

Once Again 21

Chapter 21

The night air was cold. Dojin walked out of his home with a thick hoodie and a basketball in hand.

[You want to play basketball?]

Daemyung sounded very conservative with his request.

“Want to? Why couldn’t he be upfront and tell me he wanted to play basketball?”

Dojin thought Daemyung could get much more confident as a person. The guy was alright, but awkward expressing a lot of his opinions.

It was a week ago, for example. He, Maru, and Daemyung were trying to decide what to eat for dinner after school. Maru wanted soup, and Dojin wanted noodles. Daemyung just answered with a ‘I’ll have whatever of the two’ at the time.

Dojin was not a fan of the way Daemyung spoke. He wanted to tell the boy to be a bit brave, but Maru just kept stopping him. In any case, he made his way to the park as he lightly dribbled the ball between his hands.

It was cold, but not freezing. He could see plenty of other people in the park exercising. Some were playing badminton, and others were running or doing jump rope. Thankfully, the basketball court was empty.

“Here!”

He could see Daemyung wave at him from afar. The two of them lived surprisingly close to each other. Dojin lived in Sangdong Apartments, at house number 201. Daemyung lived right across the street, at Hanra Apartments, 403. Not even ten minutes apart.

“What’s up with wanting to play basketball and all?”

It was just supposed to be an opener for the conversation, but Daemyung took it in the worst way possible.

“R-right? Sorry. I called you for nothing. It’s too late, isn’t it? I shouldn’t have called. Sorry.”

Daemyung’s voice crawled back nervously. Dojin threw his ball into the other boy’s chest. He was feeling something hot rise up in his chest.

“Ouch,” Daemyung stepped back. He picked up the ball with a scared look.

“What’s wrong, Dojin?”

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“Did I say something to you? Like, I can’t play basketball, or something? Or was I complaining to you?”

“.....”

“Dude, what the hell are you sorry for? I was just surprised that you were out playing basketball. Did I sound like I was picking a fight?”

“N-no.”

“Why are you being like this, then? I didn’t hit you or anything either.”

“.....”

“Jesus.”

Dojin was frustrated. Weren’t they friends? Why the hell was he acting like this, then? Daemyung looked down at the floor nervously, which ended up pissing his friend off even more. He walked forward and straightened the other boy’s shoulders.

Their eyes met for a split second. Daemyung looked away immediately.

“Hey,” Dojin said.

“Yeah?”

“Are you uncomfortable around me?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Did you do something wrong, then? Why are you so apologetic? Why do you keep trying to act pitiful?”

“...Sor...”

Daemyung stopped himself there and looked at Dojin worriedly. There it was again.

“Is something going on?”

“No.”

“You’re lying and you know it. Dude, I’ve only known you for a month, but even I know better than that. You’re a lot better than this. What’s going on?”

That must’ve been it. Daemyung dribbled the ball a little bit with a little sigh. The ball eventually escaped his grasp with how lightly he was dribbling it. The ball rolled away, and Daemyung sighed a little deeper.

“I was just thinking of old times. I used to be bullied.”

He smiled, trying to make light of the word ‘bullied’.

“...What?”

Dojin became confused. Bullying? Out of nowhere? It also made his blood run cold a little bit. Bullying... was a word that had a lot of meaning to Dojin as well.

* * *

Dowook opened the door to his home with his bike. He lived in a 2 floor single home surrounded by a tall fence. Even now, he didn't feel very used to living in a home like this. A little dog ran over to greet him with an excited look.

The dog's name was Little. The only thing in the house he's gotten used to living with. Dowook had no idea what breed the dog was. He just knew it's been five years since he picked it up from the old lady on the street.

At least it was growing healthily.

He pet the dog a little bit as he parked the bike on the wall next to him.

Dowook walked up the three stairs up to his front door. A warm air greeted him upon his first step inside. He didn't bother saying his greetings, since he knew there was no one home. He slipped into his slippers and walked over to the kitchen.

More cold food again for him to reheat.

He warmed up the rice and soup in the microwave. He watched the plate inside spin for a few seconds before walking out with some dog food. The dog greeted him with its wavy tail.

Good boy.

"What were you doing all this time?"

Dowook asked, pushing the food bowl towards it. It didn't answer. Obviously. Dowook pet its head before walking back into the kitchen. The microwave beeped from inside to let him know the food was done. He started eating his food.

There was a sticky note under the bowl of rice had originally been, he noticed. It was a message from his mom, he had no need to read. It was probably the same thing as always anyway. He finished eating and turned on the TV. It was pretty cold in the living room, so he turned on the heater as well.

After laughing at a random reality show for 30 minutes or so, he went to use the restroom. A laugh track was playing the moment he stepped outside. The timing got on his nerves, for some reason. He pressed the power button on the remote to no avail. He tried again. Still nothing. Again. Finally. He walked up to his room on the second floor where he could hear the dog barking outside after finishing its meal.

He decided to ignore it. He turned on his computer and opened up messenger after a bit of hesitation. 13 friends were currently online. They were all his middle school friends. None of them responded to his messages. Then again, they weren't really great friends to begin with.

Dowook turned to look at his phone. He scrolled through his contacts, trying to find a friend that he could call. His face turned stiffer with each scroll upon each realization that there wasn't anyone he could really call.

"Fuck."

He closed his phone. Why was he feeling so nervous right now? Trying to call his friends wasn't anything to be embarrassed about so why was he hesitating?

Then again, what would he even say to them?

What was the name of the kid up front again? Ah, Jichul, right. Why was he thinking of that guy now? The guy always stayed alone by himself because of how quiet he was. Dowook could remember Jichul's troubled expression lingering as he looked around every time there was group work.

"...Hah."

Crap. Dowook was just like that guy right now. That was what made him feel nervous. It was even worse, actually. At least Jichul had people who occasionally talked to him. He recalled everything he said at school in the previous week.

"...There's nothing."

Just conversations with the teacher was all. He's never talked to the other students. No, he 'couldn't' talk with the other students. Was this what being bullied was like? For some reason, the faces of his previous victims started popping up in his head clearly.

Please, he didn't want to remember. Crap. Their faces wouldn't leave his mind. About how they could only ever say "I'm sorry" and "please forgive me" in school.

"Fuck."

Dowook turned on a song at full volume. A quiet ballad shook his room like a heavy metal song. Hopefully the noise will drown out some of his feelings.

"...Crap."

The voices of his victims still wouldn't go away.

* * *

"Come out?"

- Yeah. I need your help. You're better at this kind of stuff than me.

"What stuff?"

- Daemyung.

Daemyung? At 11 at night? Why? He'd have to bike for 20 minutes to get there.

"Damn it, fine."

People don't change that easily. Maru didn't want to ignore someone when they needed his help. Especially friends.

"I'll be out for a bit, mom."

"Where are you going?"

"Friends."

"What?"

“Don’t worry mom, I’ll be fine.”

“.....”

Mom hesitated before telling him to come back quickly. That reminded him, he’s always thought of raising a kid freely when he grew up. Like his parents. That’s exactly what he did with his daughter. She’s hurt him occasionally, but she did grow to become a fine lady.

‘Helicopter parenting is no good.’

Maru peeked into the fridge as he stepped out of his parent’s bedroom. Talking with friends, huh... Well, that meant he would need a certain things with him, then. He pulled out a can of beer and put it in his pocket before walking outside.

* * *

There weren’t many people outside when Maru arrived. They all probably went home. He spotted a few couples in the park before turning to go further inside.

“Oh, you’re here.”

“Ugh, so cold.”

Maru grinned, looking at his two friends sitting close to each other for warmth.

“Why not go to a PC bang if you’re so cold?”

“We’re poor, dude. Besides, we came out for that,” Daemyung’s shivering finger pointed at the basketball.

His fault for coming out in gym clothes, Maru thought.

“Let’s go to a convenience store for some instant noodles,” Maru suggested.

“Oh, you’re paying?”

Dojin’s face instantly bloomed with excitement, whereas Daemyung’s expression brightened briefly before shaking his head glumly.

“I’m good.”

“What, you trying to lose weight?”

There was no other reason why the boy would call Dojin out for basketball otherwise.

“.....”

“Just one, man. You’re going to get sick if you don’t have something warm. Let’s go.”

Maru walked into the convenience store nearby with his bike. It was a big store, so there were quite a number of people inside still. Maru bought three cups of noodles and walked over to the hot water station.

“Let’s eat first, men,” Maru said, splitting the chopsticks in his hand.

The others nodded and dug into the noodles. They smiled as they slurped in the hot soup.

“God, I feel so much more alive now.”

“Me too.”

They licked every inch of their bowls clean before walking back to the park. It was still bright out, thanks to all the lights.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Maru asked, sitting on a bench nearby.

“You tell him,” Dojin said.

Daemyung sighed. He didn’t look like he could get it out of him.

“Come on, man,” Dojin urged. It didn’t really work.

Maru nodded. This was probably really important to Daemyung. But he couldn’t go back without hearing anything. He pulled a can of beer out of his pocket, earning a surprised look from the other two. Maru grinned.

“A medicine to make you start talking, buddy.”

Chapter 22

Dojin’s eyes were sparkling with curiosity, whilst Daemyung looked around worriedly. That alone spoke loudly of their personalities.

“Alcohol?” Daemyung asked. Maru nodded.

“Where did you get it?”

“I took it out of the fridge.”

“Won’t you get yelled at?”

“That’s my problem, not yours. You ever drink before, Daemyung?”

“Nope, never.”

Maru handed the can over.

“Drink.”

“.....”

“Don’t worry, it won’t kill you,” Dojin said, looking like he wanted to try it himself.

Daemyung took a small sip of the beer.

“Ugh, bitter.”

“Is it?”

Dojin tried a sip of it himself.

“Ugh, what’s up with that flavor?”

“What?”

“No, I mean, don’t actors enjoy beer when they have it in movies? What kind of a flavor is this?”

“Just means you two are innocent.”

Maru took a big swig of beer himself. His 45 year old self could go strong even after 4 bottles of soju. His body was just tolerant of alcohol. That didn’t change much after coming back to the past.

“You like that stuff?” Dojin frowned.

“I’m not innocent like you two.”

“What the hell are you on?”

