

LIFE, ONCE AGAIN!

Chapter 14

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Maru's mother, Lee Sunji, woke up in her bed in surprise. She reached out for the TV remote. When she pressed the on button, the TV sprang to life with a beep.

"What do I do..."

7:50AM. Bada was fine since she could walk to school in ten minutes, but Maru...

"Why didn't the alarm go off?"

Maru was going to be so mad at her. When she made her way out of the room, though, she was greeted with Maru doing the dishes.

"M-Marua?"

"You're up, mom? I made breakfast right here for you, so have some after you dress up."

Maru pointed at the fried rice on the plate. Sunji could only nod in confusion.

"Where's Bada?"

"She's over there."ch

Bada was watching TV in the living room while eating some apples. She noticed her mom staring at her and blinked a few times.

"You're up, mom?"

"Y-yeah. Did you eat?"

"Mhm. Maru made breakfast for me."

“Phew, that’s good.”

She sat down on the dining table with an exhausted look. Maru passed her a glass of warm water, earning another confused look amongst the many he’s received from her lately.

“What’s up?”

“I’m just... surprised.”

“What’s there to be surprised about? I’ll be going now. If you want soup, there’s some on the stove.”

“Soup? What soup?”

She looked at the stove with wide eyes.

“Just seaweed soup. I didn’t have time to make anything better. Just leave it if you don’t like it. I’ll eat it when I come back.”

His alarm in the morning woke him up. He went to the kitchen where his mother was nowhere in sight. Upon peeking into her room, he noticed her still snoring in her bed. His younger self would have tried to wake her up for breakfast, so he cooked one of the few dishes he made often, the seaweed soup. It wasn’t as good as his wife’s, of course... but it was good enough. At the very least, his sister ate it without complaint.

“I’ll be going,” he said.

“...Sure. Be careful of cars,” his mom still sounded confused. Maru waved his hand at her and went outside. It was already mid-March, but the weather was still cold as ever. He could see little bits of ice form at the front window of a car parked near his house. He had been hoping for the weather to get better by now, but... the sky seemed to disagree.

Maru put on his gloves and started pedalling, music blasting in his ears. This was the path he’s taken for 3 years of his life. The path he’ll have to pass for 3

more years. After pedaling through familiar shops, trees, and people, he's reached the school. Along the way, he noticed a few students talking while glancing his way.

"I feel so jealous of them. Casual wear and all."

"I hate my uniform."

Just wait a month, you guys. You'll realize how great your uniforms are by then.

As Maru got off his bike, he came across a few students trying to get over the school fence. Ah, that waxy hair... the disciplinary teacher would punish them with a slap on the face at the very least. Maru didn't have such a problem, of course. Having short hair made him feel like he was on the highway.

"Good morning, sir."

"Sure."

Maru passed by the disciplinary teacher without a hitch. He walked over to the bike stands to lock his bike in place. Right then, he felt someone approach him. Oh, it's that road bike from the other day. He could finally meet the owner for once.

"Oh, it's you," realization dawned upon Maru. It was Dowook, who immediately turned towards him with a frown on his face.

"What?"

"I was just wondering who had such a nice bike. Don't lose it, man."

"....."

Dowook's frown grew more intense. Maru just walked off before the boy could open his mouth. He could hear Dowook lock the bike in a violent manner behind him.

Maru took the staircase located on the right side of the building to enter his class. It was a loud scene that displayed everyone's friendship with one another.

"You're here?"

"Yeap."

Dojin greeted him with a candy toss. Ah, strawberry today, huh.

"Dude, your teeth are going to rot at this rate."

"No worries, I'm brushing three times a day."

"You do your homework?"

"Nope, I used that time to prepare my bribery for you. Can I copy your homework?"

"...Bribery? Just this candy?"

"Want one more?" Dojin grinned at him. Maru just threw him his notebook. Daemyung approached the two of them from the first row along with his friends.

"H-hey Maru, can I see too?" he asked.

"Nope."

Daemyung's face fell. Man, this guy took his jokes too seriously... Maru told him he was just joking, to which the boy responded with a grin on his face. The other boys behind him were looking at Maru with desperation.

"Hey! I had to bribe him, you know!" Dojin said, raising Maru's notebook up in the air. Maru just snatched it out and threw it at the circle of kids.

"Just don't copy it word for word," he said.

Man, to think such a day would come... He's never done his homework on time during his high school years. He only did his homework by copying others or after being scolded. At this rate, he could probably aim for a B in his class. That should be good enough.

* * *

"Han Maru."

"Yessir."

"You got any complaints?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"Let's not do this again, alright?"

"Yessir."

His hamstrings were burning in pain after each slap. Maru knelt on top of his desk, getting slapped by a wooden stick. Each and every hit burned uniquely. Just what kind of wood did they use for this stuff? It's thinner than even his finger, but it hurt like hell. Even more so than getting hit in the butt by a PVC pipe. The English teacher had an apologetic look on his face, but that didn't make the stick hurt any less.

"I'm letting you off with just this, since this is the first time. Alright?"

"Yessir."

"And for the guys who copied Maru's homework today, I hope you won't be doing this kind of thing again."

"...Yes," said a few of the students with a dejected voice.

