

Once Again 151

Chapter 151

It just... kind of happened. There was no other way Dojin could explain his current situation.

"A friend?"

"Yes!"

Dojin replied loudly to Iseul's mother. He didn't reply too loudly, did he?

"You can work him as much as you want, mom. He's a worker for just today."

Iseul slapped Dojin's back with a big grin, the boy was starting to learn just how strong she really is.

How did he even get here, anyway?

Iseul asked him if he had anything to do at school, and he replied no. She told him to follow her and before he knew it, they were at her family's restaurant. By the time he came to, he was wearing a kitchen apron peeling onions in a corner.

"Bite on this if your eyes hurt too much."

Iseul handed him a green onion as she peeled the garlic from next to him.

"Wouldn't this just make it worse?"

"Just trust me and do it."

Well, he had no choice then, did he? She was smiling at him so prettily. He put the green onion in his mouth and went back to peeling. Huh, she was right. It really didn't hurt anymore.

"You were right."

"Just a little business know-how."

Iseul wiped her nose with a finger, she looked like a total princess but acted like a tomboy.

"You two should go out and play after you finish that," Iseul's mom said.

"We'll help until dad comes back."

Iseul seemed to be used to working at the restaurant, she immediately stepped out to take orders whenever new customers came. It was a small place, so the tables were always full. The two of them weren't able to talk properly due to how busy the restaurant was. Only when the time became 2 o'clock were they finally able to start talking a bit more.

"Thanks for the help."

They stepped out after taking off their aprons. Dojin's legs were aching from how long he was squatting, but he didn't feel too bad. At least he was with a girl he liked.

"We should have lunch."

“Where?”

Iseul just grabbed his arm in response. Before he could even do anything, she dragged him away; he once again realized just how tall Iseul during that moment. Her limbs were pretty long as well and the proportions of her body were well balanced. He wondered for a split second if he even had a chance with this girl, he gave up on worrying about it pretty quickly. Dojin wasn't good at worrying about stuff, so he might as well not do it at all. What mattered right now was that he was happy. The two of them eventually arrived at a four-story apartment.

“What's this?”

“My home.”

And here he thought they were going to a restaurant. Dojin got nervous for no reason. The two of them walked up to the second floor and entered the unit numbered 202. Unlike their restaurant, the house was quiet, bordering on feeling abandoned.

“We sleep at the restaurant pretty often.”

That's right, the restaurant had a little room stuck next to the kitchen. Since the restaurant opened until dawn, the family must've spent many nights there. Dojin sat down on the dining table and Iseul stood in front of the fridge. She started taking a bunch of things out and started cooking. She made fried rice, some pancakes, and stir-fried sausage.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

He took a bite of the rice. Absolutely delicious. Then again, even if she made him instant noodles, his reaction wouldn't change. Just as he was about to take a spoon of the soup, Iseul asked him a question.

“Do you like me?”

Dojin almost dropped the spoon. He wanted to try to maintain his calm and deny it, but what he came out of his mouth was something entirely different.

“...Yeah.”

Wow, he must look pathetic right now. He couldn't even look her in the eye, but he did feel a little expectant. If she was asking him outright, did it mean...

“Sorry, I'm not very interested just yet.”

She was very firm. Her words woke Dojin right up. It felt like blood was draining straight out of his fingertips.

“I'm thankful that you like me. I don't dislike you either. But you saw what the morning shift was like, didn't you? We were swamped. I don't think I can even continue with the acting club next year either. My dad got hurt, so I'll have to stand in for him.”

“I... see. I didn't know. Is he hurt badly?”

“Kind of. It looks like my mom will have to handle the restaurant alone for a while. She looks really tired though. I can’t just sit around playing looking at that.”

Dojin didn’t even want to eat anymore. Thankfully, he had just finished. The two of them started moving the dishes into the sink. He had no idea that the girl shouldered such burdens. Back in the club, she was always smiling. He felt sorry that he never noticed.

“I hope he gets better soon.”

“Of course he will. Mom would collapse otherwise.”

She was smiling, but it really wasn’t something to smile about. Working in a restaurant was incredibly taxing, Dojin noticed. Doing it by herself with her mother... It probably exhausted her. The dishes clacked together as Iseul started washing. Dojin just watched her work from the side, he didn’t know what to say. Emotions like happiness or love were long gone from his heart right now.

Iseul finished washing the dishes and wiped her hands on the towel.

“Let’s just stay friends. I think that’d be better for the both of us.”

“Will you really stop coming to the club in your second year?”

“Well, even if my dad’s hips get better, he wouldn’t be able to work as he did before. I’d need to step in to stop him from overworking. I do want to continue going to the club, but that doesn’t seem possible at the moment. I like to go all in on something if I start it, but I don’t think I can do that with acting if I work at the restaurant.”

“.....”

“What about you?”

The two of them returned to the table, Iseul poured some juice for him. Tomato juice. Dojin started thinking as he looked at the red juice in front of him.

He grabbed Maru and entered the club for the hell of it. It looked fun and the seniors looked pretty. That was it for him, no deep reasons. Before he knew it, a year had passed. Nothing much had changed. He wasn’t desperate to get good at acting, nor did he have a set path for that acting life in front of him.

“I don’t really know.”

“If you like it, you should keep going.”

Iseul took a sip of the juice. Her eyes, slightly visible atop the mug as she drank, was looking at Dojin.

“...I’ve been thinking about it for a while, but I really don’t know what I want to do. Acting’s fun, yeah. But how should I put it? It occasionally feels like I’m idling by while everyone else is moving forward.”

He smiled awkwardly.

“But it’s not like I have a dream in acting either. I think about this and forget about it on the next day as well. It’s like I’m on a constant loop.”

Dojin stopped talking there, it felt like he was just making himself look worse in front of her.

"I think it's that way for everyone," Iseul began as she put down her cup, "it's not like I have a goal either. I only want to inherit the restaurant because it's all I've known in my life. There's nothing else that I really want to do... I just kind of... do it because I have to."

It was a difficult topic to talk about. She tapped the cup in front of her a few times.

"At least I don't dislike this though. I like the restaurant my parents made. I like the fact that I can work here. It's a blessing. At least I don't have to think about stuff like entrance exams..."

"You said you won't be going to college, right?"

"Yeah. It's not like going to college would improve the flavor of our food."

"Did your parents allow it?"

"No way. They'll probably get really mad at me. I'm going to make them give up though."

Iseul grinned.

"...Aren't you worried? I can't imagine not going to a college."

Dojin tried to stay silent because he didn't want to appear weak, he couldn't help himself though. Iseul looked powerful, she looked alive; just looking at her gave him strength. He didn't want to hide anything in front of someone like that.

"Why are you being like this right now? Are you really Dojin? Why are you being so depressing?"

Iseul slapped his back one more time.

"Of course I'm worried. All of my friends would go to college. They're already talking about it now. But that's why I think I'd need to be even more careful. I just think that as long as I don't regret my actions, I'd be happy with my life. College isn't necessary to success after all."

Iseul finished her cup of juice.

"Plus, I don't want to just imitate other people."

* * *

They were on their way back to the restaurant. Dojin turned to look at Iseul next to him. He wanted to say something to her, but nothing came to mind. Soon, the two of them arrived at the restaurant.

"I'll buy you something tasty next time. Seriously, thank you for today. You helped out a lot."

Iseul waved her hand at him. Instead of saying goodbye, he decided to say something else.

"I finally found something I want to keep on doing today."

"Mm?"

Iseul looked at him curiously. Dojin suppressed the embarrassment inside him and looked straight at her.

"I'm going to keep liking you until I graduate."

Iseul burst out into laughter.

“Alright, fine. But I’m going to keep making you work at the restaurant until then. I’ll call you out whenever you’re free. Are you okay with that?”

“Whenever! I’m always free!”

“That doesn’t sound charming at all you know.”

She waved her hand one last time with a smile. This time, Dojin waved back.

“Bye.”

“See you.”

Dojin got on the bus, his heart felt like it was about to explode. He found something he wanted to do for the first time. It was kind of stupid and the reason why he wanted to do it was even more stupid. But whatever.

As soon as he arrived back home, Dojin turned on the computer. He typed “cook” on the search bar. He knew he was being very hasty right now, but when had Dojin ever not been hasty? Right now, his eyes were shining brighter than anything else.

* * *

“Over here.”

Maru bowed at Mintae from afar. Mintae flinched a little from the distance before bowing as well. By the looks of it, the man only noticed Daemyung before this.

“Bro, this is Maru.”

Daemyung acted as the mediator between the two. Maru recalled meeting this man before, though he had to wonder if the man remembered him.

“We met before, didn’t we? I’m Yoon Mintae.”

The man, who was in his mid-twenties, extended his hand out for a shake. Maru grabbed it firmly.

“Please don’t be so polite in front of me. You can treat me as you do Daemyung.”

“Well, sure then.”

Mintae smiled brightly.

“Did you guys eat yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Alright. Might as well get something. I haven’t eaten yet either.”

Mintae took them to a BBQ place. It was already dinnertime, so the place was crowded.

“Daemyung told you why you’re here, right?”

“Yes.”

They were making an original play completely from scratch, everything from writing the script to the stage tech would be done by them.

“We’re not planning on making this a short-term project. The idea is to rent out a theater in Hyehwa station later on to begin our first play.”

“What about the script?”

“Daemyung decided to give it a go. We’ll have to help him obviously.”

The two of them looked at Daemyung, who smiled nervously at them. The boy seemed dead set on entering into the industry as a director.

“So just us three, then?”

“For now. We’ll need more later though. First off, we need a writer. Someone who can breathe life into the writing. It’s going to be a little difficult for just Daemyung to write it, since we’re all just beginners.”

Making a play. It was a tempting offer. It would be a difficult, yet rewarding project.

“I can decorate the stage,” Mintae began.

“And Maru can take care of the acting,” Daemyung replied.

The two of them seemed to have thought of the roles already.

“How is it? Want to try it?”

Maru nodded after a few seconds of thought.

“I don’t think I can join in right away though. I have to take care of a few things.”

“Of course. I know you guys have that festival. Focus on that first. We can set up the other stuff afterwards. I just wanted to meet you for today.”

Mintae had a wide smile on his face.

Chapter 152

Geunseok’s phone went off again, causing Yurim to bite down on her fork a bit harder than she intended. Her front teeth were throbbing slightly in pain. Already, Geunseok’s stared at his phone four times throughout their date. He just told her he was talking with his coach whenever she asked about it. She wanted to ask what the coach was like, but she lacked the courage each time. The boy already looked annoyed by her. He would hate her for sure if she overstepped her boundaries. So instead, Yurim handed him a piece of a fried dumpling.

“Try this, it’s good.”

“Sure.”

Right then, his phone vibrated again. Geunseok put down his fork with a smile. Yurim felt like she was choking.

“That dumpling’s tasty.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You’re not going to eat it?”

“I will, after this.”

“If it cools down...”

Geunseok raised his hand with an annoyed expression. That face didn’t last long though. After just a second, he had a smile on his face again.

“I’ll eat it on my own time. You should eat it too.”

Geunseok went back to reading his phone. The boy had an incredibly energetic look on his face as he read. Yurim looked at him dumbly before putting a piece of tteokbokki in her mouth. It was sweet. Salty. Spicy. No, it didn’t taste like anything. Since when was this dish so bland? The sticky rice cake felt awful in her mouth. She rolled it in her mouth as she chewed and ended up biting her tongue. She let out a slight moan in pain, but at least with this, she might be able to get Geunseok’s attention...

“Pft.”

Geunseok was laughing while looking at his phone. Yurim tasted blood in her mouth. She thought back to that woman named Suyeon in Geunseok’s phone, that was probably his coach. She looked down slightly. She tried hard to look good with her beige pants, so why did she feel so out of style right now? Also, since when was she so fat? Her hips felt like they were about to explode.

She looked a little further upwards. She could see her stomach. She touched the skin hidden under her shirt, she could feel the fat underneath. The woman in the picture probably didn’t have anything like this. Lastly, her chest. Why was she so small? Her chest hurt a little, so she tapped it a few times with her fist. Even then she was looking at Geunseok. Maybe he’d ask her if she was hurting anywhere?

“This sis is just...” Geunseok said.