“You’ll see why this is tasty when you start suffering a bit more. Thinking badly about alcohol just shows how healthy of a life you two have.”

Maru handed the beer over to Daemyung.

“Think you can talk now?”

Daemyung shook his head.

“Have some more, then. It’ll help. Makes the cold go away as well.”

Daemyung closed his mouth and started chugging. Gulp, gulp. The beer can was emptied within seconds.

“I didn’t mean for you to just one shot that... You okay?”

“Eh? Yeah. I’m fine, I think.”

“For now, sure. Let’s walk a bit.”

The three of them strolled around the park for a few minutes.

“Hey, check Daemyung out,” Dojin pointed.

Daemyung’s face turned pink. Not completely red, but sort of pink.

On the other hand...

“Dojin, you’re so red,” Daemyung commented.

“What, me?”

Dojin was red as a tomato after a single sip.

“You should probably not drink too much in gatherings, man.”

“What? Wait, hold on. I’m red? Really? I feel fine.”

Dojin touched his cheeks a little bit and jumped in surprise.

“Hey, I’ll just do another quick lap. Man, why am I like this?” He started walking away fanning off the heat from his cheeks.

‘Is his liver bad?’

Maru decided to refrain from offering the guy alcohol from now.

“Is he fine?” Daemyung asked.

“He’s fine. Alcohol’s just not for him. How do you feel, though?”

“Eh? I feel fine. Ah, my mouth feels a tiny bit numb, though. Like the time when I got anesthetics for getting my tooth pulled when I was young. That reminds me, I was really happy back then, right? Confident, that’s the word. I didn’t even know why other kids were so afraid of the dentists. I would tell everyone else stuff like ‘why are you so afraid of dentists? I don’t even cry when I’m there!’ Hah, and now I’ve become like this...”

Daemyung started rambling on. He didn’t seem to realize it, but the alcohol definitely had an effect on him. Maru listened to him speak for a little bit. He’s never seen Daemyung be like this before. The boy was even excitedly making hand gestures for each word.

‘They’re all stories from elementary school.’

Daemyung probably became introverted some time in middle school.

“And then my desk partner in 3rd grade told me that I looked funny.”

The boy’s shoulders drooped noticeably. His voice had become a lot more quiet, too. So this is it, huh.

“The day was normal. I looked fine, I think. But she told me that I looked funny. After that, everyone started saying I looked funny as well. They probably meant well. But... I couldn’t just laugh about it. Maybe because it’s true? I mean, I do look like a dumbass.”

Daemyung smiled awkwardly. He turned to look at Maru, who just stared back without any emotion on his face.

“Keep going.”

“Eh?”

“I’m listening, so go on.”

“.....”

Daemyung continued after a moment of hesitation, recounting what happened afterwards, and how he started getting bullied.

“It feels really bad to be bullied. But I couldn’t do anything about it, because it was my fault to begin with. I mean, I look funny. I can’t even refute it, either! I was begging to be bullied.”

Daemyung stopped to look at Maru, who motioned to keep going. He hesitated, though.

“Anything else?”

“Eh?”

“Anything else you wanted to say?”

“Eh...”

“So that’s it?”

Maru looked at Daemyung for a second. Did Daemyung sober up, or had he just become self-aware as he spoke? The boy looked a lot more nervous now.

“...Funny, isn’t it? I’m being so depressed over something that just kind of had to happen. I mean, I look like a retard. It was bound to happen. But it’s okay now. I feel fine. I have friends now. Friends who listen to me.”

Daemyung smiled. But his shoulders were still drooped just like before. Maru looked into the boy’s eyes. He didn’t want to see a word bubble or anything. He didn’t need it. He wanted to see a reaction.

The boy looked down without being able to meet his eyes.

“Daemyung.”

“...Sorry.”

“I had this friend a long time ago who told me this. You might not change as a person from the people you associate with, but your friends could still drift away because of them.”

Maru stood up over Daemyung. He straightened the boy’s shoulders.

“You should sit more comfortably.”

Daemyung relaxed in his seat. He still looked awkward. Hands clasped together, over his knees. He looked just like a new soldier.

“Impressions of you can change depending on who you hang out with. Some people might think of you as studious, others might say you’re awkward. You haven’t changed at all. It’s just your surroundings that makes you look different.”

“.....”

“People are very opinionated. They like getting involved, whether it be in a good or a bad way. That just can’t be helped and you can’t stop them from judging you.”

Daemyung nodded.

“You’ll just have to learn to live with it. There’s something important, though.”

Maru raised his fingers and formed a ‘T’ shape out of them.

“This horizontal finger here represents what people think of you.”

Maru raised his finger upward like a see-saw.

“Some of them might be good,”

This time, he moved it down.

“Others might be bad,” he continued, “unfortunately, you can’t control it. After all, you can’t control other people, right?”

“Yeah...”

“But look here, this finger in the middle.”

Maru put his vertical finger straight in the middle of the horizontal one.

“If you keep a good balance, there’s no way people’s impressions of you can lean too much towards one place. But what do you think would happen if that balance disappeared?”

“People’s impressions of you... will change.”

“That’s exactly it.”

Maru put away his fingers.

“Some people know exactly what to do to always get good impressions out of people. But we can’t all be like these people, right?”

“Right.”

“Normal people have to learn to live normally. That is, they need to find their balance. People normally have their balance set from the time they’re born. It’s very hard to shake them off of it. But there’s one thing that can very easily shake you off.”

“...What is it?”

“You should know better than anyone.”

“.....”

“What was that? Weirdo? Lookin’ funny? I feel like there were more.”

“.....”

“Nothing in the world can hurt you more than yourself. If you’re the one messing with your own balance... It can get very dangerous very quickly.”

Maru recalled some of the words Daemyung were called in the past. All the negative words the boy spouted before about himself. He’s always called his bullies the ‘cool kids’ whereas he was nothing more than the ‘fatty’. Maru’s seen too many people broke themselves like this in the past. Especially his fellow bus driver who ended his own life back in the day.

“Then... what should I do?”

“Don’t know. I’m not you. You should be the one thinking about it. What were you like before you started putting yourself down? Try to become like yourself from that time again. It’ll be hard, I know. People don’t just change in a day.”

“.....”

Daemyung looked even depressed. He must be thinking about a lot of things.

* * *

Daemyung thought about a few things. Things that made him completely forget about the cold. He looked down at his hands. They were chubby. No, fat. How much did he weigh again? It felt like every day, he grew a few centimeters more sideways. That too was his fault, really.

“I was thinking as I was playing a game a few hours ago. Maybe video games are just a form of escapism for me. Since I can act more freely in a video game than in real life.”

“Mm.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t be so fat if I used that time to play sports. I wouldn’t be such a damn pi... No, I’d be skinny like you, even. Hah...”

Daemyung scratched his head. He felt like he realized something.

“I decided. I’m gonna quit gaming and start playing sports. Maybe other people would look at me differently then? Yeah. I’ll be more confident then.”

Right. He could become more confident. He was thankful that Maru was willing to listen to him talk. It’s been a while since he was able to be honest with himself.

He should treat Maru to something sometime.

But... Maru wasn’t looking at him so kindly, he realized.

“I told you, didn’t I? People don’t change that easily. Though... If that’s what you’ve decided for yourself, I won’t say anything about it. Ah, I guess I already did, didn’t I?”

Maru smiled awkwardly. What was wrong about his resolution?

Chapter 23

“What’s wrong with my resolution?” Daemyung asked.

Maru answered after a brief pause.

“I’m aware that you’re conscious about your appearance and I’m not going to say that your looks don’t matter, because they do. It is very easy to capitalize on your looks after all,” Maru continued, “I agree that you should try to change yourself, but you shouldn’t limit yourself to appearances. You said video games were a form of escapism for you earlier? Perhaps. But it’s also a part of you, something you’ve invested a significant amount of your time on. It’s fine for you to think you should focus more on sports, however it’s not fine to make that decision on impulse. If people make fun of you for being skinny later down the line, you’ll try to fatten yourself up again. Either way, there is no happy ending.”

Maru paused for a second. This was a pretty difficult subject to talk about. There was no right answer for anything. It wasn’t like Daemyung could live in ignorance of the views of society. That didn’t mean he should mold himself in accordance to others’ ideals. Daemyung needed to find a balance, and maintain it. This wasn’t something that could be explained in words. It was something a person had to experience for themselves.

“Daemyung.”

“Yeah?”

“Just follow these three things. Firstly, don’t look down on yourself. If someone else says derogatory words towards you, just tell them to stop. Second, start praising yourself more. Even for the small things. Last of all, and this is what instructor Miso said as well. Be conscious of your voice. Speak loud enough for you to actually hear yourself clearly.”

“...Uh, sure. I will.”

“It’s a random thing I came up with on the spot. You don’t really have to follow it by the letter.”

Maru looked up at the sky for a second. He’s made that advice based on his life experiences and his readings from, but he didn’t know if this was actually good advice. At the very least, Daemyung looked more relieved about himself than before.

“Do you think I can do it though? Do you think I can become that confident?”

“I told you, didn’t I? People don’t change quickly. All that matters is that you actually try. You’ll see if you’ve changed or not if you look down the line later in time.”

Maru pat Daemyung’s back lightly. He was used to giving advice. He’s done it a lot in his past life. All that experience was helping him out in this life as well.

“Let’s go. It’s cold.”

“Okay.”

“Yo Dojin! Let’s leave!”

“Sure!!”

Despite the cold weather, he left with a warm feeling in his heart.

* * *

Daemyung walked back into his house. The kitchen lights turned on as he walked in. It was his mother.

“You’re back?”

“Yes.”

“It’s late. Go to sleep.”

“Alright.”

Mom turned to step back into her room. Daemyung called out from behind her.

“I’m going to change.”

It was a resolution of sorts. It was embarrassing, but he wanted to tell his mom that at the very least. He could remember his mom crying when she found about him getting bullied. She was even fine with him transferring to a worse school than the one he was originally set on going to.

'Mom must've had it hard as well.'

He could see it now. How much his mother had cared for him.

"Y-yeah."

Mom stepped into her room with a bit of a confused expression. Maru previously mentioned that change was difficult.

'Even so...'

12am. He would've stayed up gaming normally, but he decided to sleep. It wasn't like he was giving up on games or anything. He just decided to turn it into a healthier habit. Balance was important.

