

## Once Again 131

### Chapter 131

Suyeon knocked on the door of the makeup room with a bottle of aloe juice.

“Who is it?”

A woman’s head poked out from the room, she was probably one of the actors that Junmin talked about.

“Hello, I’m Kim Suyeon.”

She smiled and handed the woman a drink for now. First gifts should always be small. Something that one could easily get rid of if they didn’t like it. An expensive first gift would only garner suspicion from others.

“Ah, yes.”

The woman took the juice, confused. Success. Suyeon smiled, looking inside the dressing room through the open door. There was a sandwich inside, indicating the people inside must’ve been talking while eating.

“Oh, what nice timing. We can talk while you eat.”

She stepped in very casually. Doors were amazing things. They managed to split one space from the other both literally and figuratively. That’s why she always needed to pay attention when she was crossing doorways. If she just stepped in right away, they would be wary for sure. So instead, she’d step inside after a little bit of a positive greeting, thus they would welcome her. Her beautiful face helped with this, no doubt.

“Who are you?”

A man stood up from his seat to look at her.

“Hello, I’m Kim Suyeon.”

“Ah, yes.”

It doesn’t matter even if he didn’t know her. What’s important was telling the person his name. If she was able to use something to instill a good impression to her name, it would also make their conversation much easier.

“I heard from Mr. Junmin that there were very amazing actors in the makeup room. I just dropped by to say hello.”

Just mentioning Junmin’s name managed to change the expressions of the four people. This was why names were important.

“Are you talking about Director Lee Junmin?”

“Yes. Ah, I should introduce myself again. I’m Kim Suyeon, a hardworking actor. I’m working under Mr. Junmin.”

One of the men exclaimed lightly in recognition.

“Oh, the one from the TV miniseries...”

“Wow, you recognize me? Thank you! It’s my first time.”

This would be good enough for greetings. She had to be careful to not downplay herself, she couldn’t afford to let herself get looked down on by others. She needed to be humble, but not overly so.

“I’ve been enjoying your drama very much.”

When one person recognized her, the others started approaching her with a smile. This was why first impressions were so important. The gift she brought was very small, but it was also indicative that she prepared to meet the other party. Suyeon knew very well that this was very important in starting a good relationship.

“Thank you. Wow, I had no idea other actors were watching as well. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

People often feel charm not from a person’s good parts, but rather a person’s bad parts. The phrase “be humble” was honestly enough to describe everything about all human relationships. As long as she compliments the other side somewhat and leaves some room for herself to be complimented as well...

“Embarrassed? No way. You did very well.”

Suyeon smiled shyly one more time. She was already pretty much inside the room, but she didn’t make any motion to get further inside.

“Please, sit here.”

That was the cue she was waiting for. She didn’t think of sitting, of course. She knew very well that regardless of the situation, a surprise guest would only make people uncomfortable.

“No no, it’s fine, please keep talking. We can talk some other time when you’re not so busy. I’d definitely want some acting advice from seniors like you.”

“Haha, we’re not that skilled ourselves.”

“Even so.”

Suyeon stepped backwards and bowed. These people were all in their mid-twenties and thirties. Despite that, she still bowed to all of them politely, even to the women. She actually needed to pay more attention to women, since they had a very good eye for judging each other. If she needed to put in 20% of her effort impressing the men, the other 80% of her effort would go to impressing the women.

“Ah, that bracelet looks great on you.”

“This?”

She mentioned it on the way out, pretending as if she thought of it just now. The actress showed her bracelet with a shy smile, it was a bracelet made out of little dark stones. Honestly speaking, it didn’t fit the woman. Women with cat-like eyes, like her, were better accompanied with flashy accessories, such as gems. Of course, that was only something Suyeon thought to herself while making the compliment.

“Yeah, bracelets like that really don’t fit a person unless they have a thin wrist like you do. I tried it in the past, and oh dear, I could only sigh.”

“Why? I think it would look good on you, Ms. Suyeon.”

“No, not at all. I have a darker skin tone, so darker bracelets like that just don’t fit me.”

Suyeon stared at the bracelet for a bit before stepping back in surprise.

“I’m sorry, I must’ve wasted a lot of your free time.”

“Not at all.”

The men sat down as they bid their farewells and the actress that Suyeon complimented even walked her to the door.

“I’ll see you next time. With some alcohol, between us girls. How about it?”

“Sounds great.”

Suyeon said her goodbyes multiple times after hearing the actress’ name. They were of the same age, so they should be able to get along nicely if they meet next time.

“Then,”

Suyeon turned around and sighed. Junmin probably told her to meet them for a reason. After all, that man always had a good reason for making her do things. That was one thing she really liked about him, he was efficient. Of course, what she felt was merely admiration without an ounce of romance. After all, he was one of the few people she decided to take up as a mentor. After meeting the actors, she headed downstairs. On the way, she ran into the director of the entire stage. He seemed to have a man around her age next to him.

“Oh, you’re leaving, sir?”

“Of course. By the way, actress Kim. You’re only getting prettier by day, aren’t you?”

“Thank you.”

“This is Mintae, my student. Treat him well if you ever end up working with him.”

After shaking hands with the man introduced to her as Yoon Mintae, she walked over to find Junmin. Junmin was looking at his notebook with a very concerned face.

“Why don’t you buy a laptop at this point? The recent ones are pretty light and slim.”

“If my thought wanders off before the laptop even loads, what am I supposed to do?”

“Isn’t it uncomfortable, just writing away like that?”

“Are you uncomfortable with breathing?”

“Gosh, I don’t know what to say if you’re coming at me like that.”

Suyeon handed Junmin a new notebook as she spoke. It was an expensive brand, made by an artisan in Italy. It was expensive, but Junmin was very deserving of a gift like this. The man gave it a glance before taking it from her hands with a smile. He looked at it here and there before putting it in his pocket with a nod. He must like it.

"It's good, isn't it?"

"Why wouldn't it be good? You gave it to me after all."

"Oh my, that's a compliment, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. Only that it was directed at the notebook, not you."

"Boo."

Suyeon sat on Junmin's other side, being with this man brought her peace. She didn't need to put on a mask. That is, she didn't need to act fake or be needlessly nice in front of him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Just thinking of the old times. Wondering why you took in someone like me, and whatnot."

"You should know that better than me."

"What?"

"You're good at charming people. That's an amazing skill. Charm is usually cultivated, but some people are born with it. I recognized that you were one such person, so I took you in."

"Don't you regret it? I heard some people have bad opinions of you because of this."

"You're talking about the men who feel like they lost because they got tricked by a woman? Why would I need to feel regret about that? If not by you, someone else would've come along and done the same thing anyways."

Junmin closed his notebook and took off his glasses. Those glasses dangling on his neck couldn't look sexier to Suyeon right now. Middle-aged men always had a certain charm to them.

"Just be careful not to break the law. There's nothing wrong with a woman trying to take advantage of her gender. Whether you try to look like a slut or simply a beautiful woman is all up to you."

"You've never thought of me as disgusting, teacher?"

"Did you ever think that way about yourself?"

"No, not at all. I'm just very good at manipulating people."

"That's enough, then. If men are creatures who use their strength to take women, then women are the ones who actually control the men. Men are drawn to beauty, the same way that women are drawn to power. It's a natural thing. We were born this way and we'll die this way."

"Is that so?"

“Do what you want. But always make sure you can take care of it. If you cause too much trouble, I’ll cut you away immediately. Just like you have a talent for charm, I have a talent for severing relationships.”

“How cruel. If that’s the case, why do you raise so many dogs?”

“Because dogs love you back just as much as you love them. Humans, on the other hand, start rebelling against you if you show them love. If you treat them well, they treat you like an idiot. If you get mad at them, you’re a bastard. I’d rather be a bastard than an idiot. At least that way I can get some food on my table.”

“You’re way too cynical for someone who deals with people for a living, do you know that?”

“Of course I do. That’s why I have you around, because you’re useful.”

“Really? Just because I’m useful? Nothing else?”

“If I didn’t care about you, I wouldn’t be telling you this to begin with. As long as you’re with me, I’m going to be kind to you.”

“Ew, sounds so cheesy.”

Suyeon laughed to herself loudly. This was why she couldn’t leave Junmin. This person gave her confidence, confidence that she would be able to thrive even if she were to throw her mask away.

“I’m going to ask you this one more time. Do you want to have dinner with me tonight? I know a great hotel.”

“I don’t eat anything too expensive. Go find someone else.”

“Wow, aren’t you picky.”

Suyeon stood up with a wink.

“Ah, by the way, the boy that’s under Ganghwan. Is that someone under you, too, Teacher?”

“Han Maru?”

Junmin smiled even brighter than when he got the notebook when he said the name.

“Wow, he must be something else if you’re smiling that widely.”

“He definitely is, I still don’t know what he is. I’m even more excited by the fact that I can’t tell just how far he can go.”

“Hmm, is that so?”

“Are you thinking of playing around with him?”

“If you allow it.”

“It probably won’t work that easily.”

“Why?”

“He’s... a bit of a strange one.”

Junmin put on a mysterious look as he spoke.

“Mm, now you’re scaring me a little. I’m gonna give up.”

“You should meet him, though. It’ll be pretty fun.”

Junmin looked down at his notebook, indicating that the conversation was over. Suyeon bowed. She watched Junmin wave back before leaving the theater.

“Ah, Ms. Suyeon.”

It was the actress from before. Suyeon put on her mask again, approaching the actress with a smile on her face.

“It’s over?”

“Yes.”

“What a coincidence. Would you like to go for a drink? Ah, do you drink?”

“A little bit.”

“What happened to the men from before?”

“We were all a bit busy, so we split up.”

“Ah, are you busy?”

“No, I’m free.”

“Good to hear. Let’s go!”

Suyeon locked her arms with the woman’s. She needed to be good at skinships if she wanted to be social. Judging from the actress’ reaction, the woman didn’t seem to hate it. In fact, she seemed to be welcoming of Suyeon’s friendliness.

“We’re the same age, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Should we drop formalities, then?”

“Sure.”

And with this, a new connection was formed. Suyeon thought carefully about what she could get through this relationship as they walked down the street.

\* \* \*

“Take care.”

“Yes. You too.”

“Of course.”

Maru started moving after seeing the car take off. Thanks to Ganghwan, he managed to get home with ease. The man told Maru that he was going to teach Maru a lot of things, but they ended up talking about girls instead because of Suyeon. Since men were always into pretty women, Maru just went along with the conversation all the way till now.

“Oh, you came back early today.”

His sister greeted him when he entered, she'd been treating him nicer recently. Did she get mature, or did she just give in after all the money he gave her?

“Ah, I gave Dowook that ginseng drink.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course.”

“Heck yeah, he deserved it.”

“Hey, what's with your language? I thought it was a gift.”

“But he didn't take it. He must've drunk it without even wanting to, so he totally deserves it.”

“You should try to be nicer.”

“I'm nice enough already.”

Bada grinned happily. How did such a bright girl get divorced? Maru realized once again how uncaring he was towards his family. He smiled bitterly, once again realizing that his parents weren't all there was to it.

“Dinner?”

“I ate already.”

“What the.”

“Why?”

“I bought that already since I thought you haven't eaten yet.”

His sister was pointing at a cup noodle on the table. Maru could only smile.

“I'll eat it.”

He'd probably get scolded by her if he didn't actually eat it. Plus, he did still feel a little bit hungry after the burger. As he stood around in the kitchen waiting for the water to boil, he got a message. It was from her.

[You didn't feel lonely or anything without me, did you?]

Oh?

Maru thought about sending a teasing message before changing his mind.

[Really lonely.]

No response. But just thinking of her being happy at his message made him feel happy as well.

“Bro! The water’s boiling!”

“Yeah.”

But before anything, he had to eat before his sister became cranky.

## **Chapter 132**

It was a Thursday. Thursday in the middle of December, a week before Christmas. It was also four days before the prelims for the nationals.

“So, the reason why I know this is because...”

Dojin had been reading from his script since morning. He was carrying it around everywhere, saying that he just couldn’t memorize his new lines from the edited script. It was probably because he was nervous. After all, the prelims was dead ahead.

“Gaaah! Why can’t I think, god damn it?!”

He’d even gotten to the point of starting to insult himself. As a matter of fact, his behavior was starting to get to Maru as well.

“Just stay calm. You memorized this already, so why are you getting so worried?”

“It’s all changed slightly, so I can’t remember it. If it keeps going like this, the instructor’s going to murder me for sure.”

“It’s not like you never got scolded by her, you’ll be fine.”

“Dude, you might get screwed over too.”

Dojin was looking down at the script then the ceiling repeatedly as he said his lines. By the looks of things, this would likely continue for the rest of the day. Maru could already imagine Miso shouting at Dojin in his head.

“Math is our last class?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to have to give up math.”

“You’ve always given up on math though.”

“I’m going to sacrifice math for my acting.”

“Nice excuse.”

“Ugh, please!”

Dojin flipped at his hair for a bit before realizing he didn’t have time for this and got back to memorizing his script. His hand was moving quickly as well, writing down the lines he said in his notebook. If only he



would study this hard... He'd probably score in the ninetieth percentile with ease. Maru took his eyes off of Dojin for a second to look at the front of the classroom. Daemyung was chanting out his lines as well out of nervousness.