He probably didn’t mean to say it out loud. Unfortunately, Yurim heard everything. Geunseok looked up, seemingly realizing his loud voice. Yurim quickly stretched to grab a tissue.

“...I spilled something,” she said, trying her best to hide the fact she heard him.

Geunseok clicked his tongue in disapproval.

“You should be careful. So unladylike.”

“Y-yeah.”

Yurim smiled as she wiped down the already clean table, this was the first time their eyes met since they started eating.

“Geunseok,”

“Yeah?”

“Do you... have anything that’s been bothering you recently?”

“What are you talking about all of a sudden?”

“No, just... I wanted you to know that I’m always here to help you. Just like last time.”

She barely managed to squeeze the words out of her. That’s right, the two of them had a bond that no one could break. Geunseok was relying on her. Speaking the words out loud calmed her down significantly. Surely the boy would come to her if hard times fell on him.

“Like last time?”

Geunseok responded coldly at her words, cold enough to make her flinch. Yurim was afraid of Geunseok’s glare, so she could only stutter out a response.

“N-no, u-um...”

“Explain what you meant by ‘last time’?”

“No, I spoke wrongly.”

“Tell me.”

Geunseok leaned forward, casting a shadow over his face. Yurim felt afraid, his pressuring gaze made her heart tremble. At the same time, she felt oddly comforted. At least he wasn’t looking at his phone anymore, he wasn’t giving that woman any more attention. His eyes were on her and her alone.

She had to suppress a twisted smile appearing on her face. Yurim looked around carefully. She’d be losing to that woman if she didn’t reign in this opportunity. She organized her thoughts before opening her mouth again.

“You know what happened last time. When Maru said those things about you. You were... crying a lot.”

She looked straight down, she could just imagine what kind of a face Geunseok had on him right now. His gaze felt pretty hot on her, but the fact that she could control his emotions made her feel a little bit excited. She knew well that she couldn’t take back the words that she said. She continued talking regardless.

“You remember how I hugged you last time? You looked really sad. You cried a lot in my arms. I still remember you from then. You told me that I was of help to you. That you felt happy when you were with me. Right? I’m... always on your side.”

She looked back up with that. Surely he was fuming now, but at least he’d be looking at her.

“Ah.”

A moan crawled out of her mouth. Geunseok wasn’t looking at her anymore. He was staring at his phone with a smile on his face.

“Geunseok.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you hear me?”

“Yeah. Sort of.”

Sort of. Yurim felt a chill run down her neck, she wanted to throw up. She put a hand over her mouth as she stared at Geunseok. How could he be smiling so happily like that? Come to think of, when was the last time he smiled at her like that? She couldn't remember. She was at a loss. It felt like her precious treasure was slipping out of her fingertips like sand. She tried her best to keep it together in her hands, but her efforts were futile.

“Um, Geunseok.”

Her voice was like that of a mosquito. She could only hope that Geunseok would reply regardless.

“Geunseok.”

He still didn't respond.

“Hey, Geunseok. Geunseok?”

She was losing the energy to even talk now. Geunseok was moving further away from her. Upon that realization, she found it increasingly difficult to breathe. There were girls talking around her. Couples looking at each other. Boys loudly talking behind her. All of their words were fusing together into one incoherent mess. Suddenly, the calm atmosphere of the restaurant was spiralling into something more chaotic.

“Hah, hah, hah.”

She started huffing. Did Geunseok no longer need her anymore? She was starting to suffocate under a feeling of loss and nervousness. She became strong for Geunseok. She was cowardly and weak, but she was ready to stand up whenever Geunseok needed her. Suddenly, the boy didn't need her anymore. He wasn't looking at her anymore.

‘Phone, phone, phone.’

She started digging her bag in a hurry. Her old flip phone quickly came into her vision. She used to have it in her hands all the time, but she started not needing it when she was with Geunseok. In the corner of her mind, she could hear the honks of a car. The laughter of unfamiliar men rang in her ears as well.

- Can you tell us the way to the nearby elementary school?

‘No, I don't know.’

- Don't be like that.

The group of men in black shirts started walking towards her. Yurim gripped her phone tightly. She knew all this was in the past. That didn't make it any less scary though. Her consciousness started to fade away into darkness.

“Are you sick?”

Suddenly, a hand came over her forehead. She let out a sigh as she raised her hand. Geunseok was looking at her worriedly.

“Did you choke on some food?”

“No, it’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Really?”

The grip on her phone loosened. She’d realized. She needed Geunseok in order to survive. So then... how could she make the boy look at her again?

‘Maybe... I could be his support once he gets in trouble again.’

A smile came over her face. Geunseok just needs to experience another tragedy. The boy would look for support and she could come over to help him. Her heart trembled with joy. She was getting excited all over again.

‘I wonder what I’ll need to do to make him hurt.’

It didn’t matter if these were twisted thoughts. She would help him keep going anyhow.

“Geunseok.”

“What?”

“Is there anything you’re concerned about now?”

“...What is it, all of a sudden?”

“Just curious.”

She smiled lightly. Geunseok put the phone down on the table for now.

“Right now? Plays.”

“Plays must be pretty precious to you.”

“Well, isn’t it obvious?”

“In what way, though?”

She looked at Geunseok with curious eyes. The boy liked being praised. He enjoyed people’s attention to him. Indeed, he smiled as he started talking.

“Because it brought me a lot of change. I’d be living a boring life if I didn’t act right now.”

“You said you were going to go into college for movie acting, right?”

“Yeah. I know it sounds odd for me to say, but there’s more than just a few people who recognize my talent. The person who assigned a coach to me also promised me scholarship money. Did I tell you about that already?”

“Yeah, you did.”

“That’s why the prelims are important. Because they’re pretty strict. He might lose interest in me if I don’t give him results. My acting doesn’t matter, of course. You saw how everyone was praising me, right?”

“Of course. You’re perfect, Geunseok.”

“That is... true.”

“We just need to do better.”

“That’s the issue. You guys need to support me well. As long as you don’t make mistakes, we should be able to get through easily.”

“So I just need to trust you?”

“Of course.”

Fun. Talking with him was fun. No one was interrupting them at this moment.

But the vibrations from Geunseok’s phone made Yurim clench her hands. The boy was looking at his phone again. She hated that phone. She wanted to break it. She gripped her fork tightly. Would the phone break if she stabbed the phone with it? No, Geunseok would be mad at her if she did it. That couldn’t happen. She needed to push him over the edge without his knowledge.

Yurim looked down at her own phone. She got a text. She checked the message with a dumb look.

[Do you have time tomorrow? Want to buy clothes together?]

It was Soyeon. She felt tempted for a second, but she remembered them having fun without her at Iseul’s place last time. Traitor. They were all traitors.

[Busy.]

She closed her phone. As long as Geunseok was with her, she didn’t feel nervous. She didn’t need her phone when Geunseok was with her.

‘That’s why the prelims are important.’

The sentence reverberated inside her head. Right then, she thought of the wall in the auditorium. That black corner of the room. Fire. Burnt costumes and props. The seniors who weren’t even able to get to the prelims.

“Pft.”

She let out a small laugh.

“What?”

“It’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

It’s that. She could use that to break Geunseok. Surely she could use this to get his attention again.

‘You can cry whenever you want. I’ll always be ready.’

She didn't ever want to return to her old self again.

'I'm not weak. I can help other people. I can be his support.'

She became calm again. She was happy.

* * *

"Method acting isn't anything special. You just need to completely immerse in a character. The problem is, the better you get at acting, the better you get at erasing yourself. In the end, you might erase yourself for good. If things get really bad, your actual personality might permanently change. Some people even end up having to get treatment because of it."

"That actually happens?"

"You ever saw a pathological liar?"

"From a TV a few times."

"That's kind of similar to what method acting's like. Pathological lying starts to turn into reality for a person. If things get bad, you might even start trying to turn that lie into reality. There's an actor in France who assumed the role of a father that lost his son. Things got so bad for him that he started forgetting his own son."

"I see."

Maru nodded at Ganghwan. It was an interesting story. To think immersive acting can actually ruin a person...

"Acting's complicated, isn't it?"

"That it is."

Ganghwan pressed on the pedal with a sigh.

Chapter 153

The Myungdong Art Theater. It was his first time back here in two weeks. He found the kids huddled together once he walked onto the stage. Baekjoon, who played the class president, and Yoojin greeted him in turn. Next to them was Choi Areum, who played their teacher.

"Long time no see," Baekjoon received Maru with a slap on the shoulder, "how was your prelims?"

"It was okay."

"Stop pretending to be humble. Yoojin told me you guys were no joke."

What did they talk about? Maru turned to Yoojin in curiosity.

"I just told him you guys did well. By the way..."

Yoojin approached him to whisper.

"How was it after that?"

“After what?”

“Didn’t you get dragged away by her mom?”

“You saw?”

“Of course. I was caught by her too. I was just watching you guys kiss before she suddenly appeared behind me. I almost shouted from surprise.”

Oh, so she saw *that*? Yoojin grinned when he glared at her slightly.

“No worries. I’ll keep it a secret. Tell me a bit more about what happened afterwards though. I’m curious as hell.”

“Not much. I just talked with her a little.”

“What? That’s it? Nothing special?”

“What the hell do you even want to hear?”

“Um... something from a drama?”

“Hah.”

Areum and Baekjoon tried to join in on the conversation as well.

“What are you two talking about?”

“Let us join.”

Maru shut himself right up. These two were oddly energetic together, so he couldn’t trust them to keep any secrets. They were almost like twins.

“Well, you see, Maru...”

Yoojin smiled mischievously. Maru raised his hands in resignation, which made her shut her mouth right up.

“Oh, you two are suspicious.”

“So suspicious.”

Maru turned his back to the two and raised his script. It’d been a while since he’d last seen it. It would take a while for him to regain his feel for it. As he read, the other students started arriving one by one. It really has been a while since he’d seen all of them, so he talked with them happily. They talked about a lot of things, but all of their conversations circled back into one topic.

“Do you think you passed the prelims?”

He didn’t know who said it, but they were loud. While it wasn’t directed at anyone in the room, but it aroused everyone’s concern. The northern and southern areas of the Gyeonggi province, and Seoul. Unlike all the other regions in the country that picked one team to go to the nationals, these areas picked two teams each. Out of the 12 students in this amateur acting class, 7 of them were from high

schools in Seoul. Each of them was from a different school, so at least five people here would fail. The same applied to the students from the Gyeonggi province.

“I heard Ilyang High and Daejin Woman’s High are the representatives for Seoul.”

“It would probably be Myunghwa High for Gyeonggi, and... Is there anything else?”

The students turned to Maru and Yoojin, since they were the only two from Gyeonggi that were here right now.

“We still have a single prelim left. The northern area finished their prelims last week though.”

Yoojin shrugged as she answered.

“Your province has two different prelims?”

“Yeah, because it’s so huge. 2 from the North, 2 from the South. We’ll have another prelim after that to pick out the final 2 from our province.”

Baekjoon nodded in understanding.

“No wonder your province wins all the time. You guys have so many schools.”

“Maybe. But isn’t that really just because of Myunghwa High? They’re the only one that won.”

“Wait... I heard Woosung High used to win all the time as well?” Baekjoon muttered to himself in confusion.

Everyone turned to look at Maru. He had to put down his script for a moment.

“A long time ago, yeah. A very long time ago.”

“Woosung High’s really good this time. They were pretty good. No, they were amazing.”

Yoojin nodded confidently. The kids started looking at him even more carefully, making Maru sigh. Yoojin had a lot of influence here, so of course people would look at him like that. Why did the girl even have to say that? Well, it was pretty obvious, he guessed.

‘She’s totally enjoying it.’

Yoojin was grinning ear to ear. The kids started flooding him with questions about what plays they were performing and Maru ended up having to answer all of them.

“I’m telling you, Maru’s completely different from practice. He literally starts flying around when he’s on stage.”

She was like a bard in a tavern, the type that gets paid money to gossip with people. Maru gestured at her to stop, trying to silently send a message that he’d tell her everything. Yoojin finally smiled back at him and redirected the conversation elsewhere. In the end, they started talking about the famous actor that was going to come to their class.

Maru remembered hearing that Yoojin’s mother worked in the drama business. He didn’t quite remember what she did, but he finally calmed down when the kids focused back on Yoojin.

