

Once Again 101

Chapter 101

"That crazy son of a..."

Changhu couldn't even laugh at how ridiculous this is. Did Maru even know where he was right now? The boy was staring at Changhu's victim intently, which irritated Changhu to no end. In the end, he leaned towards the idiot in front of him and whispered.

"Don't mind that kid and go back to your class, okay?"

"...Okay."

"Nothing happened today. You should know that though, right?"

The idiot nodded, and Changhu pushed him away with ease. Thankfully, idiots like him were easy to silence. Changhu knew very well that speaking in a roundabout way instills greater fear upon them. The idiot disappeared off to the other side of the school.

"You have business here?" Changhu asked.

"You're going all out, huh? I thought you were just a show-off, but you're just a complete asshole."

"Hah, you son of a..."

Changhu glanced behind Maru. He needed to check if the other boy brought friends along. It didn't look like he did.

'Fucking poser.'

Changhu gave his friends a few glances as he walked towards Maru, he didn't want to fight. He was just going to scare the other guy. Just as he got about two meters away from Maru, the boy opened his mouth.

"I came to get my money back."

Changhu stopped walking.

"Money?"

"Yeah. Money."

"Ahh, that hundred thousand?"

Changhu started laughing with his friends around him.

"What, you came here for money?"

"What else would I be here for?"

"Motherfucker, you're way too unpredictable."

"I'll keep it short. Give me my money back."

“Hundred thousand won... Yeah, I did borrow it, but... I don’t want to pay you back. So stop being so petty about it. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Changhu lightly pushed Maru’s shoulder with a smile.

“Didn’t you have a lot of money anyway? Why do you even care about chump change like this?”

“Don’t change the topic. Give me my money back.”

“Don’t want to.”

Changhu grinned. He did have the money, but he didn’t want to give it away.

“Do you do this to other kids as well?”

“Why would you care? What? You want to join them?”

Changhu pushed Maru one more time and turned away.

‘This kid doesn’t fear fists.’

He realized that in the bathroom last time. That kid doesn’t like to get violent, but he was the type that lays the smackdown on one person exclusively when he got in a fight. Changhu knew very well that Maru’s target would be him, so he didn’t want to instigate a fight just like that.

“So, you don’t want to pay me back?”

“Think what you want, do what you want. Snitch on me if you want, I’ll give you your money back then. I’m sure you won’t do something so childish though, right?”

“I’ll ask you one last time. Think carefully before you answer. You asked for a hundred thousand won, and I gave it. You’re saying you’re not going to pay me back?”

“Motherfucker, do you really have to make me say it twice? I’m not going to give you your fucking money back.”

Right then, two more people appeared behind them. It was Daemyung and Dojin.

“What the hell’s going on?” Dojin stepped forward with a glare.

Of all the people to appear, did it really have to be that guy? Dojin was harder to mess with than Maru. The guy was most definitely someone who played around back in the day. He also seemed pretty good at fighting, too. Changhu didn’t like to mess around with people who were capable of fighting back.

‘I’ll have to beat him senseless if things go wrong, though.’

It was a good thing Changhu was with his friends. He might as well really scare these kids while he still could.

“If you want a fight, come at us. But we’re going to spread bad rumors about your pretty club. We’ll tell the teachers, too.”

“You’re a fucking child.”

Dojin stepped forward, gritting his teeth. Changhu stepped forward as well, he knew the other guy wouldn't be able to hit him anyway. He confirmed it last time, too. The acting club seemed like a very precious place to Dojin. Plus, it wasn't like getting hit would kill him or anything. If Changhu could have more fun at the expense of some pain, he would get hit in a heartbeat. Changhu turned his cheek, taunting Dojin to hit him. Dojin, of course, could only fume.

'As I thought.'

Changhu grinned. It was very obvious at this point that the acting club was these kids' weak point.

"Let's go."

"Hey! Han Maru!"

Maru retreated without another word. Dojin ran towards the other boy with angry huffs. Daemyung stepped away quickly as well.

"Coward."

"What do we do if Maru snitches?"

"Don't worry, he won't. Fucker has pride for some reason."

"Does he?"

"Plus, even if he does snitch, we can just tell the teacher it was just a simple misunderstanding. Teachers hate having to deal with trouble, so they'll just pass it off as well, 100%. Remember what middle school was like? It's the exact same here."

"You're right, Changhu."

Changhu grinned, messing with people's weak points was always cathartic for him. The knowledge of being able to treat them however he wanted made him feel like he was the top of the world. As a matter of fact, he could feel no greater joy when he beat someone up, and all the other party could do was stare lifelessly like a broken puppet.

"They should be quiet now, too."

* * *

"You shouldn't have come."

"You would've been in big trouble if we weren't there, you know that?"

"No way."

"Anyway, why were you there to begin with?"

Maru scratched his eyebrows at Dojin's question.

"Might as well finish what I started."

"What?"

Dojin looked at Maru with a confused expression.

* * *

Byungsoo from class 2 was spending most of the day watching the clock again. He couldn't wait until the last class was over.

"Hey, let's go to a PC bang."

"Didn't you want to go play billiards?"

"Screw that, let's go to an AYCE bbq. I'm hungry as balls."

All the other kids were talking about going places in groups. Byungsoo wanted to be one of them at one point, but not anymore. Nowadays, the only thing he could think about was going home as quickly as he could.

"Hey, Byungsoo, go clean that blackboard eraser for me."

"Byungsoo, throw this away for me."

Byungsoo silently got up to pick up the eraser and the piece of trash. Since when did he become like this? He felt a bit of anger flare up inside him, but he repressed himself. People were watching him. He quickly cleaned the eraser and threw out the trash before returning to his seat.

At that point... he was back to being invisible. He could see his two friends laugh together a bit of a way away from him. He used to talk to them a lot, but they wouldn't even greet him now. How did this happen? Byungsoo shook his head. He should just stop thinking, thinking just made everything too painful. He gave up on thinking why no one liked him, he just tried to go with the flow as best he could. At least that way, the other kids didn't torture him.

'I wonder if things will change in my second year.'

Thinking that, Byungsoo hoped to himself that this horrid winter would pass. The teacher eventually came into the class and announced the end of the school day.

"I'm ending it early for all of you, so don't do anything funny and go home."

Byungsoo grabbed his bag as fast as he could and walked out, he didn't even have anyone who'd call out to him anyway. His desk was like an island, an island he needed to escape from as fast as possible.

Byungsoo's phone rang, it was from his middle school friend. He took the phone call with a little bit of excitement.

- Byungsoo! It's been a while. How have you been?

"O-okay, of course."

- You should call every once in a while, you fuck. How's school? Does it have a lot of delinquents?

"No way, they're all nice."

- That so? Yo, the other guys all want to meet up soon, so how's the weekend sound? You free?

“Course. Been a while since I saw everyone.”

- You should really give us a call every now and then. You don't even come on the chat anymore! You should come over there too.

Byungsoo quickly hung up after saying “okay”. Immediately, the thought of middle school got him feeling a bit depressed. He used to have so many friends back then, too. But nowadays, he no longer frequented the messenger, because his friends tab was completely empty at this point. His middle school friends were all getting along with their new high school friends, and yet... He was getting bullied, like this. It wasn't like he could tell his friends that either. What if they just turn away from him too, as everyone else did?

Right then, he got a new call. It was his mom. Byungsoo took the call with an annoyed face.

“What!”

- ...Mom might be a little late.

“You're always late. You wanted me to eat instant noodles again for dinner?”

- I'm sorry, dear.

“Sorry my ass. I heard my friends' moms all do a bunch of things for them. And here I am, doing all the chores, making all the food... What do you even do for me, mom?”

- Sorry, dear. Mom's just...

“Stop it. Words are just words. No wonder you got divorced with dad.”

- ...You should buy something if you want to eat it. Mom left money on the dining table.

Mom hung up. Byungsoo stared at his phone dumbly for a second.

“.....”

He could think of nothing other than “I'm an asshole” right then. He was expressing his anger at someone completely unrelated. He started moving faster, feeling tears start welling up in his eyes. He was still in school and he couldn't afford to show his weak side to his classmates, lest he get bullied even more. He ran down the stairs and quickly put on his outdoor shoes. The front entrance of the school was shining in front of him like a gateway to heaven, he needed to leave this hell. In the middle of walking, he suddenly turned around towards the bike stands.

‘Why are they...’

“They” were waiting at the front gate. The delinquent in his class, the guys who always liked to take money from him. They had pretty girls next to them. Byungsoo wanted nothing else than to pass those gates without a bit of fear, but he knew that was impossible for him. He pretended to unlock his bike as he glanced at the gates. As he tried to kill time waiting for them to leave, though....

“That's not a very good place to hide.”

A voice came from behind him, Byungsoo turned away in shock. There was only a single type of people who talked to him in schools: delinquents. But... the kid behind him was someone he'd never seen before. No, actually, he saw the boy behind school earlier in the day.

"Why are you so surprised?"

"Eh, ah... well..."

"That bike's mine, by the way."

"Ah! Sorry."

Byungsoo quickly let go. This was someone who talked with Changhu without a hint of fear. Probably a delinquent, in that case. That meant he had to lower himself as much as possible.

"Lee Byungsoo, right?"

"...Yeah."

In the end, it comes to this, huh. Byungsoo thought of the 20 thousand won in his pocket. Would this be enough? But the kid in front of him ended up saying something completely unexpected instead.

"Can we talk for a second? Ah, that's what the delinquents over there like to say, isn't it."

"....."

"Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about something."

The boy spoke, scratching his eyebrow. Byungsoo nodded, almost subconsciously.

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"Instructor Miso, Maru..."

"I got a call from him. He has work, right? We were just going to finish with a simple reading session today, so it's fine."

Dojin stepped back with a loud shout of acknowledgment. Miso got a call from Maru just before she arrived at school, the boy apparently had business at Myungdong today. She would've rejected them if it were anyone else speaking, but she let Maru go. She knew the boy was very responsible about his words, so she trusted that the boy wouldn't be wasting time.

"We need to go somewhere after we do our reading."

"Where?"

"The theater where the prelims are held. It's in Anyang. We're all going to look around together, so get ready."

"Yes!"

"Good, get together, now."

The club gathered at Miso's gesture.

* * *

Byungsoo followed Han Maru carefully, it honestly didn't feel good coming back inside the school building. As they walked towards the school store, they ran into some of the kids in Byungsoo's class. Their eyes met, but nothing really special happened. It probably didn't even register to the others that someone called Byungsoo even existed.

"Same class?"

"Ah, yeah."

Maru nodded.

"Let's get a drink before we do anything else."

Chapter 102

Byungsoo couldn't tell if he was drinking hot chocolate through his mouth or his nose, his brain went into overdrive as he looked at Maru. Some kid he met for the first time in his life was buying him hot chocolate for no reason. In the past, he would've drunk it happily with no worries at all, but right now he was trying to figure out why he was being given this drink. He didn't like how far he was thinking into this, but that didn't change the fact that this was what he was thinking right now.

"I ended up hearing your phone call a moment ago."

"....."

Embarrassment washed over him immediately, to think that the fact that he was a horrible son got exposed in school....

"Do the others bully you a lot?"

"...N-no. They don't."

Byungsoo felt a chill run down his neck. Maybe the delinquents sent this guy to test him? Changhu could easily do that to him, he closed his lips tightly and smiled. At the same time, Byungsoo curled up his toes from the sheer amount of shame he felt.

"Saying yes is always difficult."

"W-what are you talking about? They're all nice people. You're not even from my class. You don't know what my class is like. They're all... Good people."

He started saying all sorts of stuff to cover for himself. The only thing he got better at after entering high school, it looked like, was lying. Much unlike his grades, unfortunately. His mind an utter mess, Byungsoo continued speaking good things about his friends with as much passion as he could gather. Funny thing was, talking like this was actually starting to reduce the amount of anger he felt at them. That's right, they were all nice people from the start. I'm the weird one. Changhu's the same. He wouldn't be like this if I did a bit better.

After repeating the same words over and over again, Byungsoo stood up from his seat, saying he would leave. So who cared if this was Changhu's test? He didn't do anything wrong, he should be able to go home safely.

"You might actually start thinking that for real if you keep brainwashing yourself like that."

Byungsoo turned to look at Maru, who was staring directly at him.

"Brainwash? I really..."

"There's no better method of brainwashing than repeating lies to yourself."

"I never lied."

"Is that so?"

Maru suddenly walked over and put a hand over Byungsoo's shoulder. What was this guy thinking?

"Changhu's probably still at the school entrance."

"W-what?"

"You said you guys are friends, right? Let's go."

"No!"

"Why? I thought you were friends?"

"Y-yeah, but we aren't that good friends."

"Friends are friends, though. Come on, let's go talk with him."

Byungsoo gritted his teeth and pushed Maru away. He realized he made a mistake, but this was better than getting dragged away to Changhu. Byungsoo apologized immediately.

"Sorry, I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I see what you're thinking. You think I'm with Changhu, don't you? I'm not with him. I'm actually here with you because I want to silence him before he goes wild."

What in the world was this kid talking about? He's here to silence Changhu? Byungsoo couldn't understand what Maru meant by that. What could a victim like him even do?

"Don't you imagine it often? Fighting back against the guys that bullied you?"

"....."

"Coming to school isn't very fun anymore, is it? You just want to go home, staying in school just makes you feel more pain. You just end up expressing your anger at your poor parents."

