So he won’t even talk to her without others around them. Soyeon could only pray for Dojin and Daemyung to return quickly.

* * *

Iseul chopped up some sausages before putting it in a container.

“You should rest a bit, you have friends here,” her mom commented.

Iseul shook her head.

“Ugh, mom, can’t you see what’s happening over there?”

Iseul pointed at the table with Taejoon and Soyeon. Her mom smiled immediately.

“Are they going out?”

“Nope, it’s a one-sided love.”

“The guy, huh?”

“Right? Right? But the girl doesn’t know at all.”

“She doesn’t? With him being that obvious?”

“Yeah. Soyeon never looks at Taejoon. Especially when they’re alone. Hehe.”

“You should tell her, then.”

“I should, but... That’s not fun.”

“And the other kids just left to set the mood?”

“Yeah. I mean, we came here just for this today. Oh, that and promoting our restaurant.”

“Oh my, my daughter’s become a true merchant, I see.”

“Whose daughter do you think I am?”

“Mine, obviously.”

Iseul’s dad shouted from a different room in the kitchen.

“What about me?”

Iseul smiled before directing her attention back to the table. Soyeon was still looking down at her bowl of soup. Taejoon, on the other hand, was fiddling with his spoon with a stiff expression.

“A-hem! Springtime of youth!”

Things would immediately get heartwarming and romantic if Iseul told Soyeon what was going on, but... then the club would be deprived of entertainment.

‘Well, it all ends today, though.’

Taejoon promised himself. He would confess to Soyeon before today ends.

* * *

“Hah.”

“What’s up?”

Daemyung looked at Dojin standing next to him.

“Everyone else is finding their girlfriends and boyfriends, and here I am, what I was thinking.”

“.....”

“Iseul doesn’t seem interested in getting into a relationship, the seniors all seem to have their matches, but me on the other hand... Ah, my springtime is rotting away.”

“Romance doesn’t account for all of your youth, you know.”

“It isn’t, but it does account for a significant part of it. Daemyung, Maru is our only hope. I’m sure he got that girl’s number that time. We need to make use of that.”

Daemyung shook his head.

“I’m n-not that interested.”

“Liar. Cross your heart and tell me. Every dude with a dick wants love, yo.”

Dojin spoke with exaggeration as he would on stage, some of the pedestrians turned to look at them as a result. Daemyung became embarrassed, and quickly started walking away.

“Hey! Don’t leave me alone, dude. I feel embarrassed.”

“O-oh, so you’re aware that you’re an embarrassment?”

“...Yeah.”

The two of them entered a convenience store nearby.

“Taejoon was confessing today, right? You think he would’ve done it by now?”

“Dunno.”

Daemyung was pretty surprised when Taejoon informed the group of his plan. Taejoon? Liking Soyeon? Even more surprising, everyone else already knew about this?

‘Maybe I’m just slow.’

A girlfriend... Just thinking about it made Daemyung a little excited.

“Oh, it’s Maru,” Dojin said, taking out his phone.

After exchanging a few words, Dojin ended the call with a ‘meet you at the station’.

“Maru’s done with work?”

“Yeah. And here I thought he couldn’t make it. Anyway, to think he’d give up being with a pretty lady to hang with us instead... He’s a bit odd himself.”

Daemyung thought of Soojin. The woman was incredibly pretty, he remembered. She was the manifestation of purity itself, as a matter of fact. After a while of waiting, Maru came into the convenience store himself, with his hands in his pockets.

“Let’s go,” he said, before walking back out.

“How was work?”

“It was alright. It ended pretty fast, which was why I called you. What are you doing here, by the way?”

Dojin gestured at the restaurant nearby.

“They’re in there right now.”

“Ah. How was Taejoon?”

“I honestly wanted to take a picture.”

Daemyung smiled, too, remembering Taejoon’s expression. The boy’s frozen face was an uncharacteristic expression.

“We’ll probably have to wait then, huh?”

“Probably?”

* * *

And yet again, they were at a bar. Miso grinned, looking at Taesik sitting next to her. Just looking at him made her happy, the fact that this man was hers made her even happier.

“So, how has practice been?”

“Ugh, what’s up with the guys around me and the acting club? Aren’t you interested in me? Also, that politeness thing! Can’t you try fixing it?”

“I’m sorry. No, sorry.”

Miso shook her head.

“Well, practice is perfect for now. My use of the word ‘perfect’ should give you a pretty good sense of what’s happening.”

“Yeah, I can see it.”

“It’s going to be different from the first competition. Plus, Maru’s here too.”

“So the prelims aren’t going to be a problem?”

“If it is, I’m going to leave the industry.”

She was confident. Really. They were on a highway to the finals, and they would take first place as well.

“A comedy... isn’t it difficult?”

“It is. But that’s what makes us special. If we win at the nationals this winter, we’re going to sweep up every award. Just watch!”

“That’d be nice. Would be something nice to brag about.”

“Oh my, Mr. Advisor. Were you having a hard time?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t have to care so much about what the other teachers think of me.”

Watching Taesik complain was a little cute. Miso couldn't resist pinching his cheek.

"Don't you worry, mister. I'll change what the school thinks of your club with this."

Just you watch. That first place plaque was going to have the name 'Blue Sky' engraved on it.