"Work hard, me."

* * *

"I need to apologize to him," Dojin said.

The two of them spoke a little bit more after Daemyung left. Dojin was feeling apologetic for his friend. That was the reason why he left his place to begin with. He was the bully, and Daemyung the victim. They might have gone to different schools, but that didn't help with the guilt.

"Just apologize, then."

"...It's embarrassing."

"Hesitating is even worse. Besides, you're going to do it anyway, right?"

"I should."

"Just apologize and cheer him on."

"Damn it, I poked his sensitive spot because I was a little pissed off. Damn this stupid mouth of mine."

Dojin walked back home in anger. Maru donned his hood and started his ride back home. It was pretty late. By the time he got back, it was already 1am. He washed his hands and stepped back into his room.

But right before he could hit the hay, a knock on his door could be heard.

"Maru."

It was his dad. Maru got back up to try to open the door.

"If you're going to drink, at least learn how to drink from your dad."

With that, the man walked away. Maru stepped back into his bed with a grin.

'He's just like me.'

He could hear the clock ticking near his bed. Maru closed his eyes. There were lots of things that happened today, at the same time it gave off the feeling that nothing happened. At least he was sure that he didn't spend the day in vain.

* * *

Maru's phone vibrated with a ding. Maru opened his phone for a second and closed it again. A call? This early in the morning? He tried to go back to sleep after hanging up, but the phone started ringing again. This time, he took the call with a sigh.

"Hello..."

- Wake up, Han Maru!!

The voice was loud enough to make his ears ache. Maru moved his phone further from his ear after a moment's hesitation. Who the hell was this? It was 8:43am on a Sunday. Practically dawn. Who was crazy enough to...

Ah, Yoonjung. That makes sense.

"Yes, I'm awake, senior."

He rose up from his bed, still unable to muster enough strength into his voice to make him sound like anything other than a sickly patient.

- Come to school.

"Pardon me?"

- Come to school.

What the hell? Maru checked the day again. Right, it's a Sunday for sure. Definitely not a day a student goes to school.

"It's a Sunday, though?"

- Yeah.

"Yeah?"

- I know. Come to school, okay? You can, right? You don't go to church? You don't seem like a religious type. Right? Right? Right?

Maru wanted to tell her to take a step back and breathe for a bit, but chose otherwise.

"I'm going to church."

Of course, the Han family had been atheists for generations. But today especially Maru felt like he needed Jesus' blessings.

- Really?

"Yes."

- When does it end?

"Eh..."

When did his wife come back home on Sundays again?

“After all the afternoon sessions, around 2 pm? Or 3?”

- So late.

“Yes. I don’t know what it is, but I’m sorry.”

Maru grinned victoriously. He had no intention of going to school on a Sunday and he wasn’t dumb enough to sacrifice his break to school activities. But just as he was about to hang up... his sister stepped into the room with a shout.

“I’m going out to meet friends! Mom and dad went out to do something a moment ago. They left 20 thousand won, so I took half, okay?”

The door closed with a bang. Maru put his phone back on his ear with an annoyed face.

- What was that about church again?

Maru replied with a sigh.

“5th floor auditorium?”

* * *

Maru arrived at the school, still struggling to wake up. School? On a Sunday? Ridiculous.

"Ugh."

The school was quiet. There was no way engineering students would come to school on a sun...

Oh, there goes one. And another one. There was quite a lot, actually.

“Eh?”

There was a boy running past him with a guitar bag, and a girl running across to meet her friends in baggy pants. There were more in the field as well.

“Huh.”

Students, on a Sunday. It looked like they were all here for club activities. He could make out the music club, the dance club, and even some of the sports clubs with their advisors. Interesting, he didn’t think people were this committed to their clubs.

“School on a Sunday...” he heard someone say behind him.

It was Dojin. Maru smiled tiredly back at the boy.

“Well, they told us to come, didn’t they?”

“Ugh, I definitely wouldn’t have done this if I knew it was gonna be this bad.”

“You can still change, you know. Want to?”

“No man, I was just complaining a little. We haven’t even begun our club activities yet. Plus... girls, you know?”

Dojin walked in through the gate with a small grin. Maru shook his head as he followed inwards. The two of them walked up the stairs quickly, up to the auditorium. They stiffened up when they heard a few shouts coming from inside.

“Gaaah!”

“Aaaahhh!”

Maru didn’t dare open the door. Dojin agreed with that sentiment.

“I wonder what that sound is?”

“Dunno.”

“Want to just leave?”

“I’m going in if you’re going in.”

The two of them opened the door bitterly.

“Oh, you’re finally here.”

Miso greeted them in her black gym clothes.

* * *

“Ahhhhh!”

“Louder!”

“Aaahhhhh!”

“Don’t scream. Pull it out from your diaphragm.”

The club members were projecting their voices into the auditorium. Though it looked closer to screaming at this point than anything. All 12 of them were here in the hall.

“Starting with Joonghyuk, then we’ll start moving left down the line. I’ll be on the other side. Open your mouth widely, try to clear out your throats as much as possible, and put some strength into your abdomen. Don’t try to squeeze out your voice. Push outwards with the air in your stomach,” Miso continued as she walked away, “I’ll punish you harder if you make weird noises, so do your best.”

Miso posed comfortably when she reached the other side of the hall. She shouted ‘start!’ from across the hall. Joonghyuk began with an ‘ahhhh’. This was the sound Maru heard from outside the door. Now, Maru was a part of this madness.

‘You received a quest to satisfy the demon king, Miso.’

Shouting? At this time? Maru kept his mouth wide open for now. He’s picked up a thing or two from his time as a stage manager back in the day, so he was planning on trying some of them out for this.

“Next!”

Miso's voice sounded like she was speaking right next to them even from afar. Minsung was the next to start, but as soon as he started,

"Louder," Miso said.

The boy's voice got a little bit louder. This continued until they reached the final one, Iseul.

"Good!" Miso shouted.

Was this it? But right then...

"All of you, duck walk over to me. Right now," she said with a smile.

Chapter 24

Maru thought she was kidding at first. Everyone did. But watching her face stiffen up by the second she made all of them start duck walking towards her automatically. 60 meters. It was pretty far. When they managed to get all the way to her, Miso spoke with a clap.

"Now, go back. But this time, loosen up your joints."

Miso demonstrated this herself. With every step, she shook her wrist and ankle a few times. After every three steps, she stretched her neck as well.

"Begin."

The club members all went back as she instructed. As soon as they all got back, the shouting practice resumed.

"Shout with that feeling of keeping your throat completely open."

Ah yes, that mysterious feeling. Maru was reminded of an instance in his company when the advertiser came to him with a picture and said 'I want something that feels like this'.

"Ahhhhh!"

The shouting frenzy proceeded with Joonghyuk at the forefront. Everyone was a little bit louder this time. The shouts continued all the way back to Iseul, and the entire club looked at Miso with a confident look. And the response was...

"Duck walk."

More punishment. Maru thought that the woman was just trying to put them in their place for now. She'd probably stop after everyone got kind of tired.

It didn't take long for him to realize this wasn't the case, though.

* * *

"Huff, huff, huff..."

Beads of sweat were dripping from his forehead. Miso truly looked like a demon to Maru from afar. The woman gestured for them to come closer. The four left behind in the pack, including Maru, completed their duck walk just barely.

Their eccentric training had gone on for a full hour at this point. The cycle of shouting and duck walking became duck walking over and over again at this point. No more shouting, just duck walking.

“Duck goes quack quack. Chicks go?!”

“Peep... peep!!”

Joonghyuk, Taejoon, Maru and Geunseok were truly trying their utmost. Starting from the 50 minute mark, the only thing that fueled their walks was their will. Even Maru’s quads trained by daily bike rides were suffering from duck walking this much at this point. The four of them barely reached Miso with loud huffs.

“Nice eyes, boys.”

Miso smiled at them. Just what was this woman? Maru grit his teeth to stop his legs from shaking any more.

“How is it, still doable?”

“...Yes.”

They didn’t sound so confident anymore. Then again, it’s been a full hour of walking.

“You can sit now. And the rest of you, looking at the wall!”

Miso shouted across the hall. Her voice loud as usual. The other kids that tapped out in the middle turned to look over to her.

“Run over here!”

“Yes!!”

The other club members ran over hurriedly. They all looked at the tired four with a sorry look.

“Guy who gave up first.”

“Yes!”

Daemyung responded loudly from nervousness.

“We have some sports drinks next to the door. Bring them in.”

“Yes!”

Daemyung ran over to the back door. Maru watched him in his exhaustion. He’s never seen the chubby boy run that fast.

Gulp gulp.

The club members shared the drinks among each other. Finally, a moment of rest. The last four were massaging their thighs as they moaned a little in pain.

“I’m going to say a few things. Answer accordingly, understand?”

“Yes!”

“Second years.”

“Yes!”

“What festivals did you go to last year?”

“We went to the one hosted by the city, and the one hosted by Kangwoo university.”

Yoonjung responded. She looked like a real club president with her response.

“What about regionals?”

“...We didn’t go.”

“You mean you couldn’t?”

Yoonjung bit her lips. She seemed to want to say something in protest.

“Don’t you think the first years deserve to know what happened to make such a famous club fall down to the depths like this?”

“.....”

“Sit.”

“Yes.”

Yoonjung sat down. Miso sat down on her foldable chair as well.

“Hey, you, first years.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how many theater festivals there are for teenagers in South Korea?”

No one answered. Maru had no idea either.

“Really? No one? Even a guess is fine.”

Geunseok quietly raised his hand.

“I knew it. Go on, tell me.”

“There’s the national theater festival, first of all, funded by the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, and the Arts Council Korea.”

“That’s right.”

“There’s also festivals hosted by universities. The ones hosted by Kangwoo, Hoecheon, and Jookyung University are quite famous.”

“Good, good.”

“There are also citywide and regional festivals hosted for the sake of the national festival.”

“Pretty good explanation. Good job,” Miso clapped. The first years followed up with their claps as well.

'He's different for sure,' Maru noted.

As expected of the guy who came to the school specifically for the theater club. Geunseok looked like a guy who'd make it big as an actor.

'Then again, I don't think I've heard of an actor by his name in the future?'