Byungsoo's stomach turned, it felt like he was close to throwing up. He could feel anger and resentment boil up inside of him. How dare this kid act like he knows everything?

“You must be treated like an idiot at school. You don’t even have friends to go back home with. You don’t even know how much money they took from you at this point, do you? Since calculating just got too painful at some point.”

“.....”

“You must think of the past a lot. I used to have so many friends in middle school. Ah, were you perhaps bullied in middle school, too? Did you ever have a single friend in your life? Is it that bad?”

“N-no, it’s not...”

“You had friends in middle school?”

“Yeah.”

“Pft.”

Byungsoo gritted his teeth hard enough to hear it creak, the other boy’s laughter was making his head start to swim. How dare this kid...

“You’re lying. You were probably bullied your whole life. You just look the part. You were bullied in elementary school, too, weren’t you? You were probably that kid who would get awkward whenever the teacher singled you out. Be honest with me. You were alone for all of your life, weren’t you?”

“I wasn’t.”

“Wasn’t? There you go, lying again.” “I really wasn’t. Even I, back in middle school...”

“Even I? Eh? That’s an odd choice of words. So you’re being bullied now? You just said you had a lot of friends though. So you *were* lying, after all?”

Byungsoo became dizzier the more he heard Maru speak. Why was this kid being like this? What did he do wrong? He really did have a normal life in middle school. He played soccer, he went to PC bangs, and he went out to play with his friends on the weekend. He wasn’t lying. In fact, his friends just called him not long ago. He wasn’t making any of this up. For the first time, Byungsoo raised his head, and whispered bitterly.

“What do you know?”

He ended up spitting those words out in bitter anger. Maru’s face turned into an angry frown, which woke Byungsoo up immediately.

“I... That wasn’t what I meant, I was thinking of something else. I’m sorry, I’m not lying.”

“Why do you get so defensive?”

“.....”

“Don’t you have something else you want to say?”

“That’s...”

Maru's frown disappeared off his face, Byungsoo sighed in relief. Thank goodness, it didn't look like he would get hit.

"The fact that you're lying tells me you feel pain from the truth. Saying the truth is difficult, isn't it? Neither of us has that kind of bravery, after all. But there comes a time where we have to gather up our courage and say the truth. Don't you feel like you've been driven to the edge of a cliff sometimes?"

Even in the loud classroom, there was no one who greeted Byungsoo. Byungsoo also thought it was normal to not be talked to. As a matter of fact, he got scared when someone talked to him. What were they going to make him do now? What did they want from him this time? The classroom made Byungsoo feel like he was choking. Whenever he was inside, he counted each second, each minute, waiting for the hours to pass.

'I guess I'm at the edge.'

Recently, the stories of students who committed suicide didn't sound like such a foreign idea to him. Of course, he didn't like the situation he was in. Who would? He wanted to struggle, and try to make a change in his life but lacked the courage. His voice always crawled somewhere deep in his body, sitting there until it eventually transformed into anger and hatred. Anger that he expelled to his mother. He knew this was wrong, but he didn't know how he would change anything.

"I know why you didn't say you dislike your situation. No, why you couldn't say it. After all, if you could say whatever you wanted from the very start, you wouldn't have a single worry in the world."

"...What do you want from me?"

Byungsoo was confused. He would honestly feel better if someone like Changhu was beating him right now. In his head, he could tell where Maru was trying to go. But he didn't have the courage to say that with his mouth.

"I can't do anything. I'm a coward. I'm just... dumb. No matter what the other kids say to me, I can't say anything back. Even when they take money from me, I can only smile. If I don't, I'm just going to get hit, so how am I supposed to fight back?"

He felt the strength sap from his shoulders. He just said whatever came to his head and he felt embarrassed. He felt pathetic for saying something like this. Maru probably thought of him as a bug at this point.

"Done."

A happy voice. Maru was smiling.

"What's done?"

"That's good enough. That's how you take your first step. And once you take that first step, everything else just becomes that much easier."

"What did I do?"

“Talk. Talk honestly. You can only lie if you still have a place to run to. If you really get pushed to the edge, that’s when you start doing drastic things. Most people just end up giving up on themselves since that’s the easier option.”

“...What are you trying to say to me?”

“Don’t you feel alone at the edge of that cliff?”

* * *

Byungsoo always felt nervous when he came to the back of the school, he didn’t have any good memories here. As a matter of fact, this was where all of his bad memories began. At the beginning of the school year, he got dragged here by the school delinquent and ended up parted ways with his 30,000 won.

“Why are we here?”

“We need to prepare if we want to start something.”

Maru stepped closer.

“Put some strength in your stomach.”

“What?”

“Did you?”

“Y-yeah.”

Immediately, a loud ‘pow’ hit Byungsoo’s ear. Byungsoo dropped down with a frown. He couldn’t breathe for a second.

“How is it?”

“Kah, kuh. W-why are you being like this, all of the sudden?”

Byungsoo stood back up with a hand on the wall, his body was trembling in fear. Did he get tricked? Thankfully, Maru didn’t hit him again.

“It doesn’t hurt enough for you to die, does it?”

“That’s obv...”

“Now, hit me.”

“W-what? Why would I?!”

“Just do it. Ball up your fist real hard. If you keep it too loose, you might hurt your hand.”

Maru taught him how to hold a fist, and pointed at his stomach. But what kind of a sane person would go around hitting other people?

“I’m not interested in fighting them, I don’t want to. If you’re trying to teach me how to fight, it’s pointless.”

“Who told you to fight? I just want you to know what it’s like to hit someone, and what it’s like to be hit by someone.”

“Y-you really want me to hit you? That’s dangerous.”

Maru shrugged before pointing at his stomach one more time. In the end, Byungsoo punched with a deep frown. A much weaker ‘pow’ sounded, and Maru continued talking with a dull expression.

“You’re afraid of getting hit, right?”

Byungsoo nodded, he was afraid of getting hit, that’s why he was always subservient to others.

“You’re afraid of getting hit because you don’t have the courage to hit back.”

“Courage to hit back?”

“Right. You don’t have the courage to fight back, so you become afraid of getting hit.”

“That’s inevitable, isn’t it? I can’t fight.”

“I’m not telling you to fight. Fighting is pointless.”

“Then?”

“You need to learn to be patient, knowing you can hit back.”

“Stay patient?”

“The other kids aren’t going to stop hitting you. They aren’t going to flinch even if you try to fight back. As a matter of fact, trying to fight back is only going to make them happier.”

“...Nothing’s going to change if I just keep getting hit.”

“Of course not. But once you have the confidence to fight back, that’s when your voice can finally be heard. Since you know you’ll get hit anyway.”

“I can speak back to them?”

Maru nodded.

“But that’s not going to do anything to them,” Byungsoo said.

“No, there comes a point where your words carry greater power.”

Right then, Maru took out a little plastic stick from his pocket. When Maru fiddled with one of its buttons, a sound started playing from it.

“Our voice.”

A pretty clear voice came from the device. There were other noises mixed in there, but the conversation from a moment ago was recorded perfectly.

“Are you...”

“This is the reason why I need your help, but you do need some courage to be able to speak while holding this in front of them. Courage isn’t anything special, though. It’s enough as long as you can be honest with yourself. All you have to do then is to say the words that pop up in your head.”

Byungsoo gulped.

“Are you telling me to be honest in front of them? Then...”

“You’d get beat up like never before.”

“Hey!”

This guy was being unfair. He was asking Byungsoo to do the difficult things. If Byungsoo actually followed through, he would get in big trouble. If he told them to pay him back, to stop bullying him, and to stop hitting him, he’d get a punch thrown at his face in an instant. Maru put the recording device back in his pocket.

“You made your bed, so you might as well lay on it.”

“You’re telling me to deal with it myself?”

“Right. You were honest with me, so I’ll be honest with you as well. I can’t help you with everything. That’s impossible. Some things can only be attained through sacrifice.”

“You’re saying I have to get beat up for this?”

“Yeah.”

“But it’s just voices. What will we do with that? And if they learn about what I did with it... I wouldn’t even be able to come to school anymore.”

Horrible. If the delinquents found out he tried to fight back, they wouldn’t just stop with a normal beating. He was being told to do something that dangerous? Something that could make him get bullied even more?

“Evidence is the most important thing when it comes to school violence. It’s incredibly important to get evidence over how much money they took from you, how long you’ve been bullied, and how many people bullied you.”

“But all that would just end with a scolding from the teacher! What about after that? Then I would...”

“Who said I’d be going to the teacher?”

“Then what?”

“We wouldn’t be doing this if we wanted to finish this with the school. If we start something, we might as well see the end of it.”

Maru spoke with an annoyed look, which somehow made a chill run down Byungsoo’s spine.

“There are a lot of kids that are being bullied by Changhu, actually. This will be pretty worth it if we go through with it.”

“What are you thinking of doing...?”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?”

Maru took out the recorder again.

“I just want to show them that the law is much more powerful than a fist.”

“Law? W-what, you want to sue them or something?”

Maru nodded calmly. Did this guy even know what he was talking about? Suing? That kind of stuff only happened in the world of adults!

“I’m going to explain to you what I can do, and what I can’t do. If you like what I tell you by the end of it, take the recorder. If you don’t, just give me a signature when I write a petition. I can always leave the act of recording to someone else.”

Byungsoo looked at the device with trembling eyes. For some reason, he felt like he could trust Maru, despite meeting him for the first time today. It didn’t look like Maru was being lazy about this, either. A recording device... where did he get a hold of that?

“Will you really help me?”

“It’s a win-win situation, really.”

Byungsoo thought to himself for a bit, it didn’t take him long to come to a decision. He already hit rock bottom a long time ago, he really didn’t have anywhere to go from here. If he was going to be bullied till the end anyway... He might as well go out with a bang. He was scared, but with this guy helping him, he had the support to pull it off. Byungsoo grabbed the recorder tightly from Maru’s hand.

“I’ll do it.”

“Listen to what I have to say, first. Oh, don’t grab that so tightly, by the way.”

“Why?”

“It’s not even mine, and it’s also eight hundred thousand won.”

“E-eight hundred?”

Byungsoo let go with a flinch. Just what was this guy?

“Anyway, I’ll explain what we’re going to do.”

Maru began talking with a serious look.

Chapter 103

School. Byungsoo could see one of the teachers frowning as he stood at the front gate. The man was beating several students with a stick with all his strength. Ah, yes. A typical morning at an engineering high school.

Byungsoo took a deep breath before walking into the gates. He’s never gotten scolded by the teachers in his life, perhaps the teachers didn’t even know someone like him existed. Such thoughts made him a

little depressed. This feeling wouldn't last long, though. Such casual feelings would disappear once he enters the classroom.

"Byungsoo."

Some kids approached him as soon as he entered. They didn't bully him or anything, but they always wanted something from Byungsoo. Byungsoo took out his English homework for them. They took it and left without even saying thanks, he was used to this sort of treatment at this point. Eventually, the kids finished copying his homework and left, leaving his own homework all dirtied up on a desk a few meters away. Byungsoo picked the notebook up and put it back on his desk, the other kids would come to take it away later anyway.

At the same time, something similar was happening on the other side of the class. Byungsoo took a look at the kid with glasses who was looking down at the desk, the kid turned to look his way. Just a few days ago, Byungsoo chose to ignore this kid when his eyes met. Because of that little pride he still had in his heart, the belief that he was better than this kid still.

'You're here?'

'Yeah.'

The two silently exchanged greetings with each other. If there was one thing that he learned from Maru, it was that he had comrades. They no longer ignored each other, instead forming an understanding with one another. They didn't share pain with each other, but rather strength. The kid with the glasses was called Jinho and this kid might very well become Byungsoo's first real friend in high school.

* * *

One should never rush work. Instead, he should always go about it calmly and carefully. Maru knew very well that what he was about to do should be done very, very carefully. There could be no emotions attached. Thankfully, Byungsoo, Jinho, and all others involved understood this as well.

"Byungsoo, throw this away for me."

More trash got thrown his way today. Byungsoo wasn't even mad, he just picked up the trash as usual, and threw it away. Thinking none of this would change tomorrow made a feeling of anger flare up within, but the fact that he was at least able to prepare for tomorrow made it all bearable.

'No, this isn't right.'

[You're not trying to endure your way through it. Remember that. You need to remember everything about how people treated you. You can even take notes. You might want to swear, or you might want to cry when you look at your notes, but this is essential. I'll tell you this again. You're not just enduring it anymore, you're also collecting evidence.]

Byungsoo remembered the name of the kid who threw trash at him, the kid who made him do his homework, and the kid who always hit him for no reason.

[Change never happens in an instant, people can't change with the snap of a finger. They only pretend to change in order to avoid adversity. But, there is one time when a person really does change, when they're driven to a corner. They need to survive, after all. That's when people really change. So don't try

to rush things. Though it sounds ridiculous, you did manage to come here safely after all this time, after all.]

Come here safely. Byungsoo remembered getting really surprised as he talked with Jinho, the other boy had been considering suicide many times before. Whenever he looked out the window, as a matter of fact.

[The funny thing is... I can't die, since I'm afraid people will think I'm pathetic if I kill myself. Pathetic, isn't it?]

Byungsoo disagreed almost immediately, he remembered some other kid Maru found saying he couldn't kill himself because of the porn stash on his computer. It almost made him laugh, but it also sent a chill down his spine. So everyone's considered suicide at some point, after all.