* * *

Maru went back to his room after a quick shower. After checking his homework, he opened a book related to acting. Some of them were books recommended by Miso, and others were scripts from Ganghwan. The scripts from Ganghwan were the copies used by the man himself, so it was loaded with a bunch of notes written on the sides.

[Use it as reference.]

That was what Ganghwan told him as he gave Maru the scripts. For Maru, this script lined with red and blue notes was the best teacher he could ever ask for. For the last two months, Maru diverted 20% of his time into school, and the rest all into acting. He decided to work hard for three years. He did make a deal, after all.

...Or at least, that's what he thought at first. He thought he made a great deal, what with him being able to meet his wife through this and all. But after meeting both Junmin and Ganghwan, something's changed.

He still thought this was a good deal, and he was still going to try hard. But now, he had motivation. That is, motivation to be on stage. As a matter of fact, looking at Ganghwan's script made him think of something Junmin told him in the past.

[I'll be waiting until you start acting not because of money, but because of passion. I guarantee it'll be interesting. For the both of us.]

Maru closed the script and lay down on his bed. There was a week until the prelims for the winter competition. He could see the glow light stickers stuck on the ceiling. The moon sticker was glowing faintly. The moon couldn't shine by itself.

'But if it becomes able to...'

Then, like Junmin said, things would get very interesting. Maru closed his eyes. That night, he dreamed. There was a man on a stage, wearing a black and white mask on his face. He raised his hands to the sky as he spoke,

"Did you like the choices I gave you?"

Maru could only smile in the dream.

Chapter 78

Yang Ganghwan took off the newspaper covering him.

"Phew, doesn't look like my face was paralyzed, at least."

There were a bunch of homeless people sitting around the bus terminal. After all, it was winter, and the terminal was warm. Ganghwan had been living here for around two weeks now.

“Mr. Yang.”

The person who walked up to him with a bottle of soju was Mr. Kim. The man who was the leader of the homeless here. He was the one who decides who sleeps where.

“Drinking, so early in the morning?”

“I’m drinking because it’s the morning. Looks like you’re still doing well, that’s good. Here, have a shot. It’ll warm you up.”

November. It was getting a bit too cold to keep warm with just a newspaper. The walls of the bus terminal stopped wind from getting in, but the temperature was still cold enough to paralyze a man. Paralysis, to a homeless person, was a worse outcome than death.

Ganghwan accepted the shot of soju. He felt his stomach warm up a bit.

“Stretch a bit. Your bones are going to rot away if you just curl up like that.”

Ganghwan nodded, and started stretching. His stiffened muscles were screaming at him. That was a good sign, at least he could still feel pain. According to Mr. Kim, things were really bad for you if you woke up feeling good. Because you were too numb to feel anything wrong with your body.

“Now now! Stand up! We need to leave this place squeaky clean!”

Mr. Kim started waking up all the homeless people. Each one of them started cleaning up after their sleeping areas. To begin with, Mr. Kim was the person who entered an agreement with the terminal to begin with. Most people didn’t know this, but the homeless would go elsewhere when the terminal was open for the public. They didn’t stay in places where they would attract attention, and they always cleaned up before they left. They didn’t get into fights with passengers, and they made sure not to leave behind any unwanted smells.

“Mr. Park! Clean up your clothes!”

Mr. Park nodded at Mr. Kim’s words. As soon as the homeless people managed to clean up, the passengers started coming in in droves.

“Now now, let’s get out of here.”

Mr. Kim told the employee that they would be leaving with a smile. Right then, a thirty year old lady ran into one of the homeless people. It was Mr. Hwang, a person Ganghwan was familiar with. The man came to the terminal about three days ago, and unfortunately still had his pride with him. He often said the words, “if it wasn’t for that guarantee...” under his breath.

The woman who ran into him looked him over with a disgusted frown, her eyes made Mr. Hwang flip over.

“You bitch! How dare you look at me like that!”

Ganghwan ran over to stop him immediately, just a single report would send off all of the homeless people here out into the streets. Mr. Hwang alone could easily chase everyone out of here. Ganghwan dragged Mr. Hwang away, as Mr. Kim started talking to the lady.

“Lady, are you okay?”

“Ah, yes.”

Mr. Kim looked pretty normal, dressed in clothes ready for a hike. He also looked like a wealthy individual to begin with. With Mr. Kim talking, the lady calmed down pretty quickly. He walked her over into the terminal naturally.

“Mr. Hwang, you need to calm down.”

Ganghwan took Mr. Hwang to the bathroom before any employees noticed them. Mr. Hwang angrily huffed before turning desperate.

“How did I end up like this...”

“Go wash your face and calm down a little. Mr. Kim’s handling it well out there, I think.”

“...I’m sorry.”

Mr. Hwang smelled a little of alcohol. Ganghwan shook his head before stepping back outside. He could see the woman from before heading off to the bus stops with a ticket. She didn’t seem to have made a report, thankfully.

“Mr. Hwang?”

“He’s in the bathroom.”

Mr. Kim sighed frustratedly.

“I saw him drinking yesterday... I knew this would happen.”

“The lady? She didn’t say anything?”