He's heard of Geunseok's brother more times than he could count, but nothing about Geunseok. What happened to him?

Maru shook his head. He didn't want to think about it. Perhaps with the addition of Maru into Geunseok's life, the boy's future could change just by a little bit. Not by a lot, obviously. But a change was a change regardless.

'If I can...'

If the boy ever ends up needing help... Maru wanted to be there to do so. The job of an adult was to help kids reach their dreams. Their eyes met for a second.

Geunseok looked over in confusion, to which Maru responded with a shrug.

"Obviously, the goal of all acting clubs in the country is to go for the nationals. The main festival happens during summer, and they hold regionals before that. Gyeonggi-do here will be split into four different city-wide festivals. In other words, you have to get first place in the city festival to qualify for regionals, then you have to get first place in the regionals to go to nationals. This all begins around June. Anyone know what month this is?"

"March."

"It's going to be hard. March is almost over, so we only have 2 months to practice."

The second years turned wide-eyed.

"W-we're going to nationals?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Danmi reeled back in surprise. Maru could see Yoonjung clench her fists in the corner of his eye.

"Um, instructor..." Joonghyuk raised his hand.

"What?"

"We have no third years."

"I know. It's just going to be the twelve of you from here on out."

"....."

"Anyway. Back to the main story. Let's talk about how the club became like this. I can explain it since I've heard the story from your advisor, but... What do you think, second years? Would you rather explain it yourselves?" Yoonjung was visibly deflating in the corner. Miso continued, "You should do it, right? I'll explain what this club was first."

Miso pointed at the group of first years before beginning.

“Now then. Let’s start. Blue Sky. The name was chosen by our teacher Taesik. It’s been 13 years already...” she had a nostalgic look on her face.

Miso looked over the auditorium once again. Maru could instantly tell she had been in the club at some point as well.

“Ah, I forgot to tell you, didn’t I? I’m your senior. I was in the first generation of the club. You guys... would be the 13th.”

As he thought.

“We were all first years back then. New teacher, new students, new building. Everything was brand new. The club was made by students back then as well. That’s how the club began. Though the teacher helped us out a lot as well. Speaking of which, did you know that Taesik just doesn’t age? He looked the same back then as well.”

She seemed to have entered her casual mode. The kids sighed in relief before starting to relax in their seats.

“I had no intention of joining the acting club back then. I was consumed by drawing. I wanted to be a shoujo mangaka back in the day. I sketched people when other kids were drawing apples. In any case, I was doing all that when some crazy guy came over to me and said ‘let’s do acting!’ He was crazy. Absolutely insane. He tried to recruit his entire class.”

Miso shook her head with a smile on her face.

“In any case, Blue Sky was created under him and the teacher. Funnily enough, the guy recruited only the craziest people for his club. It was chaos. Except during practice. We were more serious than anyone else when we practiced.”

She walked away for a second, returning with an album minutes later. It was the album for the first generation of the club. Miso opened the album with a ‘ta-da’. The book hadn’t aged well. Some of the pictures were torn, and others had turned yellow. Miso picked out one of them in particular.

It was a picture of 17 people standing on stage with bright smiles plastered on their faces. They had a big medal in their hand, and behind them was a sign saying ‘Congratulations on winning nationals’.

“You got first place on your first competition?” Geunseok asked. Miso nodded.

“The reason you go to competitions to begin with is to win. Participate to make memories? Cut out that bullshit. I told you, didn’t I? That one crazy guy gathered all the crazies in the club. I guess you could say I was one of them. In any case, we worked our butts off trying to get first place for that competition. We worked during class, we worked after school. Even during weekends were no exception. Sure, studying was important, but acting came first. We practiced after lunch, we practiced up at the rooftop if we got yelled at by the teachers, we lost our voice shouting too much in the school field. Some of us got our hands cut making props for the stage.”

She was turning more sentimental by the minute.

“Back then, we asked for a bunch of help from the other acting clubs nearby. Not a lot of them took us seriously. Especially that all-girl’s school nearby. Their club was pretty famous too. When we went to ask their advisor for well, advice, the guy just told me that amateurs like us would never get anything done. So we had to show it to the guy.”

Miso showed them the picture again. The smiles of each person in there seemed truly pure. Maru looked at the picture dumbly. The power emanating from the picture was quite something. Even after the passing of 13 years.

“That was what Blue Sky was made of. The crazies left after that, so we couldn’t get first place for our second year, but we still got an honorary mention. But then...”

Miso’s face stiffened as she looked over the second years.

“Now I come back to see the club like this.”

She looked at Yoonjung annoyedly.

“Explain. To the first years.”

Yoonjung stood up, garnering the attention of the room. Her usual energetic self was nowhere to be seen.

“I should’ve told you before. Sorry for being late about it. I told you before, right? That all the seniors and the second years quit except us.”

She sighed before continuing.

“The reason why they all quit... was because of an incident.”

Chapter 25

Yoonjung looked like she was at a loss, almost speechless. Maru couldn’t even see a sliver of her usual self at that moment.

‘An incident?’

It’s been 3 weeks since he’s started. He hasn’t seen a single senior or a second year who’s quit the club during this club. If they quit because of an incident, they would’ve come by every once in a while to say hello. But not a single one of them came.

Either the incident had to do with someone dying, or something else entirely.

“Incident?” Miso said, making Yoonjung flinch. She continued, “You really call that an incident? Really?”

Yoonjung’s face crumpled into an unsightly frown.

“That’s...”

“I’ll take over from here,” Joonghyuk stood up. Yoonjung hesitantly took her seat.

“Why the hell is she the president?” Miso asked.

“We voted on it.”

“That’s fine then, I guess.”

Joonghyuk turned to look at the first years. Maru could make out a few emotions out of the boy’s eyes. Regret, sadness, but most notably...

‘Anger?’

He could feel anger. Anger towards who?

“Something happened last year, right before summer break. The graduating class of that year and the second years... had a fight.”

Joonghyuk said the word ‘fight’ with great difficulty.

“It would’ve been nice if it was a normal fight, but it was far worse than that. Every prop that we made for the nationals that year was completely ruined by the end. We didn’t go to the nationals last year because we had a choice. We couldn’t. We ran out of actors and props.”

He smiled for a second. Miso motioned him to continue.

“Phew... The entire thing began over a pretty simple thing. The advisor told us to choose the main character by ourselves, and a third year quibbled a bit with a second year over it. The third year ended up becoming a stage manager, and the second year became the actor. Now, everything till now was what I saw. The stuff from here on is what I heard. The little squabble about the main character worsened over time. The third year tried to lecture the second years over not being able to get the role he wanted. The relationships between the second and the third years started worsening around then. We couldn’t do anything as first years, of course. They always told us to stay out of it.”

Joonghyuk took a deep breath for himself.

“And then a fight broke out at the auditorium. Us first years were waiting in the club room, but we went to check up on the noises from upstairs. And then...”

He walked up onto the stage and started moving a few things to the left, revealing a white corner. A corner that had clearly been painted over recently. Joonghyuk walked back over to the club members.

“At the time, that was where we placed all of our costumes and props. The first thing we saw when we walked up were all of our props going up in flames. The second and third years managed to put out the fire, but by then it was too late. Thankfully, it didn’t do too much damage to the building though.”

Joonghyuk’s expression turned somber as he looked at the wall.

“The event ended with us cleaning up the auditorium over summer break. The teachers knew it was from an incident, so they didn’t say much. Though a few teachers started becoming prejudiced against us after that.”

The teachers calling it just an ‘incident’ probably implied something else. The fire was probably caused by the students.

“We don’t know how the fire happened. None of the seniors are willing to talk about it. The teachers weren’t questioning any further, thankfully. Otherwise we would’ve gotten a far worse punishment.”

After that point, the third years refused to participate in the club. The second years were only focused on making more props. In the end, the first years were the only ones doing the acting, and we only got two participation awards as a result. Most of the students left the club after that.”

He turned to look at the other second years in the room, who were all making bitter faces with him. Joonghyuk walked back to his seat.

“You guys hear that?” Miso asked, “You guys hear how stupid their seniors were?”

The second years stiffened up.

“You.”

“Yes!”

Daemyung shouted.

“Do you think we can perform a play with just actors?”

“No!”

She turned to Taejoon this time.

“Do you think props are all there is for plays?”

“No.”

Soyeon next.

“What about a good script?”

“Probably not.”

Yurim.

“What about a pretty instructor such as myself?”

“I don’t think so...”

And now, Iseul.

“Costumes?”

“Definitely not.”

Miso nodded.

“You guys know the answer already. Tell me, head. What’s the most important thing for a successful play?”

Maru didn’t hesitate.

“All of the above.”

“Correct!”

Miso stood up.

“A play is a combination of different skills. You need amazing actors to show the play, a great script to guide the actors, lighting to make the actors stand out. You need music to heighten the mood, props to make the play seem realistic, the director, and the audience. They’re all important. Very much so. You guys are in a club at that, so every member does every one of these things. Each club member is important and you guys decide to get in a fight?”

Miso snorted angrily.

“I would’ve thrown a whole boatload of swears at them. They dare screw over the name of Blue Sky over for petty stuff? They think they can just screw over years of memories we’ve made for the club just because of a stupid role?”

She kicked over her chair like a soccer ball, her anger still apparent. To think her temper was this bad... And to think she liked the club this much to be this angry about it... They came as a bit of a surprise to Maru.

“I thought about refusing when teacher Taesik asked me to become your instructor. I didn’t think I was good enough for the club. But no, it was way worse than I thought. This place became a shithole. You know why this kind of stuff happens? Because no one ever bothers to try. Oh my god.”

A girl stood up from the second years. Oh dear. Yoonjung again.

“We all worked hard!”

“Hey, hey.”

“Come on, Yoonjung.”

Danmi and Minsung tried to calm her down, but Yoonjung completely ignored them.

“Things just became like this because of an incident. We all truly worked hard to...”

“To what? End up with this mess?”

Miso grinned.

“You like the club too, huh? After just half a year?”

“No! It’s not just that! We fought a bit, and there was an incident, but we very much cared for acting and plays.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes!”

“So you were crazy for acting?”

“Of course!”

“So why are you still here?”

“...What?”