“What are you doing?”

Someone put their chin on Maru’s shoulder. A smell of perfume swept his nose. Perfume that he bought for someone.

“You’re here?”

She was standing right behind him. He looked at her smiling face before looking slightly downwards.

“Sorry, didn’t wear it.”

She extended her hand out to Maru. He couldn’t see a ring anywhere. He expected this already, but it was still kind of disappointing.

“You look disappointed?”

“I was wondering if you’d wear them.”

She smiled before taking out her phone. Her ring was hanging dangling off of it.

“They don’t allow accessories, but they won’t touch my phone. You should just be satisfied with this.”

The ring was spinning under her phone. Maru put his hand next to it and the two rabbits met together in the air.

“What’s this?”

Yoojin grabbed Maru’s hand and her phone before he realized it. She tried to take back her phone in surprise, but Yoojin was faster.

“Oh, so you two are going out publicly now?”

“W-what?”

She was surprised. Maru remembered then that she still didn’t know about Yoojin seeing them on that day. The girl grinned playfully before gesturing for a kiss.

“Kiss kiss kiss. A kiss of passion.”

She widened her eyes and put a hand over Yoojin’s mouth.

“Y-you!”

“I saw you two really well. Kids today are so fast.”

“How...”

“The world has many eyes, baby girl.”

Yoojin pinched her nose lightly. It was like watching a mouse sitting in front of a cat.

“Maru...” “Sorry.”

He decided to just apologize for now. He should stay quiet today.

“You’re here, all of you?”

Ganghwan finally appeared with a bottle of water in hand. The kids started lining up together in front of him.

“Did you guys finish your prelims well?”

“Yes!”

“Think you’ll pass?”

None of them was able to answer him easily. Then again, all twelve of them were pretty much competitors. If one of them passes, one of them fails.

“Welcome to the world of competition. You’ll always have to compete with each other in this line of work. This isn’t bad at all. There are many auditions where you’d have to compete with a hundred other people. Enjoy your high school life, you guys.”

Ganghwan grinned playfully, earning a ton of boos from the students.

“Now then, let’s go do a few runs. I hope none of you forgot your lines in your weeks of absence.”

And so, practice began again in Myungdong.

* * *

Tsss. Tsss.

Yurim kept turning the flint on her lighter, causing a few sparks to appear. Yurim’s eyes followed the flame very intently.

It was December 31st. The last day of 2003.

Yesterday, the results of the prelims appeared. Woosung High passed, so the club went out to have a fun time with instructor Miso yesterday. She told them that they’d be able to go to the nationals as long as they did well on the second part of the prelims. Everyone smiled. The air between them was warm, but Yurim wasn’t satisfied with this. If the club did well, Geunseok would get further away from her. That was obvious. The boy would get more private lessons if he did well. Meaning, he would spend more time with that beautiful lady.

Yurim lost the strength in her hands when she thought of Geunseok disappearing. Her lighter dropped to the floor and she just stared at it dumbly.

“This can’t go on like this.”

She hoped they’d fail, but they passed. Geunseok became even more proud of himself. She couldn’t take him back like this. She needed to make him crumble and break this current flow to make him lean on her.

“Geunseok needs me. It can’t be anyone other than me.”

Yurim clenched her eyes as she muttered to herself.

“...No, I can’t exist without him. I need him.”

Her hands trembled nervously. Her breathing started getting faster. She needed to make a choice. It was the 31st. If she was going to do it, she needed to do it tomorrow. She had to do it tomorrow. Yurim grabbed a pack of glue and lighters and put them back in her bag.

* * *

Maru looked up at the clock from his room, it was almost midnight. He walked out to the living room, his family was sitting outside looking at the television.

- Hello everyone! The new year is almost upon us! Let’s wrap up our last moments of 2003 well, and get ready to greet 2004!

The faces of many people standing outdoors somewhere, waiting for a bell to ring, came on the screen. They were all looking at the countdown with expectation plastered all over their faces. The reporter was going around asking them for their wishes. In the meantime, Maru joined his family on the sofa.

“We worked hard this year too,” his dad said, looking at the screen.

- Alright, ten seconds left until 2004! Come count down with us!

The number on the bottom right of the screen started counting down. Bada started counting audibly when the number reached five.

- Happy new year!

The bell rang on the TV. Everyone on screen shouted ‘Happy New Year’.

“Good luck to you in the new year,” Maru said to his parents.

The same went to his sister as well.

“You too, big bro.”

Maru walked back to his room after speaking to his family for a second. The first thing he did was to call her, she got the call immediately.

“Good luck in the new year.”

- You too.

“Tell it to your mom as well for me.”

- She’s actually right next to me.

Maru could hear someone go, “boyfriend? Maru?” from the other side. She hung up the call with a sigh. The two of them got along well, as always.

“Two days left.”

He threw his body to his bed. They would have to compete once again in two days. They should go check the props and the costumes one last time for it. There shouldn’t be any issues. Maru breathed in before closing his eyes.

Let the beginning of 2004 be peaceful.

Chapter 154

Nothing much changed with the new year, but the joy of its greeting still made Maru smile.

“You’re going to school today too?”

“Yup.”

“Is acting really that fun?”

“Try it if you get the chance. I know some middle schools have a club.”

“Should I?”

His sister ate her cereal with a grin on her face. Her new year’s resolution was to wake up at 7am even during her vacation. Maru had to wonder how long this would continue. Probably just three days. She’d struggle to wake up tomorrow, he just knew it.

“I’m going to exercise as well tomorrow. Gonna run in the park.”

Well, it looked like she set up grand plans for herself already.

“I hope you keep your resolution.”

“What the heck, you think I won’t? I’m really good at this. Right, mom?”

All she got back was an empty smile. His sister pouted and told them to just watch.

“You’re going to be home late today as well?” His mom asked.

“Don’t know. I’ll text you if I’m gonna be late.”

His mom yawned. Maru remembered her still talking to his dad by the time he went to sleep. It only made sense that she’d feel tired.

“You should sleep.”

“Don’t be too late.”

Mom walked into her room with yet another yawn.

“Bro.”

“What?”

“Want me to check your horoscope?”

“Horoscope?”

His sister brought back a magazine from her room before he could ask what this was about. She was holding a woman’s magazine. She’s already reached that age, huh. The girl flipped through the pages before reaching ‘horoscopes for the new year’.

“When was your birthday again?”

“July 25th.”

“So you’re a Leo.”

She stuttered out a few words as she started reading.

“Your long-awaited results will arrive at last. It might not necessarily be to your desire, so be extra careful. If you are lazy about it, great misfortune will befall upon you, but otherwise, things should go well. Hm, is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

Maru smiled lightly. Stock spiels. A type of writing that always turned out to be generally true. Of course, you might get results you don’t want when you do something. Of course, things might go wrong if you are lazy about it.

‘I guess that’s what makes it a magazine article.’

He wasn’t about to get offended by what the magazine said or anything.

“Is that all?”

“Wait, there’s some more.”

It was more detailed than he thought. His sister started reading energetically when he expressed his interest.

“Ah! There it is! It says you need to watch out for Aries. You guys won’t get along together.”

“Aries?”

“Yeah. And you need to watch out for what you wear. That’s how good things would happen in your workp... Hm?”

“Does school count as work?”

“What the, they only have stuff about work here.”

Bada closed the magazine disappointedly after flipping through a few more pages. Maru immediately understood what was up when he looked at the cover. The magazine was targeted towards women who were in their 20s. Of course, they wouldn’t have anything about school here.

“Ugh, this is why you shouldn’t trust horoscopes.”

That didn’t seem like something a girl who got so excited about horoscopes just a few minutes ago should say. In any case, Maru thanked her and got up from the table.

“Brother,” his sister extended her hand out to him.

“What?”

“Allowance, please.”

Oh, so that’s what she was after.

“What about the allowance I gave you last time? And the emergency money?”

“Um... I used it all.”

“I thought I put around a hundred thou in there.”

His sister nodded.

“What did you use it on?”

She fumbled a bit before reluctantly opening her mouth.

“It’s dad’s birthday. I tried to buy some gifts for him, but I was lacking in some cash. A lot of cash, actually.”

Ah. Maru turned to look at the calendar. He completely forgot. January 8th. Their dad’s birthday wasn’t very far away anymore. What a good kid.

“What did you buy him?”

“I got dad a shirt, and I got mom a new wallet. She was still using that old wallet dad got her.”

“Oh, the brown one?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, it’s about time she got a replacement.”

Maru told her to sit still and walked into his room. He opened the box where he hid the emergency money for his sister, he’d forgotten to check it recently because he was so busy. It looked like she’s consistently been taking money from it, judging by the number of logs she wrote down.

- Mom and dad’s gift

That was the latest one on the list. She was being pretty spontaneous with her money, but looking at how she used the money made Maru feel a little proud. This was probably why dads tended to favor daughters over sons most of the time.

‘...I hope she’s living well.’

He could barely remember his daughter’s face anymore, she was probably living in a world without him right now. His chest hurt a little. All he’d ever done for her was to scold her. It felt like his entire life with her passed before he could even make good memories with her.

Maru opened his wallet and took out his debit card. This was a little early for his sister, but you could never start too early when it came to money management. Maru walked back out to the kitchen and gave his sister a debit card he got from a different bank account than one of his own.

“What’s this?”

“A debit card. I’ll put money into it every month, so use it wisely.”

“Really?”

She looked at the card curiously.

“But! Be sure to keep an account book. Write where you spend your money.”

“...Will you check?”

“No, just try to get a handle over how to manage your money. It’ll help you. It’s a debit card, so you can’t spend more than you have. Try to be strategic with your money. You can just save the rest for yourself.”

“Wow.”

His sister brought out a wallet from her room and put the card inside it. She looked incredibly proud of herself.

“Can I really use this?”

“Do what you want. Just don’t spend all of it.”

“I won’t. I’m not dumb.”

“Look at how you’ve matured. Ah, don’t tell mom.”

“Mm, got it.”

The Bada in his memories wasn’t bad with money, she even held a smaller wedding to save money. She was definitely very resourceful with her finances. Come to think of it, he always heard from his mom that she was doing fine. Why did she divorce all of a sudden? Did it have something to do with their personality? Something else?

‘Man, I really didn’t care, did I.’

He kind of felt sorry looking at Bada. He didn’t pay her any mind once he entered college.

“What, you have something to say?” Bada asked.

“I’ll keep in touch with you even after I get married.”

“...The heck does that mean?”

“No, sorry. It’s nothing.”

He told her to rest as he stepped outside the house. He walked down the stairs and got ready to get out of the apartment building before stepping in front of a mirror.

“Be careful of how I dress, right?”

He didn’t believe in horoscopes, but it didn’t hurt to follow them regardless. He straightened out his shirt just a wee bit. There. He looked a lot better already. Here’s to hoping today’s a good day. “Phew, it’s cold.”

He walked out into the streets with his hands in his pockets.

* * *

“You checked everything?”

“Yes.”

“Any missing or broken props?”

“None.”

Miso nodded. Maru took a look at the props and the costumes to the left of the auditorium, they were all well-cared for. All they needed to do now was to act well in them.

“Just rest at home today and don’t do anything else. Don’t you dare get sick by going out. Stay home, get home by 8pm. Got it?”

“Yes!”

“Good! Leave!”

Maru checked the time with his phone. It was 11am. The earliest the club disbanded ever. It just showed how much Miso cared about the condition of the club members. Then again, it would truly be infuriating if the club failed just because a few of the members were tired.

“I’m leaving first. See you guys tomorrow.”

Miso ran out first. By the looks of it, she had some other arrangements she needed to attend to. The club members naturally turned to look at Yoonjung as a result.

“Let’s just end it here, yeah. Read your scripts one last time when you get back home and rest up. Don’t go anywhere weird.”

“You’re the most problematic one here.”

Yoonjung pouted at Danmi’s comment.

“Alright guys, good work. See you tomorrow.”

As always, Joonghyuk was the one to end the club meeting.

“You guys leave first. We’ll have to drop by the clubroom for a bit.”

The seniors all left, leaving only the first years around to socialize.

“Ah, right guys. It’s Yurim’s birthday soon.”

