

## Once Again 81

### Chapter 81

“Geunseok.”

“Yes.”

“C’mere.”

Geunseok walked towards Miso. He didn’t make any mistakes here, the run just now was pretty perfect. His lines were spoken with proper articulation, and he didn’t forget any lines either. What was she going to criticize now? He’s only been criticized recently, so he walked up to her with a heavy heart.

“What’s up with your expression?”

“I was thinking of what I did wrong.”

“Who said you did anything wrong?”

“Then...”

Miso pat the boy’s arm with a smile.

“Good job. You worked hard. What do you think about your acting from just now?”

“I don’t think I did anything wrong.”

“Satisfaction?”

“...I think I did a good job. I’m satisfied.”

“Good. That’s good enough. You just need to work on the details now, since there’s nothing more to touch in terms of general skill. Just keep working hard like this from now on. Good work.”

He hadn’t heard any praise from Miso in a very long time. Geunseok was unable to hide his smile. There probably hasn’t been a point until now when he looked at instructor Miso this comfortably during the preparation of the People of Dalseok-dong.

“How’s mentoring going?”

Geunseok was assigned to a personal mentor after signing that contract with Mr. Junmin. He was assigned to a female actor who was 27 years old, and spending time with this woman was the happiest time in his life. The actor trusted him and only complimented him. He’s also seen this woman several times on TV. Not that she was incredibly famous, of course.

“It’s good.”

“Wow, well, you look ridiculously happy. She’s a good teacher, so work hard with her. She should be able to fill in the details that I can’t touch.”

“I understand.”

“Let’s try to refine your acting a bit more from here. You can go back now.”

Geunseok stepped back, he felt confident now. Not only had he earned praise from his mentor, but also Miso as well. He was improving.

“Geunseok, you got a call.”

Yurim gave him his phone that he set on vibrate, Geunseok took the phone and picked up the call.

- Geunseok, is that you?

“Ah yes, it’s me, instructor.”

- Just call me big sis. How’s it going, by the way? Did you get scolded by instructor Miso?

“No, she said I did good. She said I should focus on the details now.”

- See? I told you. You’re doing well. You’re growing as a person.

“...Thank you.”

His nervousness all fell away. His stress was gone, too. It felt like he could practice a few more times, even.

- Don’t work too hard. You’re talented. You should be able to reach the top even if you take it slow. I’m not exaggerating here. You know that, right?

“Haha, you’re embarrassing me.”

- No way. Anyway, Work hard. I’ll see you this evening.

Geunseok hung up. He could picture the woman on the other end of the phone in his head, a woman far more mature than any of the other girls in school. That cute yet mature woman who he called a big sister treated him like a friend. She even gave him advice with a very soft-spoken voice, very different from instructor Miso.

‘That’s right. I’m not bad at acting. It’s just that my instructor was unskilled till now.’

Finally, he met a real teacher, a charming one at that. Geunseok took a whiff of himself subconsciously. A little sour, probably from the sweat. He should take a shower before he goes to see her.

“What did instructor Miso say?” Yurim asked.

Geunseok responded with a smile.

“She said I was perfect.”

“Wow, as expected.”

“You did good too. You’d do better with more practice, though.”

“Really? Oh, Geunseok. Do you want to practice with me at dinnertime? Mom gave me more allowance, so we can eat something nice too.”

“Well, that’s nice, but I have to do something.”

“Something? You’ve been really busy lately.”

“Sorry. We can go see a movie during the weekend though. How’s that?”

“Really?”

Geunseok pinched Yurim’s cheek lightly, the girl smiled brightly in response. Geunseok realized that he didn’t feel much excitement anymore when he looked at the girl’s face. Yurim’s face was overlapping with that of the female actor. The actor looked somewhat soft but somewhat feline at the same time.

‘Well, Yurim cares about me, though.’

A few months ago, when Maru flipped the club completely, Yurim stopped him when he ran out of the chapel. He was very thankful back then, and he thought Yurim was the only person who understood him in the world. But...

“Why are you staring like that?”

“Oh, you were just so pretty.”

“W-what the. Why are you being like that all of the sudden?”

Geunseok grabbed Yurim’s hand for a second before letting it go. He didn’t realize it, but he was essentially getting insurance right now. Insurance for when he would fall again.

“Hehe.”

Yurim looked at Geunseok with a bright smile.

\* \* \*

Miso looked at the two lovebirds in front of her for a second. Geunseok was incredibly relaxed compared to usual. Then again, this was the first time Miso complimented him in a very long time. Miso called actor Suyeon again on her phone.

“Yes. Ms. Suyeon?”

- How was he?

“It worked very well. It’s almost like he’s about to pass out from happiness.”

- That’s good.

“But is this okay? This will only make him weaker as a person.”

Even if humans were intelligent animals, their nature and personality could change drastically from how they were nurtured. Geunseok was raised with his parents’ intense attention and intervention, Miso had already heard about this from Geunsoo. Sometimes, there are parents who try to project their dreams onto their children. They don’t consider their children to be independent human beings just like themselves. In other words, they only saw their children as dolls.

‘Praising when their kids study well, punishing when they don’t. Justifying all of it by saying it’s all for them. It’s a disgusting cycle.’

Miso's family was a mess. Her father was missing, and her mother was sick. Back in the day, she used to get so many calls from debt collectors that answering phone calls became a fear of hers. Even when she told them she didn't know where her dad was, all she got, in turn, were threats of death and insults. In an environment like that, Miso had no choice but to grow up strong. She didn't have the luxury to pay attention to how others thought of her.

Despite this, Miso never resented her mother. She's insulted her father day and night, of course...

Even though her mother was sick, she had a strong mentality. Miso never saw her crack under any kind of pressure. Her mother used to tell her that she respected her decision often as she grew up.

I respect your decision.

Her mother respected her. Miso could only learn how wise her mother was after growing up. Her mother accepted that Miso was different from her, despite being her flesh and blood. How amazing was that? Wouldn't any person feel a certain feeling of possessiveness over their child, especially if they raised that child, fed that child, and taught that child for all of the child's life? Miso's mother wasn't like that, though. She didn't use the fact that she raised Miso as justification to take control of Miso's life. After realizing what an amazing thing that was, Miso started respecting her mother more than ever.

That's why Miso could understand Geunseok. When a parent cares a little too much about their child, they fly right over their children's heads like a helicopter. Without realizing what kind of pressure doing so would be put onto a child.

'He'll have to harden himself.'

Miso knew her limits as an instructor, it's not like she got the right to teach others just because she was an adult. It was Geunseok's parents' fault that he became this way, but the boy continued this behavior by his own choice. Miso knew very well that the boy had a problem, but she also knew that she couldn't solve it for him. There were very few people who could fix Geunseok's personality.

'Either himself, or those very close to him.'

She tried telling him once to not find motivation from others, but from himself instead. The response she got back was a cold, silent expression. After seeing that, Miso gave up on the boy completely. It was all up to actor Suyeon now. How would that woman go about trying to fix Geunseok? She had no idea.

- Excuse me?

"Ah, yes. I'm here."

- Sorry. I thought you hung up because you didn't say anything. Anyway, leave it to me. If you take candy away from a child, he'd do nothing but cry. That's not smart. You have to give him something else. Eventually, after enough iterations of switching, he would stop crying with anything in his hands.

"Alright. Senior told me to leave Geunseok to you, so I'll do exactly that. Please treat him well."

- Don't worry. Ah, Ms. Miso, do you know actor Yang Ganghwan?

"Of course."

- Um, could you set up a meeting with me and him next time? I'd like to meet him at some point.

"Alright. I'll try contacting him."

- Yes, thank you. Ah, I have to start filming now. I'll see you next time.

"Yes."

The woman was much younger than Miso, but also much more successful. Miso heard a while ago that Suyeon would be starring in a lead role in a small miniseries at some point, even.

'Senior Junmin chose her, so things should go well.'

The guy was a real talent at handling people, after all. Miso clapped her hands towards the resting students.

"Now! Back to practice! Ready up!"

\* \* \*

Maru got a call on the way back home after practice, it was from Ganghwan. The guy hung up after telling him to come to a restaurant near the school, so Maru had no choice but to go. As soon as he arrived, Ganghwan said some nonsense about being unable to act without meat and fed Maru.

"Why do you act?"

Maru swallowed the pork belly in his mouth before answering.

"Didn't I answer that question already?"

"Because you need to?"

"Yes."

"You never felt passion or any heat when you acted, right?"

Passion, huh. Unfortunately, Maru didn't feel it just yet. Why would he feel passionate during practice, anyhow?

"Would things change on stage?"

"No. The stage only brings upon an annoying sense of nervousness. On stage, you only become colder, not hotter."

"Is that really something appropriate to say as an actor?"

"I think those that get excited on stage are unfit for acting."

"So when are actors supposed to get excited?"

"Well, you see..."

Ganghwan slowly tried to change his topic.

"I still can't forget my first act. It was one done at the school. I didn't even have many lines, but I still made a mistake. I thought I was going to die of embarrassment, even though there weren't even that many people in the audience. My head completely blanked out on me, and I couldn't even say anything, even after all that practice. We still managed to finish, and I went down the stage..."

"Did you get hot?"

"Nope, I cooled down like a corpse. Why? Because I wasn't satisfied with my act. That's when I made up my mind. I wanted to experience what it felt like to act perfectly and be satisfied with my own work. My chance came pretty quickly. I entered a teenage competition hosted by the city. I worked my ass off and performed to the end without a single error on stage, and as I went off the stage then..."

"Did you get hot?"

"Are you a parrot?"

"Did you feel the heat?"

"Ugh, never mind. I was walking down, and my legs just gave out on me. And then, nothing. I couldn't even remember what I just did. That was all."

"So where am I supposed to find satisfaction, then?"

"Plays themselves won't give you satisfaction, the same goes for practice. But you see, after that moment, I was getting a drink for myself in the waiting room, right? A girl from the previous play walked up to me right there. She said I was handsome, and asked for my number. That's when my blood really started boiling! Thus, my reason for acting was born. To look good in front of women!"

Ganghwan flipped some meat on the grill with a grin.

"Motivation is never constant. It's not anything simple, either. So don't try to find it. You'll find it at some point as you focus. By that point, you'd be able to say this: Eureka! So this is what I was acting for all this time."

"But without motivation, I can't keep acting."

"No, that's not because you didn't find motivation."

It's because you were searching for a reason not to act.

Ganghwan's words embedded themselves deeply into Maru's mind. He could somewhat understand what the man was trying to tell him.

"Did I look lost?"

"Kind of, yeah. You're way too mature, that's your problem. You only act after calculating everything. Sometimes, though, it's better for you to become a kid that watches Sesame Street."

"Sesame Street?"

"You know, just being able to enjoy something without having to think about it."

Maru took a look at the lettuce wrap Ganghwan wrapped for him before putting it in his mouth. He spat it out immediately, it was filled with chilies and garlic.

“Just like that.”

“What the hell do you mean, ‘just like that’?”

Maru quickly picked up all the meat off the grill and put it in his mouth.

“That’s right, you got it.”

Being with this person made Maru a little childish. That was what he realized after three weeks of being with Ganghwan. That... wasn’t such a bad feeling.

## **Chapter 82**

Ansan Art Center. It was completed fairly recently, so the facilities were pretty clean. The cultural festival that began here two days ago was filled with both artists from abroad, and from local areas, making the place shine both day and night. By the third day, the festival decorated by clubs all around the region was opened exclusively for the locals.

At the stage outside were several bands playing music, from bands in middle school all the way to bands of middle-aged men. They were showing off their skills on the instruments that the city provided. On the other side, merchants sold various snacks under white tents. There were a lot of kids running around the place, hyperactive from the cotton candy in their hands. Right next to them was a man in a clown suit handing balloon toys to children.

“Hey! There’s a pretty lady over there drawing caricatures for people. Let’s go!”

Daemyung stared at Maru as Dojin grabbed his arms. The boy clearly didn’t seem to want to go, but Maru just waved his hand with a smile.

“Have fun.”

Daemyung disappeared off with Dojin. Their play was set to start at 4pm, so Miso allowed the club to have fun till 2pm. The club members were all enjoying themselves in their makeup. Maru, of course, was no exception.

‘Nervousness... I don’t have any at all.’

The first stage, first play. Maru felt as clear as ever, and his condition was great. When he closed his eyes, he could visualize all the steps he would need to go through to perform the play.

‘I wonder what it would feel like to be on stage.’

The puppet plays he did with Soojin was fun. The reactions from the children were always very dramatic, so Maru tried to make them smile as much as possible. Today, he was performing not in front of children, but in front of an actual audience of varying ages. What would that feel like? Would he go on stage feeling nothing, just like Ganghwan said? Or would he feel an intense feeling of satisfaction?

‘I don’t really think I’d feel anything.’

The play would begin, and finishing it would definitely make him feel something. He decided to invest the three years of his life into acting, after receiving that 300 million won. This was the first real challenge Maru's ever taken on in this life, so he wanted to succeed if he could.