Lunchtime. Byungsoo quietly ate lunch with Jinho before coming back to class. The others were laughing and pointing at the two of them, talking about how likes attract likes.

12:40pm. Byungsoo and Jinho exchanged looks before stepping outside, they were headed to the auditorium on the fifth floor. The place was usually occupied by the acting club and no one else, making it a good place to meet up. Byungsoo looked around for a second before carefully entering the auditorium.

"Oh, you're here."

Inside, there were around fourteen people. All students who got bullied by Changhu and his friends. Byungsoo greeted the teacher next to Maru first, it was the acting club's advisor, Mr. Taesik. Thinking about how a teacher was on their side gave strength to Byungsoo.

Maru and Taesik were quietly talking with each other, this was already pretty amazing to Byungsoo. To be quite honest, he didn't think Maru would put this much work into all of this for them. Watching Maru work honestly made Byungsoo question if the boy really was a high schooler. Byungsoo leaned forward, trying to listen in on the two's conversation.

"Did you try talking about it in the faculty meeting?"

"The faculty's trying to improve the school's reputation, so they're trying to get rid of as much school violence as possible by next year."

"What about right now?"

"It looks like they'll open a meeting on mitigating school violence, no matter how I look at it. It's unfortunate, but they'll try not to let this go any higher than that. School parents get very, very sensitive over news like this after all."

Something wasn't right, the two didn't have a very bright look on their faces.

"But if they hold a mitigation meeting, everything's just going to end after some short volunteer work."

"Indeed. No school wants to expose their dark sides to the public. They'll try to downplay everything as much as possible, I don't think anyone will get expelled or transferred."

“What happened at the last mitigation meeting?”

“Like you said, it just ended with simple volunteer work.”

“The victim?”

“...Transferred.”

“I see. Thank you for listening to my request.”

“I have my debts to pay still, but it looks like this is about as far as I can go. If I tried to intervene here, the rest of the faculty’s just going to use it as a chance to drag down the acting club further.”

“Right. I don’t want that happening either.”

“But when did you prepare all of this to begin with? You even managed to get legal paperwork?”

“I was recently introduced to a lawyer from someone I know, I might as well go big since I decided to start something.”

“You must be busy. With this, Myungdong, and even the stuff from the acting club... Don’t overwork yourself.”

“Of course. Ah, besides that, I heard some rumors about a marriage this year?”

“Haha, oh you.”

Byungsoo said his farewells as Taesik stood up and left the auditorium. It felt like things would’ve been very different for him if someone like that had been his teacher.

“You guys wrote your stuff?”

Everyone handed Maru a sheet of A4 paper. There was a list of everything that happened today written on those papers. Maru took it and carefully put it in a plastic case.

“As you heard, things would just end with volunteer work if we tried to take this to the school. Some of the delinquents wouldn’t even be punished either.”

“J-just that?”

One of the kids spoke in a defeated tone. Byungsoo knew this kid as well, he’s gotten beat up with the kid in the past.

“We have to take proper steps with these things. People in power like it when you take things step by step. In this school, the people with the most power would be the principal. Nothing good would come from offending someone like him, so we need to start off with a mitigation meeting no matter what. We can see the results from that before making our decision.”

“Decision?”

“Right. A decision you guys will be making.”

“Us?”

Byungsoo blinked. Them? Make a decision?

“The school would have to open a mitigation meeting whether they like it or not, with solid evidence like this. They’ll have to call on everyone that’s listed on this paperwork, you guys will be questioned as well in that process. What’s important here is that you guys be completely truthful.”

Everyone nodded.

“Once that ends, the school will come up with a punishment. Anything ranging from a simple scolding to a full-on expulsion. Once they come up with a punishment, that’s when you make your decision. Whether you want to stop there, or...”

“Or?”

Byungsoo gulped.

“We can turn this into a full-blown lawsuit.”

* * *

“Where the hell have you been going recently?”

Maru just smiled at Dojin’s question, he’d never wanted to have duplicates of himself so badly.

“We’re going to a karaoke bar over the weekend. You should come.”

Maru could only apologize.

“Let’s go play when I’m done with all of this.”

“What in the world are you doing?”

“Can’t say. Secrecy’s important here.”

“What are you even going on about?”

Dojin seemed incredibly confused. Maru said his goodbyes to his two friends and went to the boxing gym in town. He could see the others waiting for him already.

“Why didn’t you go in without me?”

“It felt awkward to just go in by ourselves.”

“Come on, guys. It’s been three days. We might as well get used to it at this point.”

As soon as they entered, they were overwhelmed by the smell of sweat. Maru gave his greetings to the trainer in the corner.

“I’ll leave them to you, as always.”

“Sure.”

“Ah, right. My father wanted to know if you had time over the weekend...”

“Why wouldn’t that guy just call me directly? Why does he need me for the weekend?”

“BBQ and soju...”

The man cut Maru off, saying ‘I’ll be there for sure’. The trainer here was a friend of his dad from dad’s amateur boxer days. When Maru explained what happened at school to him, the man told him to bring the kids here ‘no matter what’. Thankfully, the price for all of this was completely free.

[I actually have some debt towards your dad in the past. I paid him back, but I’m still very thankful for what he did. After all, half of this gym was funded by him.]

“Make them a little more energetic, please.”

“Energetic, you say? Well, if they just learn how to get hit, they wouldn’t lose in a fight anymore. I’ll fix them up real good, so that they start beating the bullies before anything.”

The kids started moving at the trainer’s words. Even if the bullies get punished, the root of the problem wouldn’t be so easily changed. In the end, the person has to be fixed from the ground up. Maru wanted to help these kids as much as he could.

‘I do feel sorry for them regardless.’

He didn’t start this because he felt sorry for the kids that got bullied. In the end, he started this to solve his own problem. Changhu was sure to hurt the club in the long run, especially since he actually knew how to use his brain. Honestly, if it wasn’t for Changhu, Maru wouldn’t have stepped in at all. He wasn’t immature enough to extend his hand out to those he wouldn’t be able to help for sure.

‘But I started this already.’

If he started something, he might as well see it through to the end. That’s how Maru worked. The fact that Changhu touched his sister became another motivating factor for him. Trash that dared hit women just needed to disappear, at least in Maru’s head. He wouldn’t even try to scold trash like that, trash like that would only learn once they got a proper beating.

‘Might as well give them one, then.’

Maru realized that his sense of justice was pretty much ingrained into his personality. Even when he quit his company, he exposed all of their dark deeds beforehand. He didn’t like to get into action for many things, but he was the type that had to do something once he unsheathed his blade.

“Thank you!”

Maru stepped back out after saying goodbye to the trainer. Delinquents were only scary because they knew how to use violence. Once you believe you can resist their violence, they become trivial matters.

‘He’s a bit odd, but I guess that would be better for the kids in the long run.’

In the end, fear was subjective. Once these kids experience what punches from a real boxer is like, they’d naturally gain resistance to delinquents. It may be difficult for them at first, but surely they will grow in the future. The body was honest in that way. If you put in work into your body, it would pay you back in equal amounts of muscle. And these kids... After hitting rock bottom, they would try to climb back up with all their strength.

But if they give up there? Well, in that case, not even Maru could do anything. He didn't have a way of helping someone who would willingly jump off a cliff.

"They should do well, though."

In the end, you start feeling like you're getting bullied if you get swept up with the rest of the class. These kids don't get bullied because there's something wrong with them, they get bullied because that's just what happened as the class went on. That's why most kids in class would feign ignorance when they get asked about bullying in their classes.

They were unaware that they were even bullying someone in the first place. In that case, Maru would have to let them know. Let them know that the person they treated like air were human beings, just like them.

"Oh boy, look at the time."

Maru could just imagine Ganghwan annoyed look from waiting for him. It was the day of the amateur acting practice, he needed to run to Myungdong right away. Sure enough, he could see Ganghwan fiddling with his phone with a deep frown at their meeting spot.

"Sorry, I'm late."

"Oh, so you're well aware of that, huh?"

"We're late, so let's just go."

"God damn it, if I wasn't being paid for this, I'd just...!"

"I'll try to find a girl for you to go on a date with in the near future."

"...Dear disciple, please get in the car."

Ganghwan even opened the door to the car for him.

"We're getting our parts today, right?"

"Yeah. Everyone's in an acting club already, so they know what they're supposed to do."

Maru smiled brightly, thinking of the Myungdong Art Theater.

"Why the hell are you smiling like that all of a sudden?"

"What, I can't even smile?"

"Ugh, kids these days. Speaking of which, you seemed to be good friends with a girl there last time."

"You saw?"

"Of course. I was looking around for cute female instructors as well in the meantime, but they all turned out to be really old. Hah..."

Maru turned away from Ganghwan to look at the window. "She" was in the amateur class with him. Of course, this wasn't luck or anything. Maru asked Junmin to put her in, a good use of his power.

“I wonder when I’m going to get an SO.”

Ganghwan hummed to himself an unknown tune.

Chapter 104

Byungsoo’s jaws hurt like hell. He thought back to the boxing trainer who punched him with incredible strength with those mitts. The old man had so much strength behind him, despite having such a beer belly.

‘This pain will help though, I’m sure.’

It really did feel like he was starting to gain confidence. Right then, he thought of something that the trainer told him, which made him grin like a kid.

[You know those chairs in class? If things go badly for you, just grab one of those. Don’t actually swing it, obviously. If you actually hit someone with that thing, things might actually get fucked for you. Just grab it and glare, it should work about once. Also, start exercising from now on. The confidence of a man scales directly with his muscle mass. Throw those computer game things out for a while. If you have the time to move that mouse of yours, you have time to lift dumbbells instead. Exercise only gives back to those who really try hard.]

Byungsoo turned off the computer and started doing pushups, his arms started trembling after he did just five. Even so, he gritted his teeth and did one more. The feeling of satisfaction started spreading in his chest.

* * *

“That fucker’s been glaring every once a while.”

Changhu licked his lips, thinking of the idiot he’s been bullying recently. In the grand scheme of things, nothing changed. The idiot still gave him money when he asked for it, but something was off. The idiot has started talking back to him.

Stuff like ‘when will you pay me back?’ or ‘can you stop already?’ Even when Changhu beat the kid up, the idiot kept parroting the words at him.

“His defense points probably went up after getting beat up so much, hah!”

“Haha, is this a video game or something?”

Changhu laughed his worries away just like that, these idiots couldn’t do anything to him anyway. The best they could do was to tell the teacher, but Changhu was long prepared for that outcome.

‘I’ve been acting pretty well all this time.’

He didn’t do anything that would lower the teachers’ opinion of him. He never got caught smoking, he had never been caught beating someone up, he would always greet his teachers, and he took good care of his grades. On the outside, he was a perfect student. If an issue occurred about him in the future, he should just be able to pass it off as a simple misunderstanding. All of this was something he learned from his senior that went to a different engineering school.

According to his senior, the man earned himself around eight million won just by beating kids. He graduated safely despite that and is currently going to a college inside Seoul. Changhu looked up to that senior as his role model.

“C-Changhu!”

Right then, one of his friends ran into the class with a surprised expression. Changhu greeted him with a smile.

“What, you got caught doing something bad again?”

“N-No! It’s not that!”

This friend of his liked to overreact a lot, so Changhu didn’t pay much attention to it. But his friend’s face only got paler by the second, only then did he realize something was wrong.

“What? What happened?”

“Jungsoo got called away.”

“Yeah. So?”

There were a lot of students who got dragged away to the faculty offices. Jungsoo was one of the stupider kids, so he got dragged away to the faculty office every other day. The fact that the kid got dragged away wasn’t even news.

“He didn’t get called for just a beating!”

“What?”

“They’re opening some mitigate- mitigate- some big meeting. Everyone’s getting taken away!”

“...What?”

Right then, their homeroom teacher burst in through the door. The man literally punched the door open hard enough to make it creak a little bit as he walked in.

“You! You! You! And you! Follow me!”

The man’s cue stick was pointed at Changhu, Changhu finally clued in on what was happening. He didn’t know what this meeting thing was about, but it looked like the idiots finally told on him. The homeroom teacher walked out with a frown. Taking that as a sign, Changhu walked right up to Gijung.

“Was it you?”

“.....”

No response. That in itself was good enough as an answer, this kid was the culprit. Changhu raised his hand, and punched the back of the boy’s head. The entire class quieted down, but Changhu didn’t care about that right now.

“I asked you a question, you fuck.”

“God fucking damn, did you really?”

His friends came over to surround Gijung as well. Changhu thought he's been taking good care of this idiot recently, to think he would get blindsided like this... he could only laugh.

"So an idiot manages to get a hit on me, finally. But oh dear, I'll probably get away scott-free anyway."

Changhu grabbed Gijung by the collars and lifted the boy up.

"Good job for mustering courage, idiot. We'll be having a private meeting after this, though."

Changhu threw Gijung back on the chair, which made the boy fall back loudly.

"You can't even fight back, so how dare you backstab me like this? I'll show you that little bit of courage you showed was a mistake."

Changhu could only laugh. These were all trash in the end who couldn't even fight him, they should've just focused on their studies instead. Then again, what could he even expect from these insects? They couldn't even play, nor could they even study. They all had a reason for being bullied, really. That's all they were good for in the end.

"...Yeah, I'll see you later."