"You memorized everything, right?" Dojin asked.

Maru nodded. These two friends of his memorized their lines well from the start. They were probably only this worried because of the text they got last night.

[If you make a mistake, you're dead.]

A short, sweet, and terrifying message. It came at 1am, too. Anyone who saw it before going to sleep most likely didn't get a good night's sleep. Miso *probably* wouldn't murder anyone, since it was illegal. Just that, it was easy to imagine she'd get very close to it if given the chance. In fact, Maru could still hear the club members screaming during the fall exercise sessions. Maru carefully took out his script. He knew he was perfect, but just in case... He really didn't want to mess with a tiger that just sharpened its claws.

"I can't memorize it!"

Maru started focusing on the script, treating Dojin's screams as something like background music.

\* \* \*

The last class of the day ended. For some reason, their homeroom teacher told them he wasn't going to check the class for cleanliness as he left. Thanks to that, the cleaning team had the fortune of going home early. Maru, Dojin and Daemyung were also a part of those who experienced this fortune.

"They're probably all there already..."

They weren't fans of getting to go early, though. Dojin looked at his script one last time as he started moving. Maru could only shake his head.

"You still haven't managed to memorize it?"

"I don't get it. Why? This never happened before."

"Must be because you're too nervous. Just be normal man, normal."

Right. Being normal was important. In the end, they just didn't have to mess up. They just needed to do as they always did in practice.

...Though, once Maru actually managed to reach the auditorium doors, he had to retract his previous statement.

He could hear a chilling shout come from behind the iron door.

"Are you crazy? Are you actually for real?! Why did you stutter there! You must be going mad, aren't you? Aren't you?!"

"I'm sorry!"

The person who screamed in apology was a second year. Minsung, to be exact. Hearing the boy's scared voice was enough to make even Maru get nervous. It seemed that Miso really came here with the intent to kill today.

"...Want to run?"

Why was it that Dojin's idiotic suggestion seemed so tempting today? But it was too late. Before he even realized it, Maru was already opening the door. Then again, he might as well get this over with.

"Get over here, you lazy idiots!"

The first thing they got when they walked in was a shout. Maru threw his bag on the ground and started running. The other two behind him did the same.

"Han Dojin."

"Yes!"

Miso glared at Dojin for a second before flipping through her script. She came to a spot somewhere in the middle to read a line.

"Hello, I just moved in upstairs. This isn't much, but please have some rice cake."

That was Geunseok's line, in a scene where he was handing out rice cakes to all the neighbors of Dalseok-dong. Dojin stared at Miso confusedly. After exactly three seconds,

"You lost your mind, didn't you?"

"W-what?"

"You don't know what you're doing, don't you? You don't even know what *we're* doing, do you? You weren't even memorizing your lines, weren't you!!"

Miso rolled up her script into a stick and started poking Dojin's stomach with it.

"20 laps around the auditorium. Sprint."

"Yes!"

Dojin stepped back with gritted teeth. Like Minsung, he started sprinting as well. The auditorium took up a massive section of the fifth floor. Sprinting twenty laps around it would most definitely be a difficult task.

"Park Daemyung."

"Yes!"

This time, Miso didn't even look at the script as she said her line. Just like before, it was one of Geunseok's lines. Daemyung immediately turned bright when he heard it, he needed to know this part. Daemyung calmly said his line back at Miso.

"This country is rotten. All sorts of animals are trying to become government workers just because it's 'easy'. Ah, what am I doing, you ask? I'm unemployed."

There wasn't anything wrong, at least from how Maru heard it. This was probably a pass, right? But when Maru looked at Miso, he found an even scarier face than when Dojin forgot his line. It looks like they were screwed no matter what they did today.

"What are you doing?"

"Um, what?"

"Are you reading a textbook?"

"....."

"You must be crazy. Hey, Daemyung."

"Yes!"

"You must've gotten very lazy after all these times I've complimented you. Isn't that right!"

"Not at all, ma'am!"

"Then why the hell are you saying your lines like that? Are you a pro? You think you can just say your line perfectly when you go on stage without any practice?"

"...No, ma'am."

"So why are you reading your line like it's from a textbook? Are you trying to show off just because you memorized your line? You run 30 laps."

Daemyung stepped back with a defeated expression. Maru looked at his friends nervously, something told him that he would be joining them soon.

"Han Maru."

"Yes."

"You're not focusing, are you? You don't care about any of this?"

"....."

"40 laps."

Good god.

Maru started sprinting right past his friend Daemyung.

\* \* \*

"Focus! We're doing one more run with no mistakes. Don't stop being nervous. Got it?"

"Yes!"

They were entering their third run at this point. The clock pointed to 9pm. Maru already decided to skip the amateur acting class for the nationals, but he really missed that place right around now. Miso was glaring at them still, telling them to hurry up. The club members exchanged looks and began the play.

Every time they made a mistake, Miso would unleash her wrath upon them. They really needed to focus today.

The play began with Geunseok stepping off of the stage. The club members looked at their scripts whenever they were outside the current scene. On stage, Geunseok was carefully saying his lines, making sure not to make mistakes.

'Maybe Miso's the nervous one here.'

This was honestly the first time Miso's gotten this brutal towards the students. Perhaps it was because her pride got shattered during the last nationals. Moreover, she was a professional. Professionals needed to show results to prove their skill and she already failed last time in doing this.

Of course, Maru knew very well that Miso wasn't the type of person who'd get nervous over something like this. It was probably just one of the reasons why she was acting like this today.

'Let's focus.'

He wasn't nervous even on a real stage. Then again, acting in front of strangers was always easier. Strangers couldn't tell when you made mistakes, but Miso wasn't a stranger. Today, she was a strict queen striving towards perfection. The moment any of them makes a mistake, they would all be sent to the guillotine.

\* \* \*

"You can rest."

"Yes."

The students gathered with their scripts. Looking at that, Miso sighed in relief. During the extra month they were given, Miso tried to give the students all sorts of experiences. She dragged actors she knew to show them what good acting looked like. She also let them practice on a bigger stage, like the one in the Blue Sky theater in HyeHwa station. She even gave them homework to observe each other. She didn't regret her decision. If they just kept on practicing for a month, the club would've only gotten lazy.

When she came to the auditorium two days ago, Miso could only laugh from how ridiculous the sight in front of her was. She wasn't supposed to come to school that day, it was a day when the students would practice by themselves and go home. It just so happened that business on her end ended quickly, so she dropped by the school with a few snacks. What greeted her was darkness. It was only eight, yet the auditorium had clearly been deserted for a few hours. That was when she could feel the heat rise to her head. She picked up the phone and asked Yoonjung casually, 'what did you do today?' The answer she got was a 'we went back home after a single run.'

"Crazy."

That was all Miso could say. Freedom always comes with responsibility, freedom without responsibility was nothing but laziness. She would've felt nothing if this was done by the pros. They would've practiced in their own time, after all. But these were students. Amateur actors. They dared go back home after just a single run? Proudly, at that?

"They need to get beat up. Badly."

Miso sighed furiously. She only stopped here because these were students. If these were actors from the Blue Sky Theater.... She really would've murdered them. Taesik's been struggling a lot recently because of the club, too. Yet, the students were all going about their lives very lazily. Miso kicked the wall next to her angrily before going back into the auditorium.

\* \* \*

Practice ended at midnight. Miso stopped the club in the middle of their fourth run and put them through physical training. Then, they did their last run. Thankfully, they didn't make any mistakes.

"Don't you have any greed?"

That was the first thing Miso asked the club members. Greed. Maru shook his head. To begin with, there weren't any people on earth who didn't have any greed. Indeed, the other students answered 'no' as well. Miso smiled mockingly at them.

"Oh, so greedy kids like you dared go home after just one run?"

Maru understood exactly why Miso was so mad then. At the same time, he felt a little apologetic towards everyone else.

"Who said you could be lazy just because one person wasn't there? You should've worked just as hard, if not harder without Maru! Do you think this is a joke? More than that, don't you feel bad about treating acting so lightly, after all the time you invested into it? Ugh, seriously. Do you like it when I treat you like this?"

"No, ma'am."

"You're all grown up now, you don't need to be told what to do. Even babies cry when they have something they want. You guys can't even think about crying? Is that it?"

"....."

"Was I the only one who hoped to win at the winter nationals after our failure?"

"I'm sorry."

Miso sighed in annoyance.

"I'm from Blue Sky, too. I sacrificed my youth into this club. I told you, didn't I? If you don't plan on taking acting seriously, you might as well leave. What did you say back then? Except for Maru, all of you said you'd try your best. Keep your words. Keep your words if you're a human being. Hah. I'm sorry for being so mad. Go home and get to sleep. I'll see you tomorrow."

Miso left right away, without sticking around to hear a single goodbye.

### **Chapter 133**

Everyone has expectations. When the other party fails to meet those expectations, a person would not only feel disappointment, but also a little feeling of betrayal as well.

"It looks like things became like this because of me. I'm sorry."

“No, it’s not that at all.”

Yoonjung waved her hands with a small smile.

“We did end up getting lazy. You weren’t the issue or anything here.”

Joonghyuk agreed. He was still staring at the doors Miso left through.

“Let’s go back for now. It’s too late. Ah, right. Which of you are going by bus, again? Daemyung, Dojin, Yurim and Geunseok?”

Yoonjung spoke with a worried voice. It was already past midnight. At this rate, everyone would have to walk home.

“We can walk back home. It’s just 40 minutes.”

“Will you be okay?”

“Daemyung needs to lose weight anyway.”

Dojin wrapped his arm around Daemyung with a giant grin. Daemyung nodded with a pretty calm expression.

“It’s going to be cold, though.”

“We can run, then.”

Yoonjung was probably worried about the mid-December weather. The second years got together and spoke for a second. Moments later, Yoonjung called everyone over to her.

“Here.”

Yoonjung handed them four ten thousand won bills.

“Go back by taxi. Yurim and Geunseok can ride in one taxi. Daemyung and Dojin can ride in the other.”

“We’re fine.”

“It’s cold. You’re going to catch a cold. You really need to take care of yourselves. Plus, you guys sweated way too much. Trust me, with clothes like those right now, you’re going to freeze.”

Danmi took off her scarf to wrap it around Yurim. The girl tried to refuse the scarf at first, but eventually gave up resisting. Soyeon, Taejoon, and Iseul thankfully lived within walking distance to their homes. They usually got back home by bus, but they could easily walk it.

“Sorry. It’s all our fault.”

Yoonjung looked at the floor dejectedly. The weight of being president was probably bearing down on her.

“We’ll focus again tomorrow, so that instructor Miso won’t be disappointed. She doesn’t hold grudges, so we’ll be seeing each other with smiles on our faces tomorrow. Promise.”

Yoonjung often made herself seem a little childish, but she looked very much like a president right now. Maru listened to the girl as he calculated taxi fees inside his head. He was thinking of giving the kids a little more outside if they were a little short, but ten thousand per person should easily cover it.

“You guys go back first. We’ll stay back to clean things up.”

“We’ll help.”

“It’s fine, your parents must be worried. You should really go.”

Yoonjung dragged them out of the auditorium one by one. She waved at the club members with a smile before slowly closing the door on them.

“I feel sorry for them.”

“Yeah.”

It looked like everyone felt a lot from this experience, even Maru felt a little heavy.

[Do you guys think this is a joke?]

Perhaps Miso, their instructor, was taking the play far more seriously than the actors themselves. Looking back, the woman liked to use the word ‘definitely’ a lot. As light as the word seemed, it carried a lot of weight behind it. After all, the word indicated that something would get done no matter what.

The eight members walked down with a deep sigh. When the security guard found them and asked why they were leaving so late, they told the guard that there were still people upstairs.

“Still? It’s almost dawn now.”

The guard looked up at the stairs with wide eyes before going back to the security office.

“Yeah, it’s definitely late.”

“Holy moly, I just checked the phone and I got so many calls from my mom. I’m dead...”

Dojin paled as he stared at his phone. The others seemed to be in a similar situation, judging from their expressions. None of them had the time to check their phones since they were so busy with practice. Even if they had the time, they probably wouldn’t have been able to check it, given how angry Miso was.

“Call them first. They must be worried.”

“Of course.”

Everyone started calling their parents with their phones. In the meantime, Maru checked his phone as well. There was a single message.

[You’re late. Be quiet when you come inside.]

The end.

Maru’s mom had a very laissez-faire approach to raising her children. Honestly, Maru would appreciate it more if his mom would occasionally send him a text out of worry. He messaged her back, saying he was going back now. He knew that his mom was worrying about him despite writing a message like this.

Parents tended to go to sleep nervously, despite knowing their children were safe. Maru knew that feeling well. Children just felt so fragile by themselves, no matter how old they were.

Once he looked up, he noticed that everyone had a frown on their faces, likely from the scoldings they received from their parents. What a day. First Miso managed to land several hits on them during training, then their parents basically scored a home run.

“I feel like my allowance is going to get a cut...”

“Congrats. You’ve jinxed yourself.”

“God damn it.”

They did seem to relax a little though at the prospect of going back home. They were stiffening up again at the prospect of seeing Miso tomorrow, but it’d be alright. Like Yoonjung said, Miso wasn’t the type who held grudges. As they stepped outside the building, they were greeted with four taxis waiting for them at the entrance.