Excitement. Maru wanted to feel his heartbeat thumping. Excitement that he rarely felt since he came back to the past. He's felt it once on the day of starting anew, once when he saw his young mother, and once when he saw his young wife. Was his sense of emotion just dulled? He realized that he was very calm, and always very logical about the way he conducted himself. It almost felt like he was missing something as a person.

'Did I become a pessimist?'

What was the Maru of his previous timeline like? He couldn't remember much, but he did remember this. The Maru of that time smiled a lot more than this. He also cracked a lot of dumb jokes, too.

What about now?

The one thing he talked the most about are the necessities, and the one thing he thinks about the most is efficiency. He always put off things that didn't fit in either of those categories. As a matter of fact, he couldn't even remember the last time he played a videogame. When was the last time he read a novel? During March, he tried to limit his time playing videogames, but nowadays he lost that interest completely.

Maybe it was because he had a goal now?

Well, in any case, he had no idea if this change was for good or bad. Perhaps he gained this sort of calmness after experiencing death, not that he could ask anyone about it.

Maru took a look at the band playing right now. They were beating their drums, twanging their guitars, and expressing with all their energy that they were alive at this moment. The claps from the audience, the shouts, and the music. The noise was a testament to the fact that all of these people were alive. This was heat, the type of heat that made your heart beat fast.

Maru looked down at his hands for a second. He was calm. Even with the beat of the music playing so loudly, both his body and mind were incredibly calm. Since when was he like this? Since when did his body become so boring? Maru walked a little bit closer to the source of the music. Despite it being mid-fall, the outdoor stage was brimming with heat. Maru walked into the crowd of dancing people, he started dancing with them; he beat his feet against the ground to the beat of the music. He raised his hands to the sky and shouted. He grinned in excitement, just like the people around him.

And yet, excitement would not come. His body didn't respond a single bit. Maru stopped and looked forward. It felt like the shouts and the music around him were becoming quieter. He felt like a foreigner. Someone who felt alien amongst all the sounds and smiles.

'I became boring.'

Forty-five years old... That shouldn't have been enough to make him like this. Surely he wasn't as emotionless as this. Why did the world today seem so colorless to him?

"Well, at least I'm not broken."



He came here after death. In the process, he was given a few abilities. Perhaps this calmness was one of them. The thought comforted him a little, but he did feel nervous at the fact that he was no longer normal. For some reason, the faces of several people started floating up in his mind. Miso, Ganghwan, Junmin, Geunsoo. Perhaps he listened so intently to what these people had to say because he admired them? Or maybe he wanted to imitate these people who were colored so brightly among everyone else?

He had no idea.

His head felt dizzy all of a sudden, he came all the way here just so that he could make her happy. Everything he's done till now was for her happiness. Finding a dream, trying to make money, and even doing acting. All of this was done for her.

- Motivation isn't that easy to find.

Maru thought for a second, maybe the fact that his motivation was so clear was a problem. He might be nervous. He did receive 300 million won, but that wasn't enough in the grand scheme of things. If he were to think of the future, and the future of that future, he couldn't help but get nervous.

Should he be satisfied with his life now? Was there anything more he could do? Maybe there's a way to be more efficient now, for a better future?

He felt like he was choking. The sounds around him that felt so far away started affecting him negatively. Loneliness in a way that he's never felt before started pressuring him from all sides. He had to stop thinking. He needed to get away from this place, where there was no music, no people, no anything. But just as he was about to walk out,

"Eh? You are!"

A smiling girl was looking at him. Suddenly, it felt so much easier to breathe. The music around him started sounding fun again. The voices of the people around him started making his heart beat. The change came quickly. Maru couldn't even think anymore. All he could do was grab the girl's arm and run outside.

"W-wait!"

He was aware of just how rude this was, but he didn't want to stop. No, he couldn't stop. He ran outside the stage with the girl in tow. She was wearing casual clothes today. When he paid attention, he could also see makeup on her face. Makeup for the stage.

"You surprised me."

When Maru let go, she looked at her wrist before looking at Maru again.

"I-I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to do that."

"What *were* you trying to do, then?"

She sounded pretty annoyed.

"No, it's just... I'm sorry. I wasn't right in the head just now."

“Well... you didn’t look very good, so I’ll let it pass. But again, why are you trying to be that polite? I thought we were the same age, at least from when we last talked.”

She spoke with a smile on her face. She was probably referring to the time when they last met at Hyehwa station.

“Oh? That makeup... You’re playing today?”

“Ah, yes. That’s what ended up happening.”

“What the, you were an actor too? You should’ve told me, I had no idea! I was wondering why some dude asked for my name out of nowhere last time. You recognized our uniform, didn’t you? Of course, you did, we got first place on the nationals! Hum hum!”

The girl raised her head proudly. She was like this from the past. Her expressions always became so diverse when she talked about acting.

“Well, let’s put it at that for now, sure.”

“Anyway, what was that just now? You surprised me.”

“It might sound weird, but I couldn’t breathe.”

“Couldn’t breathe?”

“Yes.”

“So what does that have to do with me?”

“Mm, well... it’s just... Well, there’s a reason for it, I swear.”

“Be honest with me. You’re trying to ask me out, aren’t you? This is what it is, isn’t it? Isn’t it?”

...That’s right, he forgot she was like this. It was a bit of a surprise, but a welcomed one nonetheless. Her unchanged personality helped him calm down.

“That was a joke! Of course, you wouldn’t be doing that. What school are you from, by the way? I heard there were four teams going today.”

“Woosung Engineering High.”

“Ah! Blue Sky!”

“You knew about us?”

“Of course, our seniors told us that you guys used to be famous. Ah, was that rude?”

The girl said ‘sorry’ with an awkward smile.

“You really should be more casual with me, though. We’re the same age after all,” she continued with a pout.

That pout... he recognized it. She only did that when she was embarrassed. Seeing that same pout all over again calmed him down even more. At least she hasn’t changed from this mess.

“Where were you!”

Her friends walked up to her in a half jog, and scanned Maru suspiciously.

“Ah, you’re that...”

“Strange guy from before.”

“Right?”

Strange guy. That was understandable. He just disappeared last time after asking for a name.

“What the, since when were the two of you so close?”

A girl who seemed to be the teasing type poked at her playfully. She crossed her arms before replying in a slightly annoyed tone.

“We met by chance. Actually, he dragged me here out of nowhere.”

“What? Dragged?”

The other girls immediately turned fierce upon hearing that word, Maru could only smile awkwardly. She noticed what was going on pretty quick, and jumped in between the two with a smile.

“Don’t look at him like that. It was just a small thing.”

“What the, that’s suspicious. Why are you helping him?”

“I’m not helping him, you guys are just being weird here. Nothing’s happening, so just go on, now.”

She pushed her friends away and started to get further away from Maru. Maru clenched his fists. That’s right. This was just a small thing, something that could very easily be forgotten. But he didn’t want to keep it like that. He didn’t want his meeting with her to just be something so forgettable.

A spontaneous feeling erupted from his chest. For the moment, Maru decided to let his body go along with the flow of this feeling. For the first time after starting his second life, Maru became emotional.

“I’ll come to find you in the future! My name is Han Maru, don’t you forget it! Maru, meaning the sky. And...”

It’s also a name you liked for sounding so odd. Maru was unable to say those last words, but he trusted that the feeling got through to her.

And...

“What the, what the. What did he say just now?”

“Whoaaa. What the heck.”

The girls were going wild.

## **Chapter 83**

“Did something good happen?” Dojin asked.

Maru took a look at himself through the mirror. Sure enough, he was grinning like a kid.

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“Kids wouldn’t understand.”

“Ugh, again with the adult bullshit.”

Maru dodged Dojin’s attempted headlock and stood up. The smile from after meeting her still hadn't left him. The air was sweet, and the nervousness from before was gone. Maru realized once again how much meaning she held in his life. He wanted nothing more than to start a family with her again and live a happy life. He wanted to meet their daughter again if he could. Surely this would be the case if god was benevolent.

“You don’t seem nervous, despite being in your first play.”

Daemyung seemed very curious about Maru's behavior. After all, the boy was struggling to keep his breathing normal. Actually, now that Maru looked around a bit, everyone else was like this. Even Dojin seemed a little nervous.

“Yeah.”

“You really aren’t nervous?”

“Not at all. Are you?”

“A little. Actually, a lot. I’m even more nervous than before. That’s odd.”

“You have a lot of lines this time. And even a solo scene. Plus... we definitely can’t fail this time,” Dojin said.

Everyone in the room turned to look at Dojin. The surprise of realizing the cause of the nervousness washed over everyone. Dojin quickly covered his mouth, but the deed was already done.

“Right. We can’t fail,” Joonghyuk said.

Maru sent a small glance over to the second years: Joonghyuk, Yoonjung, Danmi, Minsung. They all seemed even more nervous than the first years. Most likely because of the fact that this would be their last chance to act. He recalled Joonghyuk informing him about the second years’ plan on retiring after the winter competition. They would stay in the club even in their third years, but no longer active to this extent.

This play, as a result, probably meant a lot to the second years. The prelims for the winter competition would start right after this festival. Starting off strong here would give the club a bit of confidence before going in for the real thing. This festival purely existed for them to measure their current skill before the actual competition.

“You guys all heard, right? The instructor’s invited several critics for this.”

Everyone nodded. They all heard the news this morning. Miso said she invited a few critics to review the club's work as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Thanks to this, the pressure on the club went up by another degree.

'She's going off strong.'

Miso is most likely putting the pressure on them on purpose. During the summer prelims, the club messed up after getting interrupted by the audience. Geunseok's mistake was the cause, but the entire club became messed up as a result. Due to this, Miso must've decided to train the club members' mental fortitude a bit. She would beat them like a blacksmith forging a piece of metal. After enough heat, hammering, and quenching, the metal should become hard. A human's mind was similar to this. With enough pressure, experience, and time, it would mature.

'If we do this successfully, the stage fright for most of the club should disappear.'

Of course, something completely unexpected could happen as well. If any one of the steps in the blacksmithing process went wrong, the metal would turn incredibly brittle and turn into something that would shatter easily. What would Miso's strategy do for the students? Would they mature, or would they crack under the pressure?

'We still have time.'

Even if they mess up here, there was still plenty of time to recover. Miso was probably pressuring them with all that in mind. Once the club successfully finishes here, they'd be able to work on the next play much easier. Otherwise, they'd need some more time to recover again.

"It'll be like summer all over again. We're getting reviewed, but there's no need to be afraid or worried. You're probably nervous. I feel the same. But, it's as the instructor always told us, we need to embrace this nervousness. We need to get used to it. We can finish this play with no mistakes. We can show the audience how complete we are."

Joonghyuk stretched out his hand. Everyone else did the same.

"Joonghyuk said everything I was supposed to say. But I'm still the president, so I should say something, right?"

Yoonjung smiled brightly.

"Blue Sky!"

The club threw their hands down.

"Fighting!!"

With that,

"Please get ready. Blue Sky will be up next."

The staff marked the beginning of their play.

\* \* \*

“Are you really okay with not going?”

“I’m on break for today,” Miso said, looking between Ganghwan and Geunsoo.

She told the kids that she brought experienced critics, but there really was no way that she could call on people like that. So she just dragged in two of her friends, with a bit of threat mixed in.

“How are the kids?”

“Perfect.”

“Well, that’s good to hear.”

Ganghwan leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed.

“The chair’s nice and comfy. I think I’ll sleep well on this.”

“You’re gonna sleep?”

“I mean, you said they were perfect. There’s nothing more boring than a perfect play.”

Geunsoo nodded in agreement and prepared to sleep. Miso pouted and pinched the cheeks of her friends.

“Watch, you bastards, watch.”

“Ouch ouch! I get it, I get it! Let go!”

“It hurts.”

Geunsoo and Ganghwan returned to a sitting position in a hurry. They were both actors carrying big expectations in their respective fields. Geunsoo was slowly getting popular through an independent film, and Ganghwan often got good reviews through his plays. They were both very good friends, and also the perfect critics for this play.

‘They’ll help for sure.’

Before the play started, Miso asked the two of them to review the play, along with some technical advice as well. Miso thought of herself as a critic, but she knew she was clouded by bias from their time spent together. Plus, she knew better than anyone that the club didn’t need compliments right now.

“Aren’t you expecting too much out of a high school play?”

Ganghwan said, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

“They were burned hard once already. They’re going to get first place this time, just you watch. I won’t let it happen again.”

“Isn’t that just for your pride?”

“Do you really have to state the obvious?”

“Well, that was an obvious lie.”

Miso stared at Ganghwan, who was smiling at her, before turning to Geunsoo.

“Did you call your brother?”

“Yeah. He still sounded pretty edgy, but not sad anymore. I think the trauma from the last play’s gone... Is it because of that mentor Junmin introduced him to?”

“Probably. She seemed pretty talented. She said she’d start off by complimenting him.”