“How are you still here? Everything you made, worked hard for, invested time into got destroyed in one ‘incident’. By your seniors at that. And yet you’re still here?”

Yoonjung stepped back.

“Being crazy for acting means you see nothing but acting in your life. You’re crazy for the craft. If you were actually mad for acting at that moment!”

She paused after raising her voice. She clicked her tongue and calmed down a little.

“You should’ve stepped in when your seniors started going crazy. That’s what you should’ve done. That’s how you would have protected the club.”

Miso sighed again, saying ‘why am I getting so angry over kids?’ under her breath.

“Sit.”

“...Yes.”

“All of you, if you were just a little braver back then... Nevermind. Let’s just move on.”

Clap. Miso tried to refresh the mood of the room a little bit.

“I’m saying it again. We will win the nationals. Understood?”

“...Yes.”

“Look at you kids. So quiet? You want to do the duck goes quack quack thing again?”

“No ma’am!”

“Good! Now stand up! More practice!”

That day, Maru barely managed to walk home with trembling legs. His mom asked if something happened, but he was too tired to even respond. He went to sleep after a quick shower.

And by the time he woke up,

“Ugh.”

It was 7 am on a Monday.

Chapter 26

Maru could barely remember how he got to school the next day. Before he knew it, he was already sprawled out on his table. Dojin was snoring away right next to him. To his front, Daemyung was completely passed out too.

“Wake up, you lazy idiots,” the teacher said, walking into the classroom.

It was time for their logic gate class. Maru woke Dojin up. They needed to stay awake for four hours until lunchtime. Was that even possible...?

‘I need to study...’

Maru's eyes were drooping down already. Life... wasn't very easy to try to take control of.

* * *

"I did it," Dojin said, as soon as the fourth period ended. Maru lowered his head muttering 'nap time' to himself.

"You two alright?" Daemyung said, stumbling towards the two. Yesterday, Miso gave special training to him. Making him run and jump all over the place...

'Maybe she was just trying to make him suffer.'

His thighs were still hurting. He should probably rest for the rest of the day.

"I'm doing sort of fine. What about you, Daemyung?"

"Me?"

Daemyung pointed at his foot. It was shaking violently.

"So, on that note..."

The boy smiled.

* * *

"Phew."

"Hah."

Maru and Dojin stood side by side next to Dojin. They were trying their best to support their friend in walking to the cafeteria. The line was already long. Maru could see a few familiar first years in the line posed similarly to him. Stooped low with hands massaging their thighs constantly.

"Geunseok," Maru shouted. The boy looked back with a smile.

They were feeling a strange sense of camaraderie together. The boy smiled quite easily outside of the club room. It just goes to show how serious he was about acting.

'What about me?'

It's been four weeks since he started living his life again. He's adapted very well. Well, it'd be better to say he's accepted his new life pretty well. To say he adapted would be to say that he's melded into his life. He hasn't managed to do that before.

It couldn't be helped. He was still 45 years old, after all. Although he couldn't remember most of his memories, the experiences were all still there. A high schooler's body, and a 45 year old's mind. He looked at Dojin and Daemyung. These two were definitely his friends. But... in reality, he wasn't looking at them as equals, but as little kids he was looking after.

Was that a bad thing? He hadn't the faintest. He's never experienced this before. He couldn't ask for advice about living twice in the world. In the end, he'd have to try to find the answers himself. Only when he reached the age of 45 again would he be able to say,

“Ah, I’ve lived a good life.”

Or...

“Hey, let’s go,” Dojin waved. The line was moving in front of him.

“Sure, sure.”

Right, for now, he’d just keep on moving.

* * *

Classes were over. Maru had no idea what he learned today. Or what he did at all in school for that matter.

“Yaaawn,” Dojin stretched, “let’s go home. I’ll treat you to some fries on the way back?”

“Sounds good.”

“Daemyung! Let’s go!”

The boy at the front struggled to stand up from his seat.

“Dude, how did you even get here this morning?”

“I didn’t want to get scolded. The teacher’s too scary. Just ran my ass off as fast as I could. Hehe.”

Dojin grabbed Daemyung’s bag for the poor boy. The two of them exited through the door talking about the pain they experienced the previous night. Just as Maru was about to leave with them, though, he heard a voice behind him.

“Hey, give me some cigs bro.”

Laughter came shortly afterwards. Maru turned around. He noticed that Changhu and his friends were surrounding Dowook’s desk. The two got along well before, but after that one day they became complete enemies.

Changhu’s gang looked very bright. They didn’t have expressions of bullies. They looked like friends asking for something from another friend. Maru didn’t like that. Some of these guys were clearly following Changhu without the faintest idea of what they were doing. It was incredibly irritating to look at.

“Come on man. Just one cig.”

Changhu kicked the table lightly. Dowook looked up at the other boy before whispering ‘I don’t have any’ under his breath.

“Bahaha, just tell me straight then, dude. Why act so scared?”

A pack of cigarettes dropped on Dowook’s desk.

“Here, smoke some of this and stop acting like a pussy, alright? You were a good kid, weren’t you? Don’t bully him guys, ok? He’s a good guy.”

The kids around Changhu started laughing under their breaths.

“Dowook. We really gotta get along, yeah? The girls back at the park are looking for you. So come on, man. You know what I want, right?”

Changhu pushed the pack closer to Dowook before walking off.

“Alright, see ya.”

Maru looked at the boy curiously.

“What?” Changhu said.

“Nothing.”

“...Be careful, okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Maru pat Changhu’s back lightly, causing the boy to let out a short snort before leaving. The pack of boys each glared at Maru before leaving themselves.

This used to look so cool to him back in the day, he remembered. Belonging in a “cool kids group” felt like the best thing to do. Then again, there was always the “cool kids group” that he wanted to be in as he was growing up. When he was a college student, it was a good college. When he was preparing to get a job, it was a corporation. When he was an office worker, it was to be a manager.

In high school, this group would be the group of delinquents that established their rules purely through intimidation. Of course, some people may disagree, but... most people would rather belong to that group rather than be bullied by it.

Dowook stood up from his seat. The package of cigarettes was crushed by his grip. He breathed for a bit before opening the cleaning cabinet from the back of the classroom. He took out a wooden broom, and tried to leave the classroom with a pale face. Maru grabbed the boy before he passed.

“Let go of me.”

“You planning on fighting them with that thing?”

“You want to fight me first?”

“Come on, man. You’ve been so patient. Why stop now?”

“Patient? Fuck, fine. I tried to be patient. I tried to study and go to college. But I can’t just sit and watch those fuckers stay like that. I need to fuck them up.”

Dowook tried to slap away Maru’s arm, but Maru only strengthened his grip. The boy frowned, and tried to exert more strength. He just couldn’t do it though.

‘I mean, I was pretty strong since childhood.’

Maru looked straight at Dowook.

“You feel sick of being made fun of?”

“Fuck, you think I wouldn’t?”

“Stop swearing. You cuss way too much.”

“Fucking hell! What the hell do you want?”

Dowook gripped Maru’s collars with a shout. Maru shrugged. “Weren’t you reflecting?”

“What?”

“Did I see wrong? Were you just being patient because you didn’t want to bother with them?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“That’s the stuff you used to do, isn’t it? What they’re doing to you now.”

“...Me?”

“Dojin’s told me once that he keeps dreaming of his victims at night. And that whenever he’s alone in his rooms, he can hear their voices in his ears. Isn’t that the same for you?”

Dowook’s eyes shook for a second as a word bubble popped above his head.

[How did this guy know?]

The boy was surprised. Rightfully so. Maru’s been getting incredibly good at reading people over the last few days. The biggest difference he’s seen in Dowook was the fact that the boy couldn’t look straight at Daemyung.

Probably out of guilt, no doubt.

Dowook was definitely changing. He still spoke the same way, but his treatment of others was different. The other kids in the class even started speaking with him. This was good. He was realizing what was previously wrong with his personality. Maru had been confident that the boy would be able to make new friends in the near future.

But not if he goes off to beat up Changhu with that broom. Definitely not.

“What are you talking about?” Dowook asked.

“I saw you talking and smiling with other kids this morning.”

“.....”

“I don’t think you’re a good guy. But you’re not bad either. I think you can change.”

This was how Maru felt so far about the boy. Dowook seemed to understand it as well. The boy shook Maru off one last time with an annoyed look. He let go this time. Dowook didn’t look like he was about to run off anymore. The boy threw down his broom on the ground.

“Stop lecturing me. It’s annoying.”

“Sorry about that.”

Dowook left the room with a shake of his head. Maru grabbed the broom on the floor.

“Couldn’t even clean?”

But just as he was about to get out after putting the broom back... His phone started ringing. Maru didn’t pick up. He had a very bad feeling about that phone call and made his way towards the exit of the school. Unfortunately, he ended up seeing something he shouldn’t have on the way.

“Hey Maru...”

“Where do you think you’re going, bud?”

Daemyung and Dojin were looking at him with a despondent expression. Miso’s smiling face never looked more devious.

* * *

Maru smiled bitterly, looking at the rest of the club members at the auditorium.

“You didn’t answer my calls, I noticed?” Miso asked.

Maru looked away for a second as he answered.

“I have bad ears.”

“Oh really? Want me to fix that for you?”

“That’s a little...”

“Take my calls from now on. Alright?”

“Yes ma’am.”

The woman truly sounded like a demoness right about now. The club members were standing in a straight line with Miso looking over them.

“How does your body feel? With how much I worked you yesterday, a little stiff I should hope?”

‘Little stiff’? That was a bit of an understatement.

“This is because you were using muscles you don’t often use. You just haven’t trained enough.”

Well, that sounded suspicious. Maru was deeply considering whether coming to this club was a good idea. He came into this club to become a casual member, not to get trained by some crazy lady.

“We’re training again. Training your voices is fine for now. I feel like I expected too much out of you yesterday. Today, we’re going to make your bodies move more flexibly. We’re going to free up your bodies from various habits it’s built up so far. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Why so quiet?”

“Yes!!”

“Good.”

Miso's expression changed right then.

"There's something I need to do first though."

She glared at the club members intensely before speaking again.

"We need to weed out the fakes. This is going to be difficult even with the serious kids."

She looked more serious than she ever did.