“What the hell were you doing in there?! You guys don’t want to go back home?!”

Miso was shouting at them from next to her car. Maru let out a small laugh when he saw her. The other kids were still looking back and forth between the taxis and Miso with confused expressions. Maru stepped down first as the other kids stood dumbly from atop the stairs.

“You didn’t leave yet?”

“I knew the last bus left already, so of course not.”

“You know you’re breaking that terrifying image you built all day by doing this, right?”

“I know you guys aren’t idiots. I trust that you’d understand my intentions after a small scolding. Am I wrong?”

Maru could only shake his head.

“Where are the second years, by the way?”

“They’re cleaning up upstairs.”

“Hah, so they’re seniors, is that it?”

“They’re very good seniors, even gave us money to go back home.”

“Good lord. Look at those little things pretending to be adults.”

That being said, Miso was looking up at the fifth floor with a tiny smile.

“First years.”

“Y-yes!”

“Go back home. Just tell your parents that your instructor went way off the rails today and didn’t let you go. If there’s a problem, just call me. Got it?”



“...Yes.”

“The drivers are waiting. Get moving.”

Miso sent the seven kids off on their way. Three of the taxis left. Miso told the last driver to wait a second before stepping into the school. A little later, she stepped out dragging Yoonjung and Danmi by their arms, Joonghyuk and Minsung were following closely behind them. Miso stuffed the four of them into a taxi before asking the driver to leave.

“So you know where everyone lives.”

It looked like Miso had an idea of in which direction everyone lived.

“I’m your instructor, so why wouldn’t I? By the way, you commute by bike, right?”

“Yes.”

Right then, a strong wind blew. The type that really showed that it was winter. It felt like Maru’s skin would peel off from the harsh wind.

“How long does it take?”

“Not that long.”

“I don’t believe you. Give me a number.”

“...40 minutes?”

“Are you crazy?! In this weather?”

Miso shouted before grabbing Maru’s arm. Maru just stared at his bike from afar.

“Coming to school’s going to be annoying tomorrow without that, though.”

“So, you’re going to ride it?”

“I’m not going to die in this weather. I can do it.”

Unfortunately, that was exactly when a bit of snot dribbled down his nose. Miso narrowed her eyes at him.

“Get on.”

“.....”

“Want me to throw you in?”

“I get it, I’ll get in.”

Goodbye, my horse.

Maru gave his bike one last look before getting in the car. The heat from the car made him shiver a little when he stepped inside.

“Seriously, I can’t believe you thought about biking in this weather.”

"I heard people used to walk for several tens of kilometers for school during winter though."

"We don't live in those times anymore. Just put on your seatbelt already."

Maru put on his seatbelt with a smile. The car exited the school and the two of them stopped talking for a second. Maru looked out the window for a bit before opening his mouth.

"Is there a different reason other than the fact that we were lazy?"

The dolls on the back mirror were shaking side by side. Miso glanced at Maru before opening her mouth.

"The part where I got angry?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you think that?"

"Just a feeling. You scold us a lot, but you never put any personal feelings into it. You're a professional, after all. But today was different. You seemed genuinely angry."

"Did the other kids think the same?"

"No, it was just me."

"....."

Miso didn't say anything for a while, an awkward silence flowed between them. Maru seemed to be right on the mark here. What else made Miso mad today? No matter what he thought, there weren't many things that could've made her mad. That meant she was mad because of something else. But she was a pro. She wouldn't take out her anger on the students.

That meant one thing. There was something bothering her immensely and it was about the acting club. What was it?

"Taesik, no, your teacher told me that the club might have to vacate the auditorium."

"The auditorium?"

"The fifth floor auditorium always belonged to the acting club. After all, the acting club were the only people who could use it during practice. No one cared. We even got awards from local competitions and everything. We even got a lot of famous actors, too. But the club hasn't gotten anything done recently. You know that, right?"

Maru nodded. They lost during last year's winter nationals. That wasn't the club's problem. They couldn't participate because of the fire. The club the year before that participated, but they lost as well. Geunsoo's club was the golden age of the acting club, the club's only been in decline since then.

"Back then, the school funded everything for the club. But as you know, the teacher is the one funding the club now. Back in my day, students used to come to our school just to come to our acting club. That fact alone gave the lot of us pride. After all, there were students who came to our school just because of us. We worked very hard, and even got first place in the nationals in our third year as well."

Miso frowned before continuing.

“Your teacher told me that we might have to give the auditorium to the baseball team.”

“The baseball team?”

The Woosung baseball team managed to win during their high school competition this year. The baseball club finally managed to bring in results for the school. Thanks to them, the entire school even went to cheer for the club instead of taking classes.

“It looks like the chairman’s getting greedy. He wants to get rid of the auditorium to build a fitness center for the baseball team and wants to convert the gym building into a makeshift auditorium.”

A good baseball team could be a massive selling point to any high school. That’s probably why the chairman was thinking about investing a lot into this. Instead of funding the acting club that almost started a fire and continued failing in the prelims, it would be better to fund the baseball club. Even Maru thought this was a sensible decision.

“This is a matter of pride. Plus, that place has been ours for years.”

“But it’s about to get ripped away from us.” “What the, giving up already?”

“This is a matter of money. Students can’t do anything about this. We might as well be thinking about something else since this is pointless.”

“Ugh, this is why I didn’t want to talk to you about this. At least the other kids would tell me to cheer up or something.”

“There’s a difference between something you can do and something you can’t do.”

“...I won’t watch you guys get kicked out of there for the death of me. My pride as a Blue Sky member is at stake here.”

“So that’s why you were so angry.”

“It’s complicated. Watching you guys get lazy when our home was about to get stolen... that did make me really mad. We tried so hard to get that place...”

“I’m sorry.”

There was nothing else Maru could say. In truth, it was possible to just tell her she was overreacting and that the club could always find somewhere else to practice. The world would be a very boring place if everyone was logical like that though. It’s because people like Miso existed, who cared about memories, that life could be interesting for everyone.

“Do you think we’d have a chance if we win the nationals?”

“I don’t know. If the chairman already made his decision, we’d get kicked out no matter what. We can always practice in a classroom or something, but... I’d feel horrible about it.”

Miso gripped her handle with a pout. Maru could tell from her actions just how much she cared about the club.

‘Then again, her theater in HyeHwa station has the same name too.’

The name definitely had a lot of meanings to her. After all, it was what really kicked off her current life to begin with.

“So we’ll have to get something even bigger.”

“Big enough to tempt the chairman.”

“I see.”

“Why?”

“No, I was just thinking about it.”

“Hah, I see. Anyway, you guys have to practice like hell from now. Forget passing the prelims. You need to sweep in all of the awards at the nationals. Got it?”

“We’ll try.”

“Trying isn't enough! Damn it!”

Maru smiled as he turned to look forward again.

### **Chapter 134**

Maru headed home after stepping out of Miso’s car. He thought he’d opened the door quietly, but he could see his mom coming out of her room.

“You’re home.”

“Yeah. Why did you wake up? You must be tired.”

“No mother would sleep soundly with her son being out late. Go take a shower before you go to sleep.”

His mom sounded cool in the message, but she really must’ve been worried. She stepped back into her room with a small sigh. Maru silently bowed towards her before going to the bathroom for a shower. By the time he came back, it was 1am. He considered going to sleep just like that before sitting down at his desk.

‘The auditorium, huh.’

He took out his script and grabbed his pen. He could still see Miso’s frustrated expression in his head. She probably couldn’t accept the fact that the tower she built with her friends was about to crumble so easily, her words were filled with rage and frustration back in the car. Hearing emotions like that honestly made Maru feel like he was partly responsible. Humans always walk towards the future, but their motivations often stem from memories.

If Miso didn’t get so mad in the car, Maru would’ve just accepted the situation as a fact of life and moved on. After all, the club could always practice in their club room instead of the auditorium. But Miso did get mad. In fact, she even took out a part of this anger on the club members. Maybe this was her way of asking them to help her. After all, she wasn’t the type that could simply tell people to do well. She really needed to whip them into a shape that she knew they’d do well.

To be honest, Maru was touched from the side of Miso he saw today. It was difficult to see people who not only truly cared about the work they did, but also had the conviction to take the harder route regardless of easier ones. Miso wasn't even a member of the Blue Sky club anymore. Despite that, she was putting in more work into the club than anyone else.

Not even pros did this. Pros proved their worth to people and received compensation for it. The money the school paid Miso was pitifully little, especially considering her value. No pro worked in a place that refused to pay them for their worth. Plus, working as an instructor for a school really wasn't particularly good for Miso's resume either. Not only that, she was putting a considerable amount of work into this club as well. In the end, she was only here for personal reasons.

The club was very precious to her. That's what made Maru feel sorry for her.

Maru spun the pen in his hand as he focused on the script. There wasn't much else he could do right now other than this. He needed to breathe life into his character, so that his character could be as real as real could be on stage.

"I need to work hard now that I saw how serious she's going on about this."

He wouldn't be a proper human if he didn't reciprocate even a little bit to her emotions. Maru spent the next few minutes analyzing his lines and imagining himself on the stage. As he was going about it, his phone vibrated. It was a message from Daemyung.

[You asleep?]

Maru responded with a 'no.'

[Instructor Miso seemed really disappointed, didn't she? I keep thinking about her telling us we were being lazy.]

Maru could almost see Daemyung drooping dejectedly from the other side of the screen. The boy probably became even moodier than usual as more of the night passed. Maru thought for a second before sending him a small briefing of what Miso told him. Daemyung was good at keeping secrets, so he should be fine even if Maru told him about what was happening.

[Really? So if we fail here, we'll get pushed away by the baseball club?]

[Probably.]

[What do we do?]

[We just do the best we can.]

Maru didn't get a response after that. Daemyung was probably reading his script.

"Do the... best we can."

It was a promise Maru was making with himself. Often, people say that they don't know what to do, but most of the people asking this question already knew the answer deep in their hearts. That was because the answer was simple. If you want something, chase it. Just modifying that sentence was enough to bring about a satisfying answer.

In the end, the method wasn't what's important. All that mattered was how much focus you were putting into your work.

Scratch scratch.

Maru's pen moved across his script. This was going to be a long night. He was sure of it.

\* \* \*

It seemed that Maru wasn't the only one who decided he needed practice last night, he realized such when he noticed the dark circles hanging around Dojin's eyes.

"Didn't get any sleep?"

"Not like I could get any."

Dojin raised his worn out script with a grin.

"Morning... yawn."

Daemyung stepped into the class next with his eyes half-closed.

"When the hell did you sleep?"

"...Like four?"

"How did you wake up?"

"Alarm clocks, man. I feel like I'm gonna collapse."

Daemyung put his bag on his desk with wobbly legs. The trio looked at each other before grinning.

"What was our first class today?"

"Math."

"So if we sleep, we're dead."

"Just tape your eyes open, dude."

Maru gave the two of them a piece of gum. He always carried some in his pocket, which was a habit he picked up after spending many night shifts driving a bus.

"Work hard until lunch."

"I'm gonna sleep till first class first."

"Me too."

Maru flopped down onto his desk along with his friends. This situation reminded him of a friend he had back in school that always slept through classes. He couldn't remember the boy's name or face, but he did remember that the boy showed up to their high school reunion in a Benz. Everyone wondered at the time how the boy managed to get so successful despite sleeping so much, but Maru felt like he knew why this was the case now.

'What you see isn't everything, huh.'

Maru closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

"We survived."

"Yeah."

They somehow managed to stay awake until last class by pinching on their thighs. As soon as their homeroom teacher told them they could leave, they ran up to the fifth floor.

"I always wonder, how the hell does all of our sleepiness disappear as soon as school ends?"

"Come on, you're trying to solve humanity's greatest mystery now, of all times?"

Dojin nodded at Maru's words. For now, they needed to stop thinking about random things and focus on practice. The three of them opened the doors into the auditorium. There wasn't anyone else there yet.

"Alright, let's begin."

Some people might ask, 'why try so hard when the prelims are so close? It's not like you're going to improve much more anyway.' But one could retort: 'If you don't work hard to the end, you don't even have the right to feel regret if you lose. Is that really what you want?'

They stretched quickly before going straight into reading. They weren't just reading their lines this time. They were putting as much emotion as they could into it. They went on with practice by quickly filling in for the students that weren't there yet.

"Wouldn't it be better if you raised your hand here?"

"That might be confusing, wouldn't it?"

"Here, take a look for me."

Maru and Daemyung went over to Miso's usual spot and sat at Dojin's request. Dojin said his line and raised his hand as he said he would. Dojin seemed to want to change the part where his character 'scratched his head awkwardly' to 'raised his hand before putting it back down'. Dojin raised his hand towards his head before stopping in the middle and smiling.

"Hey, that's not bad."

"Right? I thought it was a bit odd to smile as I scratched my head last night."

After that small change, they continued their reading. Instead of their normal, almost mechanical practices, they held discussions about any concerns regarding a line. That small change made them feel like they got out of their usual lazy cycle just a little bit. For sure, the club worked hard. But if asked if they practiced with thought and care, they wouldn't be able to say 'yes'. Practice with a decent amount of nervousness helps a group become perfect over time, but if they become too used to their routine, they would eventually slack off. Were they working as hard as they could, or were they being lazy? Miso's behavior last night was a good enough answer to this question.