“Complimenting...”

Geunsoo didn’t seem to like the word.

“Well, just watch for now. Try to come up with something you can tell them.”

Miso sighed and turned back to look at the stage. Finally, the play was beginning.

‘It’s his first play, too.’

Maru’s first play. The boy hadn’t shown anything special so far. He was good at progressing through the play, but he lacked the ability to attract empathy from the audience.

‘Man, I’m expecting way too much out of the boy.’

Miso changed her thoughts. She shouldn’t expect too much here. Talent didn’t just bloom out of nowhere. Today, she just needed to focus on seeing what Han Maru, the amateur, was capable of.

But... on one side, she couldn’t help but get a little excited.

Miso thought back to the first day she took Maru to the Blue Sky theater. When she watched the boy read a script calmly on the stage, she realized she needed to put him on the stage. After several months, she finally managed to get him there.

‘I know I shouldn’t expect much, but I just can’t help it.’

\* \* \*

“There are so many people, gosh. I think all 600 seats are filled,” Soyeon said nervously.

“They’re not here to see us. They’re just here because of the event that takes place afterward.”

Taejoon tried to respond calmly, but his voice was trembling a bit. The boy was right, though. There was a regional talent competition that took place after the acting event. That was probably what filled all 686 seats here.

“Alright, get ready. We just need to do as well as practice. Got it?” Yoonjung said.

The president’s words made everyone nod.

“Good luck, Maru.”

“Yup.”

The play would begin with Maru’s appearance. The ‘teenager’ character barely interacted with other actors. Instead, conversing with the audience. He would talk to the audience to engage them with the story.

\* \* \*

“A character who breaks down the wall between the stage and the seats.”

“The teenager is the critical factor in getting the audience engaged.”

Geunsoo and Ganghwan were talking.

“Miso chose this play of all things?” Geunsoo whispered so that Miso wouldn’t be able to hear.

“I hear everything, Geunsoo.”

Geunsoo shrugged and leaned back.

“He’s not wrong. If the teenager does badly, the entire play will go askew.”

“Yup, that’s exactly the issue.”

Geunsoo nodded at Ganghwan’s insight. He didn’t know much about Maru, only that Maru was a bit odd. But that didn’t make the boy automatically good at acting. As far as he was aware, the boy was just an oddly mature kid who liked to worry a lot.

Acting, through someone like that kid...

He knew Miso liked to compliment Maru a lot. Would the boy live up to her words?

“It’s beginning.”

Ganghwan gestured towards the stage with his chin. The curtains of the stage lifted, and the lights slowly dimmed.

\* \* \*

The audience became completely silent. All 600 of them. That didn’t sound like that many, but Maru was well aware of how big of a number this was, after working in the field himself. All of these people were quiet.

Suddenly, he became even more aware of the fact that he was on stage. Not that it made him nervous. As a matter of fact...

“How interesting,” he muttered.

That’s right. It was interesting. He was curious how the 600 people would look at him. As soon as he steps out onto that dark stage, he felt something change within. How? He had no idea.

He was stepping into the unknown. And yet... He wasn’t afraid at all. Was something wrong with him? Was this a blessing? He hadn’t a clue. The audience’s breaths were clear to his ears. This was the breath of 600 people.

Maru opened his eyes. The glow sticker on the floor was the first thing to come into his vision. He focused on the x-shaped one in particular.



That was where the spotlight would be. He saw how it worked during the rehearsal. The operator up above would control it for him. The stage was completely dark. He couldn't see the audience, and the only source of light he had was a single glow sticker on the floor.

"It began."

Someone's voice. He didn't know who it was from, but he was thankful for it anyway. It snapped him out of his daydream.

Maru started walking forward. Silently. Step, step. He tried not to make a sound. Eventually, he arrived at the center. It's been ten seconds since the darkness came onto the stage. The audience should've gotten used to the darkness at this point. Perhaps some of them even recognized him on stage.

He could see the audience, too.

As soon as he realized that, a feeling of absolute comfort settled inside his stomach. At the same time, he felt himself cooling off. The temperature of his head cooled, and the heat in his chest flared just a little bit.

He never experienced this feeling before. But for some reason, he was confident that he would get used to it. Why? He wasn't even sure he would continue acting right now.

Maru tried stepping on the floor a little bit. The sound of his feet hitting wood reverberated across the stage. He couldn't see anything, but the sound helped him visualize the rest of the stage.

Whisper, whisper. He could hear people talking.

Maru stepped on the floor again. He could see colors within the darkness. A slight hint of color started filling up the rest of the stage.

This was the stage.

Maru raised his head. He could see the audience. They were all enveloped in darkness, but somehow, he could make them all out.

600 people.

As he expected, this was an amazing number of people. His vision was entirely encompassed by people. He felt his breathing slow down, he was getting calmer now. As if he was visiting his hometown during the spring. It felt like he could just fall asleep right now.

Right then, the spotlight turned on around him. For a brief second, he couldn't see the audience anymore.

His head spun for a second.

Maru closed his eyes. He could hear someone say 'it must be beginning' somewhere in front of him.

That's right. The play is beginning. Maru raised his right hand and stroked his hair. He put that hand in his pocket with a relaxed demeanor and started walking to the right. The spotlight followed him. Maru raised his head a bit and looked up at the light. Then, he turned left. Again, the spotlight followed him.

The audience was following his movements too.

Now, instead of looking up at the light, Maru looked straight into the audience.

“Um, who are you guys looking at? Could it be me, by any chance?”

This was the first line that would crumble the wall between the stage and the seats.

Maru became the teenager.

## **Chapter 84**

She was fixing up her makeup in the makeup room, brightening and shading areas around her eye and mouth to accentuate her expressions.

“You’re thinking of him, aren’t you?”

She stopped fixing her makeup and looked sideways. She could see her friend grinning at her ear to ear. She tried to say “what?” at the girl innocently, but her tongue betrayed her intent.

“W-what?”

“See? You’re being suspicious. Be honest with me here. You met him before, haven’t you?”

“No, I haven’t. That was my first time seeing him.”

“Boo, liar. So this is your second meeting, and he just confessed right there and then?”

“That wasn’t a confession!”

“That’s a confession no matter how you look at it.”

The other club members came over to check out what the noise was all about. There were even second and third years in the mix.

“What the, what the. Did someone confess to you?”

“By who?”

“Senior, please!”

This is the time to stop the talk, not keep it going like this! She raised her voice a little, but all that it accomplished was to widen everyone’s grin.

“See? That isn’t very like you, getting agitated like that. Which means...”

“There’s something really there, huh? Hohoho.”

Cats. She was surrounded by a group of cats. Ones that found a piece of juicy fish in the midst of them. She closed her mouth tightly and looked into the mirror. She knew it would be pointless to try to argue here. She’d only be feeding them if she did.

“Now now, stop there.”

Right then, the club president stepped into the fray. She was a beautiful girl pulling off short hair with a rather large physique.

The president was actually one of the people she respected. The girl managed to get an acting award twice in the nationals so far, after all. She wanted to become a good actor like the president.

“The team before us finished their play. It’s our turn, we should get ready.”

“Yes.”

So the play ended. For some reason, she thought of that boy for a second. Maru, was it?

“How’s Woosung High? They were going to the winter competition this year, weren’t they? How are they compared to us?”

One of the second years asked the president. The president had a habit of watching other teams’ plays. It was a pretty amazing feat. Despite having to act in just a few minutes, the president wasn’t nervous at all.

“Hm, how are they, huh...”

The president raised her glasses up to her eyes.

“I don’t think we have to worry about them.”

\* \* \*

Dojin felt horrible. Not because of his nervousness, not because of the audience’s cold reactions. He stared at Soyeon, Taejoon, and Maru through the side curtains.

‘.....’

Nothing changed. It was the same as every other run. Soyeon and Taejoon were acting as usual. Soyeon played the grumpy old grandma, and Taejoon acted out the weird old grandpa. There were no mistakes, either. The play was going smoothly, but... Something was wrong. The fact that Dojin was unable to figure out what was wrong was starting to tire him.

“Damn old man!”

Soyeon stood up from her seat and stomped towards Taejoon. Taejoon quickly ran away behind the shop prop. A light laughter came from the audience.

‘And here I thought this was a pretty fun scene in the audience.’

The reactions weren’t so great. Was this it? Was he feeling bad because of the audience?

The actors on stage moved away, and darkness enveloped the stage. Right after this darkness, Maru always appeared. Maru stepped past Dojin with some very casual steps. Dojin quietly whispered “good luck” to the boy.

But Maru didn’t seem to hear him. Maru was only focused on the stickers on the floor. Like a very, very angry person. Dojin felt a chill run down his neck. It was starting to tingle in nervousness. Maru’s focus

seemed pretty frightening to him. Why did it feel like he was focused to the point of not being unable to hear anything else?

“Hm, hm!”

Maru’s cough on stage marked the beginning of the next act. Dojin took a look at the audience. Right then, one of the kids pointed at Maru and shouted, “he’s here!” Since this was a festival, many parents brought their kid with them. So far, they had all been watching quietly, but one of the kids ended up getting loud. Dojin felt his heart drop.

A deja vu.

Dojin thought back to what happened in the summer. A single kid was all it took to turn Geunseok into a bumbling fool. He just stood looking at the audience forgetting everything for ten seconds. Would Maru be like this too...?

“What a bright kid.”

‘What?’

Dojin looked at Maru with his jaw dropped. Maru walked to the edge of the stage to wave his hand back to the kid, and spoke with the kid’s parents. Dojin looked at the scene dumbly. The kid’s parents were smiling. He couldn’t see them in the darkness, of course. But he could hear them laugh.

Reactions gave birth to more reactions. More kids started waving their hands at Maru, almost as if they were in a children’s play. Dojin reminisced about a Peter Pan play he once saw as a child. For a second, he could see Peter Pan from his childhood in Maru’s smile.

It took 5 seconds for Maru to interact with that kid. Thinking about having that time filled with silence was enough to make Dojin feel a little faint.

“Do you know? Dalseok-dong has a very smart friend living in it. But this guy’s kind of stupid, despite being so smart. What am I talking about? Well, see for yourself.”

Maru was a little bit faster than usual. He was probably making sure he’d still be on time. It didn’t feel unnatural at all. It was almost as if that kid from earlier was a part of the play. The lights faded, and Maru disappeared. Then, an ambient blue light depicting the nighttime came on. It was Daemyung’s turn to come on.

“Phew.”

After coming back, Maru leaned back on the wall and took a sip of water.

“Nice reflexes.”

“It was nothing. How was it, by the way? Not too awkward?”

“Not at all.”

“Good to hear.”

Maru looked at the stage with his arms crossed, Dojin decided to switch his attention as well. The audience seats became a little bit loud. The parents must've given up on trying to control their kids. Indeed, Maru's performance from a little earlier made everyone get a little bit more relaxed. Some of the kids were even saying hello to Daemyung.

Seeing that made Dojin a little nervous again. The play was going well so far, so why?

'Calm down, just be yourself. No more, no less.'

Dojin chewed on some gum. There was still some time before his scene. Even athletes liked to chew on gum to calm down, so surely this would help. Daemyung started his monologue on the stage. His stupid words and dumb logic were the comedic highlights of this scene.

'Daemyung's good at acting.'

Dojin knew that for sure, since the boy was one of few people that Miso wouldn't scold. Even now, Daemyung's lines were coming out very naturally. There was nothing wrong with the boy's acting. But...

'There's no reaction from the audience.'

The audience was silent. Some kids were waving their hands still, of course. But for a comedy, no one in the seats was actually laughing. Was that why Dojin was nervous? He wouldn't have felt this way on the last play they did. But then again, that play wasn't a comedic one at all.

'So this is the kind of pressure comedians feel.'

The audience that doesn't laugh, and the comedians that have to make them laugh. Suddenly... Dojin felt afraid of the stage.

"Move."

"Y-yeah."

It was Geunseok's turn to be on the stage. The boy stepped out with a confident look. Looking back, all the club members were engrossed in looking at their script. They all looked fine so far. But how would they feel once they saw what the audience was like?

'I shouldn't have looked.'

Dojin was quickly regretting having seen the stage.

\* \* \*

"This is..."

"A complete mess."

Miso didn't miss the two men next to her talking. A mess. She would've tackled them any other time, but right now, she had to agree.

'Ugh, this is bad.'

Indeed, the stage was a complete mess. Everyone was acting pretty well. No one was making any mistakes, and the rhythm of the play was very well maintained. Overall, the play was being performed very well. Enough to make Miso proud. But she couldn't smile at all.

"There's a gap."

"They should get rid of it."

Geunsoo and Ganghwan were talking, Miso shook her head annoyedly.

'This isn't good at all.'

There was one note in the song that stood out from all others. It was hard to notice, but it was easy to feel that there was something wrong when you listened to it.

'Han Maru.'

Miso looked at the stage with a sigh. That one note that stuck out... That was the issue.