“I told her to think as if she stepped on poop, she looked scared and left right away. Sigh, this is no good... If we get on the employees’ bad side before it gets really cold, we’re in big trouble.”

“Yeah.”

Mr. Hwang stepped out from the bathroom. He bowed slightly to Mr. Kim with an embarrassed expression before walking away.

“It’s because he still has that pride, that damned pride. He won’t be able to recover with it.”

Mr. Kim told Ganghwan to work hard before walking away, the man was probably headed for the job market. He probably wouldn’t be able to get anything done, though. After all, the job market was overflowing with people in their 20s. Mr. Kim, who had been a factory manager back in the day, got hit badly during the Asian Financial Crisis, and never recovered. He divorced, and that’s how he ended up becoming who he was now. A homeless man for six years and counting.

Ganghwan stared as he watched Mr. Kim walk away. This terminal was filled with homeless people, the “failures” of society. He had to wonder, did the people who made fun of the homeless know? That each one of these people used to be CEOs and heads of a department back in the day?

They failed because of circumstances out of their control, and were laughed at regardless. Ganghwan smiled bitterly as he took out his notebook, and started taking notes. He needed to write down exactly how he felt. He needed to write down what he ate in the morning, what happened during the day, how his body felt right now, what the scenery was like, and everything else. He took as detailed notes as he possibly could.

Afterwards, Ganghwan got two cups of coffee, and offered one to a bus driver he got to know a few days ago. As they started talking, the radio was announcing the daily news.

- The residential properties in Gangnam soared in price by about 20% recently.

“I should’ve fucking bought that land back then.”

“I heard prices rose by a huge amount?”

“Nowadays you can earn hundreds of thousands just by sitting if you have that land. There’s a bunch of people sleeping on the streets, and some lucky few are sweeping in cash just because they happened to have the right property... I don’t know if I should say that this world is disgusting or stupid.”

The bus driver watched as some of the homeless started walking away.

“Those guys are very unfortunate as well. They must want to see their wives and children, but can’t because they have no money. Damn it, it all comes down to money and its ability to ruin a family just like that.”

The bus driver left with just that. Come to think of it, the way people looked at homeless people were all different depending on their age. The older they got, the more sympathetic they became. Probably because they knew how easily they could become homeless themselves. Just a single mistake, and they could become one of the many people sleeping at a bus terminal.

“Mr. Yang.”

“Oh, Mr. Kim?”

Mr. Kim appeared with a bottle of makgeolli, instead of going to the job market like Ganghwan thought. Alcohol? At this time of day? That was very unlike Mr. Kim. Most people had the assumption that homeless people did nothing but drink, but that was absolutely false. Of course, there were those who blindly drank their lives away in despair, but the vast majority spent their time working hard and recovering. Of those, Mr. Kim was the type that stuck to a very strict schedule. That shot of soju he drank every morning was more like medicine to survive every day. It absolutely wasn’t something he drank for pleasure. But the makgeolli in his hand right now... It was clearly for entertainment.

“What happened to work...?”

“I wanted to send you off.”

Ganghwan trembled a little bit after hearing those words.

"I thought you might be leaving around today. How would you like a drink?"

* * *

Ganghwan threw on some soup stock over dried noodles, and crushed it up. Voila, a wonderful drinking food. The two of them started drinking at the park near the terminal.

"So, what do you do?"

"I act."

"Act? Why are you here, then?"

"I need awareness if I want to act properly."

"So you're saying that being homeless is helpful for you?"

"Yes. I am playing a homeless person, after all."

"Haha. I see that my first impressions of you were right on the mark now."

"What did you think of me?"

"I thought you were insane."

Ganghwan exploded into laughter after hearing that.

"It was already strange to begin with, watching a young man like yourself come into our community. You looked very much alive as well. Er, it sounds a bit awkward with me saying this, but being homeless requires you to give up everything. Pride, face, power, everything. We have nothing, so we need to act like we have nothing. At that point, we can start to see if a person's truly alive or not."

Mr. Kim was saying some scary things like it was normal to him. Ganghwan felt a bit apologetic after hearing this.

"I'm not trying to blame you for anything, it was just a passing comment. Anyway, did you learn anything?"

"Yes. I learned a lot."

"Good to know. Thank goodness you had something to learn from this hellhole."

"Hellhole's a bit strong of a descriptor, isn't it? I mean, this is still a place where people live."

Ganghwan poured Mr. Kim a full cup of makgeolli. After that, Mr. Kim started talking a lot about his life story. Even things he didn't typically talk about were shared during their shared drinks. Every once in a while during the middle of a sentence, Mr. Kim would wipe off tears with his blackened hands.

"You know now, Mr. Yang, that we aren't like this because we want to be, right? If you look at the TV, everyone treats us like sinners. Like cockroaches that don't even try to recover, and instead leech off of the donations that come their way. I want to say a few things to the people that complain about us. What do you know about us?! You bastards! I was a CEO too! I used to donate left and right! Did you

know that? You bastards! But my factory went down. It was all my fault, so I have nothing to say. I have nothing to say..."

Mr. Kim's rage was heated, and at the same time, very desperate. The man, who never showed any anger in front of homeless people, was venting like he wanted to let out all of his frustrations on this one day. Ganghwan listened, and engraved those words in his head. By the time Mr. Kim finished talking, he'd broken down into tears.

