

Once Again 20

Chapter 20

The sky was getting to the point where he could see the moon. Right next to, a little red star burning brightly.

“Must be Mars.”

“Nah man, looks like a satellite.”

“No, that should be Mars.”

2003 was the year when Mars came especially close to earth. Maru remembered this only because of a certain memory he had with a friend from high school.

[Isn't it so cool that that red thing over there can come closer to us or go away as much as it wants?]

He thought of the conversation every once in a while even as he aged. He had no idea if the person was a guy or a girl, if he was even friends with that person or what. He could only remember that it was night when this conversation took place.

“Man, thinking about that instructor's making me annoyed again.”

“Ah... you're right, we have to see her more from now on.”

Dojin and Daemyung sighed. They didn't seem to hate Miso, but they definitely disagreed with the way she taught. Then again, they got hit by her at least once.

“See ya.”

“Bye.”

Maru crossed the street away from the other two. He got on the bike and was ready to pedal. He should've brought gloves. The air was really cold now that the sun had set.

Right then, a bike passed by. It was a road bike. A yellow one.

“Dowook?”

He was here all the way up until now? He wasn't that good of a friend of his, so he pedalled slowly. Right then, Dowook stopped right in the middle of his tracks. Did he have something to say? Well, the boy wasn't saying anything, so Maru pedaled past him. But after a few minutes, Dowook started biking right next to him side by side.

“What, you have something to say?”

“.....”

Dowook didn't say anything. He did want to say something, though. Maru squeezed his breaks and came to a halt. Dowook did the same.

“What's up?”

“.....”

“What, you nervous?”

“Ah, you son of a... I really don't like you.”

Dowook glared for a second, but looked away pretty quickly with a sigh.

“Those clothes.”

“Clothes?”

“Did they get fixed?”

“The ones your friends put holes in?” “Friends my ass. Anyway, what happened? I heard it was stuff like dresses.”

“We tried to fix them up as much as we could. Don't worry about it.”

Right then.

[And here I was worried about how bad it was. Damn it, I worried over nothing.]

A word bubble popped up.

“Worry my ass. Fuck.”

Dowook looked up at the sky frustratedly as he swore a little more.

“As long as there weren't problems. Get going, then.”

The boy turned away with his bike. Presumably back home.

“Did you follow me to ask about that? Hold on, did you wait?”

“Fuck off.”

Dowook pedalled away. The bike disappeared out of Maru's sight pretty quickly.

‘He must've been feeling a lot of stuff recently.’

People tend to think a lot when they're alone. Dowook had been alone for a very long time in the last week. At least that's how it seemed to Maru. He's never seen Dowook talk to anyone, even during lunch or break time. Even his old friends had cast him out of their group.

“Well, that's just karma.”

He wouldn't be in this position if he spent his time helping others. Though... his situation would probably improve for the better if Maru decided to help.

“Hm.”

Maru thought of Dowook again. The boy wasn't a bad kid. Maybe he should help?

* * *

Bada heard the front door open as she was watching TV.

“Mom?”

Instead, it was Maru. The cold air came into the house with him.

“Close the door, it’s cold.” Bada said.

“Sure, sure.”

Maru closed the door without a word of complaint. That was weird. He shouldn’t be this kind. Normally he’d say something like ‘you close it’ or something out of spite. Sure, there were times when he acted kind. But that was usually after he got his allowance or when he had food with him. Nowadays he acted kind at all times. It was really strange.

“You have dinner yet?”

Again with that! Why was he feeding her, even? He should be asking HER for food! Asking for a bite when she ate instant noodles!

“I didn’t have anything.”

“I’ll make you something. Just wait.”

He stepped into the kitchen as if it were the most natural thing for him to do in the world. Bada watched him before taking out her phone. She opened the cover and started texting her friend.

[Hey, it’s weird if your older brother starts acting nice, right?]

The answer came surprisingly quickly.

[100%.]

[What if he keeps being nice to you?]

[He’s done something really bad. 1000%.]

It was just as she had feared, but her brother didn’t do anything wrong. He even gave her his allowance sometimes.

[But what if he did nothing wrong?]

[That kind of a brother doesn’t exist.]

It was a pretty firm response. All of her other friends responded the same way. That is: big brothers were their arch-nemesis. Bada agreed with the sentiment completely. At least, she did until last month.

‘What’s happening?’

Her brother was humming in the kitchen as he cooked. Where did he learn to make food anyway? He made soups and whatnot like he did it for years. Even mom was starting to cook less now. She looked like she hoped Maru would cook dinner from now on. It was understandable.

Big brother’s cooking was actually tasty.

“Want stir-fried pork?”

“Y-yeah.”

He found where the meat was in the fridge right away and got to cooking. That was strange. How did he know exactly where the meat was? This is almost like...

‘Mom.’

Things were only getting weirder by the second. Why couldn’t he just call her a fatty like before? Right then, a message arrived from one of the girls she asked the question to. Not really a friend or anything, just an acquaintance.