\* \* \*

"We don't have to worry?"

She put down her lipstick to look at the president. The president nodded vigorously.

"Are they that bad?"

"No, they're good."

"Eh? So why..."

"Mm, well..."

The president thought for a bit before making four students of similar height stand in a line.

"How is it?"

"What?"

Some of the club members couldn't understand the question.

"How are they, when you line them up like this?"

"I mean... It looks nice since they're all the same height."

This time, the president stood in the line. The tall president looked like the odd one out, now.

"What about now?"

This time, all of the club members answered.

"You don't fit in there."

"That's exactly it."

"What?"

"I don't know how to put it in words, but that's how it feels. Woosung High's very obviously good at acting. Even I can see that. Everyone in that club feels well-practiced. But... When they're together, they feel odd. Nothing fits."

"They can't cooperate?"

"Not exactly. You'll be able to get it when you see it. They're good, but they're also bad. I don't know how else to put it."

Good, but also bad. She tilted her head to the side in confusion. What in the world did that mean?

\* \* \*

Curtain call. Soyeon grabbed Taejoon's hand and stepped forward. Holding hands with him made her feel a little nervous, but she realized there was no reason to be when she was walking out on stage.

Applause.

Soyeon blanked out when she was greeted with applause. This was her third time experiencing it, but she still wasn't used to it. It made her think, so this is why people do acting.

"Good work. Really," Taejoon whispered to her.

Soyeon could feel her cheeks redden, so she just kept looking forward. The club members stepped forward one by one, and lastly, Geunseok bowed to the audience. This was the first curtain call. After all of the club left the stage, Maru ran into the stage hurriedly.

"Hey, guys! What about me?!"

Maru ran into the stage shouting. He did a quick kowtow to the audience before running straight back out, that was the end of the curtain call. Soyeon could hear the audience laughing outside. Did they have fun? Did they laugh a lot? She couldn't see what the audience was like since she was so busy acting. Just saying her lines were hard enough.

'I should congratulate everyone.'

But as soon as Soyeon turned around, she noticed everyone had very uncomfortable expressions on their faces.

"Phew."

Everyone was sighing, as a matter of fact. Soyeon turned to look at Daemyung.

"What the, what happened?"

"...We didn't get good reactions."

"Ah."

Only then did she remember what the audience was like during the play. She only heard one or two people laugh silently. There wasn't the expected amount of laughter during any of the comedic highlights. Did they fail? How did they not make anyone laugh in a comedy?

“Well, at least Maru made them laugh.”

“They also laughed at some of the other scenes,” the other members said.

Everyone knew this wasn't enough to satisfy them, though, so they all just went back to sighing.

“Let's move it. The other team's coming soon. Everyone, get to work, we need to get these props out of here.”

Joonghyuk refreshed the club with a clap of his hand. The club members went back out to the stage with a heavy heart.

## **Chapter 85**

Maru ran into her again as he cleaned up the stage. She looked a little awkward in her heavy makeup. Probably because she was applying so much makeup on such a young face.

“Good luck.”

“Y-yeah.”

She seemed to be avoiding him a little. Maru scratched his eyebrows. Well, after saying something like that, it would've been weirder if she wasn't being awkward. But at that time, he just wanted to deliver his feelings purely towards her. It could've been pretty embarrassing for her, but judging from her expression, she didn't seem to dislike it.

At this point, Maru pretty much gave up on chasing after a pure teenage relationship. He was a little bit too old for that at this point. Sometimes, knowing so much was only painful to Maru.

‘Well, at least she's pretty.’

Seeing his wife's younger self made his heart beat with an odd, exciting feeling. It wasn't that his middle-aged wife wasn't beautiful, but the beauty of her younger self was shining much brighter.

‘That's vulgar, Maru. Absolutely vulgar.’

Well, for now, Maru told himself that he was still an animal, and he couldn't help but think what he thought. He decided to be honest, his wife was more beautiful when she was young. For a second, he could hear his middle-aged wife chide at him with annoyance in the background. Something about living happily with a young woman.

“Maru, bring that over here.”

“Yes.”

The club members were busy moving around after the play. That was one of the few charms of a teenage competition, everything from making the props to setting it up on stage had to be done by the club. In this play, much of the props were made using wooden planks, so the bigger props had to be moved with at least three or four guys.

“The girls should take care of the trash.”

The next team came up to set up once they cleared all of their props. She was busy setting up as well.



“Oh, it’s Myunghwa high.”

“Isn’t that where the girls Maru tried to talk to went to?”

Dojin and Daemyung were talking as they looked at the girls. Maru took his two friends that were staring at the girls and moved them away from the stage. The stairs below were filled with little bags of props. The club members started removing their costumes as well. Maru’s costume was just his everyday clothes, so he didn’t really need to change. He’d look the same as usual once he removed some makeup from his face.

“Good work! No mistakes this time at all! Hahaha! Good job, good job!”

Yoonjung went around patting the shoulders of the students around her. The club members started smiling one by one as well as they shook off the last vestiges of their nervousness.

“You did well too, Maru.”

“I thought I might make a mistake, but it went smoothly, thankfully. The audience laughed a bit as well.”

“...Yeah, at least they laughed. Ugh! Why couldn’t they all laugh loudly like they’re supposed to, am I right?”

Maru felt a bit of strangeness from Yoonjung right then. There was a slight pause. Right before Yoonjung opened her mouth again, she closed her mouth with a bitter smile. What did her expression mean?

“Good work.”

Miso stepped into the waiting room before Maru had the chance to respond to Yoonjung. Geunsoo and Ganghwan followed close behind.

“You should know him since you saw him last time. This is Yang Ganghwan, an actor. He came here to give you guys advice, so clap your hands.”

The club members clapped loudly.

“Alright, let’s get out of here first. The next team is about to come. You two! Come, help.”

Ganghwan and Geunsoo stepped forward, muttering “are we slaves or something?” under their breath.

“So you were dragged in here by instructor Miso.”

“Does it look that obvious?”

Maru moved a plank with Ganghwan on the other side.

“Aren’t you busy?”

“I’m pretty much unemployed, since there aren’t any plays willing to take me. I’m just living off of the money I get out of mentoring you.”

“So you need to look good in front of me, then?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

Ganghwan hoisted one of the props on a 1-ton truck with a grin.

“Anyway, how was your first play?”

“I thought I would be really nervous, but I was okay. I did feel nervous, but it was a good one.”

“That’s good. At least you’re not afraid of the stage.”

“That’s a thing?”

“It is. Well, it’s really just a fear born out of peer pressure.”

“Peer pressure.”

“A lot of times, guys that speak better than Marlon Brando in the waiting room turn completely mute on stage. They get pressured into silence by the eyes of the audience. A lot of them manage to get over it with practice, but sometimes, they just leave the industry completely.”

“You have to be born with it.”

“Kind of, yeah. In that sense, you’re blessed.”

At some point, they managed to move everything onto the truck.

“I’ll be going first, so follow me. You guys, split up into Geunsoo’s car and Ganghwan’s car,” Miso said as she got on the truck.

Maru looked at Ganghwan, who was smiling in irritation.

“I knew she’d do this when she told me to bring my car. Get on. Ah, try to bring girls, got it?”

Ganghwan walked to his car with a wink. Maru decided to take those words to heart, and collected exclusively men.

“...What kind of a pepper field did I step my foot into?”

“Yeah, what the hell? It just smells of peppers here.”

As expected, Dojin got along really well with Ganghwan.

“Eh? What happened to that chubby kid?” Ganghwan asked as he looked at the back seats.

Maru pointed at Geunsoo’s car behind them.

“Over there.”

“A baby pig in a field of flowers... My god.”

Ganghwan shook his head disapprovingly.

\* \* \*

Daemyung fixed his eyes to the right window. He didn’t dare look to the left of him. Iseul was just sitting right there next to him. How did this happen?

“What are you looking at?”

“T-the sky.”

Daemyung’s heart was beating too fast with Iseul talking to him. He was fine during practice, so why?

“Doesn’t your neck hurt? You’ve been like that for a while now.”

“Yeah. T-the sky’s pretty, so I’m fine.”

“That’s pretty amazing.”

He couldn’t even move, with all of them crowded in the car like this.

‘Maru...’

To think that’s what he meant when he said, ‘lucky guy’. Daemyung could only sigh whenever Maru pulled pranks like this. As he continued staring outside, he heard someone next to him speak.

“We’re missing something.”

It was Danmi. Missing... Daemyung nodded. The play was successful. They didn’t make any mistakes, which was the goal. But that’s not all there was to a play, was it?

“I didn’t notice anyone laughing during my scene. I thought my scenes were pretty funny, too.”

“You were definitely funny.”

Danmi shook her head at Iseul’s words.

“The audience clearly didn’t think the same. But Daemyung managed to get a few reactions, I noticed?”

“N-no, they must’ve been laughing at how I looked.”

“Why are you being so self-conscious. You did well.”

“Maru did better...”

“Maru did better, but he’s got the advantage of being a character with short lines that talks directly with the audience. I think in that sense, you did better than him.”

Daemyung nodded for now, but he couldn’t agree. Wasn’t Maru’s role difficult because he talked with the audience? The rest of the club could just interact with each other, but Maru had to talk to the audience from within the realm that was Dalseok-dong. Daemyung believed that to be the reason that made Maru’s role difficult.

“Good work, all. There are some regrets, but it wasn’t awful like last time, was it? Come on, smile, all of you.”

Yoonjung turned around from the shotgun seat to look at them. She was always very energetic. But for some reason, it kind of felt like she was squeezing all the energy out of herself today. Daemyung smiled awkwardly at her before turning to look out again.

‘Did we... do well?’

Just eight months ago, Daemyung had no idea what a play even was. Five months ago, he was afraid to be on stage. For sure, he's improved. So why did he feel so oddly irritated inside? It felt like his heart was filled with emotions that failed to explode outwards. If only he managed to do that on stage...

'Why couldn't I do that?'

Daemyung turned to look at everyone else. Yurim and Iseul looked the same as usual. As a matter of fact, they looked as if a burden was lifted from their shoulders. While Danmi, Yoonjung, and Soyeon all looked like they lost something. Why?

Daemyung thought a bit before opening his script with a surprised expression. He needed to confirm something. After he scanned the entire thing, he realized what happened.

Was it just coincidence? No, it couldn't be.

'All of us, the ones who feel iffy about the play, always had scenes right after Maru.'

Daemyung thought back to the stage. He could see the quiet audience. Then, a spotlight. Maru came on stage, and caught their attention. With his character's unique charm, he managed to make them laugh. As Daemyung observed, he realized exactly what went wrong.

'I was hurried. And I had this feeling that I could be like him, too.'

Maru was definitely good at acting. But his level of skill still seemed easily achievable. Because of that, Daemyung ended up stepping on stage with a very high level of confidence, and put in more energy than usual.

'And all I got was a quiet audience.'

Was that why he was disappointed? All he had to do was act a little better.

'The seniors probably feel the same.'

Right then, Danmi opened her mouth with an embarrassed expression.

"Hah, actually... I was a little intimidated when I saw Maru act. I thought I'd get compared."

"What?"

Daemyung felt odd hearing that. Intimidated?

"You didn't feel that way?"

"I thought I could be around that good as long as I worked hard. Didn't you feel that way, too?"

"Not at all. People laughed at his scenes, but they didn't laugh in mine. There's a difference in our acting, and that intimidated me. I even thought to myself things would've been better if... Maru acted normally."

"Normally?"

"What I mean is... Ah, I don't know. It just felt really uncomfortable acting today. That's just how I felt."

Danmi muttered, "disgusting, aren't I?" under her breath.

“Why are you all being like this? We did fine!”

“Yeah.”

Iseul and Yurim butted in with a confused expression.

“I understand how Danmi feels,” Soyeon said.

Everyone had different opinions. Why? Some people thought Maru’s level of acting was achievable, and others thought he was like a distant star. Why was that? The person in the driver’s seat answered that question.

“It’s because he’s right in the middle.”

Right in the middle? Daemyung could somewhat understand what Geunsoo meant by that.

\* \* \*

Miso watched the kids move the props, before calling Geunsoo and Ganghwan towards her.

“You all think similar, right?”

Ganghwan nodded.

“Yeah, we’ll have to get rid of it, or try to bring the other side up. But right now, I think it’d be better to get rid of some of Maru’s acting.”

“Geunsoo?”

“I think so, too. That’s the fastest way to balance things.”

Miso turned to look at Maru with a complicated expression.

“If you’re going to be good, why can’t you just be *really* good? Do you really have to be iffy like this?”

The three people sighed simultaneously.

## **Chapter 86**

“It’s an issue of synergy.”

That was how Miso decided to summarize the situation. As mentioned previously, plays had three elements: the stage, the actor, and the audience. The reason why the audience was one of the three was that they were who gave life to the play itself, but that wasn’t the only reason why. On stage, an actor uses all of their imagination to become a specific character. Even a hardwood floor with a very rudimentary setup could become a sandy beach, once an actor’s imagination was applied to it.