"Why are you crying, Mr. Yang?"

"What, can't I cry?"

"Of course you can cry! As a matter of fact, I'm thankful that you're crying for me!"

Mr. Kim poured Ganghwan a cup of makgeolli with a jovial laughter.

* * *

Miso headed to the theater with a single ticket in hand, the show was just about to begin. She was here to see a play by the name of 'A Human's Repayment' and planned on visiting the dressing room before the play, but her tardiness led her to the audience seats.

The entire theater was packed full with 300 people. Miso tried to get a ticket herself, but it was sold out within minutes on the internet. The ticket she had now was gifted to her by one of the cast members.

"I wonder when Ganghwan will come out."

"Yeah."

Two girls, presumably in college, were whispering next to her. As Miso thought, Ganghwan was still as popular as ever. He was one of those eccentric actors who left a popular private theater to go to a no-name theater in a regional city. He made his name there for a while before getting scouted into a company in Seoul. From what she's heard so far, all the big theater companies in Hyejwa station were trying to scout him right now.

'He was born to be successful.'

A prodigy. That was the only word she could describe him with. But she wasn't jealous. She knew how much he had to work to get to where he was now. As a matter of fact, she felt ashamed when she started comparing herself to him.

'He's worked enough to deserve all that attention.'

The man spent an insane amount of time practicing. As she spent a few minutes observing the stage, the lights went out. The sound of the wind blowing started coming from the speakers.

The play was about to begin.

* * *

Breathless. That was how Miso felt at this very moment. She was certain that this was shared by everyone else in the theater. This was a play for adults. Not in a sexual way, no. But in a violent way

instead. Not a physical violence, but a mental one. The actors brutally acted out the cruelty of modern-day society, the cruelty that only humans were capable of.

It was insane. The person who came up with the play, the people performing the play... They were all insane. Worst of all...

The spotlight turned on, focusing on a single man.

Car horns were blaring around him, and the sounds of people talking were being played all around them. Amongst all the noise, the man spoke a sentence that marked the climax of the entire play.

"I saw a sentence written on a bridge on the Hangang river. 'I want to go home'. Seeing that, my friend said he wanted to go home. Back to his wife and child. He said he wanted to go back."

The man stretched out his hands. They were trembling lightly.

"Do you know what I thought? I saw those same words and thought, 'I want to die.' Those words that sounded so warm to you... were the same words that gave me this urge to throw myself off of that bridge."

The man kneeled, Miso could hear the girls next to him moan. They were absolutely taken by the play, by that actor on stage.

"A failure. A loser. A nobody. That's probably what you think of me. But know this, I didn't become a failure on purpose."

The man slowly raised his head. His expression, a concoction of rage, loss, despair, fear, and... a silent call for help. He looked at the audience with this complicated expression.

"You were... Just a little more lucky, compared to me. Remember this. You could be next. This cold, desperate hellscape could come to you, next. So I'll pray for you. I'll pray that you can survive when that moment comes."

The man fell backwards. Flop.

And with that, the stage turned dark.

* * *

No one said anything. The audience left almost as if they were afraid of talking to each other. Some people were even ripping apart their pamphlet angrily, others were shivering nervously. Everyone had different reactions, but it all seemed to mean one thing.

They never wanted to see the play again.

Miso shook her head. This play wasn't going to earn much money, unless it ended up becoming a sensation or something. It would probably get forgotten completely. Because... it invoked too much pain in the audience.

"It hurts too much."

It would honestly be better if it was just sad. At least then people would watch it again. But this hit the audience exactly where it hurt, and it hit again and again. Miso found herself running into the dressing room as soon as she got outside. She knew the play would be good because he was performing, but to think it'd be this good... She quickly greeted the staff she knew before jumping straight into the dressing room. She could see Ganghwan erasing his makeup in front of one of the mirrors.

"Oh! Miso!"

"Oh my ass!"

Miso slapped Ganghwan's head with her pamphlet.

Chapter 79

"You managed to see it to the end, huh? Getting your own play performed, that is. How did you manage to persuade the director, anyway? You probably just begged him until he gave in, right?"

Miso and Ganghwan were sitting together in a cafe near the theater.

"Begged? No way, he jumped at the idea. Plus, a true artist shouldn't care so much about money. Don't worry, things went well with the director. Plus, you saw how many people there were in the seats."

"You know no one's going to watch this play once they learn what it's really like."

"Do you really think so?"

Ganghwan was confident. For sure, the play didn't have any faults in it. The actors acted very well, and the props on the stage were very well-made. The play managed to invoke feelings in the audience very easily. The only problem was, again, the amount of painful feelings it invoked.

"This play isn't for everyone, I know. To begin with, I don't even have enough talent to make a play that could satisfy everyone."

"Not enough talent? Do you really think you have the right to say that? By the way, what happened? You used to hate homeless people before, but you were almost defending them in this play?"

"I mean, they say the more you know, the more you see. I lived like a homeless person around three months before I started preparing for this play. The first month was dreadful. The fact that my body hurt wasn't that much of an issue, the people were."

"People?"