He heard that voice come from behind him just as he was about to go outside. Changhu thought he heard wrong, but the voice was much too clear to just be a figment of his imagination. Behind him, Gijung was getting back up with a frown. There wasn't any fighting spirit in the boy's eyes, but there wasn't fear, either.

Changhu realized something very quickly. This kid... wasn't looking away from him.

"Hah, that fuck. He's very funny."

"Yeah, is he crazy, or what?"

His friends were all laughing, but Changhu wasn't. He had a very bad feeling about all of this. The fact that the kid was different from before meant that the kid had someone to rely on. There was no reason for someone like that to change otherwise. Changhu knew very well that people didn't change unless they were put in a corner, he knew this well from years of experience as a delinquent. After all, he didn't really want to drive a person to suicide, either. That'd leave a bad taste in his mouth.

In that sense, Gijung was like all of the other idiots. The type that would go back to normal once he left the boy alone for a bit. But those eyes from before weren't like the usual, the boy was clearly looking for a fight. He could see Gijung get back to his seat with a calm expression. Changhu thought about beating the boy up on the spot again, but gave up. Something was very wrong right now.

"Let's go."

"Yeah."

Changhu, after walking outside into the hallway, looked into the class through the windows. He could see Gijung trembling inside, the boy was scared of him for sure. So where did that boy's confidence come from, just now?

Right then, he noticed Gijung looking to the back of the class. Changhu turned to look at where the boy was looking. And there... He could see Maru yawning.

'Could it be?'

"Changhu, let's go. We don't want the teacher getting mad at us even more."

For now, Changhu decided to go up to the faculty office. He did wonder, though. Did Maru get involved with this somehow? No, the boy had no reason to. Was it because of the money?

'No, no way. I'm just assuming things too much. This is just going to be another one of those small things.'

But when Changhu entered the faculty office, he realized that this wasn't going to be like "another one of those small things". Especially with that amount of paperwork he saw on the table.

"You motherfuckers."

That was the first thing that came out of the teacher's mouth.

* * *

"It starts today."

The kids all nodded at Maru's words. Byungsoo could feel his heart beat. It's finally begun. They couldn't take any of this back now. They drew their swords, and someone was going to go down, no matter who it was. Now, it was time for them to lay low, and make sure they wouldn't get hurt themselves.

"You guys probably met one on one with the teachers at this point. Like I said before, you guys should just say the stuff that's happened to you without any exaggeration. Even if the teacher keeps telling you that you're just making stuff up, you have to keep denying them. Just keep parroting the truth. The disciplinary teacher's also gotten selected to be in the mitigation meeting. The board members for this one are going to be chosen by the principal, so I can't do anything here. You guys are on your own from here."

"I did exactly what you said."

"Me too."

"The disciplinary teacher kept trying to scare me, but thanks to the boxing trainer, he wasn't scary at all."

Byungsoo noticed small smiles appearing on his friends' expressions. He could feel a deep sense of gratitude flowing up towards the trainer on the inside, their trainer was trying to help all of them earnestly. Thanks to that, Byungsoo got pretty bad muscle aches, but he did attain confidence through it.

"I'd look pretty pathetic for being proud of this, but I managed to talk back at Changhu today," a boy named Gijung spoke up.

Everyone in the room gave the boy a thumbs up, this was definitely an improvement for all of them.

“They got the complaints from the victims, so they’ll hear the story from the bullies’ side of things. You saw them getting dragged away, didn’t you? After that, they’ll set up a meeting for both sides, and then they’ll come up with a punishment for the bullies.”

“By a meeting... you mean we’ll have to be in the same room as them?” one of the kids asked.

Maru shook his head.

“It’s normal to call both sides one by one. If they put all of you in the same room, just complain right there and then. This is your right.”

“Y-yeah.”

“And like I said in the beginning, I can’t help you anymore from here. I can always talk to you, but I’m not going to reveal that I’m connected to this at all. You should all know the reason why at this point, right?”

“We’re happy with all you’ve done for us already.”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll... take it from here.”

Maru nodded. He’s already explained to the group about the reputation of the acting club. Byungsoo understood as well. If Maru were to be found out for helping them, the acting club might end up getting in trouble. Honestly, the boy’s already done more than enough for the group.

“Focus. All the way up until the meeting ends.”

“Okay.”

“Your classmates will start treating you differently from now as well, I hope you can take care of that as well. Remember what the trainer said?”

“People don’t hit sandbags that can fight back,” Byungsoo said.

It was something that the trainer liked to always talk about.

[You guys are sandbags. You can’t just turn into someone who’s good at fighting overnight. But! You can turn into thorny sandbags at the very least. That’s where we’ll start.]

“You guys worked hard. But it’s still not over yet, so don’t let your guard down.”

Maru extended his hand forward. The others all put their hands over his and said a quiet “fighting” under their breaths.

Chapter 105

After that day, the delinquents all became quiet. They were glaring harder than ever before, but Byungsoo got used to those glares very quickly. He’s learned that glares don’t hurt, no matter how much you receive them. As a matter of fact, looking back at these delinquents just reassure him of his victory. They all looked visibly worried at this point.

Like Maru predicted yesterday, they were all called out to speak with the teachers. They were getting interviewed so that the teachers could make sure they were getting the truth from both sides.

What really surprised Byungsoo was how the disciplinary teacher took it. All this time, he thought the disciplinary teacher came to school to beat up kids, but that scary teacher was listening to his story quite seriously. The man even commented that 'kids with no chance at redemption like that need special punishment.'

Of course, not all teachers were like this. All the other teachers in the mitigation meeting only pretended to understand Byungsoo, while trying to downscale all of this as much as possible. Looking at these people's work made Byungsoo very surprised. He even told them that he was considering suicide and all these people told him was 'but they're friends, so you should be understanding'. Listening to them made Byungsoo think back to something Maru told him.

[In the end, school is also a form of a business. Businesses only work when people actually come to it. In order to make people come, you need to have a good reputation. In that sense, our school has every reason to shake off any rumors involving delinquency. That's why a lot of the teachers will try to hide that this bullying stuff ever happened.]

Maru did warn that the teachers would try to downplay everything, but actually seeing that happen in front of him just made Byungsoo laugh in dejection. He didn't hate the teachers for what they did, though. As he prepared for all of this with Maru, he's thought a lot about this. His other friends probably did the same.

'Everyone has their own sense of justice.'

Some teachers think justice is to fight for kids like them, some teachers think justice is to work hard for a promotion or to work for their own family. Everyone has their own reasons for working the way that they did. Byungsoo's learned that at this point that everyone has their own reasons for living the way they did. At the same time, he's realized that he would need a more solidified worldview for himself.

'Other people's perspectives are, in the end, their own.'

Just because Byungsoo understood why people did the things they did didn't necessarily make him agree with it. Byungsoo shook his head when the teachers told him to let this pass easily, they frustratedly told him to think about the future instead of focusing on getting instant gratification. Hearing that made Byungsoo's opinions even more set in stone, he said on the spot that he wanted to see the bullies get punished. That his thoughts on the matter wouldn't change no matter how much they tried.

He didn't sound *that* cool at the time, of course. He was actually stuttering and everything, but that didn't make him feel any less proud of saying what he said. For the first time in a long time, he managed to say his opinion to someone else.

Byungsoo saw one of his other friends being called into a teacher's office on his way back to class. Another one of his comrades in arms. He recalled smiling at this friend as he passed by. He realized then, that he finally had enough confidence to start cheering other people on. Just this realization was enough to change his life for the better, he actually started enjoying school a bit more.

“Yo, weren’t my punches pretty great yesterday?”

“Yeah bro. There were some nice sounds coming out of those mitts. Are we doing roadwork again today, by the way? Doing that always makes me want to throw up.”

“Obviously. If we try to skip it, the trainer’s going to kill us.”

He’s finally gotten a friend to talk to during break times as well. It was just one person, but a friend was still a friend. The fourteen friends he met during this time felt especially precious to Byungsoo. Not just because they shared a common pain, but because they were all fighting the same battle. Without it, they wouldn’t be as close as they are now.

Lunchtime. Byungsoo stopped heading out of the classroom in a hurry, he’d casually waited for his friends in other classes before heading down happily. The gazes from other students around him... felt normal, surprisingly enough. To be honest, he was a little scared at first. He thought he’d get bullied by the class for selling out a delinquent in his class, but the reactions he got from his classmates were very, very normal. They just didn’t care. Apparently it was the same in the other classes, too.

There, Byungsoo and his friends learned one more thing, people wouldn’t care about others if they weren’t involved. Byungsoo thought back to his middle school days as well. Back then, there was a kid who was a little slower than others. He didn’t actively bully the kid, but he and his classmates teased the kid about it.

Looking back, he definitely took part in bullying. Perhaps that kid was getting beat up where he couldn’t see as well. But at the time, Byungsoo didn’t have any interest in the kid at all. He just threw a joke or two about the kid every once in a while, because everyone else was doing it.

That’s right, he didn’t care at all at the time. In the end, the kid was like a prop on a stage, something that he actively ignored.

‘It must be the same for them, too.’

His classmates probably thought the same. There probably weren’t many in his class who were bullying him for the sake of bullying.

That didn’t mean he forgave them for their actions, of course. They knew he was getting bullied, but didn’t do anything about it. He did, however, stopped blaming them for everything. He realized how pointless it was to try to shift blame onto other people. In the end, problems could only be solved if you came to face it directly.

[If you can dodge a problem and have it be solved, just dodge it. But if you can’t, in the end, you’ll have to face it. No matter how much you dodge it, eventually, that problem’s going to come and catch up to you.]

That was another thing Maru told him. Of course, Byungsoo didn’t believe Maru’s words all the time. In fact, he disagreed with Maru often as well. Whenever that happened, Maru took his words into account and came up with a different decision. Byungsoo could sense a lot of experience from the boy in those moments.

At the same time, he felt very foreign to Byungsoo. When he asked around, he found that all his other friends felt the same way as well.

“Doesn’t Maru always talk like he’s not involved in something?”

“Yeah. He treats certain things like he’s not involved in it at all, despite being the one to instigate this in the first place.”

Maru was always very calm in nature, adding a sense of maturity which made him seem much older than he actually was. The boy had a very good head on his shoulders. But strangely, Byungsoo didn’t want to become the boy’s friend at all. Was it because of the boy’s ever-bored expression? Or the boy’s confidence?

For sure, Maru was a great ally to have. But that’s all there was to it. Something made Byungsoo very sure that the two of them would never get very close.

‘I guess it doesn’t matter that much, though.’

To begin with, Maru had no reason to hang out with kids like him in the first place. Byungsoo’s learned through all of this that Maru was shouldering expectations from a lot of people. The boy received calls all the time, mostly from adults.

Even Maru’s school friends seemed amazing. Then again, everyone in the acting club looked very quirky and charming. Again, Maru... had no reason to be with them. Regardless, Maru had some sort of an aura about him that made him hard to approach.

Not his talent, or personality. Just something odd that made him hard to befriend. The others thought the same as well.

“Maru’s kind of... It feels like he’s there, but also not there? It’s a bit hard to describe.”

“Yeah, he’s a good guy, but...”

The others didn’t think deeply about it. Regardless of what Maru was like, the fact that the boy was their savior didn’t change.

* * *

“...Yawn.”

“You’ve been yawning a lot recently.”

“I’m tired.”

Dojin looked around for a second before leaning towards Maru.

“You’ve been together with the bullied kids recently, I noticed. Were you the one that made them do all of this?”

“I only helped them a little.”

“I knew something was off.”

Dojin handed Maru a cherry flavored candy. Maru took it and popped it into his mouth. Perfect timing, he was craving the sweet stuff just now.

“Is this because of Changhu?”

“For now, yeah.”

“You’ve really made up your mind, haven’t you? But wouldn’t this be dangerous if he finds out? You know he gets really petty with stuff like this.”

Dojin pointed very carefully at Changhu. Changhu and his friends had been getting called out to the faculty offices almost daily in the past few days. Because of this, pretty much every student in the school knew what was happening at this point. No matter how quietly the teachers tried to handle things, the rumors still spread like wildfire.

“I’m not doing anything that’d make me visible, so don’t worry. Plus, Changhu probably doesn’t even have time to think. His parents should be receiving a call sooner or later.”

“God damn am I glad to be your friend. You cruel bastard.”

“Cruel? No way. This is just karma.”

“So this is why you’ve been so busy recently.”

“It’s almost all over, so I can finally breathe a little.”

“Here, eat this.”

Someone else jumped right onto their conversation in the middle. It was Daemyung, who handed them both a burger. The boy’s been gaining weight again after the club started training, apparently, Miso’s been making plans to make Daemyung lose weight for good in the near future.

“I just thought I wouldn’t be able to eat however as much as I wanted after this point. Hehe.”

“You’re going to get fat again. Control yourself.”

“I will, I will. I’m going on a diet tomorrow.”

“That’s what they all say.”

Dojin and Daemyung talked to each other with a grin. Maru, in the meantime, chewed the candy in his mouth before turning his attention towards the burger. On the weekdays, he had club practice and Ganghwan’s private lessons. On Wednesdays to Fridays, he had training for the Myungdong Art Theater. On Saturday he needed to go to Hyehwa station, and then back to Myungdong in the evening. Sunday was the same. As a matter of fact, he didn’t have time to meet Soojin for the past month.

‘Come to think of...’

There was that thing with Dowook as well, Maru wanted to help the guy if he could. Maru thought of his schedule for this week.