Chapter 27

"I honestly want to make this club great again. I need to get the people who are truly serious in that case. Understand?" she continued after a brief pause, "High school clubs are usually for casual things, I understand. But not here. Not as long as I'm here. I only want the crazies. I want the ones who are really crazy for acting. Otherwise you might as well just give up entirely."

Her words had strength to it. A different kind of strength from a typical leader. Miso was a tyrant. She was trying to take over the club entirely. This was wrong, especially since this was coming from a person unrelated to the school. But... When Maru turned to look at the second years, he noticed that they had their mouths closed. Even Yoonjung. Did they talk about this beforehand? Or...

The second years might actually like Miso. She was a tyrant. One that was determined to make the club members suffer. They experienced it last Sunday already. There was probably only one reason why they tolerated Miso's tyranny despite all else.

The woman was talented.

She started with a club that had nothing, and took it to first place at nationals. Not only that, she became an instructor for a university club, even. The second years might not like the way she did things, but they had no doubts about her abilities. Because they were crazy, they were crazy enough to stay with the club even when everyone else left. They cared a lot for the club, more so than anyone else.

Maybe Miso and the second years recognized that they both loved the club more than anything else. That might be the reason for their acceptance of her way of teaching. They moved to the left without another word, with Miso standing in the middle of them and the first years still standing to her right.

"I'll say this again. Sunday was just a hint of what you'd get out of me. That was about the worst you'll get out of physical training. But you'll definitely need to be prepared. I have quite the personality, as you may have realized by now. Despite this pretty face of mine."

Miso grinned. This woman was definitely pretty. She was expressive, and she even had a good body. But no one in the room thought that the woman looked pretty right now. Maru looked around him. To his expectations, everyone's bodies were stiffened up even more than usual.

Except for one person.

Geunseok stepped to the left before Miso even managed to finish. He looked at Miso without another word. Miso nodded.

“Those of you who are thinking of working with me, be prepared to sacrifice your weekdays and your weekends. So think carefully. You really don’t want to be here to be casual. I don’t want people who are crazy in acting to become an actor.”

Miso looked to her left.

“I’ll torture the people to my left. Same for the stage managers as well. After all, just because you signed up to be a manager once doesn’t mean you will always be a manager in this club.”

And then to her right.

“I’ll ask for small tasks from the people to the right. Hey, can you do this? What about that? Stuff like that. I promise a fun high school life from you. I’ll let you watch plays every once in awhile as well. Sounds good, right?”

Her face wore a smile, but her eyes weren’t. She was making her position very clear to the students. The people to the left were the ‘real’ club. Everyone else were only here for the sake of it.

The first years exchanged their looks. Daemyung and Dojin looked at each other as well before turning to Maru.

“I’m doing it. Daemyung is going to as well. You too, right?”

“Dunno.”

“What do you mean, dunno?”

Dojin walked over to the left with a deep breath. Daemyung scrambled over as well. The first years began moving one by one to the left. Iseul moved, then Taejoon followed. Yurim seemed hesitant at first, but ended up following her friend Soyeon to the left. Maru was the only one left.

He looked over for a second. Everyone in the club was looking at him expectantly. Plays. He actually quite liked plays. He’s seen a countless number of them when he was a road manager. He’s even asked several personalities about becoming an actor in the past. He was interested for sure.

‘So why...’

Maru looked inside himself for a second. Just how did he want to live? The club would be fun. The people were great. He’d be able to be with his friends. But would it be a good thing to lose so much of his time to the club? He looked over at his two friends. They probably didn’t know how difficult life would get after this.

College degrees didn’t matter for squat if you didn’t come from a big one, and you had to learn random words from different languages for the slight chance you could use them.

Learning that you couldn’t become an employee of a company even after suffering for weeks as an intern, and realizing how stupid and unreal ‘dreams’ were in the end.

That was the kind of life waiting for his friends.

Even now, Maru was trying his best to study right after school. It wasn't like he was trying to succeed as a scholar. He didn't even have the brains for it. But he did know the amount of choices good grades would provide for him in the future.

That's right.

He knew.

And that was the reason for his hesitation. If he didn't know all of this, he would have stepped to the left right away. To make all those wonderful memories with his friends. He would've spent his time working his ass off to try to become an actor. But even now, he was weighing his options carefully. He was thinking about how much good this would do him.

Even though he didn't want to. He couldn't help it. He's cried too much suffering from society trying to feed his family in the past. Thanks to it, there was a module in his head that did all his calculations for him.

He didn't want to do it.

He wanted to just jump in there for a year.

[Daddy, can you buy me that? Please? Ah... No, no. I don't actually need it. I don't need it.]

What day was it again? Christmas? Her birthday? He recalled his daughter's exact words as she looked at something with desire. The first thing Maru thought of at the time was his empty wallet and his wife's warning of 'raising the rent'. He didn't say anything and just looked down at his daughter.

The poor girl caught onto his thoughts far too quickly. It was less painful for him to suffer a beating from his boss instead. Looking at such a little girl having to shake her head with such a knowing look made him feel like the world was falling apart.

He was living in the present.

But his mind was still stuck in the past. A constant reminder of his future.

The woman said to him that he could meet his wife and child again. His past came crashing back down on him. If he didn't want to repeat his poor life again, he would have to try hard. He'd have to invest a lot in order to succeed in life.

What he needed to invest was time.

"Well, we'll say this is it, then," Miso turned her back on him.

The first years all looked at him strangely. Right, this was fine. He would give up a little bit of fun in the present to gain a greater happiness in the future.

Maru... did not move from the right.

"Now, Maru," Miso said.

"Yes."

"You can leave now."

“...Yes.”

He waved goodbye to his two dumbfounded friends and slipped out. What he wanted to do, he had no answer for. He was just getting chased around by the idea that he couldn't 'waste time'.

A fun life...

Maru scratched his eyebrow. It felt like something was burning inside him, but maybe he was just imagining things.

Probably.

* * *

Maru sat down on his table after getting dinner. He felt like a third year already. He didn't like math or English very much, but studying it constantly at least allowed him an understanding of it.

'I guess they were right when they said you study with your butt,' he found himself thinking.

He looked at the clock after a while of studying. It was 10pm already. His phone beeped right then. Two text messages.

[You damn traitor!]

[Maru, this really hurts.]

They were from Dojin and Daemyung respectively. It must be over now. Today was probably bad for them as well. He would expect no less from Miso. He sent them a text telling both of them to rest before coming out to the living room. His sister was watching TV. She glanced his way for a second, did she want to say something?

“You want to use the computer?”

“No.”

“Are you hungry?”

“No!”

That temper of hers again. His father wasn't back yet. He was at his second night shift. Mom was out at her friend's place working. Something about building cars? Maru didn't quite know what she did. All he did know was that all of their money was being invested right back into this household.

He didn't know when he was young. He just thought this kind of stuff was just... obvious.

Of course the fridge would have food. Of course the house would always be warm. Of course his parents would provide for him. But... They weren't such obvious things in reality.

He recalled the phrase 'equivalent exchange'. This was what the house was. All the comfort he was experiencing came out from an equivalent amount of work.

“Do you want juice?”

“Oh my gosh, stop it!!”

His sister passed by him into her room after looking at him like an alien.

“Puberty, huh.”

Maru stepped back into his room with a cup of juice in hand and started studying again. He would ask the smart guy about the parts he didn’t understand tomorrow. His pen moved smoothly over his book. Right now, he didn’t understand whether the decision he made today was the right one or the wrong one.

“I’ll be able to tell far in the future.”

Maru studied for another hour before standing up with a stretch. He exercised for a few minutes before returning to his room.

It was a productive day. As a matter of fact, he probably couldn’t have been more productive. So why...

“Why am I sighing so much?”

Click. He shut off the lights in his room. Maru lay down on his heated mattress. Right as he was getting ready to sleep, he noticed a small light on the wall. It was a glow-in-the-dark sticker, shaped like a moon. Something he put up in the past.

[Moon is cool because it shines.]

He recalled saying. But he knew better now.

“The moon is a pitiful thing. It can’t shine by itself.”

The moon only shone next to someone brighter. Maru closed his eyes.

That night, Maru dreamed, looking up at the moon above him.

Chapter 28

Studying, chatting, and then going home. Occasionally visiting PC bangs and bathhouses with friends before coming back home to study. By the time Maru was done with his studies it was already 11 at night. He would blog a little, surf the web for a few minutes before going to sleep at midnight. He could hear his computer’s fan whirling in the background.

Maru stared blankly at his monitor for a second before pulling out a book. It was something he borrowed from a nearby library. He tried to find a few “self-improvement” books, but couldn’t find many of them. Come to think of it, there was no such thing during this time.

From the time Maru started working in a company all the way to becoming a bus driver, he had read a pile of books as high as him. Reading this many self improvement books lead him to one conclusion.

Self improvement books were just books about successful people reminiscing about their past.

“But I keep reading them again and again for some reason.”

One of the books he remembered most had a Japanese author: The Morning Person. The trend of this era was being active in the morning. The idea that the early birds would succeed was the prevalent thing

in this time. Maru turned the page. He knew every word the author would say after each page, but still read it anyway.

It was 1am by the time he finished the book. He set it next to his bed before falling asleep. Today was a productive day. So why...

“Why did it feel so unfulfilling?”

It feels like he was on a highway with nothing around it. He knew he wouldn't be taking any detours as long as he was on this highway. Despite that, he couldn't help but look at people driving on the twisty local roads. At the people who were enjoying the scenery to the fullest, going on an adventure following where the road was taking them.

Being late to their destination didn't matter, as long as they managed to arrive in the end. The only problem is...

“When you run out of fuel.”

Having to watch other people zoom by you as you sit on the road completely out of fuel. Maru closed his eyes again, this time accompanied with a bitter smile. Today, too, he realized living again wasn't such an easy thing after all. A quiet air descended down on his room.

* * *

Time passed quickly. The entire class was used to school life by now. None of their previous confusion was here now. Everyone was in a friend group of their own, friend groups that's been around long enough to last the entire year now.

It was currently the end of April. Maru looked out at the window as his two friends sat next to him, with bread in one hand and chips on the other. Countless students approached them asking for a bite, but Dojin shooed them all away.

“I asked for this burger from the guy at the store. Ugh, you beautiful little thing, you.”