Soyeon spoke as she pulled Yurim’s hand, Maru noticed Yurim let go with a slight glare. Soyeon smiled awkwardly and put her hand in her pocket.

“What, it was almost your birthday?” Geunseok said.

This time, Yurim responded with a noticeably brighter smile.

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“January 5th.”

“We only have a few days left. We should have a party.”

“It’s okay.”

“Should we have a party after the next competition?” Iseul butted in.

Dojin shouted his agreement almost immediately, they spoke almost too perfectly together. The boy avoided Maru’s gaze, Maru noticed.

‘Iseul must’ve said something.’

It didn’t look like Dojin got rejected, but it didn’t look like they were going out either. Hm.

“We can’t just let a birthday pass right under our noses.”

Taejoon seemed excited as well.

“Looking out for your girlfriend?” Dojin asked with a grin.

Taejoon nodded confidently in response.

“Why don’t we go to a karaoke after the prelims, then?”

“Sounds great.”

Everyone was making plans already. In a flash, it was decided that they would hold the party shortly after the competition.

“I should bring money tomorrow then.”

“Don’t bring too much.”

“Now now, let’s go! Go rest up!”

They started coming out one by one with their bags and gathered at the school entrance.

“Wait, where’s Yurim?” Daemyung asked.

“Wasn’t she around here just a moment ago?” Iseul noted.

Where did the girl go? Maru turned to look back into the building, there was no one there. When they waited a few more minutes, the girl finally appeared with the seniors.

“Ah, she waited for them. That’s polite,” Iseul grinned.

“Guys, let’s go!” Yoonjung shouted from afar.

Everyone shook their heads as they started walking.

“Wait, let me get my bike.”

“I’ll go with you.”

Maru said his farewells early with the crew before walking back inside, Dojin and Daemyung decided to tag along with him.

“Biking still? It’s so cold.”

“Just ride the bus.”

“It’s fine, I developed resistance.”

Maru realized something just when he unlocked his bike.

“Ah, I forgot my phone.”

He’d left it next to the costumes, he remembered.

“Ugh, hurry up.”

“Want me to come with you?”

Dojin told him to hurry, and Daemyung offered to come with.

“I’ll be back quick, so guard my bike for me.”

He changed his shoes again after giving his bike to Dojin. Just thinking of running back upstairs made him tired already.

“Ugh, my hips.”

He stood in front of the auditorium doors as he complained to himself, he grabbed the door handle and twisted. He could see a little red light slipping through the cracks.

Wait, red?

It was a cloudy day today. So what’s up with the lights? Maru slammed the door open as fast as he could.

“...Damn it.”

What greeted him was the sight of bright red flames licking the props. What an unlucky day.

Chapter 155

Parents often become sensitive to their child’s well-being, Maru was no exception. He started seeing corners of desks as a horrific weapon once he had his daughter. He started putting sponges to cover the corners and went so far as to ban all sharp objects from the house. He used to think his friends were overreacting with their kids, that all kids were supposed to get hurt as part of growing up. But once he had one of his own, he understood. Just watching his daughter cry made his heart drop. He wanted to take care of all sources of danger before she could get hurt.

One day in the past, he was talking with his fellow bus drivers about his cute daughter with a cup of coffee. He got a call from his wife, she told him their house was on fire with a very calm voice. Maru was surprised enough to spit out his coffee, but his wife just hung up casually. He told his boss about what happened and ran straight back home. The door to his house was opened and there was a crowd

surrounding his house. The first thing he saw when he ran inside was his wife opening the door to the veranda with their daughter in her arms.

The cause of the fire was a phone charger, it caused a spark that turned into a burst of flame. Their daughter was sleeping right next to it at the time. When the fire happened, his wife quickly draped a towel over their daughter. The blood drained from Maru's face when he learned of the situation. A fire? From electricity? What if she shocked herself? She glared at him and shouted when he told her that she was being too rash.

What if our daughter got hurt!

That was when his wife burst into tears, Maru realized only then that he'd made a mistake. His wife was shivering like she was exposed to the exposed cold, she couldn't be more scared. It was just that... besides just being his wife, she was first and foremost a mother.

After that, quite a few people from the phone company came back to take care of what happened. That was one of the few times when he saw his wife get so mad at people, even Maru's anger calmed down just looking at her. This incident made him decide to get a fire extinguisher for their home. It would be best that it go unused forever, but life is unpredictable.

* * *

'A fire extinguisher!'

That was the first thing that came to mind. That, and a phone. He was only able to stay calm thanks to the sudden flashback. The fire burned where the costumes and props were. The important thing was that the phone was right next to them, he didn't think it survived the heat.

Maru ran out of the auditorium and looked to his left, he could see a mini fire extinguisher. He grabbed the dusty extinguisher in a flash, he took off the safety pin before running back in. Thankfully, the fire was still small enough to be dispatched by an extinguisher.

"Thank goodness it isn't that bad yet."

He squeezed down on the nozzle, white foam started gushing out with a gasping noise. That was all. The fire extinguisher died with just a little bit of foam. His eyes immediately focused on the date the extinguisher was last inspected: 2002.

"Damn it!"

Maru threw the extinguisher away and ran to the fire alarm. The rest of the school would know there was a fire from the acting club if he pressed it, but he had no choice. He couldn't let the fire spread. He strongly pressed the plastic covering on top of the button.

"....God damn it!"

The alarm didn't go off, even this was broken. Was this school a symbol of laziness or something? His phone was melted in the fire and the fire alarm didn't ring. Maru ran into a class on the other side. Inside, he was greeted with a bunch of sinks. It was a classroom the cooking club used. He started filling a bucket he found with water and ran to the windows.

“Han Dojin! Park Daemyung!”

He screamed out their name. His two friends soon appeared in his vision with his bike in hand.

“Get over here!”

His friends ran straight inside despite such little explanation, they picked up on the desperation in his voice. Once Maru confirmed that the bucket was full, he carried it back to the auditorium with both hands. Black smoke was starting to fume out of the open doors, Maru grit his teeth and walked inside. The fire was starting to spread to the smaller props now, after those came the wooden stage props. He wouldn't be able to do anything once the fire spreads there.

Right then, he had a thought. He always thought that safety came first in life. Staying away from the fire would be the smartest move and the best thing to do was to wait for the firefighters. He was just one man, there was a limit to what he could do. Waiting for help to come just made sense, but Maru's body was already moving. The fire couldn't be suppressed with just a bucket of water anymore. He knew that. He got the water for something else.

“I must be insane.”

Maru dumped the bucket onto himself as his two friends ran up right behind him.

“W-what the!”

“Fire!”

Maru summarized the situation to his friends.

“Keep getting buckets of water from the class next door. Call the fire department if you feel like things get out of hand. Try not to call them if you don't have to.”

With that, Maru wrapped his wet jacket over his head.

“Maru?”

Maru jumped to the props as he heard Dojin's confused voice.

“Hey, you crazy son of a bitch!”

He could only agree to the voice behind him, he must be completely insane. But if he acted now, he could at least save the stage props. They could easily replace the costumes since they were doing a modern play, the same couldn't be said about the stage props. Those took way too long to make.

The fire wasn't as hot as he thought. What was really the problem was the hot air seeping into his lungs, it felt like they'd melt if he breathed wrong. His wet clothes would probably burn away soon as well. He only had a few seconds, still plenty of time. The first thing he grabbed was a deck bench, they usually had it split into different sections, but not now. The full thing was incredibly heavy, still, Maru pulled at one of the legs of the bench with gritted teeth. It started slowly leaning away from the fire.

‘Good.’

The building props still hadn't caught on fire. As long as he got this deck bench away from the fire...

Right then, his body started getting pulled back to the direction the bench was leaning. He could see a part of his jacket stuck in the bench.

'Was this why they told me to dress well? Damn horoscopes!'

His body fell towards the bench. The only thing he could do at this point was to twist his body away to protect himself as much as possible.

"Maru!"

With Daemyung's shout,

Bang.

The bench fell back.

* * *

Junmin turned on the light next to his bed and picked up a book next to him. He'd had a lot of late nights recently. It was only dawn, but his body was screaming at him to go to sleep.

'I guess I really am old.'

He could easily go back to sleep at a normal time after just a day a few years ago, nowadays, it took him around two. Maybe he should start going to a gym? Right then, Makdoong jumped onto his bed with a slight moan. Makdoong was a Shih Tzu he's been raising at home. He was already raising three Shih Tzus, but Makdoong was the only one who really liked jumping onto his bed. Junmin helped the little thing up come fully onto his bed. The dog yawned as soon as it came up and buried its little head into the blankets.

"Are you a human or what?"

Junmin stroked its tiny round head. Just as he turned back to his book, he got a text message.

[Senior, I'm going to go visit Maru today. Will you come?]

Junmin took a look at the calendar on the wall. He still hasn't visited the boy now that he thought about it, did he? He quickly pressed the buttons on his phone to send the text to Ganghwan, he was asking the man for a ride.

"Goodness, I can't tell if he's lucky or unlucky."

Junmin got up from his bed as he pat the dog's head one last time.

* * *

It wasn't a big injury. There were a burn plus fracture in his leg and his thigh was also torn, which required stitches. The doctors told him that he'd have to rest for two weeks, but he didn't think it was that bad. No one else shared that opinion.

"Why don't you just give up on the club?"

"Mom, it's not that bad."

“Don’t get hurt then. How much are you planning on making me worry?”

“I’m not that bad of a child, you know that.”

“Look at you, you’re not missing a beat with your replies.”

His mom slapped his back. It didn’t hurt though, since he knew she did it with love. His dad told him to take care of himself. The man was right, so Maru couldn’t offer a rebuttal. Bada repeatedly visited him from home multiple times. She cried apparently, but any mention of it would earn him a glare. In any case, his family went back home after causing quite a scene at the hospital. It actually took quite a bit of work trying to stop mom from coming every day.

“I knew you’d get into an accident today.”

“I’m regretting it a lot, so please forgive me.”

Maru looked outside, it was snowing, more like a blizzard, actually. It was actually worrying how much snowfall there was right now. Bada crunched on the chips Dojin and Daemyung brought as she read a magazine.

“Go home if you don’t have work.”

“I don’t have anything to do back home. There’s just too much snow to go out as well. Want some?”

Maru took a chip from his sister’s bag. Don’t most people bring low-sodium snacks when they come for a hospital visit? At least it was tasty.

“You’re too rash, brother. What made you want to jump into a fire? I thought you were lying when I heard the story from your friends.”

“I thought about it a bit when I went in. I wasn’t being rash.”

“You still got hurt.”

His sister pulled out a marker from a shelf and wrote ‘idiot’ on his cast. Of course, she was the one who wrote ‘dumbass’ and the ‘bad son’ on there as well. Daemyung was the one who wrote ‘get well’, and Dojin wrote ‘fireman’.

“Are these your only friends?” Bada asked with a grin.

“Sorry I don’t have many friends.”

“You should be nice to people.”

“I wonder where I’d have to call to trash that debit card...”

“Oh dear brother, that’s not fair is it?”

Pft. Maru grinned.

“Your girlfriend isn’t coming?”

Oh, so that was why she was still here. Maru shrugged. He tried to hide it as much as he could to her, but he couldn't hide the fact that he would be in the hospital for two weeks. He got scolded a lot over the phone, it'd been three days since that point.

Thankfully, he managed to save the stage props pretty well. They were still able to go to the next competition that happened two days ago. Thank goodness he was the only one who got hurt. His character wasn't anything that could ruin the play, so they should be able to manage just fine without him. According to Dojin, they incorporated his lines into more of Geunseok's monologue. The boy apparently handled it pretty well.

Anyway, it was good. The school managed to finish things off pretty well, they will get their results tomorrow. Considering how Myunghwa would probably pass, it was a competition between three schools.

'I hope we pass.'

He wouldn't be able to join them even in the nationals. Worst of all, even in the amateur acting club, they got someone else to take over for his role. Thanks to it, his January schedule was completely empty. The only thing he could do was just to read or watch TV. Plus...

"You're not eating this, are you?"

"...Have fun eating."

The next best thing he could do was to just talk with his sister? Maru leaned back on the bed with a yawn. Right then, the doors to his room opened.

Chapter 156

"You've been looking dazed all day."