As they practiced by themselves, the other members started arriving one by one. The funny thing was, they all looked sleepy as hell. They definitely didn't get any sleep last night.

"Did you guys all get back well?"

"Yes, what about you, senior?"

"I did, too. Now now, since we're all alive, let's get to practice."

They returned to act one every time a new member arrived. After a few times of doing so, the entire club was here before they knew it.

"Let's try to do a run without a single mistake first before trying to improve our acting. We should try to finish two runs before instructor Miso comes."

Yoonjung gave a slight glance to all the members as she extended her hand. Maru put his hand above hers and the others followed suit.

"Blue Sky."

"Fighting."

They all separated with a short cry. They were in the same space at the same time with the same people just like yesterday, but something was different. The bomb Miso threw at all of them served as a great wakeup call for everyone. Maru could feel a fire swelling up inside himself as well.

In fact, he started smiling. What would the acting club do? The club came to a very simple, smart answer together. The answer that none of them thought of till now because it was so simple, they were going to act. Just as they got ready to practice, the doors of the auditorium opened.

Was it Miso?

"Oh dear, there's already students here."

The person who entered was a kind looking middle-aged man, behind the man was a smaller man with a familiar face. It was the principal that the students liked to call a "dwarf" due to his height. This meant... The taller man in front of the principal was the chairman of the school. Maru stepped forward first while the others were busy standing around in confusion.

"Hello, Mr. Chairman, Principal."

"Ah, yes, hello. How did you know I was the Chairman? Haha."

The chairman laughed gleefully. The principal smiled proudly as well.

"You kids should step outside for a second," the principal said.

Maru smiled bitterly inside. He could tell what was going on. The chairman seemed pretty greedy to take over this place. Right then, someone new appeared from behind all of them. It was the baseball coach.



The club members stepped out of the auditorium, still confused as ever. Maru closed his mouth and gave Daemyung a small glance. This needed to be explained to the club by Miso or Taesik. Neither of them had the right to say anything right now.

“Isn’t that the baseball coach?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the Chairman and the Principal doing here?”

“No idea.”

The second years started muttering to each other. They definitely didn’t hear anything just yet. After around twenty minutes of waiting, the three men came back out from the auditorium. The three of them walked down the stairs with very happy expressions, telling the club to work hard.

To Maru, their words sounded like a death penalty. Kind of like how a CEO would assure a recently fired employee that “everything would be fine”.

“What’s going on?”

As they all stood around in confusion, they saw Miso stepping up the stairs. She came across the Chairman on the way up and she just ignored the man completely. Maru noticed the Chairman and the Principal’s displeased faces.

Miso only said one thing as soon as she got up to the fifth floor.

“They’re annoying.”

“...You know that was the Chairman and the Principal, right?” Maru asked.

Miso nodded as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. What an amazing woman.

## **Chapter 135**

Miso’s next move was obviously to explain the situation to the club members. Maru made sure to fake a reaction as he listened. If he was listening too calmly, Dojin would definitely pick up on it.

“Things are moving much faster than I expected. They might already have things set in stone at this point.”

Miso looked around the auditorium slowly. The second years’ expressions turned dark. They spent a pretty long time at the auditorium at this point. Having this place be taken away from them must feel pretty bad.

“Is there a way to stop this? We can’t get kicked out of here,” Yoonjung said, claspng her hands together.

The girl liked being in the acting club more than the acting itself. To her, this place was like a shelter to her. Losing one’s shelter is a catastrophic event. She would, of course, become inactive by the time she enters her third year, but that didn’t mean her time spent here would become any less important.

“We’ll have to try our best.”

“But besides that?”

“We’ll have to try harder. As someone told me, this is a problem for adults concerning money. Students have no place in this issue. The best thing you guys can do is to get attention from your entire region, but the competition isn’t really that big of an issue anymore. It’s not like acting gives you any merit, either. After all, there’s so many other things to watch nowadays.”

Hearing that from a real actor made Maru’s heart ache a little bit. Miso smiled bitterly before clapping her hands loudly.

“Alright, back to practice. We need to work harder than ever. Got it?”

“...Yes.”

“I can’t hear you. Louder.”

“Yes!”

“Good. It looks like you guys are all warmed up already, so let’s begin. We’re going to check up on the stage and our costumes today as well. We’ll fix up what we can and buy what we can’t. There’s only a few days left. Focus.”

\* \* \*

The start of the play breezed through in the blink of an eye. Before they knew it, Geunseok was already on his way home after Daemyung’s odd monologue.

“Hey, young man!”

“Yes?”

“You must be having a hard time adjusting because of the odd residents of this town, am I right?”

“Not at all. I’m actually quite happy. Everyone has such great quirks here. The town I was in before had very boring people. They even treated me like a weirdo for passing around some rice cake after I moved in!” “It’s because we’re living in pretty dark times right now. Just turn on the TV, and all you get is news about crimes... it’s scary. Here, here. Come sit for a second.”

Maru nodded as he saw Soyeon’s acting. When they first started practice, he got the feeling that the girl was only imitating an old woman. Her acting now made her seem like one. If she put on a costume and some makeup right there... she’d totally be an old lady.

Geunseok was still being as good as ever, his role as the main character was to bring out the personalities of the other characters even more. The effectiveness of the play would vary depending on how well he could motivate the other characters. Then again, that was why he was the main character.

People often say that you could only see as much as you knew. To Maru, the things that the other actors showed and told him became experience, and he felt like he could see just that much more as a result. Thanks to it, he finally realized what all the adults meant when they said Geunseok was good at acting. It wasn’t just because the boy had a good voice and enunciation. That was just the basics. Not only did Geunseok have the basics pretty much set in stone, the boy was also natural.

Natural.

Maru realized just how difficult it was to act natural on stage through experience. Acting naturally took a ton of practice and hard work. In the end, a person could only be natural on stage only if they were experienced. They could only act naturally if they knew roughly every possible thing that could happen to them and knew how to react to those situations. If he went back for a second and thought back to the times when Miso told him he had talent, he realized one thing.

'I'm incredibly lucky.'

He was already natural on stage because he already had all the life experience he needed. He didn't know if it was god's gift to him or just something he developed in his 45 years of living, but he never became nervous on top of the stage. In fact, he didn't feel anything. It just felt like he was standing in a place that people liked to look at often. Now that he thought about it, he realized this was a blessing. He held an advantage compared to his peers. That is, he was starting out from a location that others took years of practice to get to; even the fact that he liked to read literature became a strong point for him.

Maru didn't know how much Geunseok worked to get to where he was, but it could be no small amount of time and effort. It was obvious. After all, the boy was good at studying and acting. People might say acting was simply a result of talent, but Maru could say for sure now. Acting wasn't just talent, it also took an incredible amount of hard work, just like studying.

"Stop there. We'll rest for a bit before continuing again."

"Okay."

The club members all collapsed, they must've been pouring a lot of energy into this. They didn't even waste the energy to talk. Instead, what little energy they had left was focused on thinking about their respective characters. A heavy air emanated across the auditorium. Not the sort of air that made people nervous, but the type that made one want to focus on work.

Maru was also thinking about his character, trying to think about how to make the teenager more realistic. Right then, he started feeling vibrations coming from his pocket. He took it out. It was Ganghwan.

- Going well?

"I don't know, but I'm trying hard."

- That's fine and all, but all that matters in the end are results.

"That's true. What's up with the call, by the way?"

- The prelims are getting close, so I decided to cancel practice today. I don't want to bother you guys when you're all so busy.

"So you called me because you were bored?"

- Kind of, yeah. All my friends are busy and I'm the only one without work.

"If you're that bored, why don't you come here?"

- Eh?

“Instructor Miso’s here too, so why don’t you come to help?”

- No, just because I’m bored doesn’t mean I’m going to work...

“Come on, this is your good student asking you for a favor here.”

- I don’t recall you ever doing “good” things for me though...

“Hold on.”

Maru walked towards Miso, who was sitting down with her eyes closed. He initially thought she was just closing her eyes, but soon realized she was actually fast asleep. What a woman. To think she’d be able to sleep even when students were muttering their lines all around her... He also felt a bit sorry for her. She was clearly working hard enough to need little naps in the middle of work.

“Instructor.”

Maru called at her silently. He remembered getting beat up in the military when he tapped his senior awake and he didn’t want to go through that experience again. Miso opened her eyes after a few moments. She turned to look at him briefly before flinching backwards.

“Ugh, you surprised me.”

“Tired?”

“Yawn, yeah. I shouldn’t sleep, but I just can’t help it.”

“Do you need any reinforcement?”

“Reinforcement?”

Maru handed her the phone, making her put on a confused expression.

“It’s Ganghwan.”

“Him? Why?”

“He said he was bored.”

“Reaaaally?”

Her eyes shone brightly as she immediately put the phone against her ear.

“Yang Ganghwan! Get the hell over here if you’re free. This is Woosung High. Just search your navigator if you don’t know where it is. What? Seems like too much work? You said you were bored yourself. Big sis will play with you, so get the hell over here. Ah, get some food on the way here. You don’t plan on coming here with nothing, are you?”

Miso hung up before the man even had the chance to respond. There was a hint of something sinister behind her grin.

“Ganghwan’s going to be a great reinforcement for sure. I’ll make him do all sorts of stuff once he’s here.”

“Don’t work him too hard, though.”

“He said himself he’s free as balls. All that tells me is that I can use him as much as I want. He must’ve been feeling really bored with him not getting casted for any roles.”

Maru shrugged as he took his phone back. Ganghwan was a great teacher, a better actor than Miso as well. If Miso specialized in the overall flow of a play, Ganghwan specialized in bringing out the individual skills of the actors.

“Let’s rest a little more. We can start when our guest comes. We might be going back late today as well, so tell your parents.”

The club members quickly took out their phones. Some of them were making phone calls as well. After about ten minutes, the door opened with Ganghwan on the other side. The man was holding bags of snacks from the convenience store.

“You guys are all working hard, aren’t you?”

The man handed the club members a piece of bread from the bag. He said he didn’t want to work, but he came very well prepared. Miso pulled back the grinning man towards her as the club looked at him oddly.

“You remember him from last time, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“He’s a jobless brat right now, so I called him. He’ll teach you acting. It’ll only be for a few hours, but there’s value in learning from him.”

“Hey, who said I’m a jo...”

Miso put a hand over Ganghwan’s mouth, making the man step back with a frown.

“Show him how much you practiced. Alright, let’s do a quick run.”

The club members stacked their breads into one place before walking back to the stage. They must’ve gotten excited about getting judged by someone other than Miso, given their excited looks.

“Alright, begin when you’re ready. Ganghwan, come over here.”

Ganghwan sat right next to Miso. Hearing an advice from this man, who was set to become a massive star in the future is most definitely an honor for everyone here.

“Phew.”

Someone on the stage sighed. That was the beginning of their run.

\* \* \*

“Not bad!”

That was the first thing Ganghwan said after the run. The club members brightened. To them, Ganghwan was equivalent to Miso in status. Being accepted by someone like that was bound to feel good.

“The play is well balanced. You guys are definitely a lot better than last time. I’m actually very impressed by how well you guys are stopping yourselves from looking at the audience. Some actors like to stare intently at the audience to try to communicate with them, but all that ends up doing is breaking the promise between the stage and the audience.”

“Promise?” Daemyung blurted.

The boy immediately looked down in embarrassment.

“Yeah, promise. In the end, plays are nothing but a figment of your imagination. The audience sees it as reality, if only for the moment. If the main character can’t control himself and keeps staring at the audience, the audience would no longer be watching a play. They’d only be watching some actor that stares back a lot. This is unacceptable behavior.”

Ganghwan was being absolutely certain with his words.

“In that sense, you guys did a great job with your eyes. Some kids in high school clubs like to look at odd places during the play out of nervousness, but I didn’t see that here.”

“So we did well?”

Ganghwan nodded without missing a beat at Yoonjung’s question.

“But, I don’t like how you guys are moving so stiffly.”

Ganghwan turned to look at Miso, who gave him a curt nod.

“Did you guys go see the stage yet?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember how far the audience was from the stage?”

“Around seven meters, if you think of how high up the stage was.”

“Maru, go stand about seven meters from over there.”

Maru walked away from the rest of the club.

“Say your lines for me.”

“Which one?”

“Whichever one that has movement.”

Maru nodded as he thought of a line. As the teenager, he was often in odd poses. This time, he decided to go with the intermission between act 7 and 8. The scene where he would jump into the stage before cracking a joke like a comedian.

“Isn’t it odd, everyone? People this odd, living in such a small town? What a ridic...”

“Stop there.”

Ganghwan waved Maru back before continuing.

“His movements seemed small, right?”

“...Yes.”

The club members answered nervously. Maru was shocked. He thought he was pretty expressive, but his movements were small?

“Miso probably told you herself that you’d only look annoying if you didn’t make large gestures.”

Indeed, Miso told them exactly that. That was why Maru made large movements, so why...

“You were fine for the most part, but your hands are the real problem here. You guys look way too conservative with your hand movements.”

Ganghwan walked back to where Maru was before while holding a script of the play in hand.

“Here, let me show you.”