He's learned a lot from Soojin. He didn't want to interfere with her family life, but he did want her to come to an understanding with her brother if he could. He's received a lot from her, so he thought it would be only fitting to pay her back.

Maru felt himself becoming busy, he spent too much time working nowadays. He wanted to go on another date with her as well, but he just didn't have the time. To think he'd be even busier than his adult life back in the past... This was ridiculous.

"Hey, Maru."

Maru opened his eyes, hearing Dojin call out to him.

"You look tired man, you should sleep."

"Yeah, I should. Wake me up when the teacher comes."

"Course."

Maru decided to sleep for now.

* * *

There was only one thing the kids wanted and that was to expel the bullies. They didn't want anything else and that's exactly what they told the faculty. Perhaps this was why rumors about this event spread so fast around the school.

The teachers were starting to get busier around the school. The bullies had to start talking a lot more, and the victims were getting calmer by the minute. Eventually, the parents were summoned as well. Most were mothers, but even dads decided to come occasionally.

Maru took a look at the people gathering outside. By the looks of it, the school was about to get very loud again.

"Should be alright, though."

Maru licked his lips as he looked at his contacts. Recently, he's come to realize why people in power were so desperate to keep their power.

* * *

Changhu's trusted friend shook his head with a pale expression. This guy's mother had a very good relationship with the chairman of the school, so Changhu expected good news, but... That was not the case.

"Dude, I thought your mom had power."

"Well... she said it would be good for us to follow the school's decision."

"Why?"

"If this ends up going to court, then... We'd really be screwed. She said expulsion might be our best bet."

"What? You gotta tell me more. What the hell's happening?"

Expulsion? Best choice? What kind of bullshit was this? Changhu could feel the blood rush to his head. At the same time, he noticed Gijung reading a book at a desk. He knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't control himself right now. He ran forward and kicked Gijung as hard as he could. The boy fell backward loudly, attracting the class's attention.

Changhu realized what he'd done, but the water was already spilled. He might as well finish what he started.

"You son of a bitch, try to be quiet."

"You're too loud. Dude, you think the class belongs to you?"

"Motherfucker, can't we catch a break during break time?"

All the kids in the class said something to him. Even though they didn't say anything to him in the past... Come to think of it, these were also the guys that Gijung exchanged greetings with every morning. Were they friends?

"This guy's trying to survive, too. Just stop. At this rate, you really are going to get sent to a detention center."

"Yeah. Calm down, tard."

Changhu grit his teeth. He turned around, ready to beat up the guys who dared talk back at him, but he could feel his fist start loosening up once he noticed that there weren't just a few people looking at him disapprovingly.

To be honest, Changhu didn't have that much confidence in fighting. He'd also realized. Many of the kids in his class were actually very good at fighting, unlike him.

"Oh dear, our Changhu's fucked, isn't he?"

Dojin's voice stabbed its way into Changhu's ear. In the end, all Changhu could do was leave the class with a loud huff.

Chapter 106

"It's because of bastards like these that our school has fallen to this state."

"Please, calm yourself, Mr. Lee. You're a teacher, you shouldn't speak so rashly like this."

"I understand my language isn't very proper right now, but what these kids did is just too much."

Mr. Lee threw the stack of A4 paper on the desk, the teachers looking at the paper looked with incredibly uncomfortable expressions.

"Of course. I am well aware that they crossed the line. But Mr. Lee, it's almost admission season. If bad news spreads about our school because of this, we'll be in hot water. Don't you remember what the principal told us?"

The one who was speaking was the Hanja teacher of the school, the man was someone who came up to the city from the rural part of the country. He was a prime candidate for vice principal after multiple promotions.

'He thinks he pretty much owns the place now, doesn't he?'

Mr. Lee looked disapprovingly at the Hanja teacher.

"You said the school was trying to improve its image, didn't you? We should take this as a chance. Things only got this bad because we never punished the delinquents!"

Mr. Lee boldly stepped forward. The school managed delinquency issues in its past. The kids in this school were rough, so fights broke out a lot, and things often took a turn for the worse. That's why the mitigation committee existed, but most of these meetings ended with just a slap on the wrists for the bullies. Mr. Lee wasn't a fan of this. Each time he advocated for harsher treatment for the bullies, it never worked.

To begin with, the committee was run by four parents and three teachers chosen by the principal. Mr. Lee managed to be one of those three teachers at first, he was the one who gave fitting punishment to the bullies. But at some point, his relationship with the principal went awry. Now he wasn't even able to set foot in a single committee meeting.

"We'll handle it, so don't worry."

The Hanja teacher got up from his seat with a frown. The other two teachers selected for the committee told Mr. Lee to calm down a bit before leaving as well.

"It's all screwed."

Mr. Lee started gulping down a cold drink from a freezer after everyone else left. Some of the teachers in the faculty called him an "outdated teacher" behind his back, he even got scolded for trying to solve an issue the right way.

"What kind of an educator wags his tail in front of someone that needs punishment?"

Teachers needed to punish kids who deserved it, it didn't have to be corporal punishment. There still needed to be something that could make the student fear the teacher in some way, everything else would come after that. If a student did something bad, they would need to be punished before anything else.

High schooler.

A very long time ago, people at this age would've been raising their own kids already. It seemed that the world wanted people to keep being children for as long as possible as time went on.

"They should know just about everything by now, too."

Nowadays, these kids were even smarter than the teachers thanks to the internet. The minute something goes against their liking, a video recording would be sent to the ministry of education with a formal report. Hearing about this kind of news from other schools annoyed Mr. Lee to no end.

“Bastards.”

Mr. Lee read the names written on the A4 paper. Just how much did these bastards look down on teachers, if they thought they could get away with this?

Reality couldn't be more bitter to him than this moment.

* * *

The Hanja teacher looked into the break room one more time before clicking his tongue.

“What era does that guy think he's in?”

The era of teachers being in power was long over. Back then, students and parents were the ones who had to watch out for the teacher. Not anymore, now, it was the other way around. Just twenty years ago, teachers could earn a decent sum through bribes. Parents just threw the money at teachers even when it wasn't even asked. Teachers had power back in the day, it really was a world made for learned men.

But what about now?

Everyone was a learned man at this point! Everyone! To be quite honest, the Hanja teacher was afraid to go into a class sometimes. At least he was at an engineering school where all the dumb kids were. According to his friend, private schools were absolutely terrifying.

[The students don't even listen to me. They only raise their heads when I say something's going to be on a test. They only bother working on stuff given to them by academies while they're in school! Public education? Stuff like that can go burn in hell! Teachers here just spend their time trying not to step on any of the kids' toes. We don't even get treated like a teacher at this point!]

The Hanja teacher agreed very strongly with his friend's words, schools were useless at this point in society. Whether it be online videos, academies, or tutors... there were places to learn everywhere. The entire scene for education has changed, all except for public education itself. Public education in South Korea was practically rotting in the gutters at this point.

Teaching the kids?

What a funny joke. The Hanja teacher snorted as he looked back at the break room one more time. Mr. Lee, being a disciplinary teacher, was still unable to get out of the glory days of education. How some of these people could be so slow despite being his age was honestly beyond him. Schools have changed, society as a whole increased its demand for college graduates. In high school, most kids only thought about going into college. As a result, even in his classes, kids were studying math when he was teaching Hanja.

Back in the past, this sort of behavior made him furious. Nowadays he was used to it. After all, math was hundreds of times more important than Hanja in college entrance exams. Sometimes, he even told his students to ignore his lectures completely if need be.

‘This is just business.’

The Hanja teacher knew that his reputation in school wasn't so great, but he still got a good reputation from the really important kids.

That's right, the important kids. The ones who were studying to go to college.

Even an engineering school can send students to one of the SKY universities! No, it's even easier to go there from an engineering school!

Such rumors were key to improving the reputation of the school. Indeed, last year when a kid from their school got into the famous Seoul University, they put a placard about it all over the school. What did that mean?

'It's all just business! Business!'

It was an open secret at this point, schools were just companies with a different name. They could only survive if they had a good reputation. Survival of the fittest, the schools that adapted to the current environment could not only survive, but also thrive.

Nowadays, the world of education revolved around students and parents. In the end, the pride of an educator and whatnot was chump change compared to hard cash.

'It's actually even better in some aspects because of that.'

A long time ago, parents would give teachers money asking for good grades. Nowadays, though, parents give teachers money if their kids actually did well on their own. Recently, a ton more students started coming to their school to try to get into a better university. Among those students were some who came from very wealthy families.

'Really, I'm just trying to look good to my potential customers.'

He couldn't even get treated like a proper teacher anymore. In that case... he might as well be a service provider who tries to satisfy his customers. That was for the best.

"Mr. Lee, you'll learn soon enough yourself. Students aren't people you teach, they're people you try to look good in front of."

The Hanja teacher looked at the four parents who got invited to the mitigation committee. If he could get a proper understanding from these four, this meeting should end pretty easily just like the other ones.

'Ah, those two are here too, as always.'

The Hanja teacher already had words about who would be coming to this meeting. He also knew that the two women in front of him right now were the ones who had real power in this committee. These women happen to have a very good relationship with the bullies' parents in this event.

Committees like these were only attended by parents from well-off families, especially since the ones from poorer families simply couldn't find time for the small stuff like this.

'Plus, stuff like this takes money, too.'

Committees like these were organized by the rich. As a result, the rich were the only ones who benefited in a meaningful way from the school.

“You look good today, teacher. The ginseng I sent you must’ve worked very well.”

“Thank you, it’s helping me get through this cold winter indeed.”

“That’s good to hear.”

The Hanja teacher lowered himself in front of them, these people were customers. VIP customers, as a matter of fact. They were the type of people who contributed a significant sum of money to his retirement fund. As a result, he would have to do pretty much anything they asked of him to get on their good side.

“Joonyung’s mom seemed very disappointed by this.”

“I see.”

Joonyung. That was one of the bullies involved in this situation, one of the worst out of all the others. The boy was actually redoing his grade this year.

“Joonyung’s not the type to do something like this.”

“That’s what we think as well.”

“Right? Right? To be honest, I think it’s a bit foolish to gather for something this trivial. In the end, it’s just kids playing with each other.”

“Right you are.”

The woman in her forties smiled at him brightly. Despite her age, her skin was smooth like she was still in her twenties.

“The chairman’s too much, too. We asked him to handle it well and he just told us we should follow the decision that comes out of this meeting. He even said we should get ready for our kids to face expulsion.”

“Hahaha. Surely he was just joking.”

This actually confused the Hanja teacher a bit as well, opening the mitigation committee was necessary. In fact, it would’ve been weird if they didn’t, given the amount of evidence thrown at them. Like usual, the committee would open, they would zoom through the meetings, and sweep everything under the rug. That’s how the chairman and the principal liked to handle things. Strangely enough, only the principal was the one who was handling everything this time. The chairman was keeping his mouth shut, which was very unlike the man.

“It looks like there was a misunderstanding with Joonyung and his friends, which ended up like that. They think they might even be expelled...”

“There’s no way that would happen.”

“Is that so? I wonder why I keep hearing about it. It’s very worrying. Joonyung’s mother just keeps sighing like the world is ending, but the chairman isn’t saying anything. Even after all these gifts we gave to the school...” “Of course.” The Hanja teacher tried his best to try and make his customers happy. He didn’t know where these ridiculous rumors were coming from, but they were completely false. The decision from this meeting was pretty much set in stone already.

20 hours of in-school volunteer work, and a verbal apology to the victims, that should be a fitting punishment.

‘So what if the victims don’t like that punishment?’

The school had no intention of punishing the bullies.

“I’ll try contacting the chairman separately, don’t worry. Ah, we’ll have to start a formal meeting later for everyone else after this, so I’d appreciate it if you could wait a bit longer.”

“I understand. Ah, it’d be nice if we could have a meal with the teachers here afterward. What do you think, Yoonsung’s mom?”

“Of course, that sounds great.”

The sounds of merry laughter came from the break room. The Hanja teacher calmed down, seeing how this meeting was going just like all of the other ones.

* * *

“.....”

“I think you guys would be satisfied with this decision, I understand the pain and suffering you felt through all this. But you also have to understand, these bullies are repenting themselves from the bottoms of their hearts. You need understanding and learn to forgive them.”

Byungsoo looked at the Hanja teacher dumbly. They worked so hard till now, they gritted their teeth to get these bullies out of here. But... the only thing they got, in the end, was a slap on the wrist. And...

“I’m so sorry, dude. God, you guys are so fucking petty. It’s just a chump change. Fine, I won’t take your money anymore, idiots.”

“Sorry for everything, retards.”

An apology that was nothing more than a thinly veiled insult.

“I got scared for nothing. That fuck scared the shit out of me.”

“Apparently that was because there was a miscommunication with the chairman.”

“Yeah, that was all it was, right? Man, Joonyung’s mom really is the best.”

“But what do we do with these fucks now?”

“What else other than to fuck them over?”

The delinquents were laughing amongst themselves without even a care in the world, Byungsoo found Joonyung's gaze to be the scariest out of all of them.

'Is this the end? Do we really have to sue?'

Just as thoughts like these began to fill his head.

Bang!

The Hanja teacher banged the door open and entered. His hair was fluttering from how quickly he entered the room, Byungsoo caught a few beads of sweat running down the man's face as well. The Hanja teacher raised his finger at the delinquents with a trembling hand.

"C-come here for a second."