Dojin offered Maru half of the burger with a grin. Maru accepted with a quick thank you.

“This guy needs to lose weight. At least, according to instructor Miso.”

“Just a little more, she says. Ugh.”

Daemyung sipped on water sadly. They both seemed to be working at the club well. Dojin and Daemyung both became actors. According to them, Miso told them to practice the characters they wanted to play. They both tried for the more important side characters, but failed just like that. In the end, they ended up becoming passenger 1 and co.

“I have no idea why I can't even memorize such simple things.” “My head is still drawing a blank in front of the teach. I can't do anything.”

Teach, huh. They seemed to have gotten closer to her. Then again, it was pretty inevitable with them getting together almost every day. Sometimes they would get together for lunch as well. Of course,

Maru had no idea what they were doing. He usually just showed up on Saturdays to read a few lines and make a few props.

[You can leave now, Maru.]

That was the most he would ever get out of Miso. 5 o'clock on full school days, and 3 o'clock during half days. Miso would always tell him that when the clock reached that time. At that point, Maru would grab his bag and just leave. There were other things happening in the auditorium, but Maru has never bothered to stay.

"Is it alright?"

That was the only thing he found himself saying because of that. Is it alright? There was not much else he could ask, since he had no idea what was going on behind the stage.

"I'm dying, man."

"So tired..."

The response from his friends were always the same as well. Always a variant of "I'm tired". But Maru could tell that their expressions had changed. They were definitely experiencing progress. Maru took a big bite out of his burger. He's regretted deciding to stay on the sidelines a few times after that day. Especially whenever he looked at his club members laugh about a script he knew nothing about. Then his regret would multiply even more.

But he was fine now, having gotten used to it.

"Work hard, alright? There's only a month left, right?"

"Yeah, just about a month," Dojin responded, sucking away at his fingers.

"Man, I'm so nervous. I hope we get into at least 8th place."

Maru already knew about the story as well. In the city-wide competitions, 16 teams out of 80 schools would qualify for the regionals. The first and second place in the regionals would then be able to move onto nationals. It was a pretty tight schedule, especially with 11 club members and a single helper.

They might be able to take care of the costumes with the ones made by their seniors, but the props had to be made from scratch.

"Class is about to begin, man."

"Here, have some of this, Maru."

Maru slipped the bag of chips Daemyung gave him under his desk. To think the kid was able to control himself... He must be quite motivated.

'They're all doing very well.'

Again, that slight feeling of loneliness came over Maru. Though, having a few of the chips did help get rid of it.

'I should just stick to doing what I can.'

He's already made his decision a month ago. Thinking about it any further was just unhealthy.

"Yo Dowook, I need my notebook back."

"Sure."

Maru turned to look at where the voices came from. He could see Dowook give back a notebook to a friend. He's melded into the class very well since then. He got mad every once in a while, but nothing big.

Dowook would look away whenever their eyes met. He seemed like he wanted to say something, but refused to say it himself. What a complicated kid.

The class door opened with a creak, and the teacher finally walked in.

* * *

"Hard at work, huh?"

Mom walked in with a smile. For the last two months, Maru was living by the same pattern over and over again. School, library, gym, study. It was no surprise that his mom would say something like this to him at this point.

"But... there's nothing happening, is there?"

"What's happening?"

"Mom's happy that you've matured, but you know... It's a bit sudden."

Mom put down a bag of chips on Maru's desk. He looked up at his mother, who gave him a slightly awkward smile.

"Just talk to me if there's something going on, okay?"

"Alright."

"Good."

Mom closed the door quietly on the way out. By the time she was halfway through closing, she called out to him.

"I'll knock from now on."

"It's whatever."

Maru exclaimed at amazement inside. His parents were very perceptive about how he changed. Then again, he was the same with his daughter. It would actually be strange if they didn't notice something. Mom probably thought that Maru just matured all of the sudden. It probably felt surprising to her.

Well, equal parts surprising and disappointing. Maru was well acquainted with the feeling of watching a child leave their parent's grasps. That feeling of learning that their children didn't need them anymore.

"I... should treat them well."

Thousands of thoughts passed by in his head. He didn't really feel like studying anymore today. He closed the textbook and laid down on the bed with a new book. This one was an autobiography written by an actor. The man was apparently famous, but Maru had no clue of who he was. He just picked it up because it was in the recommended section.

Maru started turning the page. After a while of it, he turned off the lights. Today was also a good day. Probably...

* * *

The weather was warm enough for Maru to bike without gloves today. It's been awhile since he last did it. He could feel the rubber rub at his palms.

The weather was much better now. It will be May soon. People were starting to dress lighter outside. It really was the season when people started transitioning back into their usual jackets.

The bike chains rattled under him. Maru pedaled wondering if he needed to oil the damn thing today. Speaking of which, today was a day for the students to spend on their clubs. The acting club, too, was gathered completely on the 5th floor auditorium.

The two things he had on him were book he was reading last night, as well as a bottle of water. Not much has changed for Maru despite the lack of classes. Most of the props were done now, and all there was left to do was to practice acting. Maru parked the bike at the school and started up the stairs. He could hear the soccer club shouting amongst themselves outside.

They probably bet a lot of money on the oncoming match.

He could hear singing as he came up to the 5th floor. The music club, no doubt. Right next to it, he could hear the toy club mess around with a bunch of things in their room. The entire floor was loud. Only by the time he came to the middle of the floor could he finally starting to hear the acting club.

"Stretches first, and then we'll start."

"Yes ma'am!"

He could hear the students talking brightly behind the door. The club was supposed to meet at 9am. Maru took out his phone to make sure one more time. 8:50am. Everyone was trying very hard in the club.

Maru opened the door with a strange sense of nervousness.

Chapter 29

The first thing that greeted him was heat. The next was the 11 sets of eyes staring at him. Maru shrugged before saying his greetings to Miso.

"Hello."

"Yeah."

The answer was short, but he was used to it. Maru stepped up to one of the audience seats, where all the drinks for the actors were located. He sat down there with his book. He could see the actors here from this spot.

Maru turned to his left where he could see the props that were supposed to be used in this play. Sofas, tables, tablecloths, wooden plants and etc...

“Ah ah ah ah. Lower your voices a little. More strength in your abdomen. Really make use of your diaphragm. Imagine for a second that you’re looking inside yourselves. When you’re opening your mouth to go ahh, you can see your vocal cords open. The air would pass through it from your stomach all the way to your mouth. Don’t let any of the air out, though, just the sound. Try to drag out all the sound you can from your belly,” Miso said, grabbing at one of the students’ stomachs.

She held one hand over their stomach and one hand over the parts where they were messing up. Each time the club members would correct their position and try again. Maru could easily see the difference from the first time they practiced together.

First of all, the club members were way more composed. Their voices weren’t trembling either. It was deep now. All thanks to practice.

“Good, now walk fast.”

The students formed a circle together as soon as Miso said the word. They started walking as if they were trying to catch the person in front of them. They were quite fast, actually.

“Try to remember how you’re moving right now. Feel exactly what muscles you’re using with each step. Remember how you’re taking your breaths. Imagine that there’s a camera filming your head from the top, like a 3rd person point of view.”

After around five minutes of this, Miso clapped her hand, “Slowly.” The students slowed down almost as if they were shooting a slo-mo video. This wasn’t anything new to Maru at this point, though.

He’s seen a lot of this when he was a road manager. It was pretty typical for actors to do this kind of stuff. After all, body language was very important to them. He could still remember an inexperienced actor being scolded over it.

Maru’s tried that type of practice a long time ago as well. He just kind of joined in when the actual actors were practicing out of curiosity. He didn’t learn a lot, of course. Especially because he didn’t know their instructor for too long. He did hear about what the man was doing by the time he found a company to work for, though. The instructor became a salaryman at a company, just like himself.

“Don’t move your fingers or toes! Make every bit of movement meaningful! This is important right now. You don’t want any wasted movement when you’re acting. You understand?”

“Yes!!”

The club members were moving very slowly despite their quick answer. They were probably going to go at it for around ten more minutes. Despite its appearance, moving slowly like this consumed a lot of energy. An example of this was to stand at position for a length of time in the military.

One by one, the students started frowning. They sometimes even lost their balance and broke the circle at times. Every time they did this, Miso shouted at them angrily.

“Focus!”

She was a total lioness. Maru opened his book and started reading. There was no way he'd allow himself to get involved in that training routine anyway. After a few more minutes of this, they all stood in a line again. Miso allowed them 15 minutes of rest.

Maru closed his book and looked forward. He could see the club members desperately competing for water. He threw the one in front of him towards Dojin.

“Oh my god, it's so bad!”

“You're still alive, at least.”

“Huff, huff.”

Even Geunseok was huffing in pain from all the training in the morning. Yurim was fiddling with her phone even during recovery. At this point, it was almost an extension of her.

“My legs hurt,” Soyeon said, massaging her calves. She was noticeably thinner than before. She was still a little chubby, but she looked a lot more agile now.

Iseul and Taejoon still looked good as always. Oh, correction. Taejoon wasn't as handsome with all the exhaustion in his eyes. The boy had surprisingly little stamina despite his physical build. He was doing even worse than Daemyung, which was saying something.

‘Is this a camp for dieting?’

No matter the intention, there was no doubt that this training routine was effective on weight loss.

“I thought I was going to get a cramp in my left leg.”

“Just ignore it.”

“Ugh, what happened to just being stage managers for our second year?” Minsung said towards Joonghyuk. They claimed to be managers for the second year, but they themselves were participating religiously in Miso's training. Both of them managed to snatch pretty good roles for themselves. The main character's father and uncle respectively.

“Ugh, Danmi, can you massage my legs? They hurt.”

“Shush, I'm tired too.”

“Oh gosh, you've turned so cold.”

Yoonjung and Danmi were talking together as well. They were all radiating with heat. Maru weaved through each of them, handing out cold water and snacks as required.

“Niceee, Mr. Manager,” Yoonjung commented.

At one point, that's what Maru's title had become. Not even he could remember who called him that first. It was a joke at first, but everyone became used to calling him like this now.

Manager. He didn't think he would be referred to as such again. It was pretty strange.

"Work hard, okay?"

"We will. There's not much time left."