He flipped through the script for a bit before finding a line he liked. He moved to the left before starting his act, he was acting out the part that Maru just acted out himself. The man jumped in, with his expression looking like a little clown.

“Isn’t it odd, everyone? People this odd, living in such a small town?”

Ganghwan calmly took in a small breath.

“Let me show you a different act this time. The scene that the girl just played, the one with the old lady.”

Then, he went back to acting.

### **Chapter 136**

He was... different. There was nothing else they could say about it. The man spoke the same lines from the same characters, but he looked so very different compared to everyone else. The club members all looked at Ganghwan dumbly. The man was showing them the difference between a pro and an amateur.

“Did I overdo it?”

Ganghwan smiled after doing a short performance of all twelve characters. The man’s arrogant comment was even sounding a bit like words from a wiseman after such a shocking performance. Now that Maru thought about it, he’d never actually seen Ganghwan act. Ganghwan was acting in an adult play at the time when Maru joined him. They practiced together a lot, but they’d never worked together on the same stage. Maru had to wonder what it would feel like to exchange lines with someone that skilled. He couldn’t even imagine it right now.

“Starting off from the basics, we need to focus on accents. I’m not telling you to follow me. You need to go develop one yourself. There are tricks, though.”

The club members flocked around Ganghwan at a flick of his hands. Miso was watching him intently from afar, her eyes filled with respect. Not respect as a friend, but as an actor.

“Acting out a character much older than you is actually very difficult. If you want to act out a character seventy years older than you, you need just that much experience to do well. That’s not easy. For us pros, we go to the scenes itself in order to get experience, but that’s not an option for you guys. So the only thing you guys can do is take tips and tricks and do your best with those.”

“What would those tips be?”

Soyeon and Taejoon widened their eyes in surprise. Ganghwan told the two of them to just focus more on their bodies than their lines.

“If you try to make yourself sound old, all you’d really be doing is ruining your projection. Not only that, you might end up damaging your throat as well. Most people mistakenly think that old people have a very lethargic, airy voice. In this industry, it’s almost like a promise between the actor and the audience as well. The actor’s basically telling the audience that he’s acting an old character, so the audience needs to understand that as a fact.”

Ganghwan looked over the club members.

“Does any one of you live with your grandparents?”

No one raised their hands.

“Well, it’s pretty hard to see people living with their extended families nowadays, so I guess it’s understandable. It must be hard for you to see what old people are actually like. That’s why you act out your roles based on the stereotypes of old people you see in society.”

Maru thought for a second. When he entered his forties, the only times he went to see his parents were during holidays. His parents were over their seventies by that point. They weren’t incredibly old, but they were getting there for sure.

“This is a strange case, but this is easier for you if you think of yourselves as voice actors. Your voices can’t change by an incredible amount especially after you pass puberty. There are even old men whose voices don’t change at all from their younger years. What should you do, then? In the end, it all just comes down to the details.”

Ganghwan brought over a chair.

“The old lady in front of the shop is always described to be sitting outside her store. She often says her lines from her chair, right?”

“Yes. She stands up too, but she often says her lines from the chair.”

“The age range of the character is?”

“Late 70s.”

“Health?”



“Not that bad, since she can still come outside. She’s not that lethargic either since she can hold her own in an argument still.”

“Good. If you’re aware of all the details, then the rest of it should be pretty easy. Just convince yourself that you’re actually old. When you get back home, try to find videos on actual old people talking.”

“Yes.”

“One of the first things that happens as you age is that your skin starts stretching. Studying how that would affect the rest of your body would be most useful here. But since this is a bit rushed, just follow me first.”

Ganghwan put on a slight frown as he stretched his jaws and cheeks downwards, making him look a little bit depressed. Soyeon followed suit, albeit with a little bit of confusion.

“If you age like this, the overall muscles in your face lose energy like this. Open your mouth here. You’ll notice you can’t open it as much.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“The reason why old people have bad enunciations is because their muscles don’t work so well anymore. But it’d be horrible if an actor had bad enunciation. You’ll have to put in the practice to make yourself maintain that ‘old person vibe’ while managing to keep clear enunciation. But you definitely don’t have the time for that right now, so save it for the next nationals.”

“Thank you.”

“As for your gestures...”

Ganghwan was very different here from his usual self in his amateur classes. Back there, he only showed the actors the directions they could take for improvement. Now, he was actively pointing out places where each student could improve. If he focused on the theory for the amateur acting class, over here he focused a lot on the practical information.

“Name?”

Ganghwan’s next target was Geunseok.

“I’m Hong Geunseok.”

“Ah right, Geunsoo’s brother. I don’t have much to tell you. Good job. I think you have a very decent grasp of what your character is like.”

“Thank you.”

“As expected of Geunsoo’s brother. Good job, good job.”

Ganghwan gave the boy a thumbs up. Geunseok put on a very comforted smile.

“Alright, next...”

Ganghwan moved onto the next person.

\* \* \*

Ganghwan and Miso stepped outside the auditorium. By the time they finished another run, it was already 9pm.

“You planning on keeping them around for a bit longer?”

“I have to. The prelims are in two days.”

“Don’t pressure them too much, they’re just kids. You get way too rough sometimes, you have to be softer with them.”

“If I was soft too, wouldn’t I be way too perfect?”

Ganghwan firmly shook his head. This woman didn’t have any humility. Then again, that was the source of her charm.

“How’s your work going on that side?”

“My kids are elites, so they’re all doing very well.”

“Elites, huh.”

The two of them walked into a restaurant nearby. They ordered some food before sitting down. The lady at the store told them it’d take around 15 minutes.

“Are you paying all of them for their food?”

“What, would I be making them pay then?”

“Dang, Miso. You must be earning a lot of money.”

“Hell yeah I do.”

“Why don’t you invest a bit of money into my play, then? I promise we’ll make good returns.”

“Go find someone else. I’m too young to be investing any money right now. Plus, I don’t have that much money to begin with. Why don’t you just go to senior Junmin?”

“I’d rather die before asking him. I don’t want to become even more indebted to him when I’m already knee deep inside. I don’t want money ruining our relationship.”

“...Oh? So you’re fine if our relationship gets ruined?”

“You just realized? You, me, and Geunsoo. We’re terrible, terrible friends.”

“You’re not wrong. Ugh.”

Ganghwan watched Miso as she flopped down on a table in front of her. It’d been a while since he last saw her this tired.

“Something wrong?”

“It’s just the acting club. Everything else is fine. Hah...”

She sighed loudly enough to make her hair start moving on her desk. Looking at that, Ganghwan started twisting her hair with a grin.

“Hey!”

“You surprised me.”

Miso stood back up with a massive frown.

“This is why you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Hey, don’t hit me where it hurts like that. It’s not like you have a boyfriend either.”

“Me? I do.”

“...Hah! That’s the funniest joke I heard all year. You? A guy? Are you sure he’s not involved in some pyramid scheme?”

“You want to get beat up?”

Ganghwan stepped away from her into the kitchen for a bit. In the meantime, the lady from the store came back with bags of kimbap and stir fried pork.

“Do you need chopsticks?”

“Yes, can we have fourteen?”

The two of them stepped outside, each one holding a bag of food in their hands.

“Are you actually dating someone, though?”

“I do.”

“Who? Someone I know? Which actor is it?”

“...No, he isn’t related to this industry at all. Well, wait, I guess he kind of is.”

“Who is it?”

“Ugh, why do you want to know so badly?”

“Why? I’m curious! I want to know who would date someone with a terrible personality like you.”

“Do you actually have a death wish?”

Ganghwan didn’t stop teasing her, despite all the threats. Miso said some terrifying things, but Ganghwan could tell she was actually embarrassed. He’d never seen that side of her before, he couldn’t stop teasing her here.

“...He’s a school teacher.”

“Really? I suppose it *is* the mission of teachers to rescue lost little lambs. Where does he work?”

“Woosung High.”

“Really? This one? Wait, so you met him through the club? So it’s been like a year, huh?”

Finding love from your high school... Love really was a strange thing.

“It’s been more than ten years.”

“What?”

“I had a crush on him for a full decade. I’ve only managed to get somewhere with it recently.”

Miso’s face was as red as a beet. Ten years, though? What was up with that?

“He’s the person who made the acting club with me while I was still here. He was really cute back then. Not that he isn’t cute now.”

“Hold on.”

“What?”

“So you’re dating a teacher you had a crush on while you were in high school?”

“Yeah.”

“Hahaha, don’t joke with me. Are you the heroine of some romance novel? You should at least make your stories believable.”

“Do I look like I’m lying?”

Miso frowned annoyedly. Ganghwan’s face stiffened. A teacher who dates his student?

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Really really?”

“Yeah yeah!”

“...Ha. Haha. Life is meaningless. Ugh.”

Ganghwan sighed deeply in defeat.

\* \* \*

“Thank you for the hard work,” Maru said.

“Hard work? Nah. It was fun. It was like I was back in high school again. The kids in Myungdong all know what they’re doing, so it’s no fun teaching them.”

“Does that include me?”

“Nah, of course not.”

Ganghwan got in his car with a grin. Maru was thankful that the man managed to take out his time for something like this. He’d learned a lot from just this one day.

“Miso taught you well.”

“She’s passionate, if nothing else.”

“Individually, you all have something to be desired, but you guys have a really nice vibe going when you’re all together. You might actually manage to win something. But! Your role is critical in making that happen.”

“Please don’t pressure me like that. I’m just an extra.”

“A very important extra. Oh, also, try to get on good terms with Geunseok.”

“Geunseok?”

“Yeah. The kid knows what he’s doing. He definitely studied a lot in his own time as well. He’ll make a great partner.”

“Well, sure.”

He probably couldn’t get close to Geunseok anymore, though. Maru swallowed his thoughts as he smiled. Ganghwan told Maru to do well in the prelims.

“You aren’t coming to see us?”

“I can’t blatantly favor you when there’s so many other kids I’m teaching involved.”

“But we’re kind of in a master-disciple relationship, aren’t we?”

“Still, it’s a no. Plus, I’m going to be busy.”

“Are you going into a project?”

“Probably. And... it’s nothing. I’ll tell you some other time. But definitely be alert for something.”

Ganghwan was saying some mysterious words. Did his business have something to do with Maru as well? For now, Maru just nodded. He’d probably have to prepare for something.

“Ah, also.”

“?”

“Do you happen to know any cute female teachers?”

Maru smiled and told the man to get a move on, Ganghwan shrugged before leaving in his car.

“Maru! Let’s go!”

11pm. It was minutes from before the last bus of the day left. Maru walked towards his friends alongside his bike. It took quite some effort to get Miso away from him, but he managed to get his bike today.

“Hah,” Dojin sighed.

“What’s up?”

“Let’s work hard.”

“Well, that came out of nowhere.”

“You two really need to work hard. Especially since that’s your dreams now. I... Just need to get along for the ride.”

Dojin was smiling a little awkwardly. Maru patted the boy’s back. Daemyung, too, awkwardly patted Dojin.

“Don’t forget me if you become famous.”

“Don’t dream too much about the high life, since it’s not going to happen.”

“In any case, at least mention my name if you get on TV.”

“Any time, friend.”

Daemyung said ‘me too’ under his breath as well.

“Let’s work hard.”

“Yeah.”

“Definitely.”

Work hard. The phrase warmed up Maru’s chest ever so slightly.

### **Chapter 137**

Moonjoong looked downwards as he chewed on the candied ginseng his daughter sent him. Dalgu, who had gained a lot of weight recently, was begging for food below him. So even animals know what was good for the body, huh.

“Dalgu, you fool. You have too much heat in your body. This won’t be good for you.”

Moonjoong didn’t actually know that with certainty, but that didn’t change the fact that he wasn’t going to share his food. He did feel bad about just watching his dog walk away sadly though, so he gave the poor thing some dog food. As he watched his dog eat with a smile on his face, he noticed someone outside his door. The person had a confused expression as they pressed on his broken doorbell. Moonjoong looked through the door in confusion at the spectacle.

“What the... what’s he doing here?”

Moonjoong went to greet the man, neglecting to even put on his shoes. The wind from outside was terribly cold, but he didn’t even feel it from how surprised he was right now.

“My, aren’t you a pleasant surprise.”

“Haha, Moonjoong!”

The person in the grey coat was Yu Chulmin, Moonjoong’s old friend. He stood in front of an expensive-looking car parked in front of his house.

“What brought you here all of a sudden?”

“Nothing special. I just wanted to see if my dear friend was still alive. I’ve been telling myself to go see your plays, but I never did find the time.”

“So that’s why you came all the way here so early in the morning?”

“Of course.”

Moonjoong brought his friend inside with a happy grin. Dalgu stopped eating his food and immediately ran over to Chulmin happily.

“Oh, so you remember me, huh?”

Chulmin rubbed the little dog’s head.

“Here, here. Take a seat. Did you have breakfast?”

“Not yet.”

“Your wife didn’t make you anything?”

“She never makes me anything anymore. She’s gone to Jeju island with her friends, actually.”

“What stamina.”

“Indeed.”

Moonjoong scooped up a bowl of rice, some soup, and some side dishes as well. It wasn’t anything very fit to serve a guest, but Moonjoong knew very well that his friend wouldn’t care.

“It’s been a while since I last had a meal at your house.”

“It really has been. To think that I used to see you so damn often forty years ago, too.”