The actor would project this scene onto the audience using his acting. The audience, having been delivered the actor’s imagination, could in turn project back their emotions. They could express themselves with sounds and gestures.

That’s right.

The reason why the audience counted as one of the three elements was because of their capability to send constant feedback. Whether the feedback is good or bad didn't matter. What's important is that their reactions had an impact on the actor.

For example, if a steely actor makes a mistake for an unknown reason on stage, and if the reactions from the audience were negative, the actor would probably get shaken greatly. That's how big of an impact the audience had.

The actor had to perform under the gazes of tens of hundreds of people. Because of this, the actor always needed to be capable of handling the audience's emotions.

"He definitely has talent. He was born with it. I've never taught him, and he's never had time to learn. Despite that, he already knows how to work with the audience."

A pro actor would've easily been able to measure how well they were synergizing with the audience, but this was Maru's first stage. He had no idea how well he was doing. Miso didn't know, either. Back then at the cafe, Miso simply thought he got the audience's attention using his unique method, but that wasn't it at all.

"That's definitely true. Acting ability aside, he catches the eye of people really easily," Ganghwan agreed.

Miso thought back to the play she saw in the morning. There, Maru had the role of coming out in the middle of the play and connecting the audience with the rest of the play. In practice, Maru would've smoothly transitioned the play into the next scene.

'But on stage, he was definitely different. That's what messed up the play.'

Maru actually articulated more and gestured better during practice, he was perfectly aligned with what they had in plan. He didn't miss a single comma, and none of his lines were spoken wrong.

The Maru on stage was different. There was no rhythm to his lines. He seemed a little bit too energetic. In some parts, he was a little lacking in breath. His movements were untimely in some areas, and his walking posture was very unlike his character.

'He didn't act like he was supposed to during practice. He probably doesn't realize it though.'

When she asked the boy a few minutes ago, he said he acted the same as he always did. But he was clearly different in Miso's eyes.

'It's like watching a robot puppy and a real puppy.'

Life. On stage, Maru blew life into his character. Something that no novice should even be capable of, the audience was what made that possible for him. Maru turned out to have an incredible talent for integrating the energy from the audience with his own. Miso became sure of that today.

'Maybe Junmin thought highly of Maru because of this.'

That day at the cafe, Junmin saw Maru from the eyes of an audience. Then, he formed a contract. Miso didn't know the specifics, but she knew that this was a very different contract compared to Junmin's usual ones.

If there was one thing an actor did, it was practice. Every actor practiced with their teeth gritted and got on stage. Despite that, only a select few become stars. The rest have to either keep working or just leave the stage entirely.

If everyone practiced the same amount, their difference in skill would be determined by talent. The best talent that an actor could have wasn't the ability to read, nor was it the ability to act well. It was the ability to transform an audience's energy into their own. Those kinds of actors never got exhausted. As long as there were audiences and a stage, they would always shine.

"If only we had more time."

"No, this isn't an issue of time. You can't fix something like this with just practice. Depending on what kind of experience he has, he can improve by leaps and bounds in one day, or he might stay at this level forever."

"True, that."

Miso listened to her two friends talk. The rest of the club was resting after organizing all of their props back in the auditorium. Miso wanted to hear what her friends thought before telling the kids about today. In the end, these two were talking about one thing.

Han Maru.

The boy had an ability to shine on stage, but right now, it wasn't enough. That shine of his was messing up the rest of the play.

"If only he had enough charisma to just shake up the entire play."

"I mean, there'd be no worries at all, then. Miso would probably be showering him with kisses right now, too, if that were the case."

"Kisses my ass."

Miso frowned when her friends turned to look at her.

"Don't you remember what happened in high school? You tried to kiss all of us when we got first place."

Geunsoo shivered in horror.

"Ugh! Talk about stuff like that somewhere else."

Miso pinched Geunsoo's lips lightly, his expression sending her a playful smile.

"Well, in the end, you're their instructor. You have to make a decision. Will you press him down, or will you let him run wild?"

"This play definitely had an effect on him, don't you think?"

"The boy probably doesn't realize it, but yeah."

"This is concerning. What do you think, Mr. Maru's tutor?" Miso asked Ganghwan.

"If we're just talking about the boy alone, there's no need to press him down."

“But what about in a play? That takes place in a month?”

“If we can’t raise the skill level of everyone else, we should just focus on pressing him down. The other kids probably noticed already, too. Though they all probably felt different things.”

“Hm.”

“Shouldn’t we hear what the kids have to say about it first? We might be overestimating them right now.”

Geunsoo gestured towards the club members at the other end of the auditorium. Miso nodded. If the kids didn’t feel anything from this play, the problem could be solved very easily.

“Get over here!”

The club ran over immediately after she shouted towards them, and stood in a single-file.

“Man, how much did you work these kids?”

“Yeah, it’s almost like they’re in a military.”

Miso ignored what the two men behind him were saying before looking at the expressions of the kids. They didn’t look so bad. Then again, they were just talking to each other casually just now. She didn’t know how much of the play they understood, but generally speaking, they all looked happy enough.

“Good work so far. You didn’t make any mistakes. I told you to perform just as well as you do in practice, so how dare you just go and do better?”

“Hehe.”

The kids looked at her embarrassedly. Well, all except the one guy looking at her like he was telling her to get on with it.

‘He’s just not cute.’

Miso cleared her throat.

“Overall, you guys did pretty well. But I’d like to hear how you felt about the play today. Be honest, anything’s fine.”

The kids looked at each other confusedly. Usually, after a play, Miso would tell them to do a run to show them they did wrong. Instead, she was just asking them for their thoughts right away.

“I’m going straight to your thoughts because you did well.”

“Ah, yes.”

Of course, this was a lie. To the director, this play was a mess. Every actor did their jobs to the best of their abilities, but they didn’t mesh together at all. Overall, a disappointment.

“President, you go first.”

“Mm... I liked everything. We didn’t make mistakes, and it was pretty fun. I loved seeing the audience smile, too.”



“Really? You liked everything?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s change the question, then. What was one thing that you felt was lacking in this play?”

“What?”

“Give me a review. Talk to me in the shoes of a director. What did you think about the play? The acting?”

Miso crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes.

“Be honest with me. Did you like the play today? Just because you didn’t make any mistakes? Really?”

She said what she wanted to say, and the resulting effect was pretty immediate. She noticed several kids stiffen up.

‘There’s no way they didn’t feel what I felt.’

Miso waited. After a few seconds, Yoonjung started talking again after biting her lip.

\* \* \*

Maru didn’t know what he had to say. This was the first time in this life when he felt troubled by a situation. The gazes the club members were giving him were odd, and a little bit confusing to try to understand.

“That’s what some of the club members felt. What do you think, Maru?”

“I don’t know. I don’t enjoy mincing my words, so I’ll be direct. What do you want from me, instructor?”

The acting club didn’t practice just to have fun, they were practicing to win at the winter competition; to get first place. In that regard, Miso was like a captain of a ship. She needed to make sure that the ship was clear to set sail without issues.

After listening to the club members’ feedback, Miso played a recording of the play today. Looking at the play from the perspective of the audience helped Maru understand what was happening.

‘The scenes all changed immediately after I went.’

The students that went after him acted a little more energetically as he did. That in itself wasn’t an issue, but this effect didn’t extend into the scenes that followed. That messed up the harmony of the actors just a little bit. The play quickly found its balance and continued on normally afterward, but this messed up the audience’s ability to be able to concentrate.

A good analogy would be like having other noises get mixed into the music you listen to. Indeed, Maru noticed the audience talking about other things whenever the play got unharmonious. They became completely unable to focus.

“Become calm. Even more so than when you practice. That’s the advice I’m going to give you.”

“Is that how we can make our play more complete?”

“A little more than before, yes.”

“I understand. I get what you’re trying to say.”

Miso nodded.

\* \* \*

Tssss.

“I don’t think I can eat.”

“Me neither.”

The club members just dumbly watched as the meat cooked on the grill in front of them. After Miso gave her little spiel, Geunsoo and Ganghwan each gave short lectures. Afterward, Miso dragged everyone to a karaoke. That was 5pm, and they only managed to leave at 9pm. After spending four whole hours in a karaoke, everyone was understandably drained.

“Hey, hey! The meat’s about to burn! Go on and eat, you idiots!”

The scary part was, Miso didn’t look even a bit tired despite singing more than anyone else. Maru shook his head as he flipped a few pieces of meat on the grill.

“Hey, let’s talk.”

Right as he was about to take a bite of the food, Ganghwan called Maru outside. Maru handed the lettuce wrap in his hand off to Dojin before heading outside.

“Are you disappointed?”

“About what?”

“About what Miso said. She was telling you to kill your acting.”

“I mean, what she said makes sense. Harmony comes foremost before anything else. I think the instructor was making the right decision. And to be honest... I don’t even know why I should be disappointed. I think I was just doing the same thing as usual.”

“You could hear all the sounds around you on stage, right?”

“Yes.”

“You could hear the audience talking, and you could hear your footsteps.”

“Right.”

“That’s the difference between you and the rest of the club. It’s a small one, but it’s a difference nonetheless. If you managed to get a bigger reaction from the audience, the rest of the club would’ve wanted to follow in your footsteps today. If that were the case, the play would’ve gone a lot differently.”

“So I’m just being iffy.”

“Yeah. You’re not doing ridiculously well, but you’re still having an impact nonetheless. That impact changes the way other people act. There’s a difference between those who were impacted by you and those who weren’t. Then there’s you. It’s like noticing a few rough edges on a smooth piece of fabric.”

“Either make the entire piece of fabric rough to begin with, or press down those few rough edges. Is that it?”

“That’s right. After all, what matters, in the end, is how well you get reactions from the audience. Miso needs to show results as a director, and you need to show results after signing that contract with Junmin.”

“So do I need to act more like a robot in the future, in that case?”

“No.”

“What?”

“That’d only be the case if you can’t grow. But if you grow enough to be able to influence the entire club, there would be no need to press you down at all.”

Ganghwan poked Maru’s chest lightly.

“Let’s turn you into something amazing. If we can’t, we can just go along with Miso’s wishes. If we can... pft, things will get pretty interesting.”

Ganghwan smiled mischievously, and Maru remembered that smile. Ganghwan smiled like that when he told Maru to act like a blind person. Just what was he planning right now?

“Let’s try seeing just what that talent of yours is capable of. We won’t be able to do much in just a single month, but we might as well try. Try hard in your youth, or something like that. Hard enough to puke.”

Puke? Wasn’t that going a little too far?

“Oh, I’m also curious about this one thing.”

“About what?”

“The play. Was it fun?”

Fun? Maru found himself smiling almost subconsciously.

“It wasn’t bad.”

Right. It wasn’t bad. Actually, it was even a bit exciting.

“Hah! Nice! Let’s go back in. Free meat always deserves attention.”

Ganghwan slapped Maru’s back energetically. Maru nodded, and followed him back into the restaurant.

## **Chapter 87**

After the meal at the restaurant, the second years gathered to rest up and chat at Danmi’s house.

“So, we’re basically a little worse than Maru?” Yoonjung said, lightly tapping her teaspoon.

She would've been completely fine with the fact had it been someone else in the club. After all, the rest of the first years worked just as hard as them, but Maru was different. He only practiced for two months. Hearing that Maru was more capable of getting people's attention than the rest of the club frankly made Yoonjung a little disappointed.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Joonghyuk asked.

"It is," Minsung answered.

Yoonjung pouted for a second before letting out a short laugh.

"Yeah! I'm kind of jealous, but this is good for the club anyway."

To begin with, they wanted Maru to be the future president. For him to be good at acting was just an added bonus.

"I'm going to teach him everything, starting tomorrow. Everything! I'm a bit jealous, so I might as well go all out, too."

"Ugh, she's at it again."

"I mean, you know she does this pretty much every day."

Danmi and Minsung smiled lightly. Right then, Joonghyuk shook his head and stopped Yoonjung.

"You might want to leave that for later."

"Why?"

"We didn't get an answer yet. Don't you remember me telling you that Maru didn't seem too fond of the idea?"

"Oh, you're right."

Yoonjung took a little sip of her now-lukewarm cocoa.

"I wonder when he'll answer."

"Who knows."

"Should I ask?"

"I feel like he'd just refuse if we did."

Yoonjung nodded. Maru would probably refuse them if they were to be persistent.

"Who were you thinking of if Maru refuses, by the way?" Yoonjung asked, looking at the other three.

Joonghyuk shook his head. He didn't seem to think of anyone just yet. Danmi said Iseul, and Minsung said Geunseok.

"Geunseok?"

"He seemed pretty weak-minded during summer, but I feel like he's grown a lot through this play."

“Yeah, that’s true. What do you think, Joonghyuk?”

“That wouldn’t be a bad idea if Geunseok keeps growing like this. I don’t know if the other kids would follow him, though.”