He gave Byungsoo a glare before leaving promptly, the delinquents followed the teacher with a confused expression. After exactly 20 minutes, they all came back to class with pale faces.

'What happened?'

* * *

Maru fiddled with his phone dumbly on the windowsill. Money and power, what great things.

"Dude, the chairman came to our school."

"What's happening?"

"Dunno. The Hanja teacher got dragged away though."

"I heard him shouting in the hallway. Something about wanting to see him die?"

"What the hell?"

"Dunno."

Maru started humming to himself, listening to those around him talk.

"Hm hm. The law, the law. What a great thing it is."

Chapter 107

Junmin walked into a building at HyeHwa station, with some honeyed water in hand. He stepped onto the elevator. Inside this building was a practice room that was exactly the size of the Myungdong Art Theater stage. The theater had a practice room underground, but it was much too small for its intended use.

When he entered the practice room, he could see many actors already practicing by themselves. There were quite a few of them, actors that already made a name for themselves in smaller theaters, and actors you could only see from very expensive theaters. They made sure to select the truly talented actors to commemorate the opening of the theater.

The one who cast them, to begin with, was Junmin. He was probably working harder on this play as a casting director than on any others to try and make it a success.

“Coffee, so early in the morning? You’re going to ruin your stomach.”

An old friend of his greeted him, pointing at a seat. Junmin scanned the actors once more before sitting down.

“It’s not coffee, just honey water.”

“Honey? Let me try some.”

His bearded friend extended his hand with a grin on his face. This happened all the time, so Junmin didn’t even respond. This guy was the director of the play and a good friend he’d worked with many times over the years.

“How’s the play going?”

“Just a few months ago, the newbies weren’t able to handle the veterans at all, but...”

“Newbies? They’re pretty popular in their respective theaters, you know.”

“Everyone here is. Anyway, they’re making jokes together nowadays and everything. Then again, it’s been four months, so I guess it’s about time they got used to each other.”

“That’s good.”

“Just thinking about the amount of work I did because of you, then... Ugh. Making these guys mesh well together was a disgusting amount of work.”

“I brought you an all-star team, though, only because I knew you could make them work together.”

This was a room full of veterans, each and every one of them had their own quirks. Lots of them were starring in movies and dramas as well. Normally, it was impossible to cast even one of these people in a play. But with the reopening of the Myungdong Art Theater being as special as it was, many actors volunteered to act in its opening play. Junmin had selected the most talented actors of the bunch, and that was exactly who the people in front of him were. It would probably be near impossible to get a cast like this ever again, at least anytime within the next decade.

“Ah, you’re here.”

An older actor walked over to the two of them with a bag on his back. This man was an honorable senior of Junmin and his director friend that they would have to pay respects to even after passing the age of fifty. The two of them stood up from their seats immediately.

“Sit, sit. I didn’t greet you two to be paid respect.”

Junmin quickly brought out a chair for the old actor, the actor smiled before taking his seat.

“You must be suffering quite a bit in preparation.”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Suffering? Not at all.”

The man who Junmin was calling “sir” was Yoon Munjoong, an actor who turned sixty five just this year; a man who had the most influence in the industry during the 80s. The man retired in the late 90s, but came out to act due to Junmin’s request.

“Teacher.”

“Mm?”

“Is there anyone that catches your eye here?”

Munjoong laughed at Junmin’s question.

“They all look great.”

“If anyone catches your eye in particular, though, please let me know.”

“You probably have better eyes than me.”

“Don’t say that. Please tell me, I heard from this guy that someone caught your eye...”

Munjoong was one of the few actors that Junmin really looked up to, knowing an actor that this man had his eye on would be very helpful for Junmin.

“If I really had to pick someone out...”

Munjoong’s eyes turned to a corner of the room. This play had about thirty actors in it. Considering how the stage could only take about ten people at a time, it was an incredibly large number of people. Due to this, the actors mostly practiced in teams during practice sessions. Most of the talented ones practiced in the middle and the less experienced people naturally ended up in the corners.

Minjun’s eyes followed Munjoong’s, into the corner where several young actors were practicing together. His eyes focused on one man in particular, the one that was making big gestures in front of the mirror with a frown. Someone Junmin knew very well himself.

“How is he? You had your eyes on him as well, yes?”

“Oh dear. It does feel great knowing that we had our eyes on the same person.”

“Is that so? Hahaha.”

Munjoong stroked his beard lightly before continuing.

“That young man... I like the way he goes about practice. He knows how to think and how to act. His concentration is quite amazing, as well. It’s almost like he forgets everything around him when he becomes immersed in the play. If I was still running a theater company, I would’ve scouted him for sure.”

Junmin nodded. Indeed, focused was one of the correct descriptors for the man they were looking at.

“I heard he was doing independent movies now?”

“He starred in one already, and he’s now shooting his second film with the same director.”

“Is the director someone you know?”

“Yes, I’ve met him several times. Ah, he’s also worked with director Yoo.”

“You mean Chulmin? Why?”

“The current director he’s working with was good friends with director Yoo Chulmin, the man caught director Yoo’s eyes when they met.”

“Hah, that guy? I thought he was busy since he wasn’t coming to any of the association meetings, so this is what he’s been up to.”

Director Yoo Chulmin was the owner of Sky Theater, which was one of the most famed theater companies in South Korea. Right now, he was also the chairman of the Korean Acting Association.

“And here I thought I was the only one who found a diamond in the rough. Everyone’s had their eyes on him already, huh,” Munjoong muttered.

The man told Junmin to raise the actor well before standing up from his spot. As the man walked away to the exit, Junmin could visibly see the actors tense up in nervousness. That was understandable. The old man may have look very lax and kind right now, but he became venomous and terrifying during actual practice. Junmin’s director friend, in the meantime, was still looking at the actor the two of them were looking at seconds before.

“He’s that talented?”

“Of course.”

“Hm.”

“See where you can go with him. It’s probably going to be difficult to see him in plays from now on.”

“What, you planning on taking him to Chungmu-ro?”

“If possible.”

“Well, this is you talking, so I’ll assume that’s exactly what’s going to happen for now. Hong Geunsoo, is it?”

The director looked at the clock for a second before standing up, the man was probably about to start practice again. Junmin told the director about a few changes regarding the play before standing up to leave himself.

The street outside the building was incredibly breezy. Junmin observed the empty road in front of him briefly, before answering a call from his pocket. It was Munjoong.

“Yes, sir.”

- I see you left already, you’re very busy.

“Haha, I could go back up again if you have something to say to me.”

- No, no, you’re fine. I can just tell you over the phone. I just wanted to ask if you’re still digging for young talents.

"It's my job, so yes, I am."

- Is there anyone special? I'd like someone in either middle or high school.

"There's a few. May I ask why you're asking?"

- Taking up acting again was giving me a pretty big hit of nostalgia. It's nice living a lax life as someone who retired, but it does feel like I retired a little too early.

Junmin caught onto what Munjoong was trying to hint at immediately.

"You want to raise newbie actors again, sir?"

- You catch on quick.

"Really? Teacher, if you really do this, literally any actor, no matter how young or how old would ask to be taught by you."

- I don't like things to get that loud. I just want to teach young kids in my spare time, kind of like a hobby.

"I see. I understand. I'll send you a list quickly."

- That would be nice. Bring me some of the smart ones, please.

"Um, sir..."

- Hm?

"Are you perhaps thinking of starting up your theater company again..."

- No, not that far.

To Junmin's disappointment, Munjoong hung up promptly after that. Back in the day, Munjoong's theater company had a reputation as one of the two most famous theaters in Hyeonwa station; even Junmin had tried to get into the company in the past. He hoped for a second that the theater company of his dreams would be revived, but unfortunately, that didn't seem like it would happen any time soon.

"Even so..."

At least the man was willing to raise young actors. There were a lot of actors nowadays, but there weren't any that were talented enough. Plus, idols were starting to use their popularity to nudge their way into the world of acting as well. The world was quickly entering an era where actors had to truly show their worth.

"Kids, huh."

Junmin had quite a lot of young actors around him at the moment. Who should he choose out of them? He should probably call his senior later to see how many people the man was thinking of teaching as well.

Right then, Junmin's phone rang. He looked at the number on the phone curiously before taking the call.

"Lawyer Park? Is something wrong?"

- I called because of that kid you introduced to me, I felt like I should at least make a short report to my client.

“Ah, Maru?”

Junmin thought back to the boy’s ever-bored expression. The boy looked like he was starting to develop a serious interest in acting, but before he really managed to get into it, he got himself involved with an odd case.

School violence. Maru called a few days ago, claiming that the acting club was involved as well. The boy’s request was short, but that didn’t make it any less bold. The boy wanted to be introduced to a lawyer.

It was Junmin’s job as a producer to help an actor focus solely on acting. He had a good impression of Maru as well, so he easily accepted that request. Lawyer Park was the person he ended up introducing to Maru.

“How did it go?”

- It was simple. I was preparing a lot since you asked me to help him, but he came in with a ton of evidence from the start. He knew some of the lingo as well. He understood my words better than most adults, which felt a bit odd.

“The boy’s like that, yes. So, did it end up going well?”

- For now. Then again, just our law firm’s name solves most of our problems.

“Ugh, again with that bragging. Anyway, what about your pay?”

- It’s 120 thou per hour. Are you really willing to pay?

“...That’s a bit.”

- That was a joke. Consider this just one of those friend things, pay me back with actor Jung Woosung’s signature some other time. My daughter is a big fan.

“I’ll do that.”

Junmin hung up promptly.

* * *

Maru stood up from his seat after bidding farewell to lawyer Park, today should be the last day he would have to visit this law firm in Seoul.

“How bougie.”

The building that held the most influential law firm in the country looked much fancier than even the buildings around it, for whatever reason. This was a place full of lawyers who took a million won as base pay, with half a million as hourly rates. A true holy land for lawyers.

“Names are scary indeed.”

The moment Maru heard about the school committee's decision, he went to work. He thought about making a report to the ministry of education, but that would be complicated. The government wasn't especially good at their job when it came to things like this. Maru wanted to finish this off as fast as he could, so he got some help.

He didn't want to ruin the acting club's reputation by stepping forward, so he started off by using one of the victims to send threats to sue towards the principal and the chairman of the school. Lawyer Park sent a warning to the chairman in the very beginning, but there seemed to be a miscommunication between him and the principal. So while the chairman stepped back into the shadows, the principal simply worked as he always did.

The committee members probably laughed when they saw the threats to sue as well. They were composed of well-off parents, after all. The name of the KY law firm changed everything though. There was only one thing the school could do when faced with the biggest law firm in the biggest nation.

A white flag.

Plus, one of the victims' parents was actually one of lawyer Park's high school friends. They rekindled their friendship through this case, and lawyer Park motivation shot up as a result. The school surrendered fairly quickly, which marked an end to Maru's meetings with lawyer Park.

'The change should be reported tomorrow.'

The bullies should receive word about the new decision tomorrow. They should be facing a transfer at the very least.

"A power behind a name..."

This was why a person needed to become famous before doing anything else, power followed fame. If Junmin didn't help him, things would've been very troublesome for Maru.

Maru turned around from the building with a bitter smile. The law was scarier than violence and money was scarier than the law. But in the end, connections were the scariest above all else.

Chapter 108

In short, there were now four empty seats in the class. The bullies tried to transfer, but the school decided to expel them in the end. Byungsoo told Maru privately that in truth, he felt a little disappointed by the result.

[I did want this, but... It doesn't feel like we won.]

A 20 hour volunteer work turned into an expulsion in just a few minutes. The intended result was achieved, but Byungsoo probably didn't like how they achieved it. After all, if it wasn't for Maru's intervention, the school never would've acquiesced.

"The Hanja teacher will take an indefinite break due to a private reason. He seems sick, so be sure to write him a letter."

The Hanja teacher would probably have to give up on education completely. This was a private engineering school. His relationship with the chairman was ruined for good, so he probably couldn't

continue working here. According to lawyer Park, the chairman was just cutting off his tail. The man probably suggested to the teacher to quit quietly while he still could.

“I heard the Hanja teacher was super corrupt.”

“Maybe that’s why he got fired?”

Maru had to wonder just who was spreading these rumors among the students. Sometimes, they were scarily accurate to what really happened. In the end, the classroom was still as lively as ever, no one even cared about what happened to the bullies. Then again, the people who would care got expelled, too.

The boy called Gijung who used to get bullied by Changhu was still as quiet as ever. He did seem a little happier though, thankfully. The boy was starting to come back to class after break time with a smile on his face.

Despite all that, the relationship between the victims and the rest of the school wouldn’t improve by much any time soon. Most students probably thought of them as snitches at this point. Plus, everyone was in their own social circles already, it would be difficult for the victims to try to get in there.

‘But then again.’

It looked like the victims went on to form their own social circle. A good sign. They would probably maintain a very good relationship together for a very long time.

Maru’s eyes met with Gijung’s. Maru shrugged, causing Gijung to look away with a bit of shock.

“Hm.”

Maru told them multiple times that he was only helping them for the acting club, perhaps that’s why Gijung looked so shocked. He didn’t do all of this for a reward or anything, but that kind of reaction was still a little troublesome.

‘Byungsoo was like that, too.’

The other boy gave Maru a bit of a forced smile the last time they met. The boy practically ran away as soon as he saw Maru, making Maru wonder if he did something wrong.