“Too often. Way too often.”

Four decades ago, the two of them worked in the same movie company. Back then, movie companies produced movies like crazy. They even hit 200 movies released in one year back then. After all, movies were the best form of entertainment anyone could experience without a TV. The two worked as extras for various movies during that time. Of course, they weren’t paid well at all.

In those times, actors were treated horribly. Even more so for actresses, they had to do very shameful things in order to get into a film. In the end, the two of them left the industry to go into plays. They made a theater company. More and more people started coming and before they knew it, they were even taking on sponsors.

That was around the time when TVs became more commonplace to the people. Movie companies started going out of business left and right, while more and more actors started joining their company. That was also when Seoul University relocated closer to Gwanaksan, more artists started gathering towards that area as a result. The two of them decided to move as well. That’s where Marronnier Park now stands and became a safe haven for artists nowadays.

“Gosh, we suffered quite a bit back then, didn’t we?”

“That we did. Do you remember? We tried making the stage by ourselves, but all we ended up doing was ruin the floor completely.”

“Of course I remember.”

Moonjoong watched as his friend wiped his bowl clean.

“Wait a second.”

Moonjoong brought out his candied ginseng.

“This stuff’s been slathered with honey and it tastes quite amazing.”

“Oh, that sounds so expensive.”

“It’s from my daughter. Try it.”

“Hey, you should keep stuff like this for yourself. Don’t be sharing it willy-nilly just like that.”

“I have too much.”

Moonjoong actually had very little of the stuff, but he wanted to share the good stuff with his friend who worked with him for most of his life.

“Well, thanks for the food, then.”

Chulmin smiled as soon as he put a piece of the ginseng in his mouth.

“Want more?”

“One’s just fine, thank you.”

Moonjoong put away the ginseng somewhere else with a nod, Dalgu started sniffing the thing curiously.

“Can dogs eat ginseng?”

“Probably not.”

Moonjoong took the ginseng and put it out of Dalgu’s reach. He had to wonder sometimes just who the dog took after to become such a glutton.

“So, mind telling me the real reason why you came here? You couldn’t have just come here to see me. You’re too busy for that.”

“Well, I really did come here to just see you. Plus one more small thing.”

Chulmin took a sip of a drink Moonjoong gave him.

“Do you have time?”

“Time? What time?”

“Time for a project.”



“Project?”

Chulmin nodded.

“You have no idea how happy I was when I heard you were going to be on stage again.”

“That’s because Junmin begged me to come back. Plus, there was a great meaning behind it. I mean, it’s the reopening of the Myungdong Art Theater, after all.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re back on stage. I’ve started hearing some good rumors about you coming from the younger folk, too.”

“The younger actors just have a good impression of me is all.”

“Don’t be so humble, I know your skills better than anyone. You were nominated for the position of Chairman of the National Theater Association even before me, remember?”

“That’s so long ago. Plus, they were just asking me that in passing.”

Hearing the current chairman of the association say something like this was rather embarrassing for Moonjoong.

“In any case, how was acting after years of retirement? I don’t even know what acting is like anymore since I haven’t done it for so long.”

“Haha, don’t joke like that.”

Chulmin smiled playfully. The man wasn’t wrong, though. As the Chairman of the National Theater Association, a social worker, an advisor for playwrights, and a college professor, he was simply too busy to do anything else. That was why Moonjoong didn’t even feel bad when Chulmin told him that the man was too busy to see his plays.

“Alright, stop changing the subject and just tell me. How was acting? Isn’t it more fun than just teaching? I heard you’ve been smiling all the time in the practice room.”

“Now I’m getting curious about just who your source of information is. Is it Junmin?”

“He’s one of them, sure.”

“Don’t force people to do too many things for you just because you’re a chairman, you hear?”

Moonjoong closed his mouth for a second to think. Indeed, acting again was very fun. Watching the passion of the younger actors, experiencing new technology on the stage, and looking at the audience members again. Everything felt new to him and that came as a very fun, fresh experience.

“It was fun. I guess acting really is the perfect job for me.”

“That’s why I brought this up in the first place. Why don’t you try acting in a movie?”

“A movie?”

“The script, the cast, the investors. They all want you.”

A movie... When was the last time he shot a movie? He left the movie business to go into plays. After making his name there, he went back to shooting movies and starred in over 50 movies. That was when he was in his forties, it's already been three decades since.

"Why are you dragging out someone that's been forgotten?"

"I told you. People know that you aren't dead anymore."

"Oh, dear."

"It's not anything with a high budget, but the people behind you will be fantastic, I guarantee it. So how about it? Don't you want to show the young ones that the old guys are still going strong?"

"...Why are you talking about that now all of a sudden?"

"Because I'm that investor."

"Hah!"

"I'd like to see you on screen again."

"You..."

"I'll send you the synopsis by today. The script, too. You'll probably want to meet with the scriptwriter and the director as well."

"I didn't tell you I was going to..."

"I'm going to pretend you said yes. See you. The food was really good."

"Hey! Hey, stop right there!"

His friend took off just like that. Moonjoong tried to catch up to the man, but Chulmin just jumped into his car shouting, 'No need for farewells!'

...Then, the man got off the car and came back to the doorstep.

"Actually, come with me."

"...You haven't changed at all, have you?"

Even while saying that, Moonjoong grabbed his jacket. He was leaning towards saying yes to his friend's offer already, he knew his friend wanted the best for him. Moonjoong trusted Chulmin, which was why he didn't need to hesitate on trying to make a decision.

Moonjoong got inside Chulmin's car. He thought he would be alone with his friend, but there turned out to be someone else in there. A young man with a very well-defined face. Someone Moonjoong knew very well.

"Hello, sir."

The young man greeted him very politely.

"Ah, so it's you, Geunsoo."

“Yes.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I got hired as a temporary driver,” Geunsoo said with a grin.

Moonjoong couldn’t help but glance at Chulmin.

“Are you at least paying the poor kid?”

“What, you think I’m a CEO of a black company or something? Geunsoo, am I making you do this for free?”

“No, sir. I’m learning a lot.”

“See? Why are you making me out to be the villain, when I’m so kind?”

Moonjoong and Chulmin burst out into laughter together, Moonjoong hadn’t felt like this in a very long time.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So where are we going, anyway?” Moonjoong asked.

“There’s an event the director of the movie is involved in, so I was just thinking of dropping in for a chat.”

“An event?”

“A competition for the babies. It’s the nationals starting today.”

“I thought that was in summer?”

“That’s the one held by us. This one’s backed by industries and production companies. Much smaller than the one we hold.”

Geunsoo decided to butt into the conversation.

“But the industry rates the winter competitions with higher regard than the summer one. I don’t know if you remember, but I won in the winter competition three times back in high school.”

“I know, I know. You’ve bragged about it so much that I remember it by heart at this point,” Chulmin responded, clicking his tongue.

Geunsoo started coughing embarrassedly.

“You’ll see a lot of familiar faces once you’re there. We’re not actually going for the competition, but rather the drama production announcement meeting being held in the building next to it.”

“I see.”

“You should try watching how the younger kids act too if you have the time.”

“Younger kids, huh.”

Moonjoong turned to look outside the window.

\* \* \*

"You didn't forget anything, did you?"

“Nope.”

“Check again, just to be sure.”

“You look even more nervous than us for some reason, Instructor.”

“You're literally the only person calm here!”

Maru watched as Miso walked away to somewhere else. Today was the day of the prelims, so the acting club was especially busy.

“Maru! Help me with this!” Soyeon called out.

Maru ran over. They needed to move their props over to the stage in Anyang. He put on the chair Soyeon was holding into a truck in the middle of the school field.

“Pretty much done, right?” Dojin asked.

The costumes were carried by the girls. They checked everything last night, so they definitely didn't forget anything. Things should be fine as long as the props arrive safely at the stage.

“Careful not to break them. They're made of wood.”

They tied the wooden props to the top of the truck under Joonghyuk's instructions. In total, they had a building prop, streetlights, trash cans, a store, and a few desks to go in front of said store as well.

“Here, let me see.”

An employee of the moving company checked things over one last time before covering it up with a tarp and tying it all down with more ropes.

“Phew, finally.”

The club members let out a sigh of relief. They'd done this several times already, but they always got stressed anyway. They didn't want their precious props breaking on them, after all. Unfortunately, it'd already happened twice to them so far.

“Please take good care of it, sir.”

“Of course.”

The truck left first. The club members split up between a taxi, Miso's car, and Ganghwan's car.

“You should just come in as our secondary advisor at this point,” Maru commented, getting into the shotgun seat in Ganghwan's car.

“Hey, don't say that. You're going to jinx it. Oh, guys, it's a little dirty, but please bear with me.”

“Yes.”

Indeed, the back seats were littered with Ganghwan’s clothes, scripts, and various tools. Daemyung, Taejoon, and Dojin carefully moved everything to the side before they settled into their seats.

“We’re leaving.”

Ganghwan pressed on the pedal as soon as he saw Miso leave. It was 11 am when the club finally made their way towards Anyang. Maru took out his phone to read a message he received just yesterday.

[We’ll go easy on you for the prelims, so good luck. We’ll win at the finals though.]

It was her. Looking at the message just gave him strength.

“Nervous?”

“Yes.”

“Well, aren’t you good at lying. You don’t even feel anything, do you?”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Very. At least try to fake it better. I told you, didn’t I? You’re the type that gets stimulated on stage, so some nervousness beforehand is really good for you. If you go wild by yourself, that’s not acting anymore. If you want to communicate with the audience, you need to become calm on the stage.”

“I understand.”

Ganghwan started speaking to the kids behind him as well.

“And you guys need to stop being so nervous! Gosh damn it, what’s with you guys? The person next to me has the problem of being too calm and the people behind me are way too nervous. Come on, this isn’t like your second or third time on stage, is it? Hm?”

“...It is.”

“Oh, right. Sorry about that. I guess it’s right for you to be that nervous, then. You really can’t do anything about that.”

Maru knew Ganghwan wouldn’t stop talking there. Indeed, the man continued talking.

“Accept the fact that you’re nervous, though. This is a feeling you’ll have to live with forever, so learn to enjoy it. It’ll be a thousand times better than trying to suppress it. I promise.”

The three kids behind them nodded.

## **Chapter 138**

The first thing her mom asked her when she said she was going out on a Sunday morning was, ‘Are you going on a date?’ She couldn’t answer. All she could do instead was to run out the door. As she went down the elevator, she checked her scarf and stockings for any tears. She was good, thankfully.

“Hah.”

She puffed out a breath of white against the chilly winter air before pulling the beanie she received from Maru down to her ears. She felt warm again pretty quickly. Once she got on the bus, she took a look at the time. It was ten o'clock. The play would begin at noon, so she had plenty of time. As she watched the scenery pass by out the window, she grinned. She didn't tell Maru that she would be visiting today, he would definitely be surprised if she visited him in secret.

After getting off the bus, she turned to take a look at the community center. It was filled to the brim with high schoolers and cars, cars filled with stage props.

"Hurry up!"

"We're next."

Everyone was moving in such a hurry. She'd become one of them next week as well. She still had an hour till the play, so she headed to a convenience store nearby. She could visit Maru while she had the time, but she didn't want to bother him when he was so close to starting.

"I'll buy this."

A high schooler in a costume was buying a hot drink for himself. The poor boy looked incredibly nervous. She muttered 'good luck' under her breath. They all had to fight for the ticket to the finals, but that didn't make them sworn enemies.

As she sat down to drink some coffee, she saw a familiar face walk towards the store from the hall. The girl didn't seem to have recognized her even as she walked into the store.

"Yoojin," she called out first.

Lee Yoojin. The girl was someone who practiced in the amateur acting class with her. Yoojin smiled as soon as she discovered her.

"What the, you are on today?"

"No, I'm just here to watch."

"Really? That's the same as me, then. Ah, I'm here to spy I guess?"

Yoojin grinned. Spy, huh. What a funny way to put it.

"Did you come here with your club?" Yoojin asked.

"No, by myself."

"By yourself?"

Yoojin looked a little confused, most people wouldn't be coming here by themselves. It felt a little embarrassing to say that she was here to see Maru, so she just said she had business here. Yoojin continued despite her confusion.

"I came with my mom."

"Your mom?"

“Yeah. There’s apparently this drama event happening around here. She said she had work to do there, so I just followed her.”

“Wow, your mom works in the drama industry?”

“She runs a hair shop, but she’s involved one way or the other. That’s how I managed to become a child actor, to begin with.”

“I see. You must’ve seen a lot of celebrities.”

“Sure. From afar.”

She knew that Yoojin acted as a child actor, but she had no idea that Yoojin’s parents were involved in the industry as well. They must be pretty close to the actors if they were involved in events like this. Or maybe it was the producers instead?

“Oh, by the way... You look really mature, you know that?”

“Who, me?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you greet a lot of people for the event, too?”

“Sure. My mom would introduce me, I’d bow, and leave afterwards. I just managed to escape it.”

Yoojin spoke with a tired voice. She put her chin over her hand as she sighed.

“Sounds horrible.”

“It’s not that bad if you consider it an investment for the future. It might be tiring now, but this is just an opportunity for later.”

Yoojin sounded very calm about it, which was pretty amazing. As expected of a real actor, the girl emanated the energy of a pro.