"Yeah, the people. The characters like Mr. Kim, Mr. Lee, and Mr. Park aren't the only types of people who are homeless, after all. Most of them do nothing but bother and annoy you, and commit all sorts of crimes. They all gave up on their lives, doing nothing but drink with the money given to them."

"So, you decided to idealize them for this play?"

"No, I didn't. The character I played exists in real life."

Ganghwan took out his notebook, Miso knew what it was very well.

“From the second month, I met people who were very different from the stereotypical homeless people I knew about. People who desperately struggled to recover, despite hitting rock bottom. Those who wanted to go back into the warzone that was society. When I started talking with a lot of them, I had to wonder why they were homeless to begin with. Once I gathered up their stories, I ended up coming up with a decent character.”

“Man, what a weirdo. I feel sorry for the people who were worrying about you once you went off the grid.”

Ganghwan shrugged with a smile.

“So, what did you want to ask of me, Ms. Yang Miso?”

Miso stretched her neck forward to Ganghwan.

“I want you to mentor someone.”

“Mentor? What are you talking about?”

Ganghwan stared confusedly.

“You’ll see soon. This isn’t just a request from me, but from Junmin as well. Well, I guess it’s more of an order from him?”

* * *

Three people were sitting inside a cafe at Suwon.

“Alright, say hi.”

Maru looked at the man in front of him. The man was probably dragged here by Miso, seeing by his awkward smile.

“Hello, I’m Han Maru.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Yang Ganghwan.”

Yang? Maru took a look at Miso. Yang Miso... They weren’t family, were they?

“He’s a friend I met through acting. He’s also going to be your mentor from hereon.”

“Mentor?”

“Oh, so that’s him?”

Maru and Ganghwan both exclaimed in surprise. It looked like Ganghwan was dragged here without any explanation as well, that was kind of like Miso.

“I don’t know what you talked about with Junmin, but I heard you said you were going to focus on acting for the next three years? Might as well learn it properly then, right?”

Maru nodded in understanding. He did say he would study using related texts, but self study was difficult. Having an experienced teacher would help quite a bit.

“Well, that’s how it is, so go on and shake hands.”

Miso grabbed Ganghwan’s arm and stretched it forward. Maru grabbed the man’s hand and shook it lightly.

“Well, I’m leaving now. I gotta introduce the others to their mentors too.”

“The others?”

“Geunseok and Daemyung. Junmin’s the type to go all out when he makes his mind to raise some kids, so I need to talk to them.”

Miso stopped herself before she went out and turned back to the two of them.

“Anyway, you guys look pretty nice together. An adult weirdo and a kid weirdo.”

Weirdo?

Maru looked at Ganghwan. His face was pretty angular, which made him look pretty masculine, but overall he just looked like a nice person. His mouth and eyebrows was a testament to just how much he smiled in his day-to-day life. This person was a weirdo?

“Why are you a weirdo?” Ganghwan asked.

“What?”

“Miso’s just making fun of me when she calls me a weirdo. Why is she calling you a weirdo now?”

“She’s just making fun of me, too. A weirdo? No way. I’m perfectly normal.”

“Right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. I only talk to normal people. In any case, I only know your name right now, so I have to wonder what else I’d like to know...”

“Before that, you’re okay with this?”

“With what, teaching you?”

“Yes. You didn’t seem to know about this at all.”

“I knew I was going to mentor someone before this. Rather, did you know about this? That you were going to be mentored?”

“I wasn’t told anything until just a few minutes ago.”

“That sounds like Miso, alright. In any case, I’m going to be your mentor from now on. Ah, don’t think of me as anyone special, by the way. I don’t have some magical knowledge that’s going to turn you into a fantastic actor or anything. I can only throw you a few tips here and there. Don’t expect anything special, ok?”

Ganghwan grinned as he spoke. Right then, a certain memory replayed itself in Maru's head. He was recalling something about the man, which made his head throb a bit.

'This person, too...'

Ganghwan was an actor known as a very good friend of Hong Geunsoo. He never appeared on the big screen, but still managed to earn himself immense fame regardless. He managed to get both a lot of criticisms and praise, being a person who liked playing characters that reflected the dark side of society. He was especially famous for his ability to engage a character in the play like no other. As a matter of fact, many of his audiences liked to call his plays a 'painful play'.

'Huh, I know a lot about this guy.'

Where did Maru get this information? Surely not from the news. He probably didn't read it from any magazines either, given how busy he was at his job.

'...My wife, maybe?'

That was the most likely explanation. Or maybe he heard about it when he was a road manager? In any case, this was a famous person. That much was certain.

'Ah.'

He remembered one more thing. This was the person who dragged the 44 year old Hong Geunsoo back into the world of stage acting. He remembered that interview with Hong Geunsoo on TV, even. As he recalled, Geunsoo said that he would 'gladly go back on stage' if the request was from Ganghwan.

"Um, do you happen to know Hong Geunsoo, by any chance?"

"Geunsoo? Ahh, I completely forgot. You were from Blue Sky. Yeah, I'm an old friend of his."

The man made a comfortable smile as he said the word 'friend'. They were definitely good friends.

"Care to grab something to eat as we talk? I'm hungry."

The two of them walked out, and went to a restaurant nearby. After ordering a lunch special, they started talking again.

"How did you get to know Senior Junmin? He doesn't like dealing with any average kid with those eyes of his."