“Wonderful. The class looks so nice now,” Dojin said, looking at Changhu’s seat.

“I heard one of the kids in that group had ties to the chairman, I’m surprised that the chairman cut them off. I wonder if that guy’s actually a nice person?”

Dojin popped some candy in his mouth with a grin, Maru decided to leave the boy be. If he revealed the truth here, he’d be chased by Dojin for the next several days for details.

“I kind of feel sorry for the bullies.”

“Oh, you big softie, you.”

Daemyung was commenting as he looked sadly at the empty seats. Apparently, if you get expelled by the school, you’d have it on your record for the next two years. They’d probably have to study

independently and do a test through the government to get a high school diploma. Only then would they be qualified to take the college entrance exams. At that point, they would be able to go around telling people that they dropped out of school instead of talking about what really happened.

“You don’t have to worry about it, they probably already hired good tutors to study. Maybe they’re even planning on doing international study. You know they’re all filthy rich.”

“T-that’s true. But... That guy worries me a bit.”

“Hosung?”

Daemyung nodded. There was a kid named Hosung in Changhu’s group. Unlike everyone else in that group, he alone seemed to have come from a poorer family.

“It’s totally his fault for acting like that, to begin with. Daemyung, this is just karma. Ignore it and move on. Man, you’re too kind.”

Daemyung smiled awkwardly. The boy was right though. Since Hosung wasn’t blessed with money like the others, he would have to work very hard by himself. That would be no easy feat.

“I really have to earn a lot of money.”

“What the hell?”

“Money?”

Maru told the two of them to think about what they want before falling over on his desk. Finally, he would be able to rest a bit. He was still busy for the rest of the week, but at least this was one thing off of his list.

“I’m sleeping.”

“Fine, fine. Sleep!”

* * *

“Maru’s... a bit weird.”

“Hm?”

Daemyung asked what was up as he passed a cup of hot chocolate to Dojin. Maru? Weird?

“He’s been a really cool guy from the day I met him. He also thinks really differently compared to all of us.”

“So?”

“It feels like there’s a distance between the two of us.”

“Well, he’s busy. He goes to a lot of places for acting. Maybe it’s because of that?”

“Well, there’s that, too, but... How do I put it? I feel a bit annoyed when I look at him.”

“Annoyed?”

Daemyung stepped sideways, dodging a female student running towards him. He almost spilled his drink. Daemyung took a sip from his cup before it spilled over before sighing.

"I get that he focuses on something a lot if he puts his mind to something. I also get that he cares a lot more for people than he likes to let on. After all, our relationship could only improve like this thanks to Maru."

Dojin continued with a hint of embarrassment, Daemyung started feeling a bit embarrassed as well. This guy said too many cringey things whenever they talked. Well, that was his charm, Daemyung figured.

"But if you look at him, you'll notice that there's always a reason why he does something."

"Well, he's only doing something because he has a reason."

"Ah... Damn, this is so hard to explain. It just feels like he's a bit up in the air. He's always busy and hardworking, but he has no motivation. No, he has motivation, but... Yeah! He's just circling around!"

"Circling around? Maru?"

Daemyung thought for a second. Maru? Circling around? Sure, he was doing that at the beginning of the school year for sure. He was always sitting at the edges of the club, never getting himself deeply involved. He was studying Chinese, CAD softwares, and sometimes even study guides for government employees. But recently, Maru was focusing solely on acting. How was that "circling around"?

Then, Daemyung came to a stop. Maybe Dojin was onto something.

"I don't know if it's because I'm weird, but that's what I feel whenever I look at Maru. He seems motivated but it doesn't make sense why he's motivated. It makes sense when I compare him with you. You're clearly working hard because you desperately want to get good at acting, but Maru doesn't give me that feeling at all. Even when he's working even harder than you. I might just be worrying too much, but... It feels like the more I know about Maru, the further I get from him."

A single word crossed Daemyung's mind.

"Empty..."

"....."

With a short exchange of glances, Daemyung realized that this one word explained everything Dojin was trying to say all this time.

* * *

Maru felt exhausted. He was glad that there was a heater running right above him. The school finally decided to unseal the heaters when the weather became cold. Thank goodness. Looking around him, he noticed that Dojin's seat was empty. He couldn't see Daemyung either.

"Did they leave to get snacks?"

There really weren't other places to go at this time. Maru yawned as he took out his phone, his mailbox was completely empty. In the past, when he really was this young, he used to text his friends nonstop. But as he aged, he grew tired of even asking for an update or making small talk with them. His tendency

to call people instead of messaging them probably contributed to his empty mailbox, too. But there was one person he always looked forward to getting messages from.

Her.

He wasn't even able to send her a message with how busy he's been.

"What's up?" he said, sending the message.

A reply came in just a few seconds.

[Waiting for food.]

Ah, right. She had quite an appetite. He recalled how she used to frown often whenever she got a new role in a play, the new memory lightened his mood even more.

"Do you have time on the weekend? I still haven't gotten my money back."

Again, a beep.

[We only have two weeks till the prelims. No time to play! Are you practicing well?]

"Well, you know."

I'm working hard, just for you. Maru couldn't bring himself to actually write that, so he just told her he was being lazy.

[Lazy? Wow, so confident. Well, we'll be taking first place in the winter nationals, so just you watch! Plus, we see each other three times a week already. Do you really have to ask for money through the mail? Don't you try anything weird, now.]

"Weird? No way."

Maru dropped back down on the desk after responding, "ok". He'd be seeing her again today as well. She was hard at work, even in the amateur classes. Her motivation was almost blinding in his eyes.

'Come to think of it, I need to be careful of him.'

Her charm was already starting to attract the attention of a few boys in their class.

"Why couldn't she just be a little pretty?"

Maru got a little worried, thinking that someone might steal her away from him. He thought of the future after high school, before shaking his head. He didn't want to think about such things right now.

'If she really does get together with someone else, then I...'

The door behind him opened, cutting Maru's thoughts right then and there. It was Dojin and Daemyung. Strangely, they didn't have a smile on their faces.

"Did something happen?"

"No, it's nothing."

What happened? Maru looked at the two with curious eyes.

* * *

Miso absolutely wasn't a fan of the extra one month given to them. She had created a schedule to try and make the club feel as nervous about the play as possible, but the extra month ended up ruining everything. They started practicing in August. They started doing runs in September, and they held the play at the festival in October to figure out extra problems. The plan was to enter the prelims perfectly in November. Miso's plan was perfect, but...

"We're getting lazy."

They were entering their fifth month of practice. Even pros only practiced for up to 2 months. Especially because extra practice could sometimes negatively impact a play, but they were entering their fifth month at this point. Everyone was visibly lax at this point.

"Everyone, come around."

Miso gathered the students around her.

"I'll give you guys homework."

"Homework?"

"Yeah, homework. You guys need something a little extra."

They all looked at each other after hearing the word "extra". Miso snapped her finger before continuing.

"Prepare a short one-man play. Your play will be about the person standing to your right. Observe your target carefully before making the play. It doesn't need to be anything special. You're just going to be imitating your neighbor."

"What?"

The club members looked at Miso in confusion.

Chapter 109

"Observation?" She asked, taking a sip of her barley tea.

"We have to make a one-man play using the characteristics of the person next to us. It's a bit harder than I thought," Maru mentioned, thinking of what happened yesterday.

He was a little surprised by the word that Miso used. What did she mean, "observation"? But as soon as he carried out the task she gave him, he understood what she was trying to do. As a matter of fact, it was exactly in line with what Ganghwan often liked to say: "there's no better training than observation." Carefully observing his target alone was giving him a very different impression of that person than what he normally felt.

"Hm, observation."

She thought for a second with a slight frown before turning to stare at Maru intently. Maru returned her gaze, mostly because he found her eyes adorable. She avoided his gaze first with a little cough. A little

word bubble appeared above her head, probably because their eyes met. Maru chose to ignore it. He didn't want to learn about what she was thinking using such underhanded tactics.

"Don't you ever get embarrassed about anything?"

"Embarrassed about what?"

"No, well... whatever. It always feels like I'm losing out if I start talking with you."

She stood up with a light snort. The two of them were currently in the Myungdong Art Theater. On days when they had their amateur classes, the theater would close a tad bit earlier, and the high schoolers and college students would practice together on stage. Maru remembered being shocked when he first started speaking on stage. Despite the auditorium being as big as it was, his voice could reverberate throughout the place easily. He could tell from just that one experience that indeed, the building was built specifically with acting in mind.

To say it was different from a small theater would be an understatement. Maru felt incredibly insignificant as soon as he looked out into the seats from the stage. To fill out a stage as big as this with one's own presence... would require an incredible amount of work.

"Hey, hey. Stop talking and get over here."

Ganghwan waved the high schoolers around him back over. There were twelve of them total, all from high school acting clubs near Seoul. Among them, there were even people who already made their debuts in the industry. Indeed, the producers for this project were incredibly careful in selecting candidates.

"I know you guys are all very busy with the festival. You have two weeks left now, right?"

"Exactly two weeks," one of the girls said nervously.

This girl was someone who went to Bosung high, a school that ended up getting second place in summer nationals, right after Myunghwa high. As a result, Maru often found the girl looking at her a lot. Whenever her eyes met with the girl's, she often waved back with an awkward smile. This caused the girl to wave back with a little bit of anger, a little bit of defeat, and a little bit of a forced smile all at once. The two would surely become good friends.

"Han Maru."

"Yes."

"Come out here and say your line," Ganghwan said, pointing towards him.

The first thing Ganghwan did after the amateur classes started was to give a script to each of the students. He gave them a temporary role and made them practice. After a few days, he held a quick reading session before making them act right away. He took careful notes as he watched the team perform a half-baked run, then assigned roles the very next day. As he assigned roles, he told them, "if you want to change roles, prove your skill to me." Meaning, they could switch roles with someone else as long as they were good enough. And today was the day when they could prove themselves to Ganghwan.

The amateur acting class was performing a play called 'class 3, grade 3', a casual play describing school life. It was a fairly average play, where none of the characters had any significant age differences.

Maru played the class president. A boy who excelled academically, but secretly admired the delinquents. Maru took a deep breath before imagining the classroom surrounding him. The classroom was tinted with a yellow hue from the warm afternoon sun. The blackboard was washed clean, and there was a little Korean flag hanging on its top left corner. He could hear some of the students making plans to go somewhere in the hallway. At the same time, he could hear the teachers yelling at the kids to not pick up any weird hobbies outside.

'Page five.'

The class president feels his heart start to beat, as he watches his friends he previously mocked start to dance. Once everyone leaves after school ends, he would look around carefully and start dancing himself, humming the song from earlier in the day. The door of the class opens, and his eyes immediately meet one of his friend's. What would the class president feel at that moment?

"....."

He was supposed to say 'no, this isn't what you think it is' in the script, but Maru had a different idea. He decided to be silent, and communicate through gestures instead. He closed his eyes tightly for a second before scratching his head awkwardly. He felt if he were in the same situation, he wouldn't be able to say anything. He fidgeted around nervously before walking away with an 'I'm leaving'.

"Okay, Kim Sihoon, you're up next."

Ganghwan nodded silently before calling on the next person. Maru walked back to where she was standing.

"Did I do well?"

"Mm, you were better than the script, at the least. But the audience wouldn't be able to see you fidgeting from afar, so maybe you do need some more dialogue to compensate."

"Hm, is that so."

"It's a pass, in my opinion. But I'm not the instructor, so don't take my words to heart."

The boy after Maru also acted out a short scene. Again, Ganghwan simply said 'okay' before calling on the next person. There was no feedback from him whatsoever, making this entire test move along incredibly quickly. The kids around Maru were talking to each other about the scene they would act out on stage.

"You want to hang out this weekend?"

"I have practice."

"Your club's pretty insane, huh. Weekend practice?"

"I know you guys practice just as much as us, so shut it."

"Rest is important, too."

“No, you. I’m going to practice more, and get that best acting award. My senior took it this summer, so I’m gonna go for the winter one.”

“Just where is that confidence coming from?”

“Practice, obviously.”

What a workaholic... Maru gave up on going on a date this week, as well. As he expected, her mind was set in stone whenever it came to acting. Even in his brief memories of the past he could see her practicing during their dates. He didn’t hate seeing her do that, though, so he didn’t mind.

The kids stepped up one by one to act. After the last kid finished, Ganghwan gave his notebook one last glance before gathering everyone up.

“Good job doing practice, first of all. You have a pretty decent grasp of your characters even while practicing for the winter nationals. And here I was getting ready to scold you for being lazy, too. I’m relieved that you’re all so hard working.”

It looked like everyone passed, for now. Ganghwan continued talking as he flipped through his notebook.

“As you guys know, this amateur class is a test run. It’s not really about holding a successful play, but more about figuring out how to schedule everything. It’s not a competition or anything either. Sure, it’d be good practice for you guys to act at a stage as big as this, but that’s not good enough of a reason to try so hard for this, is it?”

A hint of playfulness crept up on Ganghwan’s face. He was starting to rev up, clearly. Whenever the man put on a face like that, he always liked to start something ridiculously annoying. Maru had a small flashback to when the man made him walk blindly on the streets with that same expression. Saying that it was for developing Maru’s ‘other senses’ or something.

“I heard that many of you are dreaming of becoming professional actors. Some of you even worked as a child actor even. That’s why I wanted to show you how professional actors get the roles that they want. Ah, I’m not actually showing you how that would work. I’m going to make you do it.”