"Excuse me?"

Her club president put an arm around her shoulder, she lowered her head with a slight frown. Oh wait, she should've smiled here.

"Did something happen?" the president asked.

All the other members were singing gleefully, she listened to the loud music around her for a second before opening her mouth.

"My friend got hurt."

"Really? Badly?"

"I think so. He's going to be hospitalized for two weeks."

"No wonder you looked so depressed all day."

She clenched her lips together, she tried to look happy and energetic since they received word about passing the prelims. She still couldn't fool the president though.

"Sorry for not noticing," the president said, grabbing her hands.

She shook her head vigorously.

"No, I'm fine."

"Liar. It's written all over your face."

The president twisted her cheek lightly. Was this what it felt like to have an elder sister? It really was heartwarming knowing that there was someone who could understand you.

"You should go."

"What?"

"We're almost done over here. Might as well leave a little early."

"No, I'll stay."

"It's fine. I'll tell the others about what happened, so let's leave first."

The president whispered something to a second year next to her, the second year smiled and waved them goodbye as they left.

"Damn, there's so much snow. Do you have an umbrella?"

"Yes, I brought one."

The snowfall was heavy, seeming to be dumped from the sky. She took out an umbrella from her bag and opened it. The umbrella felt like it would break by all the wind.

"Take care. I'll see you on Friday."

The president saw her off to the entrance, she turned around after bidding farewell. Her thankfulness to the president didn't last long. By the time she got to the bus station, she had a massive frown on her face.

"Han Maru."

She had wondered what happened when the boy didn't appear at the Myungdong class, he wasn't the type to just skip class like that. She learned the next day from instructor Ganghwan that he got himself hurt. Before then, Maru only told her it was 'nothing special'. Only when she started pressuring him about it did he tell her everything. A burn, a fracture, and even stitches to boot... She was so surprised when she heard details that she couldn't even say a thing. Fine, she could understand him trying to hide it. It made sense in her head, but her emotions were another matter.

'Ugh, boys!'

She sighed at the bus station before turning to walk into a fruit shop and bought a small basket before getting on the bus. She was mad enough to go empty-handed, but she wasn't that rude. The bus didn't have many people, she took a seat somewhere and took a look outside.

'Doesn't he have any fear?'

At first, she thought he just hurt himself playing soccer. She honestly thought people were joking when they told her he jumped into a fire. It wasn't a joke, the boy really did jump into a fire. To think he did that to save a few props... What if something terrible had happened? It made her mad just thinking about it.

The bus came to a stop in front of a hospital, she stepped off with her umbrella. She could see the white hospital on the other side of the street. She could feel herself getting worried again. Will she be able to scold him like this? She put a hand over her chest and took a deep breath. Hearing about Maru getting hurt made her think of her father, she wasn't a fan of people close to her getting hurt again.

"I'm going to scold him for sure."

She steeled herself before stepping into the hospital, walking along the hallway trying to find the right room number. Eventually, she came to a stop after passing an old man in a wheelchair.

"Han Maru"

"Oh, it's here."

She quietly opened the door. Three of the four beds in the room were empty, she could see Maru near the windowsill. She could also see a girl eating chips with a grin. Probably his sister?

She stared at Maru from the entrance for a second, it didn't look like he noticed her just yet. Watching the boy flip through the pages of a book so calmly roused her anger. She lost sleep because of him and he had the nerve to be so nonchalant?

That was when Maru turned to look at the entrance. Their eyes met. Maru's lips flopped downwards slightly before curling back up into a smile. That awkward smile made her open her eyes widely.

"Someone's here?"

The girl who seemed to be the little sister asked. She waved her hand with a smile as she walked over with the fruit basket. She could see Maru laying down to try to go to sleep.

"Who are you?"

"This guy's friend."

She threw the fruit basket at Maru. The boy caught the basket in his hands with a surprised look.

"...You're here?"

"Yeah. I'm here."

"It was snowing a lot."

"A ton. It's still snowing. It was very hard coming here."

Should she console him, or should she scold him? Looking at him right now really made her want to scold him.

"Are you Maru's sister?"

"Yes? Ah, yes."

"You were surprised, weren't you? I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

Maru's sister smiled looking back and forth between her and Maru. What a cute kid. She looked much nicer than Maru over there, who was trying to ignore her on that bed.

"Um, big sis."

"Yeah?"

"Are you big brother's girlfriend?"

The sudden question caught her off guard.

"So you are!!"

The happy reaction was welcomed, but that didn't make any of it less surprising.

"Man, and here I thought my brother was joking. Sis, he's a waste for someone like you. Why do you go out with him?"

"T-that's..."

"He's matured a lot recently so he's better. But oh dear. You're just way too pretty for him."

The girl was going around saying embarrassing things despite being so young. She was just like Maru in that regard. Worse, actually.

"Really?"

"Yes. What kind of an idiot jumps straight into a fire? This one, apparently."

Maru's sister laughed to herself quietly. She was quite a fan of this girl called Han Bada. The little girl talked about how ridiculous a person Maru was for thirty minutes straight, it really felt amazing gossiping about someone to their face.

"Have some of this, big sis."

"Thanks."

They were already so familiar with each other. In the meantime, Maru was just staring outside the window. Like some character from a drama.

"Idiot. Idiot. Idiot."

Bada wrote 'idiot' on Maru's cast.

"Want to write something too, big sis?"

"Should I?"

Now that she looked at it, there were a ton of words written on Maru's cast. The one that stuck out to her, in particular, was 'get well'. Well, she'd only feel bad if he stayed wounded for a while, so...

'get well soon'

"Ohh, sis."

"What?"

"Watching out for him because you're his girlfriend?"

"He's pitiable like this."

"That's true."

As the two of them started talking again, the door to the room opened. Two men entered. It was instructor Ganghwan accompanied by a man in a hat.

"Eh? Instructor?"

"Oof, did we come at a bad time?"

She bowed to the instructor before turning to look at the other man. It was producer Lee Junmin.

'Why is he...'

She'd seen the man talk to Maru a few times, but they were close enough for him to come to visit?

"Teacher."

Junmin stopped Maru when the boy tried to get up.

"Thank goodness, it doesn't look like you're that hurt."

"Yes, I got lucky."

"Be careful. That body of yours doesn't belong entirely to you."

Hm? What an odd choice of words. She looked back and forth between Maru and Junmin. What kind of relationship did those two have? Junmin turned around after a few minutes of talking.

"We'll take our leave now. It won't be good if too many people came. We'll talk again some other time."

"I'm sorry I can't see you off."

"Shush. Getting farewells from a patient is just shameful."

Junmin gestured for instructor Ganghwan to put down the fruit basket they brought. It was almost too big for the cabinet. As a matter of fact, it would probably be able to fit Bada inside it if it was a little bigger.

"Sir, I don't know if I can even eat all of this."

"Just take it."

The two men left after a curt farewell, it felt like a storm just passed over the room.

"Who was that, sis?"

"Someone really famous."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

As the two of them stared at the fruit basket, the door opened again. She became a little amazed looking at the woman who opened the door. The woman, who had a big teddy bear in her hands, was incredibly beautiful. White skin, long black hair, a smiling face, everything.

"Oh, sis Soojin."

"I heard the news. Are you okay?"

The lady called Soojin handed over the teddy bear to Maru. Why a doll, though?

"Hello."

"Ah, yes, hello."

"...Hello."

She and Bada took the woman's greeting awkwardly. Soojin and Maru talked together for a bit, the two of them seemed incredibly friendly with each other.

"Dowook told me."

"How are you two nowadays?"

"Good enough to call each other?"

"Wonderful."

"All thanks to you. We're going to have a meal together soon. Want to join?"

"I shouldn't stick my head into family affairs."

"Come on, you're no stranger to our family. Dad wants to see you too, so come join."

"Okay."

"Did Dowook drop by?"

"I got a call from him, so I told him to not waste his time."

"I see."

Soojin nodded with a smile. She watched Soojin alertly from the side, she felt like she was losing to this woman somehow.

"Can I write something too?"

"Of course."

Soojin wrote 'health' with a marker. They talked for a few more minutes before Soojin finally got up.

"I'll get going then. Take care."

"Yes, see you."

"I'm sorry for interrupting, you two."

Soojin was polite until the very end. She looked at Maru along with Bada as soon as the woman left, they needed an explanation. But before Maru could say anything, the door opened again.

"Oh, so it's here."

Again, a woman. If Soojin from earlier felt innocent, this woman felt very provocative. As a matter of fact, she was even wearing a very deep v-neck shirt. The woman in the leather jacket walked forward, click, clack, in her high heels. She, too, was very beautiful.

"Remember me?"

"Ah, yes. I do."

"Oh, that makes me so happy."

Looking at the woman made her think of a fox right away, a very fierce one at that.

"Hello!"

"...Hello."

"Who are you two?"

Bada was the first one to respond.

"Sister."

She put a bit more strength behind her throat as she replied 'girlfriend', she felt a tiny bit embarrassed to say it.

"Oh, so Maru had such a cute girlfriend with him."

The woman put the potted plant she brought on the windowsill.

"Perfect. How is it?"

"Well, it's alright."

"You're not happy that I'm here?"

"Just surprised. We don't know each other that well."

"Well, you're surprisingly cold."

The woman sat down on the edge of the bed with a smile, she clenched her fist right then. This felt weird. Soojin felt like a friend when she talked. This woman was vastly different, the smiles she put on didn't really feel like a smile. They probably wouldn't become friends with each other.

"Ah!"

Bada shouted with a hand over her mouth. Why? She turned to look at the woman again. The woman had taken off her sunglasses and she too realized why Bada made that reaction.

"Suyeon, right? I saw you in a drama!"

Bada was shouting pretty gleefully. The woman, no, Suyeon smiled as she grabbed Bada's hand.

"Thanks for recognizing me. People don't often recognize me since I'm a no-name actress."

"No-name? No way! I'm your superfan. I loved your drama."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that. Thanks for the compliments."

Suyeon pat Bada's hair with a smile, even that felt fake to her right now.

'This isn't right.'

Judging a person was a bad habit to have. Plus, this person came to visit Maru when he was hurt. There was no reason for her to have a bad impression. Right then.

"Oh? There's a lot of people already."

"...Again?"

She audibly commented without even realizing it, she put a hand over her mouth when she noticed all eyes in the room turning towards her. The woman on the door was someone with short hair. Again, beautiful. She looked healthy, too.

'What's this?'

She felt depressed. She was getting increasingly conscious of her looks just because of how pretty all the visitors were. She was starting to get embarrassed about herself, even.

"Instructor Miso," Maru said.

So the woman was called Miso.

"Woow, you're quite popular, aren't you, Maru?"

Miso walked in with a loud laugh.

Chapter 157

She had a very beautiful smile. Judging by what Maru called her earlier, her name was probably Miso. The woman walked over to them as she looked around the room. Her eyes fell on the teddy bear and she smiled.

"So Soojin's been here?"

"Yes, I feel like a little girl," Maru responded as he tapped at the teddy bear's head.

Miso's eyes turned to look at Suyeon, who was still sitting on the bed.

"Eh? Ms. Suyeon?"

"Long time no see, Ms. Miso."

"It hasn't been that long. I heard your voice through the phone several times already."

"But it's been six years in reality, hasn't it?"

"That's right. How odd. People in this industry tend to meet often too."

"It really is odd. We haven't even tried to avoid each other either."

"Would you like to go for a drink, since it's been so long?"

"No, I have work."

"Ah, I see. How about you leave, then?"

"No thank you. Plus, investing time into Maru doesn't feel so bad."

Suyeon smiled at Maru after finishing her sentence, she wasn't a fan of Suyeon's movements for some reason. Miso wasn't particularly friendly towards this woman either.

"You must know Maru," Miso asked Suyeon as she handed over a juicebox.

She received the juice box awkwardly as Miso finally turned to greet her.

"Hello."

"Ah, hello."

"Mind if I sit there?"

Miso was pointing at the chair next to her. She nodded. Miso took her seat and crossed her legs. She kept glancing at Miso from the side, the woman had really thin legs.

"I don't know him that well, honestly. Hopefully it doesn't stay that way, though," Suyeon finally responded.

"I heard it's pretty rude to visit strangers in hospitals."