“The first years... they probably don’t all get along, do they?”

Minsung answered Yoonjung’s question.

“I think mostly everyone forgot about what happened at that time, but Maru and Geunseok are definitely an issue. Maru did call him out back then.”

“I don’t want to think about that time, honestly. I feel embarrassed as a senior,” Danmi said. Her eyes were drooped slightly.

“Agreed,” Yoonjung said, raising her hand.

The four of them still remembered what Maru had done very clearly. After all, Maru did what was supposed to be their job. But none of them were able to open their mouths at the time. Because they knew precisely how the club would fall to ruin if they did.

“He’s just mature. Plus, we all know that wasn’t an easy thing to do,” Joonghyuk said.

It was thanks to Joonghyuk that the rest of the second years got to know about what happened.

“He took responsibility for something he had no part in. Despite knowing he’d antagonize everyone.”

“Things are fine now, but I still can’t look at Maru straight. I just feel so guilty near him.”

Minsung and Danmi probably weren’t the only ones that felt this way.

“I should apologize properly after this play.”

“Why not now?”

Yoonjung shook her head vigorously.

“Now’s not the time. I don’t want to ruin the mood by bringing up the past. I want to formally apologize when everything’s over.”

“Oh? Look at you, thinking before acting for once.”

“What, did you take me for an idiot during all this time?”

“You weren’t?”

Yoonjung pinched Joonghyuk with a slight grin.

“In any case, this is the last time we’re meeting like this, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Whenever the club finished a play, the second years would gather at Danmi’s place to have a little tea time. To organize what happened in the day, and to talk about the things that they did right, and what they did wrong. Yoonjung forced a smile as she opened her mouth.

“We can still meet up and talk. Well, I guess we won’t be talking about acting, though.”

“Right.”

They all liked acting, but to them, this was just a hobby. There were still jobs and schools to look forward to after high school for them, so it was inevitable that they would work a lot less in their third year. Yoonjung, too, had to start focusing on studying for her dream college. It was time for her to leave the stage and come back to reality.

“Oh, that’s right Danmi, you were looking for an academy?”

“Me? I already found one.”

The conversation naturally headed elsewhere. The four people left their regrets behind them as they continued onwards with smiling faces.

\* \* \*

“I’m going to try harder,” Daemyung said in the bus.

Dojin asked what was up with a surprised expression.

“I want to be an actor. Well, a director.”

“Really?”

Dojin was a little surprised. He knew Daemyung took this seriously, but he didn’t realize just how far the boy was thinking.

“To be honest, I also met someone nice that made a promise with me.”

“What kind of a promise?”

“Promise for support. He said if I go to college for the arts or anything related, he would pay for my tuition. But I’d have to work on acting for one year in a theater company of his choosing.”

“Woah, when did that happen? Dang, you’re a total pro, aren’t you?”

College tuition was no joke, and this person Daemyung mentioned was apparently willing to pay for it. To be honest, Dojin was kind of jealous.

“So, you’re going to become a star when you graduate?” Dojin asked, poking at Daemyung’s belly.

The other boy denied it with a smile, of course.

“Daaang, Daemyung. Don’t you go ignoring me now once you get famous, alright?”

“O-of course.”

“Should I get your signature, just in case?”

“I don’t have one, though.”

“That was a joke, bro. Tell me once you get famous. I’ll get your signature then.”

Daemyung nodded a little shyly. For someone who had such a big presence on stage, he was quite shy in real life.

'But... At the same time, I guess he's already preparing for his future.'

Dojin took a look at himself reflected through the window of the bus. He was a middle school delinquent that barely made it into an engineering high school. He fixed his behaviour and tendencies, but the question remained, for how much longer would he enjoy himself like this?

To be honest, Dojin looked down on Daemyung. Right now, hearing this good news from the other boy just made him jealous. As a matter of fact, a part of him even wished Daemyung to fail.

Stop it, Dojin. You're being pathetic.

It felt like both Maru and Daemyung knew exactly what to do for their future. Neither of them seemed to have any hesitation or fear in the way they acted. They were very different compared to him.

"Work hard. Maybe buy me a house when you get really rich?"

"Ha, haha."

Dojin swallowed a bitter smile. What did he manage to achieve at the end of his first year of high school again? What will he achieve in the next two years, even?

'I guess... I'll go to college.'

He'd feel like even less of a man if he couldn't even go to a college that everyone else went to. All of a sudden, Daemyung felt so very foreign to Dojin. To think there were already people who had expectations of the boy...

"We'll have to work hard for the winter competition, right?" Daemyung asked then.

"Eh? Yeah. Of course! Damn, you're a total pro now, thinking that far already."

"I-I'm not."

Dojin pat Daemyung's shoulder with a grin. But inwardly, he didn't feel so great inside.

\* \* \*

Iseul looked at Taejoon. The boy was as red as a beet. Any other time, she would've made fun of him, but not today.

"You like Soyeon?"

"...Yeah."

Oh dear. The two of them often stayed behind to practice together for the grandpa-grandma role. To think they'd develop feelings this way...

"Does Soyeon know?"

"No, she's not even looking at me."

“Idiot, she’s intimidated by you.”

“Why?”

Taejoon looked at Iseul like a lost puppy.

“Have you never dated a girl before?”

“No.”

“Seriously? With that face?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never been close with girls before. Anyway, help me. I want to be close to Soyeon, but she won’t even look at me.”

“But you guys practice so much together.” “She always leaves right after practice.” “Really? She must hate you then. The end. Bye, I have work.”

“Come on, please.”

Taejoon was even grabbing onto her clothes now. Iseul shook her head.

“Fine, just wait. I’ll have to call the others first.”

Iseul took out her phone and messaged the rest of the club. But just before she hit send, she noticed two pretty iffy names in the message group. Iseul took out Yurim and Geunseok’s name off of the list before pressing send.

“Try being friendly first. You can do that at least, right?”

“.....”

“Ugh, that face is totally wasted on you!”

Iseul pressed the bell on the bus with a frustrated sigh.

\* \* \*

- Good work.

Geunseok smiled looking at the message from Suyeon. Finally, it felt like he met a coach who actually cared for him. She was pretty, even. Just being near her made him feel like a mature adult.

“Who is it?”

“Mm? Just someone I know.”

“Someone you know?”

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, weren’t you tired today? Instructor Miso didn’t let you go today.”

“Ugh, yeah. My throat is completely gone. I think I might even lose my voice tomorrow.”

“Drink warm water before you sleep, alright?”



“Okay.”

Geunseok and Yurim walked to the bus station together after the meal at the restaurant. They lived in opposite directions, so Geunseok planned on walking to the station on the other side in a minute. Right then, Yurim grabbed his arm, and kissed his cheek. Geunseok looked at the girl with a surprised expression.

“You were cool today. The instructor only talked about Maru today, but I think you did better. Work hard, okay?”

Yurim got on her bus with a smile. Geunseok touched his cheek for a few seconds before crossing the road with a happy smile. To be honest, he did feel a little bad when he heard Maru was good at getting attention. To think someone who didn’t even practice would have such talent... Yurim must’ve caught onto how he felt, which would explain that kiss. It definitely helped.

“You think I don’t have talent, huh?”

Geunseok rolled up his hands into a fist. So long as there weren’t any strange audience members like last time, he would be able to shine more than anyone else on stage. He was working hard, and he even had talent. The ability to converse with the audience? He didn’t even need such a talent.

‘I’m going to crush the audience with my talent.’

The audience only existed to view his acting, conversing with them was meaningless. To begin with, how would he even try to get feedback from people who could do nothing but watch? Geunseok felt Miso was pulling words out of her ass at this point. The only thing an actor had to do was to act good enough to crush any opposition from the audience.

‘Once I put them under my feet, the only thing that’ll come my way are their praises.’

Geunseok imagined himself as a star on the stage, one that only received bright words of praise from the audience.

“This is only the beginning.”

With that contract from Junmin, he would major in films during college. After college, he would enter a theater company, where he could truly start spreading his wings. His plan was flawless.

Geunseok took out his phones with a smile. Yurim and Suyeon. Two different, charming women were sending attention his way.

‘Good. Very good.’

His relationship with Yurim was only improving by the day, too. Geunseok got on the bus, thinking he should treat her better next time.

October 27th, 2003.

The Arts festival ended. And...

There was a month left until the winter nationals would begin.

## Chapter 88

It was November.

The closer the day got to the 13th, the quieter the rest of the school became. It was even forbidden to talk on the fourth floor where the third years were. For years now, the principal and the faculty worked as much as possible to change the image of the school from a school for delinquents to a school for scholars. At this point, the fact that those who stayed after school to study had the benefit of air conditioning. This right would soon get passed down onto the second years and the first years as well.

“At this rate, our school major would change from engineering to humanities,” Dojin said, rolling the candy on his tongue.

He could see a few kids gripping onto the textbook despite it being break time. They were students who came here trying to get into engineering colleges in the future. Despite having good enough grades to go to a decent school in Suwon, these kids came here instead. So that they could become the head of a snake instead of the tail of a dragon.

“You bastard, why don’t you play around a bit during break time? You study too much.”

Changhu was going around picking fights with all the studious kids. They just promptly ignored him, though. Almost as if they didn’t care about the abuse they received from him. After all, the only reason why they were at this school was to go to a better one. Changhu probably knew that messing with them would be no fun as well.

“Go to Seoul university, why don’t you.”

Changhu scanned the room for other targets with a mocking smile.

“Changhu! Let’s go!”

“Yeah.”

Changhu left once the kids from other classes called him.

“That bastard, he’s always like this.”

“Don’t worry about him, picking a fight with a dog is just a waste of your time.”

“I’m fine, since he doesn’t really talk to me nowadays, but I still feel nervous. Especially with what he said...”

“The fire at the auditorium?”

“Yeah.”

Maru turned his head to look at Changhu outside. He stopped picking a fight with them recently, probably because he found more friends. Especially since Dojin became a lot composed lately as well. This was a good sign, Maru wasn’t a fan of having to deal with delinquents himself.

‘A fight between kids is definitely scary, after all.’

Adults had a lot of things to consider. They would consider their losses first before fighting, but kids were different. The smarter ones also knew that they wouldn't be severely punished for committing felonies as well. Even if they put a kid in a wheelchair, they would probably just have to spend some time doing volunteer work. Changhu knew that very well himself, which was what made him very hard to deal with.

"If he gets in my way again..."

Dojin cracked his fingers with a frown.

"Stop it. I thought you graduated from that stuff already?"

"That's true, but..."

"Just focus on work. Don't bother wasting your energy on other things."

"I know, I know."

"Good. Ah, right. Did you see that message by the way?"

"About how the prelims got pushed to December?"

Maru nodded. The competition that originally had its prelims in November and the main competition in December got pushed back by a month. Something about the location, according to Miso?

"More practice for two months, huh. Not like there's anything more we can do."

The club was repeating runs of their play after that one festival, enough to start acting in their dreams. Dojin muttered a few words of annoyance under his breath before turning to look at Daemyung. Maru recently noticed that the boy's eyes towards Daemyung had changed quite a bit.

"Did you two fight?"

"What? No way. Me? Fight who now?" Dojin asked with a smile.

"With Daemyung. You guys aren't talking much nowadays, right?"

"Ah, right."

Dojin may have dismissed it, but his expression clearly said something different. Did something bad happen? Dojin avoided Maru's gaze for a while, before finally giving in.

"I'll buy you some hot chocolate. Can we step outside?"

\* \* \*

Right outside the school where the school store was, was a little vending machine. One that sold little cups of hot chocolate and iced tea. To the students, this place was a sort of a pit stop. According to the rumors, the person who maintains this vending machine was rich enough to own land in Gangnam.

"Maybe I should try putting a vending machine in a school as well," Dojin let out.

"What are you talking about, all of a sudden?" Maru said, taking a sip of his drink.

“It’s nothing.”

“You’ve been using that phrase a lot recently, now that I think about it. Here I thought the person called Han Dojin was someone with a very vocal mind.”

“Was I?”

Dojin looked down at his drink. his face reflected through the brownish liquid. Whenever he looked at himself through a mirror, he used to think he was pretty well off. Nowadays, though, he looked very ugly through the hot chocolate.

It was lunchtime. Despite winter being so close, the field was still filled with students playing soccer. Dojin looked at the soccer ball flying across for a second before opening his mouth.

“I’m jealous of Daemyung.”

He immediately regretted speaking, but it was already too late. Dojin shrugged and sipped on his drink. It felt bitter.

“Did something happen?”

Strangely enough, Dojin felt it would be alright to talk to Maru about this. It felt like the other boy would say something helpful for him.

“It looks like... Daemyung signed a contract with some sort of company. His college is going to be paid for, and he’s going to have a job afterward as well.”

Right when he said this, he noticed Maru looking away for a second. What was that about? Maru opened his mouth after a few seconds.

“So, you’re jealous of that? The scholarship?”

“No, not that. Just, um, you know. He was a little iffy-looking when we first met him.”