[Sounds like my older brother. He’s nice.]

“...No way.”

Weren’t older brothers creatures that only existed to bother their younger siblings? Bada looked at Maru with disbelieving eyes.

* * *

‘What’s up with her?’

She was acting pretty normally for a few days, but now she was looking at him like he stole a toy from her. She looked almost offended by him. Did he do something to her? Was their relationship this bad from the start?

‘I suppose that’s why she didn’t tell me about her divorce.’

He was way too uncaring of her in his past life, even though they were family. He deeply regretted it, which was why he decided to treat her better in this life. To become a brother who the poor girl could rely on when she had to face society.

‘I’ll treat you better.’

Maru smiled back at his sister with a warm smile.

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“He’s definitely gone insane, there’s no way about it.”

Her big brother? Smiling at her for no reason? There had to be something wrong for sure. Bada decided to do something about it.

“Hey,” she called out.

“What?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Why are you treating me so well?”

“...What?”

“Ugh, seriously. Just tell me if you did something wrong. I’ll forgive you. You don’t need to go this far.”

This should be enough, right? At least, that’s what Bada thought. She was completely wrong, though. Her brother just looked at her with eyes of pity, and...

“I’ll give you a lot more meat from now on, I promise.”

* * *

Maru looked at Bada as the girl walked over to the TV with her bowl in hand. As he thought, girls her age were just hard to predict and understand. He knew this all too well, from his experience being a father of one.

“I’m home,” mom said, walking in with groceries.

“I made food.”

“I told you I’d make it.”

“I know you wanted me to cook. If you want help, you can help me with the dishes.”

Mom entered the kitchen with a smile, letting out an exclamation of surprise looking at the pork dish he cooked. Maru just smiled in response. He couldn’t just tell her something like “I used to cook it a lot when my wife was away”.

Maru went back to his room, and booted up his computer with his toe. He’s gotten totally used to the high school life now. He’s relearned how high schoolers acted by socializing with them, and got totally used to the era that was 2003. No matter how a person looked at it, Maru just looked like a generic high schooler in 2003.

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Maru opened up the messenger app with his mouse. He didn’t really feel like playing games. He’s played too much of it in his past life. Maru greeted his friends through the app briefly before opening the web browser.

“Man, there used to be so many search engines back then.”

It was the era before all search engines were unified under just one. Maru opened up a familiar one in his head and typed in ‘plays’ in the search bar. The first results were all about college plays. Maybe a few blogs as well. There weren’t many bloggers around this time. Maru decided to open one of his own after looking around a little bit.

Not for any big reason or anything.

He just wanted to keep a diary of sorts for his second life. After a bit of thought, Maru settled on a name for the blog.

- Life, Once Again

And his first post:

- Let's live a fun, fulfilling life.

* * *

Daemyung paused for a bit in the middle of typing. It's been about two hours since he started grinding in the game with his friends. He's called them over to play once he realized that the popular hunting spots were mostly empty.

- God, look at all this exp.

- Money's good, too.

- Just need to get the items now and we good.

He played the game with his classmates. He honestly enjoyed it quite a bit. But right as he was about to grab the mouse again, he was reminded of instructor Miso's shout at him. That shout of hers that made him freeze up. His frozen self at the acting club overlapped with his current self for a second. He was too embarrassed to move.

- Yo Daemyung,

- You dead?

His friends were asking since his character wasn't moving anymore. Daemyung took a look at his avatar for a second. He invested a lot of time into this character. He wasn't the top 1% or anything in the game, but he was definitely up there. How could he not be? He's invested money and time into this character.

"...But that isn't me."

That made him feel pretty bad about himself already. Why couldn't his life be just like the game? Why wasn't he rewarded instantaneously for all the work he put into life? Right as he was thinking this, a part of his mind told him to just keep playing the game. But for some reason, this thought just made him want to play even less. He turned off the computer after bidding farewell to his friends.

The monitor turned black, and the room fell completely silent.

To think just a moment ago, he was having so much fun with his friends... Daemyung stood up from his seat. He wanted to go somewhere. Right, Dojin told him he needed to exercise some more. He might as well. He put on his sneakers and started getting ready to leave.

"Where are you going?" His mom asked, in the middle of making some snacks for the night.

"I'm going for a run."

"Really?"

Daemyung realized that for a split second, his mom's face turned into a smile. A smile that made him only feel worse about himself. So his mom hated seeing him be fat too.

"I'll be back."

"Alright, don't be late."

Daemyung stepped out with his phone and earphones.

* * *

“Don’t sleep too late. I know it’s the weekends, but that still isn’t a good excuse.”

“Ok!”

Dojin bid his mom goodbye as she stepped out for her night shift, then jumped into his room. A time without his mom in the house was a happy time. That is, porn time. He pulled one up that he received from one of his old friends. A familiar banner appeared in the beginning few seconds of the video.

“I guess the FBI watches porn, too.”

Whatever. He could just skip this. His phone started ringing right then.

“Daemyung?”