"Really? I disagree."

They went straight back to arguing again. What was up with all of these visitors? None of them were normal so far.

"Big sis."

Bada was pulling at her clothes, the girl seemed to want to go outside for a moment. She slid out of her seat and got a little further away. Even now, Miso and Suyeon were still bickering with each other. Maru watched them for a little while before getting back to reading his book. Maru was flipping through his

pages with a yawn. The two women continued arguing with each other, completely disregarding him. Just what was happening?

“These two don’t like each other, do they?” Bada whispered.

It really wouldn’t have mattered if the girl raised her voice though. The two women were talking so intensely that they didn’t look like they could hear anything.

“I think so.”

“What the heck does my brother do outside? Why are there so many adults visiting him?”

“I’m wondering the same thing.”

Bada looked at the bed with a confused expression, She turned to look as well. Maru let out a sigh as he closed the book in his hands. Its hardcovers closed with a snap, the two women finally closed their mouths.

“Thank you for coming. But any more of this and I’m really going to get a headache. If you two have something to talk about, I recommend the cafe next to the hospital. Also, instructor.”

“Yeah?”

“Did we pass?”

“Ah, right. That’s what I wanted to talk about.”

Miso made a ‘v’ with her hands.

“Passed with flying colors. The nationals are next week. We’re representing the Gyeonggi province with Myunghwa High.”

“I expected as much. You told the kids to not text me about this, didn’t you?”

“Of course. Such good news shouldn’t be delivered by text.”

“No wonder no one responded.”

Maru turned to look at Suyeon this time.

“Thank you for coming. But I am a little bit disturbed by your presence, if I’m being honest. We’re practically strangers, Ms. Suyeon.”

“Call me big sist...”

“We can think about honorifics later down the line. But if you have nothing special to say, I’d appreciate it if you could leave. Things would probably get loud again if the two of you stay here and it’s not like I can kick out my own instructor.”

“You’re surprisingly cold, seeing how you just draw a line.”

Suyeon leaned forward to Maru. Looking at that, she frowned from across the room. The woman was clearly taunting Maru. She retracted her previous thoughts about the woman, this Suyeon has bad news written all over.

"I won't be able to see you off. My leg's a little bit damaged, as you can see."

Maru spoke as he scratched his eyebrows. Suyeon pouted, seemingly having expected a different answer. She ended up shrugging in defeat.

"Please be a little bit more friendly if you can next time. I want to be on good terms with you if possible."

"Of course, if I get the chance."

"If you don't?"

"Well, life will go on regardless. Can you please leave now?"

Suyeon's eyes widened. Maru's voice was calm and relaxed, but he had strength behind his words. The woman's lips straightened, and her eyes were frigid for the briefest moment. A smile returned pretty much immediately, but she definitely caught it. This was a scary person, she just knew it.

"You're too much. I even took out time on my schedule to come to visit you."

As Suyeon raised her hand towards Maru's face, he grabbed her wrist firmly from the air.

"...That's cute."

"There's no way such a big dude like me would be cute."

"You seemed like such a quiet kid the last time I saw you. Who would've thought you'd be so feisty? So that Maru I saw on stage wasn't anything exaggerated after all."

Suyeon retracted her hand with a slight pout, she buttoned up her jacket and picked up her bag.

"I'll see you next time, Maru."

"Please take care, Ms. Kim Suyeon."

"Wow, cold until the very end."

Suyeon got up as she flipped her hair back. She watched the woman step out of the room, catching a glimpse of the woman's face before her figure disappeared entirely.

'A wild dog.'

That was the only impression she could get from it.

"I feel sorry for no reason," Miso said as she licked her lips nervously.

"Seriously. Did you two really have a reason to start fighting in front of a patient? I thought my wounds were going to explode again."

"Hey, it wasn't that bad."

The atmosphere of the room loosened up again.

"Oh my, I forgot to even introduce myself. I'm the instructor for the acting club he's in."

Miso put a hand over Maru's head and shook it. This time, unlike what he did to Suyeon, Maru let her do it. Looking at that made her realize that Maru was actually very picky when it came to people, that made her feel a little relieved. The boy always loved to tease her. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

"I'm his sister."

"Ahh, Maru had a younger sister, huh? How's he like at home? He's a total meanie that says whatever he wants, isn't he?"

"That's right. He has matured recently though."

"Is that so?"

The two of them shared a hearty laugh, she let out a small giggle as well. Miso looked towards her.

"You're a sister as well?"

"No, a friend."

Bada butted right in.

"She's his girlfriend."

"Oh my god."

Miso put Maru under a headlock and shook him. The boy could only manage to squeeze out an "I'm a patient". She smiled, feeling her cheeks heat up a little. She was embarrassed, but it also felt good hearing that from Bada.

"Were you surprised to hear that he got hurt?"

"Yes."

"Was he honest with you?"

"No, he had the gall to tell me he was okay at first."

"I knew it. This kid worries way too much about everything. Especially about other people. Well, I guess that's what makes him so likeable."

Miso seemed to know Maru very well. Then again, she was his instructor. Maru managed to get out of the headlock and fixed up his hair before talking again.

"So we both managed to go to the nationals."

"Looks like it," she nodded.

"Eh? What do you mean?"

Miso blinked in confusion. Ah, she didn't explain, did she?

"I'm from Myunghwa High's acting club."

"Really?"

“Yes.”

“Mm, so a competitor?”

“Y-yes, pretty much.”

Miso narrowed her eyes, the woman’s gaze felt hot and pressuring. It was kind of becoming a little too much, actually.

“Aren’t you going to celebrate?”

Maru took Miso’s attention away just at the right time. The woman sighed lightly in response.

“I was hoping to leave when the kids get here.”

“When the kids get here?”

Right then, the hallway outside started getting very loud.

“Is it here?”

“I think so.”

The door opened. Yoonjung was the first to step in with a big smile, the other club members followed in behind her.

“We’re here!”

“Maru, are you okay?”

“Seriously, you...”

She stepped aside to look at the club members. They were all people who worked alongside Maru to create such an amazing play. Being all people from the same club, they seemed to be good friends with Maru. Well, all except two of them, by the looks of it. One of them was the tall boy. She recognized him in an instant.

‘The boy who was good at acting.’

She could remember the boy’s acting as clear as day. He had quite the charisma on the stage, so it was hard to forget him. Next to him was a shorter girl. She looked rather cute, but also incredibly nervous for some reason as well. Her eyes went to extraordinary lengths to avoid Maru.

It was odd.

She started staring at the short girl without realizing it. Their eyes met for an instance and the girl paled like she just saw a ghost. She turned away. Was the girl sick? Or did the girl have bad memories of the hospital? Ah well, at least she came to see Maru.

“Was the cause of the fire discovered, by the way?” Maru asked Miso.

Miso’s smiling face stiffened.

“We found a tube of glue next to the burnt costumes. They’re not something we use. We only used silicon, to begin with.”

“That means...”

“We don’t have anything solid yet, but the fire might’ve been intentional.”

“I see.”

Maru looked towards her as soon as he got that far.

“I’ll leave for a bit,” she said as she turned.

Maru stopped her.

“No, we shouldn’t talk about this here anyway.”

Miso joined in with him.

“Yes, you should stay with Maru. We need to leave soon. I’ll give you a call once this all gets sorted, Maru.”

Miso left first after telling Maru to get better. One by one, the club members promised to come again before walking out.

“Who’s that, by the way?” A boy sucking on candy asked.

He was being quiet about it, but she heard him regardless.

“Girlfriend.”

“...What?”

“Dojin, can I just be alone with her for a bit?”

The boy exited the room visibly dejected when Maru waved him out. The room was quiet once more.

“Phew, finally. Bada, can you buy me some kimbap outside?”

“Mm, sure. I’ll be out for a few minutes.”

Bada went outside with a grin.

“Finally, just us two.”

Maru was saying something so embarrassing so calmly. She smiled lightly as she took a seat.

“Aren’t you popular, Mr. Maru.”

“You just realized?”

“My goodness.”

“You’re a lucky girl, did you know that?”

“You...”

“Kidding. I’m the lucky one here.”

“.....”

Maru extended his hand towards her, she grabbed it.

“I’m sorry for getting hurt. For making you relive those memories.”

Just how much of her mind did he read? She could only smile defeatedly, she couldn’t get angry like this.

“...Don’t get hurt from now on. Don’t lie, either.”

“Okay.”

“If you’re going to get hurt, ask for permission first.”

“Okay.”

“You’re just saying okay to everything.”

As she looked at Maru with a smile, his face started inching closer to hers. His lips pecked away at hers quickly, she blinked in confusion for a second before pushing him away.

“Youu!”

Maru pointed at his cast with a grin when she tried to push him harder.

“I’m a patient, go easy on me.”

This guy... Well, she didn’t... hate it.

“Ohh.”

A sound came from outside the room, she turned around in surprise. Bada was looking at the two of them with a smile.

“You’re a brave one, aren’t you, sis?”

Hah... Was everyone in Maru’s family like this?

Chapter 158

“It’s five.”

“That it is.”

Maru watched as she peeled an apple next to him. She was carefully moving her fruit knife with squinted eyes, but she peeled more fruit than skin.

“It’s hard.”

She put down the apple she just finished peeling. It was completely uneven. Maru smiled as he looked at the fruity sculpture, she pouted angrily.

“Don’t smile. I worked hard on that.”

She cut the apple into bite-sized pieces and placed them onto the plate in front of her. He didn't want to bother her, so he stayed silent. Her hand slipped a little as she cut one of the apple pieces. The plate leaned sideways a little bit, but she regained her balance just in time.

"...Ha, haha."

She smiled awkwardly.

"Give that to me."

"I'll do it."

"I feel nervous just looking at you. Give it."

He took the plate, knife, and apple from her hands. As a Korean husband in a Korean family, he learned how to cut apples nicely for ceremonies years ago. She complained as she watched Maru peel the apple smoothly.

"Why are you good at doing that?"

"Men who can cook are what's hot nowadays. I'll make you some good soup when we get married."

"...Crazy. You're crazy."

"You don't seem to dislike it, though?"

"I do. Satisfied?"

Maru was speaking playfully, but he was doing this to lay down the groundwork. So that she could accept his proposal easily when the time came, even if that was still very far along the road. He cut the apples into bite-sized pieces before giving it back to her.

"It's pretty late. Shouldn't you go back home?"

She'd been here with him since morning. He was happy that she was with him for sure, but the sun was setting now. Combined with the snow, it would honestly be best if she left as soon as possible.

"It's already dark."

"It's going to be hard to ride the bus because of all the snow. You should take a taxi."

Maru extended his hand out towards his wallet. It'd probably cost her quite a bit to go all the way back home on a taxi, but she snatched his hand from the air before he could actually grab it.

"I came here because I wanted to."

She grabbed her scarf as she finished her sentence, Maru nodded with a smile. Good deeds didn't always come off as such. If his actions hurt her pride, then it was for the best that he stop.

"Buy me some expensive porridge next time you come then."

"Your stomach isn't even hurting. Why would I get you porridge? Just have some fruit. And... It'd probably take you forever to finish this, so don't even think about eating anything else."

She spoke as she took a look at the pile of fruit baskets next to him. Among all the small ones was a massive one sitting in the middle, like an ostrich egg sitting next to chicken eggs. It was the basket from Junmin.

“You should take that.”

“What are you talking about? It’s a gift. You should eat it thankfully.”

“This is more than enough for me already. It’s going to rot just sitting her. I don’t want to waste food.”

“Take it to your home.”

“My family doesn’t like fruits that much.”

Maru stood up on his okay leg.

“You should sit.”

“I’ll see you off to the entrance.”

Maru held the crutch in one hand and the fruit basket on the other hand.

“Seriously, it’s fine. Eat it yourself.”

“Give it to your mom at home. She likes pineapples and plums. This basket is filled with it.”

“...How do you know that?”

“...You told me last time.”

“I did?”

“On the bus. You mentioned it in passing.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Maru sighed internally as he motioned her outside. Just as he stepped outside of his door, she snatched the basket away from his hands.

“It’s heavy. I’ll hold it for you, so give it back.”

“It’s fine. You look super unstable from the back, did you know that?”

She supported his now-empty arm from the side, she shrugged with a big grin.