"Our instructor invited him to watch us secretly, and we acted in front of him for a brief period of time."

"Ah, so that's where you got in his eye. That guy's still so greedy, even at his age. I don't think I've ever seen him rest. He's always out there managing and training someone. Pretty amazing. Anyway, what's your game plan for now? Probably getting a bachelor's in acting?"

Maru shook his head.

"I have no intention of going to college even if I keep doing acting, I want to learn in the industry."

"Really? No college? No way."

“Is that strange?”

“Very odd. Senior is notorious for raising kids like you for acting. He likes to say the earlier you teach them, the better. But whenever he picks up a kid around your age, he always tells them to do one thing, which is going to college. It doesn’t have to be for acting or whatever. Social Sciences, Philosophy, etc. He just wants his students to widen their worldview in school.”

That made sense to Maru, but he wasn’t one of those kids that Ganghwan just described. To begin with, the contract he signed with Junmin was something completely different.

“Also, ‘if I keep doing acting’? So you might give up in the middle?”

“Yes. I only agreed to act until the end of high school for now. After that, Mr. Junmin will decide if he wants to continue the contract. Otherwise, it’s all over. I thought this would be good for me, since I wasn’t sure of acting either.”

“...That’s really odd. He decided to take in someone like you? Did he change? Did Junmin suggest you do this?”

“No, this was a condition I set for him.”

“Y-you set it *for* him?!”

Ganghwan’s jaw dropped.

“So Senior didn’t tell you to do this, you just told him that you were going to quit if you didn’t like it by the end of high school?”

“That’s right.”

“And he just took that?”

“That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

“I’d find it easier to believe had you said that the sun was rising from the west.”

Ganghwan pulled out his phone and quickly typed a number. Then, he started with “yes, Senior. It’s me, Ganghwan.” He must be calling Junmin. After nodding a few times, he turned to look at Maru incredulously.

“Yes, I understand. Yes. I’ll come visit soon.”

Ganghwan ended the call before speaking again.

“Yeah, you’re totally a weirdo.”

* * *

‘300 million won, and third year of high school...’

Ganghwan could do nothing else but stare at Maru. The high schooler was eating the grilled fish in front of him pretty cleanly. A high schooler like this... talked about a 300 million won contract?

“You have courage. 100 million per year? As a 17 year old? Do you really think you’re worth that much?”

“No.”

Oh? Look at the kid. He was speaking with complete self assurance.

“And yet you asked for that much money regardless?”

“Yes.”

“Did you not want to do acting?”

“That’s not it at all, I did want to try acting. I wanted to see if my talent was the real deal, after being told that by people around me.”

“Despite that, you asked for 100 million.”

“It was 2 billion at first.”

“.....”

“What is it?”

“I was just wondering if the value of won dropped like a rock when I was homeless. That’s not it, right?”

“Of course not.”

“Wow, 2 billion... How much did I have in my bank again?”

Ganghwan stared intently at Maru. Just what was this kid? He could tell the kid was being serious with his words. Plus, Junmin wasn’t the type to go along with jokes.

‘He must’ve liked this kid a lot.’

Ganghwan didn’t believe that human lives were worth more than money. Money was always above humans, that’s how capitalism worked. He learned this the hard way when he spent his time being homeless. Money made the world go round, money let humans live, and money killed humans with the snap of its fingers. 300 million won... That was enough money to kill several people. He recalled seeing news about a case of someone committing suicide over 2 million won in debt a few days ago. 300 million was an absolutely ridiculous amount of money, money that Senior decided to throw at this kid.

“Do you act for money?”

“I do want money. I already earned that 300 million already as well. I plan on focusing for as much as I’ve been paid.”

Maru put down his chopsticks.

“Did what I say about acting for money annoy you?”

“No, not at all. It’s not like I expected to meet a saint when I came here. Everyone works for money. But... I’d like you to know that money can’t be a motivator in your life forever.”

You can start something to earn money. That was fine. You can focus on earning money forever in your life, too. That was also fine. But at some point, you would discover some other motivator other than money. Ganghwan experienced this, so he knew it well.

“Why do you act, coach?”

“Me? To earn money.”

“That doesn’t seem to be all, though?”

The boy was smiling lightly, Ganghwan scratched his nose. It felt like this kid was reading his mind.

“You’ll see when you start acting yourself. Everyone’s the same, be they authors, singers, or comic artists. They might all start their jobs in hopes of earning money, but they’ll all end up working for a single goal in the end.”

“What’s that?”

“Having your voice heard, that becomes everyone’s ultimate goal.”

The two of them walked out after their meal, Ganghwan still didn’t have Maru completely figured out. At least he didn’t dislike the boy, he would’ve just been annoyed if Maru tried to put on a facade instead of being honest.

“By the way, about what you said about being homeless...”

“Oh, that? I was lacking notes when I went to prepare for my play. So I went to collect notes. Write some stuff about my own feelings too. Nice, right?”

“Ahh, so you went for a few days...”

“Days? What are you talking about? I’ve barely learned anything after three months. I had to stop after that since we needed time to actually prepare for the play.”

“...Three months?”

“What?”

“Do most people go that far?”

“Probably?”

“You went back home at least, right?”