“When does it begin?”

“11.”

“So it’s started already, huh. Why aren’t you going in?”

“I’m here for the one that’s going at 12.”

“12?”

“We still have time, then. Did you have lunch?”

She looked down at her empty can of coffee as she muttered, ‘this is lunch.’

“Good lord. That’s lunch? Are you on a diet?”

“Not really. There just isn’t much for me to eat here. I don’t really want instant noodles either.”

“Mm.”

Yoojin tapped her lips for a second before widening her eyes.

“There was a katsu place nearby. Want to go?”

Katsu... she liked it, but she didn't have the money today. She only brought enough to be able to go back home.

“By the looks of it, you need me to pay, don't you?”

“I'm fine, really.”

“I'm not. I don't want to eat alone. Can you come with me? Eating alone feels awkward.”

Yoojin approached to put an arm around hers. Were they this friendly with each other before? Well, whatever. She just smiled. She wasn't the type that got uncomfortable by something like this. Plus, the girl was offering food.

“I'm going to get the one with cheese!”

“Me too.”

“Let's go.”

She followed Yoojin into a restaurant behind the hall. It was a place decorated with logs on the outside. Once she entered, she let out a small exclamation of surprise.

“It's so pretty.”

“Right?”

It must've been a popular place considering how many seats were filled. There were a lot of couples inside. The restaurant didn't have seats left on the first floor, so they had to go up. Thankfully, they could find a seat quickly on the second floor.

“A window seat! Lucky!”

Yoojin put her bag on one of the chairs as she sat down. Only then did she notice Yoojin's bag, it was a very expensive looking clutch bag. Noticing her gaze, Yoojin started showing off the bag.

“I got it as a gift.”

“It looks expensive.”

“It was from a regular in our shop who runs a jewellery shop. I couldn't ask for the price either since I was too scared to ask. That lady drives around in a Maserati...”

“What's a Maserati?”

“It's just this car thing. It looks better with older men, but the regular told me she really likes it.”

Yoojin didn't talk all that much in the acting class, but the girl was really going off today. She must be very sociable outside of work, they might even be able to become good friends. She took a sip of water with those thoughts in mind.

“That hat looks good on you.”



“Oh, this?”

She smiled as she put a hand over her hat. To be honest, she did want expensive clothes and bags. She'd get it if she could, but more than that, she wanted a gift that had thought behind it. That's why she liked this hat Maru gave her much more than the clutch that Yoojin carried around. It's something Maru bought this for her with the hopes that she wouldn't get cold.

“Ooh, is it from a guy?”

“.....”

She was embarrassed to admit it, but she didn't want to deny it. So she just closed her mouth.

“I'm so jealous. Who is it? I feel like it's from someone who likes you, you must get a ton of confessions thrown your way.”

“Confessions? No way. I don't get a lot of those.”

“Liar. You said 'a lot', so you do get them.”

“What about you? I feel like you would've gotten a lot as well.”

The two of them stopped talking for a second before smiling awkwardly. If they were better friends, they would've started cracking silly jokes here. But well, they weren't good friends just yet.

“You must be really interested in acting, by the way. Especially if you're coming to watch on a day off.”

“R-right.”

She did enjoy watching people act. That was the one hobby she used to share with her dad, but she definitely came here today for personal reasons.

“Is Myunghwa High aiming for the first prize this year, too?”

“Of course. Our seniors are ready to go all out. We might get overtaken by Bosung Girls High if we aren't careful.”

“What the, you guys were watching out for us? Then again, we're getting ready to beat you guys, too. Ugh... Our seniors are scary. They're so nervous now that we're a week out from the prelims. Hold on, if you guys win this one... You guys would be winning four nationals in a row, right?”

“You're right, now that you mention it.”

“Can't you go easy just this once?”

“No way, never.”

“Ugh, you're too greedy.”

Yoojin smiled playfully. The server walked over to serve them the food they ordered. It came on a heated stone plate, vastly different from the katsu stores near her school.

“It's not that expensive, so don't feel too bad about it.”

“Was I being too obvious?”

“Very. You have a pretty cute side to you, don’t you? I thought you’d be really stiff when I saw you in Myungdong.”

“Same here. I thought you’d be awkward, too.”

“Hm, then again, we never really talk to each other. After all, I’m... the main character. Hehe.”

“Ugh, good for you.”

She did want the role of Seulmi, the character that’s often paired with Maru’s. She had to admit that Yoojin fit the role better, so she gave up. She didn’t want to ruin the mood of the place with pointless greed. In the end, she wanted to get along with the rest of the crew.

“Ah! Come to think of it, isn’t Han Maru acting today? He was in Woosung High, wasn’t he?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Right, you guys are always together, too! Are you guys going out?”

Her mouth twitched a little. But before she could say anything, Yoojin spoke first.

“No, you didn’t seem all that interested when I saw you two at the bbq last time. You guys live in the same direction, right?”

“Y-yeah. Suwon.”

“I thought so. Maru doesn’t seem to be the type that’d get along with girls. No, he’s changed a bit recently. He always seemed to be thinking about something before, but he started speaking a lot more now. He doesn’t seem as hard to approach as before.”

“Really? I had no idea. He honestly goes around saying so many silly things.”

“Silly? Huh, interesting. I never got that from him. Ah, right. Did you know? Maru’s actually really thoughtful. He’s really hardworking when it comes to acting, too. I saw his script last time, and wow... I’ve never seen more detailed notes on a script. It was pretty cool.”

“Cool? Maru’s not cool, he’s just really stubborn about everything he does.”

She felt a little offended for some reason. She should be happy since the person she’s dating just got praised, but she didn’t feel that way at all.

‘Hold on, we *are* dating, right?’

They confessed to each other and now they were going places together, so they were... dating, right?

‘Come to think of it, he never gave me a proper response!’

Suddenly, it felt like she was losing out. The boy shook her after coming to her house at night, then called her again later. Did she ever get a single word out of him about how he felt then?

“Hey.”

“Hm?”

“Why did you become so dazed all of a sudden? Your food’s gonna get cold, let’s eat.”

“Y-yeah.”

She started eating for now, just like Yoojin said. All the while thinking about what she would say to Maru.

\* \* \*

“This is unrelated to dramas, but I just have to ask this, given the number of rumors. Ms. Suyeon, are you dating anyone? I heard you were very close with actor Choi recently.”

“Ah... For now, I think hearing such rumors are a great honor for me.”

“By that you mean?”

“Mm, honestly, I would love to date someone. But who are you talking about? Actor Choi? There’s quite a lot of actors with that last name.”

Suyeon passed the reporter’s question with a bright smile. The reporters let her go with laughter as well. This time, a different reporter asked a question.

“You have some great wit, actor Suyeon. You’ve been a rising icon in the industry. Did you know about that?”

Suyeon pointed at herself in surprise.

“Me?”

“Yes. You recently got very good reviews on the drama that you finished, ‘Blue Sparks’. It didn’t get that many views, but many of the reviews said that it was a pleasure watching you.”

“I’m very grateful for those reviews, but that’s also quite a bit pressure. I would rather not be called an ‘icon’ or anything of the sort when I’m just starting out in the business.”

“Isn’t ‘just starting out’ an inaccurate description? I heard you were very famous back in Hyehwa station.”

“Dramas are very different from plays, after all. In this world, I am nothing but an outsider and a student trying to get better. Again, I’m grateful for all the attention, but I really do think the term ‘icon’ isn’t befitting of me just yet.”

“By ‘just yet’, do you mean that you would become an icon in the future?”

“Mm, yes. I’m not trying to be arrogant here, only greedy. I want to shake up the viewers after I mature a bit more as an actress.”

“Thank you for your response.”

The actress sat back down with a grin.

**Chapter 139**

Suyeon's mouth was hurting from having to smile so much. She took a sip of water as she stretched her jaw a little bit. After her first miniseries with the K broadcasting company ended, she immediately received another job offer. The K broadcasting company was recently losing views to the S broadcasting company, which was why they were in a rush to start a new miniseries.

Suyeon looked to her right. That was the main character's seat in the announcement table, a spot she couldn't even dream of sitting at. She thought she was getting some attention initially, but in the end, all of the attention shifted over to the main character. As a 'rising star', she couldn't hold a candle to the real thing.

"Mr. Kang, you're asking such an embarrassing question."

The man talking right now was a male actor, the one actor who managed to grab the attention of all the women in the country. The romance drama he starred in held incredibly high ratings and the thriller movie he starred in later in the year gathered up to six million viewers. The man, who had just reached his thirties, was pretty much the ticket to success for just about any drama or movies right now. The K broadcasting company had somehow managed to cast the man in spite of his popularity. Also, there was one more person.

"It feels odd coming here now, I can't get used to it. Honestly, I need a shot of soju in me before I can really get going."

The actress who clearly didn't have a filter on her mouth. She managed to become a star a few years ago by demonstrating her massive talent as a side character in a movie. Her fame didn't last, though. She immediately turned her attention to shooting commercials, people insulted her for her greed back then. Not anymore. After she earned her money through commercials, she turned her attention to independent films.

By that point, she didn't give a damn about money and acted exclusively in the films that caught her attention. Just a while ago, she starred in a film about a gay character. The film got blasted by Christian media, but all of Korea back then got into a heated debate about whether or not gay love was right. The woman acted in a ton of films afterwards, but she didn't appear on TV shows or dramas. Suyeon still remembered reading her saying 'to the guys that tried to tempt me with money... fuck you,' on a magazine interview.

Ahn Joohyun.

The woman was finally going to appear on television once again. Suyeon didn't have a problem with it. As long as the woman didn't harm her in any way, she didn't care. But, as soon as Suyeon heard that she was going to be in this drama, she did everything she could to get a role here. Joohyun was a woman who always brought controversies. That meant that there was a higher chance that Suyeon's name would appear on mainstream media alongside her. Not only that, the main character was the most popular male actor of the year. This drama was too tempting to be ignored.

"Hahaha, you're very liberal about your views as I expected, Ms. Joohyun."

"Liberal? No way, I'm just rude. I still remember what your company wrote about me. Ahn Joohyun, dragged down into becoming a CF queen. Her acting? A tragedy of an actress who chases money. That was the title, wasn't it?"

The reporter who had initially asked a question froze up. Not even the people in the VIP seats had a very bright expression on them. Right now, only the general audience was laughing at what Joohyun said.

“You should’ve at least expected this much if you were from that news company.”

“.....”

“Write whatever you want. You’re going to write about how I’m a barbarian with no manners this time, aren’t you, Mr. Reporter?”

The reporter started looking around himself nervously. Given his reaction, he was probably fresh in the business. That could only mean one thing. The senior reporters of the company all knew how Joohyun would act towards them, so they sent a newbie as a sacrificial lamb.

“Hahaha, please don’t get so surprised, Mr. Reporter.”

A comedian host tried to intervene right then. The other actors tried to make the situation a little better by smiling, but the reporter in question couldn’t even lift his head.

“How is it? It’s very easy to make a person look like an idiot, isn’t it? I’m confident in my work. How about you, though? Do you take pride in insulting people like that?”

Joohyun froze up the hall yet again. Suyeon was astounded. It was essential for actors to be able to deflect a situation that could go awry. After all, actors should never get on the bad side of reporters, but Joohyun didn’t care. The woman said whatever she wanted, there was probably no one else in the entire country who was like her.

That alone indicated success in the business. At least, as an entertainer.

“Ms. Joohyun, please don’t get so aggressive, you’re scaring me.”

Only when the male actor said something did Joohyun sigh and stop. The woman would’ve probably kept going until she chased that reporter out the hall if someone didn’t stop her. Suyeon noticed the reporters typing away busily in the background. No matter what Joohyun said, these people would continue making a living out of insulting actors. They would probably write something with a title along the lines of ‘there’s an actress who bullies newbie reporters?’

Suyeon did her best to put on a calm smile. There was a high chance the reporters would stop asking questions to the main characters after getting bit like this by Joohyun. That meant she had a chance to get the attention to herself again. If she did well here, she could get herself on the title as well. Something like, ‘an arrogant actress and a humble one’, maybe?

\* \* \*

“She’s a tyrant, that one.”

“Right you are.”

Moonjoong and Chulmin were a little surprised at how bold Joohyun was. Personally, Moonjoong was a fan. As he grew up in his early years, he was stuck under the assumption that women had to be lady-like.

That is, quiet, obedient, and unseen. But the more he acted, the more he thought about the nature of humans and the more he realized that that assumption itself was inhumane.

"It's odd. You need money if you want to even begin to speak like that," Chulmin noted bitterly.

"You know, that sounds really unrealistic coming from someone as rich as you."

"Damn it, can't you agree with me for once?"

Moonjoong scanned the actors for a second after teasing his friend. On the table were eight actors that were getting fairly popular recently. Usually, the producers would only bring the main characters to a place like this, but the side characters were here as well. They probably wanted to show that even their side characters were famous people.

"You see that kid at the edge of the table over there?"

"I can."

"That's the kid that Junmin said was particularly smart. Suyeon, I believe." "Smart."

Moonjoong thought of the word as he looked at the girl. The girl had a nice first impression, but when Junmin said someone was smart, that didn't mean a good thing at all. Whenever Junmin introduces a friend, he refers to them as a 'good person'.