“You aren’t going to get this kind of support again once you get better.”

“I better stay hurt, then.”

Maru stepped forward with a similar grin.

* * *

She told Maru to step back inside from the bus station. It was snowing hard and the amount of snow gathering on his shoulders was starting to get ridiculous.

“You’re going to get sick.”

“Not with this, I won’t.”

“You’re sniffing already.”

The bus came right then, she pushed Maru away one last time before getting on. The boy kept staring at her even after she got on. He would turn into a snowman at that rate. He finally started moving when the bus started moving. He looked so fragile, walking in the snow with a clutch like that.

[Be careful, I’ll be back again.]

She sat down after sending the message.

“What do I tell mom, though?” she said, staring at the giant fruit basket in front of her.

* * *

‘It’s cold.’

Maru wanted to cross his arms for warmth. He couldn’t let go of his clutch, so he opted for putting his hand in his pocket instead. His clutch hand was cold. Alas, small sacrifices were necessary for the greater good. Maru thought about taking the elevator back up, he decided to exercise a little since he had the chance. He hopped up the staircase using his one good leg. He’d felt this over and over again, but his body really did get a lot better. His injuries were only minor because of how fit he was.

‘Well, I wouldn’t be involved with this in the first place in my past life.’

Maru stepped up to the fourth floor, he wasn’t feeling much pain in his leg anymore. He went back into his room and lay down. The exercise was good, but laying down felt best. He turned on the TV with the remote on the wall. He was using the entire four-person room by himself, so he could turn on whatever he wanted. A privilege he was quite fond of having.

He turned on the news, South Korea was getting rowdy again with all sorts of events. He put his pillow behind his back and looked out the window. It was still snowing as hard as ever. Would people even be able to drive in all of this snow? Even the news outlets spoke of the historical blizzard. There was also news about firefighters not even being able to extinguish the fire at a mansion because of all the snow, an unfortunate combination of a natural and human disaster.

“In any case.”

Maru started thinking as he crossed his arms. The fire on the fifth floor, there was no way it was natural. Miso said she found a tube of glue. No one in their right minds would purposely throw a flammable material like that next to wooden props on purpose. There was also no way for that tube of glue to set itself on fire.

So, the fire was intentional.

Moreover, it was during winter vacation. At the time of the fire, there was no one in the school other than the acting club. Though there could always be someone who was hiding in one of the classes before they left.

‘No.’

In the end, the first suspects were the acting club members. Who set the fire, and why? Maru scratched his head. There were many teachers who didn’t like the acting club. Was that reason enough to commit arson? Especially when the fire was incredibly damaging to them? To begin with, the only reason why the faculty disliked the club in the first place was due to a fire.

“Can’t be a teacher.”

The best way to figure out the intent of a crime was to figure out what someone wanted to get out of it. Maru thought for a few minutes before sighing in defeat.

“There’s no reason why anyone would start a fire.”

No one could gain anything from a fire. Was it just a prank then? No, it couldn’t be. The fire was definitely well-planned. It was done by someone who knew exactly when the club met and when they left, they even chose the day before the competition to start the fire. Clearly they knew exactly what the club was doing.

Maru briefly thought of a different school. Perhaps this was the sabotage attempt from a different school. But if any student wanted to sabotage a school, they would’ve chosen Myunghwa High.

“Hah, and the police likely won’t investigate anything either.”

The school knew there was a fire, they just didn’t want to make the news big. A school with a pyromaniac? It would damage the school’s reputation immensely. Coupled with the bullying incident... the school would cross a point of no return. If the police don’t get involved in this matter, then catching the criminal would be up to the school and the club. The school definitely wouldn’t try to get involved, so in reality, only the club would be the ones to investigate.

‘It’s not like we really have to find the criminal, but...’

It would be fine to brush it off as a simple accident, especially since the incident was contained. The problem lay in the possibility of a recurrence. If something like this happens again, things could get very bad for the club.

They were able to keep this under wraps thanks to mutual agreement between Miso and the school. The acting club had to lose a few things, but it wasn’t anything too big. But what if the same thing happened again? The school could make one of two decisions. They could call the police, or...

‘Get rid of the problem entirely.’

If the school decided there was a pyromaniac going after the acting club, the easier solution would be to just get rid of the acting club instead of trying to find the criminal. They could turn the auditorium into a gym in the process as well. They wouldn’t be losing out on anything.

‘As long as I can learn their intent...’

The intent of the crime. What one could gain from that fire. Maru smiled bitterly and grabbed a notebook, he put his book down for a second.

"I can only hope it's not true, but..."

It couldn't have been done by an outsider, it had to be done by a club member.

'Why did god have to make my ability so tricky to use?'

He would've gone straight into finding the perpetrator if he could read everyone's minds, but he had his restrictions. He needed to look them in their eyes and they needed to be thinking about him.

"Can't be the guys from the morning."

Dojin, Daemyung, Miso. Their minds were filled with worries over him when their eyes met. Won't the perpetrator think something more along the lines of 'I failed because of him' instead?

So those three were out, he wasn't able to check the others because of how busy he was. For now, he started writing down a list of the club members' names.

"Hold on."

Maru frowned.

"I might end up being a total whistleblower if things get bad."

He had a feeling that this might get out of hand.

Chapter 159

Tok, tok. The notepad was starting to get dotted with black ink. Maru looked at the names of the club members for a bit before putting down his pen.

"Hm."

The number one suspect in any given crime was the reporter of the crime, it was only logical. In this case, given the result of the situation, Maru clearly wasn't the perpetrator. He shouldn't be affected much even if the police become involved.

"But what if I was the perpetrator?"

Given the evidence, the perpetrator had to be a student. In addition, they were most likely to be in the acting club. If that was the case, perhaps he could try to get an understanding of what they are thinking of right now? The goal of the crime appeared to be the destruction of the props and costumes, but the only thing that managed to get burnt were the clothes. They even finished the play successfully.

The perpetrator would then start wondering why their crime failed, they'd realize that they failed because of someone called Maru.

They would probably hate him.

'A crime with purpose. Arson isn't easy to pull off.'

The perpetrator was deadset on their objective, enough to start a fire. But they failed, so it was likely that they felt somewhat mad. They might've also felt guilty when they looked at Maru. After all, they likely didn't intend for someone to actually get hurt.

'Anger and nervousness, I guess?'

Everyone feels nervous at first, the same was true in the case for any sort of crime. What if he uses this?

"What if I become a scapegoat?"

Perhaps they might feel something if he does something they want? Maru scratched his eyebrows for a bit before reaching for his phone. He needed to make sense of all of this first.

* * *

Miso parked her car and opened the trunk. The trunk had some paint and paint rollers inside. Soon after, a small pickup truck drove towards the school. A man walked out from it.

"Is it here?"

"Yeah. Sorry for taking your time. I'll pay you well, so please help."

"Taking my time? No way. Just help me when I need it as well."

"Anytime."

The kind-looking man in front of her was Yoon Mintae, he was a friend of Miso's that she recruited to fix up the auditorium. He was a polite young man, age 25, and he was currently working under the set director of the Myungdong Art Theater. Daemyung got off of Mintae's truck as well, the boy was holding rubber gloves along with arm sleeves.

"Will we be able to finish this quickly?"

Mintae shrugged at the boy's question.

"We'll have to see it first. Let's take our tools up. You get those, Daemyung and I'll take the cleaner."

Mintae took out the wheeled high-pressure cleaner from the truck.

"Is that something you use in the theater?"

"Yes. I got permission from the director and brought it."

"Wow, so reliable. Need any help?"

"Could you take the paint and the tools from the trunk?"

"Okay."

"Let's finish cleaning first. We can do the floors a little later."

Miso took the paint and walked upstairs. The school was completely empty for winter vacation and she couldn't be more thankful for that fact. Things would've been incredibly troublesome if this happened during the semester. Daemyung, who went up first, opened the door to the auditorium, he'd opened all

of the windows inside as well. Miso put down the paint and looked next to the entrance, the wall over there was burnt black.

“This isn’t too bad at least. We should be done with it in a jiffy.”

“Yeah. All thanks to you guys.”

There were roughly four meters of damaged wall by the entrance. Parts of the wall that actually touched the fire were burnt completely black while the rest of it was grayed out slightly.

“So this is where Maru took out that bench?”

“Yes. I took him out to the hallway with Dojin when we saw him fall. It was thanks to him that the fire didn’t spread much outside of the costumes.”

“I’m surprised that you guys didn’t call the firefighters.”

“Well... Maru told us not to call them. He said he didn’t want to make this a big incident. I brought the fire extinguisher from the fourth floor while Dojin tried to keep the fire small and that turned out to be enough.”

“There isn’t much that could get burned by this after all.”

Miso knew the rest of the story very well, Maru got sent to the hospital in an ambulance after the fire was taken care of. Miso got information about this sometime during the fire and called Taesik over to the school immediately. She felt doomed, but she was quite relieved to hear that Maru was alright. The first thing she did after that was to call the principal, Taesik took care of this part.

Miso observed the burnt wall in the meantime. Why was there a fire? As she looked around, she spotted a burnt tube of glue among all of the ash. There was no reason for something like that to be there. So, the first thing her mind went to was that someone started the fire on purpose. To begin with, there was no other option. She started thinking. Should she be truthful with the principal, or should she tell him it was just an accident?

The principal came to the school quickly, he was visibly angry. The first thing he did, in fact, was scream about how poorly they managed the kids. That’s when Miso made her decision, she told him that it was all an accident. Surprisingly, the man calmed down quickly when she said she’d take care of it with her own money. Miso told the man it was her own mistake when he asked about the cause of the fire, the principal clicked his tongue at that.

- Trying to cover for the kids is very dangerous for their growth. It’s obvious that they started the fire while trying to make a snack.

The principal also seemed rather happy.

- Well, given the club’s prior incident with fire, I don’t think I can let them use the auditorium anymore. Mr. Taesik, please give the kids the news. Understand?

It was an expected result, but she still felt bad about it. Had she told him the fire was intentional, the principal would’ve become very serious. He would’ve judged that the perpetrator was in the acting club.

In that case, the club could no longer act at all during the competition. They would have to give up on the nationals.

No, that was fine. There were more competitions down the road, but what if the principal called the police? Doing that could very easily hurt the kids. By the time Mintae arrived with his cleaner, she got a call from Maru.

“Yeah, Maru?”

- Are you free for a chat right now?

“Yes.”

Miso gestured at the other two before stepping outside. Maru clearly didn't call her to catch up.

“What's wrong?”

- Are you partying right now?

“Mm? Yeah, yup.”

Miso leaned on the wall. She did tell the boy they were going to have a party without him, but it really wasn't the time for such a thing.

- Bit too quiet for a party.

He seemed to have caught on already, too.

“Hah, yeah. Parties my ass. I told the kids to go rest. We just gathered to see you.”

- You should've celebrated. It was the perfect time, too. “Shush. Why did you call?”

- I had a few things I wanted to ask you. The people higher up didn't say anything much about the fire, judging by the faces of the club members, right? So you didn't tell them that the fire was intentional.

Miso took her phone off of her ear for a second dazedly. What was up with this kid?

“Who told you?”

- Just a theory.

“Hah. Yeap. I told the principal that it was my mistake. That's how I'm cleaning things up with Mintae right now. Ah, do you know Mintae?”

- Yoon Mintae?

“Oh? You know him?”

- Yes. I'm working with him. Anyway, good job. Things would've gotten too complicated if you told him it was intentional. There's a low chance the guy would report the incident to the police, but anything can happen after all.

“The guy? You mean the principal?”

- I can be as rude as I want to him when no one's listening.

“Oh? So you talk about me rudely when I’m not around as well?”

- I’ll leave that to your imagination. Besides that, instructor.

“What?”

- Where do you think the perpetrator is?

“Where?”

Miso frowned. She could tell where Maru was going with this.

“You think someone in the club did it?”

- Isn’t that the most logical conclusion?

“Hey!”

Being suspicious of a friend? Unthinkable. But she couldn’t help but agree with him a little bit. The only people who were at school on that day were from the acting club.

- I’m hoping it’s not true either. But as long as there’s the possibility, we have to consider it.