“No. Why? Did a homeless person have a home to go back to?”

“So you were sleeping outside for three months...”

“Yeah.”

“.....”

“What?”

“You’re weird.”

“Me? No way. I’m normal as normal could be, at least compared to you. What kind of a person asks for 2 billion won up front? I’d be way too embarrassed to ask that as a price.”

"I think I'm completely normal compared to someone who chooses to be homeless for three months just for experience. Such a dangerous thing is..."

Ganghwan looked at Maru with a frown, causing the boy to do the same. Right there, the two of them thought the exact same thing about each other.

This guy's kind of weird.

Really weird, actually.

Chapter 80

"Mr. Junmin seems to be very rich."

Maru and Ganghwan were sitting in front of a convenience store. A big one, that saw the faces of many people that passed by.

"He really is. You know land in Gangnam is exploding in value right now, right?"

"Yes."

"Four years ago... At least, I think it was four years ago. I was walking in Gangnam with him for work, and Senior just casually pointed out a few buildings on the road and told me this: 'those are mine.' I couldn't even laugh back then because of how nonsensical he sounded right there. But what makes him amazing isn't his land, it's the types of people he can call using his name."

"I noticed he doesn't often like to attend events with famous celebrities. I suppose he isn't overtly social?"

"You seem very interested in him."

"He's contractually above me, after all. In a contract worth 300 million won at that. I thought it'd be good for me to keep that in mind."

"...Fair enough. He doesn't like complicated things. Well, except for messes related to dogs. It's his dream to buy a mansion somewhere and live there with his dogs. Apparently he can do it right now if he wanted, though."

Likes dogs... Maru thought a leash would make a nice gift in the future. For a relationship forged in business like this, small gifts were important. You never know how long you could maintain this relationship in the future, so it was always good to build trust when you could. As the two of them kept talking casually, Ganghwan suddenly put an index finger on his mouth.

"Look over there."

Ganghwan was gesturing towards a woman in a gray coat. She looked good in it, especially paired with a hat of the same color.

"How old does she seem?"

"Twenty four?"

"What do you think she does?"

“Probably a college student? One that’s waiting for her friends.”

“What are her friends like?”

“I don’t really...”

Only detectives in novels would be able to accurately ascertain information like that, Maru looked at Ganghwan curiously.

“I’m not looking for an exact answer. Just imagine, turn that woman into a character. Notice her shoes, They’re sneakers, not heels, right? Hm, I wonder why. If she was here to meet her boyfriend, she probably did that to level the height with her shorter boyfriend.”

“Or maybe she hurt her ankle.”

“Very nice opinion. Observe a little more, but don’t try to be too intrusive. What else can you gather?”

Maru carefully observed the woman a little more.

“She’s wearing a ring on her finger.”

“As a simple accessory, or something a little more than that?”

“Looks like an engagement ring.”

“How does she feel?”

“Probably excited waiting for her boyfriend.”

“Maybe. Or perhaps she’s very mad at this person?”

“What?”

Right then, the woman in the gray coat stood right up. Her hands were clenched into very tight fists. Maru followed her gaze across the street to where she was staring. A man was walking towards the woman with a smile on his face. He was a little bigger than the woman. When he walked up to her and said, ‘sorry, I’m late’, the woman threw her phone on the ground.

The phone broke with a pretty loud crack. The man looked at it confusedly, before realizing something. He tried to explain himself, but the woman didn’t seem interested at all. Her foot swung right up and hit the man squarely in the stomach. That kick seemed to have quite a lot of power in it, too. The man fell right back.

“Wow!”

Ganghwan whistled, and clapped. The people around the convenience store all turned to look at what was going on.

“Don’t talk to me ever again, you piece of trash.”

The woman grabbed her bag and walked away. For a split second, Maru saw a taekwondo uniform with a black belt inside it.

“How did you know they were going to fight?”

"I heard her talk when you were buying the coffee."

"....."

"What?"

"Why did you ask me those questions, then?"

"To invoke your imagination. What else? It was just a simple game."

Ganghwan grabbed his drink on the table.

"What is an actor?"

Two days had passed since they first met each other, but Maru was already getting quite used to Ganghwan's way of talking. The man was like a daydreamer, he stared dumbly into the air for a while before asking a question out of nowhere. Trying to get context out of this man was pointless. You just had to focus on the present moment when you were with this man.

"A person who acts."

The topic of their conversation changed, as if the woman in the coat was never mentioned in the first place. Maru took a sip of coffee as well.

"What do you think acting is, then?"

A follow-up question. This time, Maru thought a bit before answering.

"A person who imitates an imaginary character, I think."

"Imitates a character. Huh, that's the right answer."

"...How many right answers do you have in your head, coach? So far, everything I said was right."

"I don't think there are any wrong answers in the world. There might be a chance that my answer could be proven otherwise by you. There are no wrong answers, only possibilities."

"What's one plus one?"

"...Maybe in some other universe, the answer is three, you bastard."

"I'll take that for now."

"The sun rose in the east a hundred days ago, it rose in the east ten days ago, and it rose in the east yesterday as well. So the sun must rise in the east tomorrow as well. In the world of logic, that may be true, but who really knows? Maybe the sun would rise in the west tomorrow."

"Earth is going to end if that happens."