“He had all the characteristics of a victim of bullying. He was one, too.”

“Hey! He’s a friend, you know!”

Maru grinned at Dojin’s angry words.

“At least you think of him as a friend, then. Thank goodness, it’s not as bad as I thought.”

...Hearing that made Dojin a bit mad. Come to think of it, the other boy always seemed to know what the people around him were thinking.

Maru felt like a friend who wasn’t a friend, someone more akin to an older brother than anything.

“Who said he wasn’t a friend? It’s just... I felt so annoyed at myself. My middle school life was a mess, so I decided to come here to change things, but here I am. Nothing happened for the first year of high school. I didn’t study, I didn’t do anything special, nor did I win any awards. It’s not like I’m good at something, either.”

“And suddenly seeing Daemyung, who you looked down on, suddenly doing well made you jealous?”

“Hey, that’s a very mean way to put it. It’s not like that. I’m just disappointed in myself.”

“Be honest here. If you want to fix a problem, you need to know what the problem is beforehand. There’s a bunch of people in this world who live better lives than you, but that didn’t seem to bother you until recently. You suddenly got angry at yourself after hearing that Daemyung was doing well?”

“Yeah! Fine! I’m jealous! I hate him! Is that enough?”

He shouldn’t have asked Maru for help. He expected to hear some words he didn’t want to hear, but not to this degree...

‘...No, maybe I wanted Maru to say something like this to me.’

He was jealous of Daemyung. He was annoyed, too. Even someone like Daemyung managed to find a life for himself, and what was he doing?

Dojin’s true feelings revealed itself for a split second, making Dojin frown bitterly.

“If you knew what I was just thinking about, you’d think I’m complete trash. Good god.”

“Something about someone like Daemyung doing well, but you can’t?”

Dojin looked at Maru dumbly.

“H-how did you know?”

“They say people only manage to communicate about 30% of information through words. The rest is carried through expressions, gestures, and the context of the entire conversation.”

“Hah. Could you not tell Daemyung about this? I’m totally trash, aren’t I? My friend is doing well, and yet all I can think is... ugh.”

“You always feel worse when you hear someone close to you is doing well. The feeling of jealousy is worse depending on how well you know the person.”

“Don’t you feel anything about this? After hearing about Daemyung’s opportunity?”

Dojin was curious about what Maru thought. Was he really the only one who thought like this? Right then, Maru looked away with an awkward cough. For the second time. Dojin realized then that information really was conveyed mostly through expressions and gestures.

“...You too?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“You! When?”

“Mine’s actually supposed to be a secret. Ah, Geunseok probably got a similar contract to Daemyung, though.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“No way.”

Dojin suddenly felt very annoyed. What was he talking to Maru about this for?

“Don’t try to hurry,” Maru said.

He continued after crushing the empty cup in his hand.

“Life doesn’t always work the way you want it to. You can prepare all you want for something, but half the time, it doesn’t go the way you want it to.”

“That doesn’t help me at all, you know? Ugh, I feel like I’ve been betrayed. So I was just getting left out here?”

Maru laughed a little, which only managed to provoke Dojin more.

“You guys can only say that because there’s someone watching out for you. I’m... I just get annoyed. I’m working just as hard as you, but... This just feels like wasted time.”

“I guess it’s fair to see it that way..”

“Ugh, aren’t you supposed to say something encouraging here?”

“If people could change just through words, I’d use all of those words on you right now, but people don’t change that easily. Plus, you don’t need any advice or encouragement. You didn’t do anything wrong, nor is there anything wrong about the way you think. Daemyung and I were lucky, so we got chosen. Who knows when this luck would leave us?”

“But you guys ended up getting something anyway.”

And he was the only one left where he originally started. While his two friends were advancing on and on.

“What do you want me to tell you?”

“.....”

Hearing that left Dojin a little lost for words. He was just annoyed. He knew he didn’t have the right to complain because he never prepared for anything or ever had any goals. Yet, he felt like he was betrayed somehow. He thought his two friends would be by his side forever, and yet...

“It’s normal to feel jealous, but try not to hang onto that feeling for too long. Don’t try to lie to yourself either. Don’t try to ignore Daemyung. Stuff like that is what ruins relationships. So just do what you’re good at doing: being honest. Go to Daemyung and talk to him about it. He’s probably a little worried as well.”

“Hah, but that makes me look like the pathetic one.”

“You were, though.”

“You...”

“But... thanks.”

Thanks? Dojin looked at Maru oddly.

“Thanks for telling me your thoughts. I know that’s a very difficult thing to do.”

Maru turned around after patting Dojin’s shoulder.

“Plus, I think it’s good that you’re worried about this at your age. But don’t try to look too far ahead into the future. You’re just a high schooler, and life isn’t so easy that it will always follow your plans. If you’re willing to make plans for yourself, you have to be ready to see those plans get broken.”

“You say that, but you’re doing a lot of things already, aren’t you?”

“Me?”

Maru turned around with a slight grin.

“Well, I’m doing this because I know a bunch of things. So I’m trying it all.”

Know a bunch of things? Dojin thought about those words for a second before frowning.

“Ah, whatever. I’m just going to say I’m jealous that you guys are doing well. So what if I feel pathetic? I should talk to Daemyung about this as well.”

“There’s the Dojin I know.”

“But if you guys do well, I’m going to leech off of you two hard. You better be prepared.”

“Any time. I’m willing to feed a friend whenever I can.”

Something told Dojin that Maru was being honest. Perhaps Maru would really lend him a room if he really needed it.

“Come. It’s practice time already.”

Maru gestured towards the stairs.

## **Chapter 89**

The entire club lay down on the floor huffing. Maru, of course, was one of them. His body was emanating enough heat to make the cold wooden floor below him feel welcoming.

“It’s winter, and yet...”

“We didn’t even turn the heater on but it feels so hot...”

“Huff, huff. Feels like I’m in a sauna.”

The club members all commented.

“Tick, tock. The clock’s ticking, ladies and gentlemen. We have exactly 48 seconds left, so you better start focusing again,” announced Miso, causing the club to groan in pain.

A single minute for them to rest was a little too much.

“How many more sets from now?” Taejoon asked.

The boy was frail from the start, but he looked pretty healthy at this point. The same went for the other members. Even Daemyung and Soyeon both lost a noticeable amount of weight.

“3 sets.”

“Gasp.”

“Alright, 27 seconds left. Get up, all of you.”

Maru slowly stood up from the floor as a single bead of sweat dripped off of his chin. There were only two days left until December, and yet he could still sweat this much... He turned to take a look at the window behind where Miso was sitting. The bare trees outside were shaking vigorously from the wind. The news stations all warned of cold wind today, but the auditorium didn't seem to be affected by it one bit.

As soon as he wiped off the sweat on his brow, Miso said there were only 13 seconds left. She was looking at her stopwatch with a devilish smile on her face.

‘Miso’s smile. Pft.’

As soon as he thought that far, Miso snapped her finger.

“Begin.”

The club members started doing push-ups right away. The girls had their knees on the floor, while the boys were doing full push-ups, all to the beat of Miso’s claps.

‘Thank goodness my physique got better in this life.’

Maru didn't know if this was a gift in this life, but his athletic abilities were improved quite a bit in this life. But even with it, Miso’s training was still very brutal.

Jumping jacks, side lunges, jumping squats, push-ups, crunches, flutter kicks... Miso often messed with the number of reps per set, which only made things more difficult.

Each set took them around 7 minutes. 7 minutes of hell.

“Stop.”

Another set ended with a short burpee test. Maru and the others all lay down again huffing. The sweat on their faces started flowing again.

“I don't know if I'm doing acting...”

“Or if I'm in an exercise club...”

“I'm dying.”

“The sky is spinning.”

“I want to throw up...”

“Please throw up somewhere else...”



Everyone was complaining. Whenever they started getting used to the new routine, Miso would spice things up. Maru could only admire Miso's demonic talent whenever he saw her do this. This was even worse than the physical training in the military, at least the drill instructors there allowed them more time to rest.

"You guys might be wondering why we have to go this far just for acting. Of course, you might not need this training if you're not a pro actor. Other instructors wouldn't be doing this for sure. But you guys know already that I hate doing things incompletely, right? It's always a go big or go home for me. You know that, right? Guys?"

"...Yes."

"I told you you'd only be able to act well if you could control every muscle on your body, from your toes all the way to your hair, right?"

"Yes."

"Alright, stand up then. You have 12 seconds."

"Hah..."

"Okay, who sighed just now? Raise your hand."

Dojin flinched before nervously raising his hand.

"Go run two laps on the field after this set. If you have the energy to sigh, might as well spend it on your feet."

"I-instructor."

"What? You want four laps?"

"No!!"

"Okay! Get on with the set, then!"

The club member snapped back to exercising with Miso's scary shout.

"You guys went all out today too, huh," Ganghwan said as he drove.

"Do all actors do this?"

"Theoretically speaking, Miso's right. Actors on stage need to have a lot of stamina. They also need to be able to move their body really well."

"So all of this does have meaning."

"That's right. Well, it does feel like she's going a bit overboard, but don't worry. You'll get used to it. She shouldn't come at you guys any harder than this either."

"That would be nice."

"But then again! She might actually make it worse, too. This is Miso we're talking about, after all."

Ganghwan grinned. But... if they exercised more than this, the club would soon turn into an acrobatics club instead of an acting club... Maru could only hope that wouldn't happen.

Maru took a look out the window, he could see the dark, wintery scenery pass by. For the past month, he started following Ganghwan all the way to Anyang every day. Today was of no exception. After maneuvering through several small streets in the first district of Anyang, their car came to a stop. The two of them got off and went into the building in front of it.

They were headed to the basement floor, which was partitioned into many soundproof rooms. It was a series of paid practice rooms. When Maru paid more attention, he could faintly hear the sound of drums and guitars. It sounded like about four different bands were practicing here.

"Let's go inside."

Ganghwan opened the practice room marked 205, revealing what was inside. An entire wall of the place was covered by a giant mirror. The floor was matted with something soft, like sponge. On the left side was a clock and below it was a sentence written, 'a line practiced once is different from a line practiced ten times' in ink. Maru realized from the moment he first came here that this place belonged to Junmin. Because on the back of this place was a picture of the man glaring.

"I think this every time I come here, but I think that teacher has a really odd preference for things."

"You're talking about that picture, right?"

"Yes."

"You'll start welcoming him at some point. He's like the identity of this place."

When the two of them entered, several people waved their hands towards them.

"Bro, you're here?"

"Yup. Did you guys eat?"

"Of course we did."

"What about mine?"

"You should take care of that yourself. Maru, hi!"

"Hello."

Maru greeted the people sitting in front of him in a circle. There were two men, and three women, all of them within their twenties. Of them, the oldest was the person who called Ganghwan a 'bro', Yu Dongjin. The man was about 25, if Maru's memory served correctly.

"Shall we begin?" Dongjin said, standing up.

"Well, you're pretty fired up today. Are you doing something with your girlfriend after this?"

"Dang, bro. You might as well set up a tarot shop at this point."

"Hah."

Ganghwan took off his jacket, Maru followed suit. Ganghwan threw his jacket in the corner of the room before calling everyone around him.

“We’re starting in two days, so don’t let your guard down.”

“We’re already nervous as is, haha,” a short-haired woman responded.

“Good. If you can laugh while being nervous, that means you’re at peak condition. Let’s do a light reading before doing a run.”

The actors split up into different parts of the room after nodding. Maru moved back to where the audience would be himself, with a notebook in his hand. For the past month, he would alternate between three different things at this place. First, the production of a play in the hands of pros. Second, he checked how different actors practiced. Lastly, he practiced for a short monodrama he would be performing right before the one these people were working on.

Maru’s homework was to improve on his influence on the audience and improve his ability to communicate with them. Two months ago at the festival, Maru showed Ganghwan a little glimpse of his talent.

[In the end, actors get better with each play they perform.]

Ganghwan’s solution was simple. It was to raise Maru’s skill by putting him on the stage as many times as possible. There was one more thing, of course. It was to never get drunk on the sensation of acting on stage.

Maru personally thought he never got “drunk” at the festival. As a matter of fact, it felt like his senses were heightened when he stood before the audience. He thought he acted as calmly as possible, but Ganghwan clearly disagreed.

[Want me to show you Miso’s video again?]

Maru could only bitterly smile. Indeed, there was a very clear difference between the Maru during practice and Maru on stage. He seemed freer on the stage. That ad-libbing he did with the kid must’ve come from that feeling of liberty he felt. He even forgot a few adjectives in his lines at certain points.

[That ability to improvise isn’t bad. It’s actually a very good thing. But you have to remember, you’re still an actor in a play. You need to connect with the other actors. You talked with the kid in the audience that day, right? It went well, thankfully, but what if the other kids in the audience started trying to talk to you? Did you think about what would happen if you continued to improvise there? Or did you just do it for fun? This is important. If things went wrong during your ad-lib, everything might’ve fallen apart in the play. Just because it worked well once doesn’t mean it would work well twice, either.]