Maru sat down in his chair to massage his throbbing legs. Sharing his homework was fine, but he glossed over a major problem.

He was ass at English.

He solved the problems on the homework with some unorthodox grammar rules, and the other boys copied them word by word. The teacher probably felt ridiculed after coming across the eighth kid with the same mistake.

“Yo, does it hurt?” Dojin whispered to him.

“Hurts like a mother.”

“Damn though, I didn’t think he’d just check it on the spot like that. Let’s not copy each others’ English homework from now on.”

“...Oh, you’re telling me?”

“Sorry.”

The English teacher returned to his podium. Maru thought the class would resume there, but he was mistaken. The English teacher’s mouth curled down into a frown. Another one, huh.

“Kang Dowook, Lim Jichul.”

Two this time. Dowook and Jichul stood up from their seats.

“Eh? We had a guy like that?” Dojin exclaimed. He was looking at Jichul.

Maru was pretty surprised, too. He thought he knew everyone, but he hadn’t even talked with Jichul before. The boy was incredibly skinny, wore metallic glasses, coupled with long hair to Maru’s notice. Jichul probably didn’t get caught by the disciplinary teacher because he looked so normal.

“Who copied?” the teacher asked.

Maru could tell Dowook was the one who did it. The others probably thought the same. After all, Dowook’s established himself as the delinquent pretty strongly since the first day. Jichul, on the other hand... seemed to be one of the outsiders. There was no way a kid like that would ask Dowook to copy

homework. Maru doubted that Dowook would've done his homework to begin with either.

'No, I'm just assuming things again,' he realized.

Maru decided to watch for now.

"I asked who copied the homework," the teacher said. He was sounding pretty pissed now.

The students called this teacher the pink pig, Maru recalled. Not because the teacher was fat, but because the man's cheeks always had a pinkish hue to it. Right now, those pink cheeks were starting to turn crimson. The stick in his hand was starting to tremble from how hard the man was gripping it, too.

Man, that's gotta hurt. Maru massaged his legs again.

Right then, he saw Jichul's hands move a little bit. He was probably planning on confessing.

"I did it." The answer came from somewhere else, though.

"Dowook, you?"

What a surprise. Dowook raised his hand?

"Yessir."

"Ridiculous. You guys should realize that I'm not giving you homework to keep you kids busy, I'm giving them because they're much needed practice for you. You get it?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Get up on your desk, Kang Dowook. Don't you know how much I hate people who let others copy their homework?"

Dowook got up on the desk without another word. Maru looked at him with a surprised face. Did Dowook really let Jichul copy his homework? Nope,

couldn't be it. Jichul was standing in his spot with a very surprised look on his face as well. Then why did he confess?

'To get hit in Jichul's place?'

Maru looked at Dowook thoughtfully as the teacher's stick whooshed down with brutal retribution.

* * *

English class ended. Maru let Dojin and Daemyung leave before him to keep an eye on Dowook. It felt like the boy became a loner after just a day. He used to be pretty loud between classes, but now he was just reading comic books by himself. The kids he used to hang out with were talking by themselves, with the beanie guy being at the center of the scene.

Jichul stood up from his seat to approach Dowook quietly. Maru pretended to look out the window as he eavesdropped between their conversation.

"Um..." Jichul started off.

"What?"

"Why did you..."

"What?"

"I-it's nothing."

Jichul walked back to his seat. Well, that ended pretty quick. Right then, Maru noticed a new development. Dowook's old friends were walking over to Dowook's seat. They took their place right in front and started talking with each other.

"Hah, what a bitch. I didn't even know a kid like that existed here," the beanie guy started.

Maru scrolled through his memories for the beanie's name. Ah, Jung Changhu? Was it?

Changhu, Changhu... Wow, just the name made him feel disgusted. Almost like he took a suckerpunch to the back of his head, and he was greeted with a smiling face when he turned back? He couldn't remember too well why he felt disgust at the name. Definitely not for a good reason, though. Come to think of it, wasn't there a really bad delinquent in his class in the past? He couldn't remember so well. But a growing suspicion told Maru that it was Changhu.

What about Dowook, then? Was he misunderstood?

"Turns out that the skinny bitch had a friend though, huh?" Changhu continued, as he gave a quick glance at Dowook. The boy's friends laughed along.

"Hey, don't be like that. Even little bitches can have friends."

"It's a world where cripples have to stick together, after all."

"Hey, hey, it's rude to make fun of disabled people, bahaha."

The group laughed for a bit before collectively turning to glare at Dowook for a second. They stood up to leave, walking towards the direction of the deli. And Dowook was left alone with his pencil, which his fury was vented upon as he gripped it to the point of snapping. Dowook's eyes followed the group as they left through the door. Something drastic would happen at this rate. Maru walked over to Dowook.

"The hell are you doing?" Dowook asked. His eyes were still locked upon his former friends. "You... Fuck, you have something against me or something?"

Dowook stood up to glare at Maru.

[So annoying. What the hell's up with this guy?]

Maru could practically feel the annoyance from the word bubble. It didn't offend him or anything at all, though.

"Don't stoop to their level," Maru said.

"What?"

"Don't let yourself get provoked by cheap taunts."

Dwook's face morphed into one of confusion. Maru just smiled a little and pat the other boy's shoulder.