"She's someone who can take advantage of scandals very well."

"Ah, smart in that sense?"

"I heard there are quite a few people who fell for that smile of hers. She's a vixen, that one."

"She must have quite the dream."

"Indeed. Personally, I'm afraid of young ones like her."

"Haha, don't worry. She's probably not even interested."

"You fool, I might look like this, but I'm a president."

"Oh dear, so you qualify to play with the younger girls, is that it?"

"No, I mean... You know what I mean."

Moonjoong knew well that Chulmin loved his wife more than anyone else. A long time ago, an actress approached him with vicious intent and the man had promptly cut ties with her right then and there. Chulmin was like a stone, unchanging and unrelenting.

"Ah, I forgot to say. Joohyun and Suyeon over there are both going to appear in that movie you're going to be in."

"You're already casting? What if I say no?"

"That's a problem for my future self."

"I see that side of you never changed."

“Anyway, let’s go to the civic hall next after this event ends. We can take a look at the young kids acting while we wait for our next meeting. The director in question is coming from Seoul right now, so everything should fit quite nicely.”

Moonjoong nodded. It looked like this event would be over soon anyhow, the actors were already starting to take group pictures.

“Thank you.”

“Please pay a lot of attention to our drama!”

When the comedian MC announced the end of the event, the general audience started flocking to the exit. Moonjoong and Chulmin tried to blend into the crowd and exit quietly. But unfortunately, someone recognized them.

“Oh, Teacher!”

A man ran over to say hello to Chulmin. Chulmin smiled and extend his hand, making the man grab it and bow again.

“This is the program director for our drama.”

“Aha.”

The program director looked up to take a look at Moonjoong this time. Moonjoong responded with a smile and the man’s jaw dropped like a rock.

“Would you happen to be Mr. Yoon Moonjoong?”

“Oh, you recognize an old man like me? What an honor.”

“Sir! I know this isn’t really the place to say this, but I was a massive fan. You’re the one who made me want to get into this business to begin with.”

The man shook Moonjoong’s hand firmly. Moonjoong smiled slightly, so there was someone who still remembered him after all. He thought he was past all the attention-seeking habits back in the old days, but he clearly didn’t shake off all of it.

“If you told me, I would’ve put you in one of the VIP seats.”

“No, no. We were just dropping by since we had the time. Don’t worry.”

“At least a meal, then...”

“We have somewhere to be, actually.”

“May I ask where...?”

“The building right next door. Just to say hi and to cheer on the young folk a bit.”

“Ah! Is it the high school competition?”

“Yes.”

“As expected of you, Teacher. You care quite a bit about raising the next generation.”

The production director looked touched, Moonjoong couldn't help but smile inside. They were only going there to kill time, but somehow a greater meaning was attached to it. It didn't look like Chulmin was going to correct the man, either.

“Would it be alright if I could join you?”

Right then, the actors started walking towards them. Why wouldn't they? Their director was talking so intently with someone at the entrance.

“These are our actors, sir.”

By the looks of it, most of the actors with the exception of the younger ones all recognized Chulmin. They all bowed in greeting.

“Dear, dear. I caused too much commotion when I was just dropping by, didn't I? We'll take our leave now, so take care.”

Chulmin clearly didn't want to cause a commotion. Moonjoong was of the same opinion, so they tried to leave as quickly as possible.

“Can I follow you, Teacher?”

“Eh? There's no need, though.”

“It's a great chance to meet talented younglings. Plus, I don't want to send the two of you off just like this. Please, sirs..”

The man told the actors that he would be leaving before walking out the door. The actors said their farewells to the three men with a confused expression before taking their leave. All except two of them.

Suyeon and Joohyun.

## **Chapter 140**

“I like the ones with chocolate on top.”

“I like cream.”

Before she knew it, her hand was getting dragged around by Yoojin's. She had a cup of coffee in one hand and Yoojin's hand in the other, it almost felt like she followed her mom outside.

“Oh? It's almost time.”

“You're right.”

The two of them turned to head towards the civic hall. The sun was shining brightly above them, making the weather a little warm for winter. She took off her beanie and put it in her bag as she entered the building. Inside, she could see a bunch of high schoolers running around busily in their makeup. She became fired up because of it. The winter competition had finally begun.

“Why are there so many people?”



“No idea.”

This was just the prelims. A regional one, too. Most of the time, high school acting competitions never got attention. Unless a school takes all of their students out to cheer for their club, the audience seats were usually empty. Plus, this was a Sunday. No school would be able to force their students to go watch a high school play on the weekend. Except for Myunghwa High, of course. Her school was very generous to the acting club. Anyhow, that didn't change the fact that there was an unnatural number of people in the building right now.

“Wow, are those cameras?”

Yoojin noticed the large cameras that were carried around by some of the people, she looked at the cameras strangely as well. A broadcasting camera, at an event like this? Why were there so many reporters as well?

“Is something else happening here today?”

“Probably not, it's just going to be the competition all the way till 6.”

“What is this, then?”

“Did someone famous come?”

“Ah, maybe.”

She moved to the first floor, wondering if a TV star came. Since the event wasn't anything special, you could sit anywhere you want. Except of course, for the reserved seats. Interestingly, there were a lot of reserved seats here today. She sat down on one of the middle seats, waiting for the next play to start. Right then, Yoojin received a call.

“Yeah, I'm in. What? You're coming? Oh, so that's what it was. Is big sis Joohyun coming too? Did she disappear in the middle? What the, and here I wanted to say hi.”

Even she knew who Ahn Joohyun was, she was a controversial actress. After hanging up, Yoojin continued talking.

“The people from the drama event are all coming here. Something as a celebration?”

“I see. So will there be famous people coming?”

“Don't know. I think the actors are all gone because of something else, though. The people coming here are all most likely from the production crew.”

“That's boring. You reckon they'd come on stage to talk about something boring?”

“Probably. They probably have the cameras here for advertising purposes too. Damn, and here I was all excited for nothing.”

Yoojin set her phone to vibrate with a tiny frown. She turned her phone off as well.

“We'll introduce our next play now. This is the 'People of Dalseok-dong', performed by Woosung High. We'll begin in ten minutes.”

Yoojin blinked her eyes in surprise.

“Maru was in Woosung High, right?”

“Yeah? Yeah.”

“Hmm, I should see how good he is.”

Yoojin let off a gaze like an experienced reviewer.

‘He should do well.’

She’s never seen Maru on the stage. All that she’s seen of him were during their practices, but she knew very well watching through practice and watching acting on stage couldn’t be more different. Maru’s acting, to her, felt calm. She occasionally heard instructor Ganghwan tell him to try and not get excited. She couldn’t understand what the man meant by that at all. Just what about Maru made him look excited?

“Yoojin.”

“Eh?”

“What’s Maru’s acting like to you?”

“Maru? Mm, he’s nice. His acting’s nice, but... It’s not eye-catching. Kind of like a floor that you know won’t give out?”

“So why did the instructor tell him to be calm?”

“Now that you mention it, I do remember him saying that. I don’t know. I don’t think there was a reason for it though? Maru never seems particularly energetic when he’s acting. Chuljin’s a really energetic character and Maru seems a little boring to watch when he plays the character.”

She must’ve thought similarly.

“But surely the instructor had a reason for saying that.”

Yoojin seemed to be pretty excited for this.

“He’s my rival for the nationals, but he’s also a partner for a play we’re working on. I hope Maru does well. If he doesn’t, that would just mean that he’s not suited to be my partner. Maru’s decent right now, but there needs to be something more. I want to act with someone who can charm me. Well, Maru’s a decent kid after all, so depending on how things go today...”

“Why are you talking about that all of the sudden?”

She cut off Yoojin right there in surprise. The girl was suddenly saying some dangerous words in front of her.

“What the, what’s with that reaction?”

“Eh?”

“I thought you didn’t think of Maru that way?”

“That’s....”

“What the, you like him?”

“.....”

“That’s a surprise. I don’t mind, though. It’s not like we’re meeting people at this age to marry them. It’s natural to date someone because you like them and break up if it doesn’t work out. No, especially our age, I think we should get into very casual relationships. To develop an eye for men. Don’t you agree?”

“I do, but I think it’s better to just stick it through with one guy.”

“Well, that’s not bad either.”

Yoojin seemed to be an open girl. On the contrary, she’d never thought about boys like that before. This was the first time she’d come to like someone and the first time she’d ever confessed back to someone. Dating a different boy? She couldn’t imagine it.

“Oh, it’s starting.”

Yoojin turned her attention back to the stage. She threw away her needless thoughts as well. Thinking about other things during a play was very rude to the actors. Plus, she knew that Woosung High swept all the nationals until eight years ago. Not only that, she also knew that one of the graduates of the club was the one teaching the club right now. She wanted to cheer for Maru, but she also needed to know just how good Woosung High was.

Just as much as she liked Maru, she also liked acting. Competing with someone she liked was fun, but she also had no intention of losing. In the end, Myunghwa High would be the one to make it to the finals.

\* \* \*

‘She’s quite something as well.’

Yoojin was impressed with how the girl next to her was focusing so intently. In their region, Myunghwa High was known for its acting club. Their club even had an admissions test for the students. Receiving such an important role in a club like that and then winning at the previous nationals meant quite a lot. Yoojin wanted to assemble a nice portfolio for her future. In that sense, this competition was very important to her. As such, there was no helping the fact that she could only be wary of the girl next to her.

‘She’s kind of cute, though.’

It was painfully obvious that the girl was going out with Maru. But since the girl was refusing to admit it, she could only assume that the girl was a newbie to romance. It was honestly great fun to tease the girl about it. They talked pretty much for the first time today, but she was appreciative of the girl’s view on acting.

“Maru’s kind of tall, too, huh?”

The girl looked at her with wide eyes when she asked the question. How adorable. The girl probably had no idea what she even looked like whenever they talked about Maru.

“Pft.”

She should stop with the teasing here, though. They had a play to watch.

\* \* \*

Geunseok took a deep breath. He thought back to a small accident that happened in summer, the day that got completely ruined because of some small kid.

‘It’s nothing. I got over it already.’

He calmed himself down to allow himself to focus, very different compared to his past self. He even managed to win at the college competition after the summer nationals, he didn’t have trauma from that incident.

“You must be nervous.”

Yurim came to talk to him, her cheeks were slightly reddened. The girl didn’t have the charm that big sis Suyeon had, but he did think it was good that he had her with him.

“A little. You?”

“I’m trembling.”

“Don’t be too nervous. We’ll be up there together.”

“...Right, together.”

They held hands tightly together before letting go. Just as Geunseok flipped through his script one last time, he got a call.

- You’re about to go now, right?

Big sis Suyeon. A smile automatically formed on his face. Yurim looked at him a little oddly, so he turned away from her to hide his face.

“Yes, we are.”

- Good luck. If you pass, I’ll hold a little party for you or something.

“Really?”

- Yup. Good luck.

He could hear the sound of a kiss from the other side. Geunseok trembled a little bit.

“Who was it?” Yurim asked.

Geunseok frowned a little bit. So boring. Suyeon’s face was still fresh on his mind. Compared to a woman like her, Yurim was a total child.

“My instructor.”

“Ah, I see.”

That smile’s kind of cute, though. Geunseok closed his eyes. Yurim probably wouldn’t talk to him like this. Thankfully, she went elsewhere after telling him to work hard.

‘Good, my emotions are at an all-time high. I can do this. I’m experienced and I’m better than everyone else in the club. I just need to believe in myself.’

He was getting drunk on confidence, he just needed to push through like this.

“Let’s do well.”

“Fighting.”

The seniors all gave him words of encouragement. They all looked at him with trust as well. In the end, he really was the only person the club could rely on.

“Alright, let go of your scripts. We’re five minutes away from starting. It’s meaningless to look at it any more,” Miso said.

Geunseok let go of his script. Despite that, it felt like he was still holding it in his hands. He felt great today. Things should go very well for him.

“You practiced harder than anyone. I swore at you and got mad at you during practice, but I don’t even bother doing that to people who I don’t even see talent from. You know that, right?”

“Yes!”

“We worked for four months. In that time, you all definitely improved. Have confidence and run wild.”

They all gathered in one place before chanting Blue Sky under their breath. Geunseok felt his heart start to beat, he loved this nervous air and the eyes that were focused on him.

‘Is this why people act?’

He grinned. It was time to show people his talent. The other schools that came before them? They were clearly all trash. They were awkward and pathetic. This club wasn’t that good either, but they were better than... that. Plus, this club had Hong Geunseok. The boy who was recognized by everyone, whose brother was a talented actor.

‘I’m not going to be cast at a real play right here, am I?’

It seemed possible. He heard something about some very famous people from the industry coming today. He saw cameras and reporters outside. If he gets in the eyes of someone like that...

‘I can rise even without Lee Junmin.’

Lee Junmin, Geunseok didn’t actually like this man that much. He was thankful to the man for introducing Suyeon to him, but that was all the goodwill Geunseok held towards him.

‘He should support me more, especially with my talent. Just you watch, I’ll leave the moment I find something better.’

Making himself known through his brother shouldn't be bad as well. Geunseok imagined the reporters all flocking towards him as he waited for them to get called out. Then...

"Woosung High, please come to the stage."

The staff gave him the go-ahead.