Conversing with the audience was important, but working with the other actors was more so. This made complete sense. If the other kids started getting rowdy after his scene, the play would have completely fallen apart.

[Plays are done by people. What’s important is that it’s done by multiple people.]

Maru completely forgot that this was a team game. He recalled a time when a new employee did something without permission when he was still working at a company. Thankfully, nothing big

happened, but that didn't make the new employee's actions right. Of course, the new employee was punished for what he did. Maru was the person to tell the person that this was a team game, as a matter of fact.

If a talented individual goes on to do something by themselves, everyone else involved would be stressed out. Even if nothing bad happens as a result.

[But if you get the ability to just completely overwhelm both the audience and the actors, then no one would mind even if you did a one-man show. But you're not that good yet.]

"Plays are done by people in the end, and yet I..."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's nothing. I just thought about a few things."

"Hah. Anyway, monitor our run well. Try to see from multiple angles about how this play will go. Remember the expressions and gestures the other actors make, and try to see the difference between the emotions that words can convey, and emotions that gestures can convey. I can't explain everything for you, so you'll have to take notes on the stuff I don't just straight up teach you. I trust you can do that much."

Ganghwan always told Maru the same things. The man always started daydreaming out of nowhere and explained to Maru what he daydreamed about. He was a bit odd in that sense, but despite that, the man still made a very good teacher. He was very different from Miso. If Miso worked from a set manual, Ganghwan tried to make his student learn through observation.

In the end, if you were stupid, you would learn nothing from Ganghwan. That's why Maru always needed to be careful. He could never know where useful information would come from.

"Guys, let's begin! We might as well eat right after this, too!"

"Bro, I told you we ate!"

"Yeah? Might as well eat again!"

The play began once the music started. This play was composed of three different stories involving three different lovers. It was filled with hugs, kisses, and quite a few sexual innuendos as well. A play that only those above 18 years of age could watch. Not even Maru could watch it until next year.

Then again, he was already 45 inside.

Maru walked around the practice room quietly as he observed how these people acted. Watching people act from the perspective of the audience, the actor in the waiting room, and the actor at the side curtain was very different. Then again, Ganghwan did tell him already that distance always had an effect on how easy it was to deliver emotions.

"Okay."

The run ended after about 70 minutes. Maru gave the actors some drinks as he asked them some questions. The actors told the boy their thoughts. After a month, they got used to this behavior from Maru.

Through these answers, Maru began to learn what acting really was about.

## Chapter 90

People often said that in a company of three, one will always turn out to be a teacher. In that sense, Maru was gifted with many teachers at this moment.

“If you put too much focus on your line, you’ll just end up wasting a lot of breath. If you get overwhelmed by the pressure to say your lines perfectly, the play is just about over for you right there,” Dongjin said, stroking his neck.

The man, who knew Ganghwan for the longest out of the group, was also the one who put in the most amount of work into teaching Maru as well. The man liked to make dumb jokes before practice, but he was completely different once practice started. Because of this, Maru liked listening to Dongjin. The man often taught him many useful things.

“But I learned that all the lines you speak should be always under your control.”

“That’s true, too.”

This was right, but that was also right. Maru looked at Dongjin with a very curious look, earning him a grin.

“When you first learn the piano, you start off by trying to follow the sheet music as closely as you can, right? That’s how they all began. At first, even that’s difficult, but everyone still has to do it. Trying to skip that step entirely by relying on your creativity doesn’t work, it’s the same with your lines. Just imagine as if you’re going to a concours, and just remember the sentence structure. Eventually, you’ll come to a point where you think, ‘oh, I think it might be better if I say it like this’. That’s when the line truly becomes yours.”

“The line becomes mine?”

Dongjin nodded vigorously.

“For example, let’s say you’re acting the role of a general in a historical play.”

As soon as he finished his sentence, he took a deep breath and shouted “charge!!” with a deep, rolling voice. Maru felt the hair on his arm stand up from the sheer amount of energy he emanated.

“Shut up!”

“Please!”

The actors at the other side of the room angrily threw their shoes towards Maru and Dongjin. Maru dodged the shoes, and carefully stacked them to the side.

“How was that?”

“Very cool.”

“Right? I had a role as a young general in this new movie that came out. It was just one scene where I shout this line. Now, a question. How many times do you think I said this line?”

Dongjin smiled mysteriously, Maru knew the answer immediately from that smile. The man definitely said this line countless times. Each time with a different tone, and a different breath.

“That line isn’t on our wall for nothing.”

Maru turned to look at the wall.

‘A line practiced once is different from a line practiced ten times.’

The first thing one would see upon entering this place.

“No matter what line you’re practicing, it’s going to grow the more you repeat it. Because you yourself are increasing in skill as you practice. There are many people who say their lines hundreds of times to improve, that’s how difficult it is to become a character in a play. Of course, this is very fun in the end, but...”

Dongjin didn’t finish his sentence. Maru could just see a glimpse of how much pain and hard work the man had to suffer through to get to where he is now. How much did this man have to sacrifice to get on stage?

His studies? Friends? Family? Perhaps even all three?

“Why did you want to become an actor?”

“I started because I needed to at first, but...”

Right. He didn’t even need to start with acting in the beginning. He thought he would be able to meet her as long as he used his god-given talent well enough. But after his first play, after interacting with the actors here, something started changing from within him.

He was starting to enjoy it. And excitement. Two feelings he never thought he could experience without her. Everything about his movements and his energetic voice on stage told him that he was having fun on the stage.

“It’s changed a little now.”

“That’s good enough. The reason why you started doesn’t matter. But you’ll really have to stick through with it. This industry is like a spotlight. The place that people turn their eyes to get all of the attention, and the rest is shrouded in darkness. You’ll have to work really hard to not be buried. Mm. I think that was a pretty cool line just now. Don’t you think so?”

As soon as Dongjin finished talking,

“Wasn’t that what I told you before?”

Ganghwan walked back in with some delivery food in hand.

“What, you think your lines are copyrighted or something? It’s first come, first serve. Also, I told you we ate, but you bought food anyway?”

“I didn’t buy it for you, so don’t worry.”

“Oh, come on, big brother! Don’t be like that. You’re not mad, are you?”

“Who knows. Guys! Let’s eat!”

The other actors in the room all gathered in the middle. The smell of spicy tteokbokki started to drift in between them.

“Hey, Maru.”

One of the women, who had bunny-like teeth, called out to Maru. Her name was Park Hanna. As the one person who loved making sexual jokes, she was known as madam Park by the rest of the group.

“...Yes?”

He wouldn’t have hesitated this much if anyone else had called him. Hanna was incredibly open in terms of talking about sex, enough to make most men flee if she talked freely. Even Ganghwan raised his hands whenever she started talking. Maru, too, was very shocked when he first met her. The first thing out of her mouth when they met was ‘your nose is big. Is it big over there too?’

Maru honestly couldn’t believe the woman was 24, he believed that there was a 50 year old lady sitting in that body of hers.

“Let’s just talk about food when we’re eating, Hanna,” Ganghwan came in first.

Hanna immediately lost the smile on her face.

“What kind of a pervert do you take me for?!”

“You are one, though. Pervert Park, Madam Park, Park Madam!” the actors responded.

On stage, too, Hanna always assumed the role of a perverted lady, to exploit her personality 100%. The one who worked as her significant other was Ahn Suchan, the person sitting next to her.

Whenever Maru took a look at the two, he thought of them as an odd couple. It felt like a meeting between a female lion and a male rabbit. Even now, Suchan looked a little lost and intimidated by what was going on. The stranger thing was the fact that they were about to get married soon.

“Maru.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

He thought for a second. There was a woman he was planning on marrying, but they only knew each other’s names so far. He did confess, but he couldn’t even contact her because of how busy he was. He should’ve gotten her number back at the festival, but that didn’t end up happening.

“Not yet...”

“Perfect!”

“What’s perfect?”

“I want to introduce you to someone.”

“What?”

“There’s a very cute junior I know who doesn’t have a boyfriend yet. She’s the same age as you. How about it?”

“I’m fine.”

“Why don’t you give her a chance? What, you already have someone in mind or something?”

“Yes, I do.”

Hanna let out a short exclamation of surprise.

“You’re a man, aren’t you, Maru? Well, that’s fine, then.”

Ganghwan joined in on the conversation right then.

“Let the kids be. Want to introduce me to someone instead?”

“I have no intention of introducing my friends to a weirdo like you!”

“What? What the hell? What did I do!”

“I mean, just going missing for three months to act like a homeless person is weird enough.”

“.....”

“You’re definitely going to make your wife suffer if you marry, so don’t you even dare think about getting it on with my friends.”

Ganghwan turned to the other two female actors, but their responses were more of the same. Then again, Hanna was right. Ganghwan’s significant other would likely suffer a lot.

“Ah, that’s a shame. It would’ve been nice watching you two be awkward.”

“So that was your goal?”

“Yah. The girl’s really innocent, so I get a kick out of teasing her. Well, she’s been fighting back recently though.”

Hanna picked up the phone and started calling someone. She was whispering, so Maru turned his attention back to the fried dumpling in front of him. Right then, a name Maru couldn’t ignore came out of Hanna’s mouth. Maru almost immediately jumped to snatch Hanna’s hand.

“W-what the?”

Hanna stuttered, caught by surprise from Maru’s action. Maru stared deeply at Hanna’s phone. Hanna blinked a few times in confusion and gave Maru her phone. Maru put the phone against his ear and became silent.



- Hello? Sis?

Maru clenched his hand into a fist and looked at Hanna.

“When do you think I should go?”

\* \* \*

She waited in front of the shoe store, staring dazedly up into the sky. She got a call from Hanna last night asking to play with her today. She wasn't doing anything particularly special during the weekend, so she accepted.

Big sis Hanna knew all of the prettiest clothes shops, so just following her was very fun. As she waited for Hanna to appear, a high-pitched voice hit her ear.

It was Hanna.

She recognized the voice right away. The woman had a very clear, distinctive voice to her. Right as she raised her hand to let Hanna know where she was, she found someone tagging along next to Hanna.

The person wasn't a woman. Who is it?

By the time the two were close enough for her to make out the faces, she let out a surprised shout.

“Eh? Why? What the?”

The boy smiling awkwardly next to Hanna... He was the boy who said weird things in front of her last time. What was he doing here? What the?

“It just happened.”

What just happened?! She demanded an explanation out of Hanna this instant, but her plea was unfortunately ignored.

“Hello, I'm Han Maru.”

“I know!”

“You're not happy?”

“Why would I be? How did you come here?”

“I came here to meet someone.”

“Who?”

“...You.”

What was up with this kid? He was so upfront! Also, what was his relationship with Hanna? And how was he managing to appear pretty much wherever she went?

She had all these thoughts, but... She didn't dislike it, for some reason. The boy was still polite with his actions. Ah, well, a little too polite though. That was kind of annoying.

“Hah. I don't know what's going on, but stop trying to be so polite. It's making me cringe.”

“Oh, okay.”

“How do you know big sis Hanna?”

“I met her in a practice room. She’s teaching me a lot of things.”

“Really?”

She looked at Hanna with surprised eyes. The woman stopped turning up at their club room recently, saying she needed to practice more. Someone like that... was teaching this kid? She glared a bit at Hanna in jealousy.

“Adult problems. You understand, right?”

“Why couldn’t you use that as an excuse to come to our club room? You didn’t turn up once no matter how much the seniors asked.”

“I was busy.”

“But you had time to teach him?”

“Teach? No way! I was just giving him some tips and tricks every once in a while. I swear!”

She pouted angrily, even after hearing that. Hanna was ignoring her school, but was teaching some high school boy that was a potential rival?

“You’re too much.”

“Fine, I’ll go sometime this week.”

“Really?”

“Really. By the way... Did you go up a cup?”

“What cup?”

Hanna smiled like a pervy old man and stared directly at her breasts.

“What, jealous?”

“...Hah, you were so cute just a half year ago, so easy to become embarrassed and all. You’re boring now.”

“Everyone’s just gotten used to your jokes now. Plus, isn’t that a bit inappropriate from someone who’s getting married soon?”

“Yes yes, I understand. Ugh, I can’t tell who’s the senior and who’s the junior at this point. You know, back in my time...”

“Hmph! You don’t deserve to be called a senior if you’re out there teaching our rivals.”

Hanna poked her tongue out at her.

“Fine! I’ll teach Woosung High instead of Myunghwa High! Beeeh.”

“You’re childish.”

“You didn’t know?”

“Hah...”

“Stop complaining, and start talking about him instead,” Hanna said, pointing at Maru.

“There’s nothing to say.”

“Why?”

“I know nothing.”

“Eh? Really?”

“Really.”

I know nothing except his name. She glanced at Maru, who was standing about three meters away from her. The boy grinned as soon as their eyes met. He smiles a lot. He was a bit odd, but he didn’t seem like a bad person.