"You know what I mean, I'm not trying to question scientific logic. Acting is one of those many jobs that require a human to be creative. But, unlike other jobs similar to it, acting shines only when you hide yourself more and more."

"You shine when you hide yourself?"

“Ever heard of method acting?”

“Yes.”

“You’re smart, so I trust that you got the gist of what I’m talking about?”

“I do.”

Actors have a role. The role can change depending on the situation, but more often than not, it was completely different from who that actor really was. It could be a fictional character, or a real one. But what was important was that the actor and the character who they were trying to act were not the same person. Method acting, it was a type of acting where the actor immersed themselves with their character.

“Immersion. What do you think that means?”

“I think it means to focus, or to dive into something. Instructor Miso liked to describe it as ‘going insane for something’.”

“Focus, dive, insanity. Do you know what these three things have in common?”

“Um, to focus?”

“Correct. But if you go a little deeper, you’ll come to the same answer I gave you a moment ago. To forget about yourself. Do you like movies?”

“I do.”

“What genre?”

“Thrillers.”

“Alright. Let’s say your favorite actor, director, and etc decided to make a movie together. When you’re watching that movie, you’d only be thinking of that movie, right?”

“Yes.”

“You would stop thinking about petty thoughts. As a matter of fact, you’d focus right on the movie. You probably won’t be able to think of anything else during the climax, either. Do you think about what’s going to happen tomorrow, what you’re doing right now, and what you’re going to eat after the movie during its climax?”

“Of course not. I’d only be thinking of the movie.”

“That’s right. The first thing you forget when you focus is yourself. Your needs will completely disappear from your mind. You don’t even realize that you forgot about yourself, even. There is nothing else to see, you’re only looking at what you’re doing now. You stop being able to live without it.”

“Like a drug.”

“Famous actors didn’t do drugs for nothing. It lets you forget yourself. Completely. Focus is the greatest form of happiness a person can experience. So when a person can find something to focus on, they forget everything else. When they stop being able to focus, they writhe in pain.”

“That almost makes me not want to focus on something.”

Ganghwan laughed.

“Maybe. Ah, anyway. I said an actor shines more the more he hides himself, right?”

“Yes.”

“But at one point, there comes a time when your character and role become one. Art is all like that. At first, everyone imitates someone else. Even when you write a song, a story, or whatever. You imitate someone who’s better than you. Acting’s no different.”

Ganghwan stiffened his expression like a character from a sad play. His voice was still light and jovial, making him look like a character from a dark comedy.

“That’s how everyone improves, before having the ability to create something of their own. It won’t be something that is purely theirs, but you have to admit, it’s work that they’ve put their own twist on. It’s just that in the case of acting, the actor has to imitate others longer than others. You need to prove that to the characters that you’re playing, and not yourself. You’ve heard this line before too, right? I saw so and so in this movie, instead of the main character.”

“Yes. I’ve seen it at movie recommendations on TV before.”

“That line is both an insult and a praise for an actor. Let’s say a no-name actor acted on stage. If the audience tells him they thought of the main character of the play when they see him, he’d feel good, right?”

“Right. Because he was praised.”

“But the story changes when this no-name actor becomes famous. People start asking for two things at once: I want to see the character portrayed by this actor. The next step to erasing yourself is to melt yourself in your character.”

“So that’s why double casting is a thing.”

“Well, that has reasons of its own, but you’re not wrong. Some people don’t just watch a play for the play itself, but others want to see how a play is changed when a different actor assumes the same role. Jang Heebin played by Jeon Doyeon and Jang Heebin played by Kim Hyesoo. No matter how much an actor tries to erase themselves, a part of themselves will be imparted in their own character. Plus, when they get famous, the way they fuse themselves with their character would be how they’ll be judged for their skill.”

“Do you have your own character, coach?”

Ganghwan shook his head quickly.

“I’m a baby chick who can’t even erase myself completely yet, I have to think about that later.”

“So I guess I would be a baby baby chick in that sense?”

“...Don’t ever make jokes when you go out. You just smell like an old man when you joke. How do you even joke like that at that age?”

“W-who knows?”

Maru avoided eye contact for a second, which made Ganghwan narrow his eyes.

“Well, I think we can call it in with theory for today. Back to the practical stuff.”

Ganghwan stood up, which made Maru sigh.

“Do we really have to do this?”

“Actors need to use their body. They also need experience. It’s good to get that experience whenever you can.”

Maru scratched his eyebrow before putting on the sunglasses Ganghwan gave him. He closed his eyes, and grabbed the cane next to him. He stood up with Ganghwan’s help.

“Create an image of the street in your head. You saw it before already.”

“What kind of a freakish genius do you think I am?”

“You’re not a genius, I know, but I also know you have a really good memory. Just do it. Once your vision disappears, the body finds other methods to cope. Listen for noises around you. Feel the wind stroking your skin. Notice how the earth feels under your feet.”

“Does this really help me?”

“Depends on how you do this.”

“Hah...”

Maru stepped forward, relying on his cane for vision.

“Who knows, maybe there will be a blind role for you in the future?”

Maru could hear Ganghwan laugh behind him. Was he making fun of Maru, or was he really intent on teaching? It’s already been two days since Maru started walking blindly on the street.