“Meaning...”

“I told you, right? If you want a role, prove your worth to me. From what I saw today, all of you are pretty average. None of you’re particularly talented or anything. So, we’ll hold a proper audition, starting today, all the way to next week. We’re going to hold an audition for several roles each day. If you want a particular role, you should apply for the audition and challenge yourself.”

Ganghwan stroked his chin with an odd smile.

“But just a simple audition is too boring. We need additional motivation. Am I right?”

The kids reluctantly nodded. Maru had to wonder just what that human was up to this time on the inside.

“You might know if you’ve seen a play, but normally there are four important roles, four side characters, and four characters that are no better than props. Occasionally you will see people saying that all

characters in a play are important, but they're wrong. After all, you can't say that Romeo's friend in Romeo and Juliet is more important than Romeo, am I right?"

"Yeah."

"That's the same with this place. The class president, the delinquents, and the teacher. Roles like these appear in every scene, and they always take the center stage. I'm planning on modifying the script to make these four characters have more importance in the play. Meaning... the stage time for other characters would be cut."

Ganghwan twirled with a little grin on his face. The students, who were used to Ganghwan's odd movements at this point, waited silently. But knowing well that this conversation could go somewhere very odd if Ganghwan was left alone to talk by himself, Maru stepped in.

"So what's the reward?"

"Reward! That's right, rewards are important. You know that our play is going to be put on for free, right?"

"Yes."

"That's it."

"What?"

Ganghwan made another odd look.

"A teacher that I respect greatly will be coming to see this play. Not just to watch the play, obviously. If you truly have dreams of becoming an actor, then... Don't miss this chance. Appeal yourselves to this man."

Ganghwan muttered 'if only I were 13 years younger' to himself dejectedly.

"Who's coming?"

"You can see for yourself on the day of. You guys might not know about him, though. He's a bit of a legend. Haha."

* * *

"I'm leaving! See ya!"

"....."

She disappeared in a flash. Her eyes changed immediately after hearing what Ganghwan said. For someone who wanted to be an actor, this chance Ganghwan offered must've been incredibly tempting for her. Maru didn't know who Ganghwan was talking about, but he could easily tell it was going to be someone extraordinary.

"Not just to watch, huh..."

Was the man there to cast some of the actors? Or what? Maru thought for a bit, but gave up thinking in the end. Honestly, he wasn't very attracted by this offer. He was busy enough. If he were to get any

busier from here, he wouldn't be able to spend any time with her. That would be troublesome. After all, he was only working hard right now for his family.

"Hah, I guess I have to work on Miso's assignment, now."

The sun was setting, but he still had a mountain of work to do. Maru took out his phone and started scrolling through his contacts.

* * *

Daemyung was on the way back home after finishing his lesson with his coach. His coach worked as a principal of an acting school after working for years around Hye-hwa station. The coach always taught him acting very kindly, always relating to personal experiences to help Daemyung understand the harder concepts.

'Hah, I need to lose weight...'

The one thing his coach gave him as homework was to control his weight. Daemyung wasn't very ashamed of his body, but he could only agree with the coach when he was told that actors needed to freely control their weight. But just as he shook off his hunger and got on the bus, his phone rang. It was Maru.

Chapter 110

Wednesday. The middle of the week. As expected, there weren't many people walking around in the park, as if to show that the weekend was still far off. Daemyung walked into a convenience store to take shelter from the cold wind. His eyes immediately wandered to the snacks and cup noodles, but he couldn't grab them because of his coach's instructions. So instead, he opted for a warm drink. The door to the convenience store opened, and a couple around his age walked in. Daemyung walked to the corner of the eating area, feeling self-conscious for some reason.

'How nice.'

There were three girls in the club, but he'd never hung out with them outside of club activities.

'They all have their matches as well.'

Geunseok and Yurim were a public couple, and Soyeon and Taejoon liked each other. Iseul... was hard to approach, so he'd pass.

'Come to think of it, they were setting up something for Taejoon, weren't they?'

Iseul had decided to help Taejoon after watching the boy struggle for all this time, saying that she'd pick a day to invite the two of them to her parents' restaurant. Daemyung didn't know the specifics of when it would happen, though. Maybe it'd be on a Sunday, when there was no practice? As the couple in the convenience store walked out, Maru walked in.

It looked like it'd gotten even colder out there. Daemyung felt he got a little colder when Maru walked towards him.

"Cold, right?"

“Pretty cold. Did you see it snowing outside?”

“Really?”

Indeed, it was snowing outside. Daemyung could see the couple smiling at each other through the window. They must be on a date. How nice.

“Hey man, there’s nothing wrong with experiencing the first snow of the season with a guy.”

“Yes there is...”

“Hmm, you planning on getting a girlfriend now, Mr. Daemyung?”

“W-what? No way? Someone like me has no chance.”

“Oh, to be young.”

Maru bought himself a piece of bread and milk before coming back.

“Did you not eat yet?”

“Yeah. I forgot to eat dinner. You’re not gonna eat?”

“I’m fine.”

Daemyung looked at his stomach with a smile.

“The coach told me to lose weight, so I’m going to try and shave five kilos.”

“Must be hard. Want cup noodles?”

Maru ate his food with a slight smile. Daemyung looked at Maru carefully. His target of observation for Miso’s homework was Maru, but he was pretty much done at this point, so he didn’t need to observe the other boy.

“Don’t look at me so intently, you’re going to make me fall for you.”

“F-fall for- what?”

Maru continued eating, ignoring Daemyung. He must’ve been pretty hungry.

“My head was spinning from how hungry I was. Are you really not going to eat, though? If you try to lose weight so quickly, your body’s not going to enjoy it. You gotta be slow with this stuff.”

“It’s okay, I had an egg already.”

“Really? That’s enough?”

“Probably not, but I’m gonna try my best.”

“Want cup noodles?”

“Stop saying that, you’re really making me hungry.”

Daemyung glanced at the cup noodles section one more time before shaking his head. A single cup noodle had at least 400 calories. He would need to walk for at least 40 minutes to burn all of that off. 5 minutes of happiness for 40 minutes of pain... Daemyung knew it was a bad deal, but his mouth just kept watering regardless.

"Is your observation period almost over?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

Daemyung took out his diary.

"Did you even have anything to write? I'm a pretty simple guy."

Maru extended his hand, and Daemyung handed him his diary.

"I didn't write much."

"Really?"

Maru started flipping through the diary with a hand on his chin. For some reason, Daemyung felt like he was getting his homework reviewed by a teacher. Maru was reading the pages with a lot of focus. It honestly made Daemyung feel pressured. Right then...

"This..."

Maru was pointing at a particular point on a page. Daemyung leaned to take a look, then took the diary out of Maru's hands.

"T-these are just personal thoughts. Don't worry about it."

"But you still got those feelings while you observed me, didn't you?"

"It's all just random bullshit. Really. I just forgot to throw it away."

That was a section Daemyung hadn't planned on showing Maru, he shouldn't have passed his diary over so casually.

"Something I shouldn't have seen..."

"W-w-what?"

Daemyung stuttered. He felt like he got found out-- no, he got found out. Had he been that obvious?

'Then again, even I would get suspicious.'

He should've just laughed it off. Why did he have to act so suspiciously? Daemyung tried to laugh it off, but Maru wasn't one to let him go just like that.

"I'm not trying to scold you or anything, I just want to know how you see me as a person."

"...I really just wrote that for no reason."

Maru looked absolutely serious. In the end, Daemyung had no choice but to hand over the diary again.

"I just wrote it for fun. Don't read into it too much or anything."

“Wait.”

Daemyung closed his mouth tightly. Was he mad? Then again, he did write something that could be pretty offensive in that notebook. Daemyung deeply regretted writing it down in his notebook. As expected, Maru had a pretty deep frown on his face, which was enough to make a chill run down Daemyung’s spine.

The boy was reading through Daemyung’s writing with intense focus, even going over the same pages repeatedly. Maru really was reading the notebook as if he was reading a novel.

‘Maybe he isn’t mad.’

Daemyung realized that Maru’s frown wasn’t actually directed at him. Once Maru finished reading, he closed the book.

“M-Mar.”

“So this is what you thought when you looked at me?”

“No, I...”

“I’m not mad, so just tell me honestly. I just want to hear what you have to say.”

Maru was talking very quietly. Unlike usual, his voice lacked confidence. The boy had always seemed to have the confidence to come out on top in any given situation, almost like an old man, but not anymore. Daemyung realized right then, Maru really did need his opinions. In fact, he didn’t even need to make his words sound better. It would be best if he was honest with Maru right now.

“This is something I thought of with Dojin last time.”

“Dojin?”

“Dojin felt the same thing as me. I realized my feelings weren’t wrong when I actually started observing you. I tried asking the other kids to make sure and they told me similar things.”

“If even the others felt this way, then this might as well be a fact about myself.”

“It’s just a feeling in the end, but...”

Daemyung fidgeted for a second before making up his mind. Maru always helped him out with his problems. This time, the other boy was the one who needed his help. He felt it was his responsibility to help the boy out as much as he could.

“I’d like to say some things if you don’t mind listening. Again, this is just an observation. Do you remember when you first talked to me in class?”

“Of course.”

“I’m thankful you did that. If you didn’t, I might be a victim of bullying by now, just like Gijung.”

“Well....”

"In any case, you're a nice person who likes to help troubled people out. But recently, I started thinking that you're not just nice. This is just me who thinks this, but I think you have a specific rule for helping people."

"Rule?"

"First, you can't get impacted negatively from helping someone out. Don't get too offended, this is just an observation like I said."

"Alright. Please continue."

"Remember when we hung out together after your summer job at the gas station ended? And some people got into a fight where we were?"

"Of course."

"I thought you'd stop them right there, but you just decided to leave instead. There's been a lot of moments like those, actually. You do help people, but you never step in if you think you're going to be affected."

"Mm. That's right."

Maru didn't disagree.

"I think you're pretty amazing, regardless. Most of us usually don't decide to help people at all."

"Thanks for the compliment, but that's not what I want to hear right now."

"Y-yeah."

Daemyung opened the diary and started reading everything about Maru from it, reading it reminded him of exactly what had happened in all of those moments.

"Back then when you saw the kids getting bullied, you didn't help them. I heard you only helped them because of Changhu. Is that true?"

"Yeah."

"The Han Maru that I've observed never does anything that would harm him, he's not really a figure of justice. But strangely, this rule doesn't actually apply when it comes to acting. Remember when you shook the club upside down that one time?"

"Oh, that?"

"I asked Mr. Taesik about what happened."

"You worked hard for this, didn't you?"

"It's homework, after all. You know my dream is to be a director. I think studying actors in detail is good practice, so... Hm, hm. In any case, you shook up the club, despite knowing that you would be impacted negatively as a result. Same with how you always did the menial tasks for the club. Whenever something involved acting, you really went out of your way to do certain things even if it would be bad for you."

“Right.”

“That’s when I started thinking, maybe acting has some great meaning to you. But that makes something else even stranger. You said at the beginning of the school year that you weren’t interested in acting, that it wasn’t worth investing time into. That was why you always skipped practice, but you’re working harder than anyone now. That’s when I realized that maybe you were trying to get something out of acting, and that was why you were trying so hard.”

That’s when Maru closed his mouth and the boy nodded in agreement silently.

“That’s when I started looking back on your character. You studied really hard when school started. But now, you’ve started skipping homework and you’re focusing most of your time on your scripts. You’re working very, very hard on acting, but I couldn’t help but get the feeling that... You might give up on acting very easily.”

Maru focused most of his time on acting when December came. He’d even used most of his time on the weekdays to work on acting, while weekends were reserved for practice in Myungdong. Clearly, the boy was dedicating most of his life to acting right now. But... Daemyung couldn’t shake off a certain feeling. Was Maru trying this hard for acting because he truly cared for it?

Looking at the boy again with that in mind made Daemyung come to ‘that’ conclusion. Empty. No matter how you tried to spin it, it wasn’t a very nice thing to say to someone. That was why Daemyung had snatched the diary from Maru’s hands in the beginning.

“And the conclusion is?”

“What?”

“If you’ve observed Han Maru this much, you must’ve come to some sort of a conclusion about your character. Some sort of a theme that you can use for the character. Am I right?”

“Ah, yeah.... yeah.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

Daemyung hesitated for a bit before opening his mouth.

“There’s two versions.”

“Two versions?”

“Yeah. The first was to portray you as a hardworking actor. A character that manages to do just about anything he wants, as long as he makes up his mind about it. A character that’s strong and kind at the same time.”

“I suppose what I’d want to listen to would obviously be the second one.”

Daemyung nodded. Honestly, he’s only thought about the second one. He didn’t really want to talk about it and he wasn’t confident that he would be able to act it out that well either. Unfortunately, he didn’t have a choice to stay silent since the boy wanted to hear about it.

“The second...”

Daemyung opened the last page of his diary.

“I thought about what you ultimately want to get through acting and what you would be like if you lost that thing.”

Daemyung carefully continued speaking.

“This might just be my imagination. Maybe I’m thinking too much. You can insult me if you want; after all, I’m saying stuff like this when you’re putting your all into acting. But I really can’t shake off this feeling. Ah, there’s one more thing. I came to this conclusion after thinking about the previous two things I mentioned, but... It really feels like you’re acting a character called Han Maru.”

Saying this was bound to make Maru mad, Daemyung thought.