Miso frowned even more. She already told the principal that this was an accident, the school was quiet about this as a result. If they were going to do this, the acting club would be alone in its investigation.

- This might not end with just this one incident.

Miso bit her nails, an old habit of hers that resurfaced. To her, the acting club was a place filled with pleasant memories. She didn’t want to lose it and she didn’t want to see its image sullied. She wanted to keep the place clean for the future students of the school, but what if there was a kid who was planning on starting trouble in the club again as Maru said?

“You know you’re the most suspicious one for bringing attention to this, right?”

- Of course. But it’s pretty obvious that I’m not the one.

That was definitely true. It wouldn’t make sense for a person who started a fire to jump inside it. Plus, Maru did his best to stop the fire. It was obvious it wasn’t him, Maru also came down from the school with everyone else. The people who came out late back then was Yurim and the second years.

- But I was the one who did it.

“What? What are you talking about?”

- It’s a bit obvious, but I’m asking to lay a trap for the perpetrator. If there really is someone who started the fire in the club, they would hate to attract attention. So we’ll set up a stage for them. That there’s someone who started the fire in the club.

“You want me to announce that?”

- Yes. Tell them that as a group. They’ll all try to deny it. After that... meet them one by one and tell them your ‘true’ feelings. That you’re suspicious of Maru.

“And?”

- Bring the ones who have even a bit of a reaction over to me. Or someone who actively tells you that I'm the perpetrator.

“...Be honest with me. You're certain that it's someone in the club, aren't you?”

- When you eliminate what's impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Plus, given our knowledge, it can only be someone in the club, don't you think?

Miso smiled bitterly.

“I suppose there's value in trying it.”

- At the very least, we can trust everyone again if we don't find anything.

“But if we do?”

- ...I'd rather not think about that.

Miso nodded. She didn't want to even imagine it either.

“But why bring them to you? Do you have a secret plan or something?”

- It's not for certain, but I have my ways. I can read minds pretty well.

“...Hah, you can joke even now? Alright, fine. I'll do what I can.”

She hung up and put the phone back in her pocket.

“Ugh, what a nerd. He reads too much.”

Miso shook her head, thinking back to what Maru had just said.

* * *

Maru sighed after hanging up.

“I hope it's not true.”

The snow outside mirrored his current feelings. For now, Maru decided to leave this to Miso since he needed to rest. He opened the hardcover book he was reading, Sherlock Holmes: The Sign of The Four.

Chapter 160

“Let's clean up first.”

There was one thing she needed to do before catching the perpetrator. When Miso rolled up her sleeves and walked into the auditorium, Mintae had just managed to rev up the high-pressure washer.

“Let's clean off the burnt bits and soot first. We can scrape off the parts that don't get washed off afterwards. I think we just need to wax the floor as well, given the damage.”

“What a professional.”

“There was a fire at a theater I used to work at. I learned a lot. And there were also the seniors I followed around for theater construction.”

“You’re really reliable, you know that?”

Miso poked Mintae’s hips.

“It might splash a bit, so please step aside. Daemyung, use that squeegee to take the water into the bathroom.”

“Got it.”

The motor rumbled loudly as the machine started shooting water.

* * *

Yurim sighed as she got back up from her bed. It was 2am, and her neck was covered with sweat. She’d been lying down for 3 hours, completely unable to go to sleep. She was fine until yesterday when they went to visit Maru, the sight of him in the morning with his injuries and cast had kept her awake. According to Dojin, Maru could’ve easily fallen into the fire if things went wrong.

“...But he didn’t get hurt. So it’s ok.”

She tried to console herself as she closed her eyes again. Looking back on it now, she had to wonder how she even mustered the courage to start the fire, to begin with. She hesitated to the very end, but she got the perfect chance to do it. It was almost as if the world was telling her to do it. All of the club members were gone and the auditorium was completely empty. The second years were cleaning up on the fourth floor as well.

A light went off in her head, she hurried back up in the middle of walking down with everyone else. She tried to put the clothes on fire with the lighter, but it wasn’t easy. She ended up squirting the glue on the clothes and the floor before setting fire to it. The fire greedily licked the glue trail and set it ablaze. The clothes were on fire in an instant and Yurim knocked on the fourth floor clubroom as if nothing had happened.

Inside, the seniors were organizing the last bits of the props. Yurim tried to calm her stomach as she helped them. They finished quickly and they came down to the first floor together. It was perfect all the way up to then. If everyone went back home, the props would’ve burnt to ashes.

But Maru decided to go inside. He saved the props, and the play went on without him. Geunseok was the one to perfectly fill up Maru’s empty spot. Rather than making the boy desperate as she intended, she bolstered his confidence instead. Everyone praised him, and even the seniors looked a lot more trusting of him. As a result, Geunseok became even stronger. That small glimpse of weakness she saw before was completely gone.

That’s when she realized he didn’t need her anymore. She approached him after the play ended, She told him that he did well. She wanted him to grab her hand as always, telling her that it was all thanks to her.

‘...I got nothing.’

That day, Geunseok nodded as if he was told something obvious. No more, no less. She felt incredibly distanced from him. The cowardly chick from a few months ago grew into an eagle that flew away from her arms.

That feeling of loss... That realization that Geunseok didn't need her anymore. Yurim wanted to faint. This wasn't possible. She needed to console Geunseok after shaking him to the core. What was the point of even starting the fire otherwise? She only did this, to begin with, because she believed she could get close to him again.

'What do I do now?'

On the way back home, she noticed him talking in a very loving tone with someone over the phone. She could tell he was talking to Suyeon. What were they talking about? How could he have such a happy face on him? Why wouldn't he smile at her like that?

Geunseok was cold to her, he was scary. It felt like he would never even talk to her again and that made her afraid. Yurim approached him inside the bus, she tried to talk to him like they usually did.

- Why are you being so annoying?

What she saw then was definitely irritation. She didn't want anything special, just a simple conversation. Even that was denied to her. And today... she wasn't even able to get a word in with him on the bus. Soyeon kept trying to talk to her, she couldn't hear it. She had stopped talking with Geunseok completely for two straight days. Her hands were sweaty and her lips were drying out. He was completely ignoring her.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock. The clock on the wall was so incredibly loud. Was it always that loud? She blocked her ears with a pillow. The noise seemed to have gone away for a second, but the ticking noise managed to pierce through the layers of cloth into her ears. She bit her lips and curled up on her bed. Ignore it. Ignore it. The sound of the clock only got sharper over time.

"Shut up!"

She threw the pillow at the clock. Crack. The clock broke upon falling onto the floor. She stared at it dumbly before realizing what she's done, she stood up to clean up the mess before yelping in pain.

"Ugh."

A sharp piece of plastic dug into her feet, it hurt too much. She sat down on the floor in pain. All she could see was plastic, blood, and a cut.

"What's wrong?"

Her mom entered the room. Yurim mumbled for a bit before squeezing out a response.

"...It fell while I was sleeping."

Mom turned on the lights in surprise. Drops of blood were falling on the floor.

"My gosh."

Mom quickly brought over some bandages.

“I’ll do it, you should go back to sleep.”

Yurim pushed her mom back out before dropping down onto the floor. She felt awful. Pathetic. She buried her face into her knees. She was afraid. Annoyed. Scared. Angry. She wanted to ask for forgiveness. It was all because of him.

All sorts of thoughts and emotions danced inside her. Her feet hurt. How did this happen? She was happy for the first time in high school. She wasn’t scared of alleyways anymore. So why?

Tears began flowing down from her face as she picked up the broken pieces of plastic. Why was she the only one to suffer like this? She lay back down on her bed. It was 3am, she still couldn’t sleep. Even though the noise from the clock was gone now. In the darkness, she started flipping through pictures on her phone. In the beginning, there were a lot of pictures she took with Soyeon. At the karaoke, at a restaurant, at a bingsoo place.

“Traitor.”

Did Soyeon forget about all of the fun times they had together? Why was the girl hanging out with other people instead of her? She hated Soyeon. She hated her. She tried to erase the pictures on the phone, but her finger wouldn’t move. In the end, she just moved onto the next page. After that came all the pictures she took with Geunseok.

She flipped through all the fond memories she had had from August to December, a smile appeared on her face just looking at the pictures. She could feel her chest warm up, but time passed, the smile on Geunseok’s face gradually stiffened. By the end, the boy’s eyes weren’t smiling at all. They were cold.

Yurim’s expression stiffened as well, something was very wrong here. Her heart was getting filled with fear and loneliness. She needed to catch him, she couldn’t let him distance himself from her like this. She didn’t want things to go back to the way they were.

Yurim stroked Geunseok’s smiling face on the phone, they needed to go back. As long as there was a proper fire, they could’ve gone back to that time.

‘He’s the bad one. It’s all his fault.’

The reason why the noise of the clock was so loud. The reason why her feet got hurt. The reason why Geunseok became cold towards her. It was all ‘his’ fault.

‘If only he didn’t go into the auditorium.’

No, if only he got really hurt in there instead...

Yurim flinched. Did she really think of such a horrible thing? She closed her phone hurriedly. That wasn’t her intent at all, but a corner of her mind kept whispering to her. What if he got hurt? Wouldn’t the play have stopped then?

‘...It probably would’ve.’

So in the end, he was the issue. He shouldn’t have jumped into the fire, he should’ve run away. It’s all his fault things went wrong, he messed up all of her plans.

Yurim clenched her eyes shut. Somewhere outside, she could hear the noise of a black pickup truck driving.

* * *

She woke up with terribly heavy eyes. It was vacation so she could've just overslept, but when she checked the clock, it was 7am. Yurim sighed and looked at the empty wall. Right, she broke her clock yesterday.

She told her mom that she was fine and ate her meal by herself at home. By the time she finished eating and watched some TV, it was already 9. She got a message, it was from instructor Miso.

[We have to organize the auditorium and have to practice, so come to school by 11am.]

Her stomach hurt when she read the word 'auditorium'. She didn't want to go, she really didn't want to go. Sadly, it was the week before the nationals, she had to go. If she skipped here, Geunseok would judge her. She washed her head in the bathroom. By the time she finished styling her hair, it was already past 10am. She put on the shirt Geunseok liked and walked outside.

The outside was draped with snow, the scene made her forget about her worries briefly. She stepped into the snow, her shoes got slightly wet, but it didn't matter. Her astonishment and happiness didn't last long, thinking about having to see the burn mark rekindled her nervousness.

'Will there be cops?'

She was getting worried about all sorts of things. The school didn't have CCTV, they wouldn't know who started the fire for sure. She just needed to be careful. She smiled awkwardly. If she got caught, everything would be ruined. She got on the bus. She immediately realized why criminals always got caught in movies, her legs were trembling and the same went for her arms. How many times had she swallowed nervously? A boy in front of her was staring at her oddly. Did she look suspicious?

All sorts of imagination flew around in her head. Yurim shook her head, this wasn't good at all, she needed to get calm. In the end, she decided to try to act out 'Yurim'. A girl who speaks little and smiles occasionally, a girl who can only act confident next to Geunseok.

'Just be normal. Don't be scared. No one's being suspicious of me. I'm safe.'

She was at school before she even realized it. The school seemed even more desolate than normal today. Why?

"You're here?"

A voice came from behind her. Soyeon. The girl seemed to have lost weight. Yurim did recall hearing that the girl started exercising since she started dating Taejoon. She ignored her and stepped up, Soyeon followed her up and greeted her again. What was this traitor thinking?

"Did something bad happen?"

She felt a little nervous inside, she ignored it. Soyeon kept following her silently before quietly muttering out a question.

“Yurim, we’re still friends, right?”

Yurim stopped for a second and turned to look at Soyeon.

“Why did you ignore me and go to Iseul’s restaurant that time?”

“I didn’t ignore you. I called you. But you...”

She could somewhat remember it, she definitely got a call. She ignored it because she was with Geunseok, her facial muscles twitched. She knew Soyeon wasn’t at fault at all, but her pride wouldn’t accept it.

“You would’ve insisted me to come if you were a real friend.”

“Yurim.”

“Stop it. Don’t try to act so friendly all of a sudden.”

Yurim turned around, biting her tongue. It felt like something snapped inside her. At the same time, she realized she couldn’t lose Geunseok more than ever now. She rolled up her fists and walked up to the auditorium. Now, it was time to act.