Break time was the only time that Maru could mingle a little bit. It was also the time Maru could use to figure out what the club was learning right then. The club members weaved their complaints about the intensity of the training along with their praise of her. Then again, even Maru could tell how good Miso was at her job.

"We're going to do readings!" Miso shouted from the back.

The club members took their scripts and ran over. Maru looked at them for a little bit before taking out his book again.

"Don't be too lonely, alright? Haha," Dojin told him as he walked away.

Loneliness was a feeling one could only experience after having belonged to a group. Maru did feel a little excluded sometimes, but never lonely. After all, he's never felt that same heat and passion the other club members felt. There was no way he could put himself on the same level as them.

He could hear the lines of each member hit his ears as he read. The play they were putting on this time was something called the 'Warm Table'. A play that Miso brought in herself. It was about a play that dealt with problems that teens of their age might have. There were two scenes in the play in total. The inside and outside of the house where the story took place. Maru remembered building the props for both of those things before.

Ah, he was getting distracted again. Back to reading. The voices of the club members were starting to fade into the background of his consciousness. He realized this only recently, but he found that his focus improved a lot whenever he was reading.

Only towards normal books, though. He's tried it for both math and english textbooks, but the focus didn't come to him with so many weird letters and numbers involved.

"I should be able to get a full score in Korean literature though."

He flipped the page with a small smile creeping on his face. The actor's autobiography was describing the kind of life being the actor would lead, and what kind of roles he took. It was written well enough for him to keep enjoying the book as he read.

At one point, he reached a sentence that he resonated with quite a bit.

- I had no idea my life would turn out this way. Before I got my first role, I thought that I would become a used car salesman in the future. To think I would become an actor... Life really is a strange thing.

The writer was right. Life was a strange thing indeed. You could never know what might happen tomorrow. Despite the mystery of tomorrow, all of us kept whipping ourselves onward to make it more

comfortable. So that the me of the future could live a better life than me of the present. He continued to read a few pages afterward before someone called him out again.

“Han Maru.”

It was Miso. Maru put down his book and walked towards her.

“Yes?”

“Try reading this.” She threw the script his way. It was one of the lines from the main character, where the character would monologue after having an argument with a friend. Maru started reading.

“I know what I did was wrong. But what he did was no better. He shouldn’t have gotten angry over something so small.”

He read slowly. Miso occasionally called him out to do readings like this. He still had no idea why. Perhaps she was trying to show a bad example of reading by using him?

“Good. Give it back.”

“Alright.”

Maru handed the script back to Miso and went back to reading. By the time he was finished, he looked up at the clock again. It was almost five already. Ten minutes away from when he could leave. He started packing. He put his water bottle and the book went back in his bag. The club members were still busy practicing in front of him.

“Look forward, not at the ground! Are you trying to show the audience what the top of your head looks like or what?!”

Miso was still shouting. Soyeon’s head jerked up in response. A little too much, though, earning another ‘tch’ from Miso. Maru couldn’t help but be amazed at how good Miso was at teaching. She really was keeping her word about acting. About how a person could only act well if they were crazy for it.

“To truly be crazy at something is not to just enjoy it, but to constantly be focused on it... Was it?”

Maru looked at the club from his seat, wondering where they were looking to do with their lives. How much would it help in life to be crazy for acting? Maru started calculating in his head. No matter how much he fiddled with the variables, he could only see a failed life in his head.

‘I’m going to turn into a total pessimist like this.’

He was aware of how cold and calculating he was becoming as a person. It was embarrassing, especially when he looked at the fiery club members in front of him. Even now, his brain was telling him to use this time to study more English, to study more math. Use this time to stu...

Slap!

Maru slapped himself. He felt like he couldn’t shake himself out of that sinkhole in his head otherwise. Thing was...

“M-Mar, dude.”

“What’s wrong?”

He slapped too hard. Everyone was looking at him, including Miso. He smiled a little awkwardly in response.

“There was a mosquito.”

Mosquito in April... It was a stupid excuse, but at least it’d work.

“Oh, what the heck.”

“Man, you surprised it.”

“You went at it a bit too strong there, didn’t you?”

The club members responded with a smile. Maru just kept his mouth shut with a grin. The clock reached 5. He stood up from his spot almost in a knee jerk reaction. He put his bag on and turned to Miso. He was waiting for the same old words to come out of her mouth.

“Dinner time. First years, go buy some food outside.”

Miso took out a few bills from her wallet and handed it out. The first years all streamed out of the auditorium together, while the second years started talking about the script amongst each other. Everyone seemed to be trying to take a break, one way or the other.

Even Miso was pretty much lying down against her chair. Maru approached her after waiting for a little bit.

“I’ll be heading out.”

“.....”

Miso didn’t respond. Was something wrong? Maru decided that she was just too tired to respond, and turned to leave. But just as he creaked the door a little bit, a voice came from behind him.

“Going home?” asked Miso. When did she get there? The woman walked through the door first before him. Maru nodded as he headed for the stairs.

Only thing was... Miso was following him as well. About halfway down, Maru turned to look up at her.

“Do you have something you need to talk about?”

“...Tsk.”

Miso turned away with a click of her tongue. She seemed to want to say something, but closed her mouth right after opening it. Just what was she up to? Maru bowed to her once more before walking away again. Whatever it was, it probably wasn’t important.

But after the third step he took,

“Hey,” Miso called out, “we need to talk.”

Chapter 30

The rooftop was pretty breezy. Miso opened it up for the two of them with the rooftop key she got from the faculty. She must've told them she wanted it for practice.

"Are you busy?"

"Why would a student be busy?"

"Izzat so?"

Miso walked towards the railings. She put her hands over the concrete fence and looked down at the field below. Maru walked up next to her as well. He could see the sun beginning to disappear over the horizon. Below, he could see the members of the soccer club talking loudly with each other with snacks and drinks.

"Your stamina's pretty good, right?"

"Well, I am young."

"Young, huh."

Miso looked towards him. This one... felt different. In the auditorium, she was king. Eleven people followed her words like the bible, and one sentence from her had the lot of them groveling for forgiveness. There, she was always confident and strong, even unfeeling towards the slightest bit of regret whenever she swore.

But right now, she was...

'She's having difficulty talking?'

He could see it from the way she moved. The way way her lips were twisting, and the occasion sigh. Plus,

[This boy's so difficult.]

The word bubble basically confirmed everything.

"What, is there something above my head?" Miso asked when Maru glanced at the bubble.

"...Just a mosquito."

"Ah, sure."

"I thought you had something to say?"

"Something to say..."

Miso twirled her hair with a finger with a groan.

"What the hell are you?"

"Excuse me?"

The question came out of nowhere, but it felt like a strong jab towards Maru.

"I've never seen such a depressing high schooler in my entire life. Is something happening at your home or what?"

"Both of my parents are doing fine, and there's nothing especially distressing going on right now."

"Look at you, sounding like an old man."

"...Is that so?"

Well, she wasn't exactly wrong. He did try to act his age when he was talking with kids his age. But whenever he talked with adults? He didn't even try. Maybe his 45 year old self came out completely raw in front of them.

That would explain why his mom acted the way she did at his room last night. Dowook had yelled at him about this as well. Telling him to stop acting like a damn know-it-all. He couldn't help but smile a little when he thought about that.

"The hell?"

"It's nothing. I just thought of something funny. What was that thing you wanted to tell me about, though? It doesn't seem like you just wanted to critique me on my line reading."

"...Did you come from the mountains or something?"

"No way."

"Do you live with your grandfather?"

"He's passed away long ago."

"....."

"What do you want to tell me?"

Miso sighed deeply before turning to look at him.

"I'll just be straight here. Are you going to just keep sitting there?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

Miso crossed her arms.

"I've taught a lot of kids in the past. By your age, no matter how mature they are, they still feel a tad bit young in some areas. It can't be helped, they just don't have enough experience in life. That's why kids your age care so much about belonging to a group. They want to get that feeling of 'I'm doing the same thing as you!' Those who are outside of that group typically feel left out and nervous because they didn't manage to get 'in'."

Miso let out a small 'tsk' under her breath. She was feeling annoyance at the fact that she had to explain everything.

“Kids like you always come out when I decide to take care of clubs. Kids that always stand to the right. I just ignore them. Why? Because I know that they’d either leave the club or join the left. It’s not that hard to change clubs after all.”

She looked a little bit worked up.

[What am I doing in front of a kid?]

A pink word bubble popped up when their eyes met. Maru once thought that the color might have some kind of a meaning behind it. Seeing how the color of the word bubble was universally pink, though, he figured that it was just god’s preference or something.

“But you... You aren’t either of those things. No, that’s wrong. You just keep wanting to be neutral. You’re balancing that feeling of wanting to be in the club, but not wanting to participate very very well. Most kids make their decision in just two weeks. You...”

Miso took off her hair tie annoyingly. Her yellow hair fluttered with the wind on the rooftop. She looked like a jellyfish, Maru thought, as opposed to a pretty lady. Though he wasn’t sure why that was the first thing he thought of.

‘I guess she’s a pretty jellyfish.’

“Again!”

“What?”

“You were thinking of something else again.”

She was really good at this. Maru supposed it was to be expected from an actor.

“Well, yes.”

“I knew it. Talking with you just doesn’t work. Aren’t you scared of me?”

“Well, sort of.”

“It’s really weird. How are you so calm for a high schooler? It’s been a month. No, more than a month. How are you not doing anything after all that time? I thought you’d just quit. But you’re still not late to the club meetings, and you’re even participating every once in a while. Despite all that, you never cross a certain line. Almost as if you’re very comfortable with where you are now.”

Miso grabbed the railing and shouted ‘gah!’ into the air. The kids at the field started looking around in confusion. Maru pulled her back a little bit from embarrassment, eliciting yet another a reaction.

“Oh lord, you’re driving me crazy,” Miso sighed with a defeated look, “do you know what they call people in their forties?”

“Unconfused (不惑).”

“...Do you know what it means?”

“As I understand it, it’s the age when you’re so focused on life that you never lose your sense of judgement.”

“Damn it, that’s exactly what I thought when I saw you. Unconfused. You seem very unwavering in your ways.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“It’s good. Sure, it’s great. But it’s a little too much in your case. I’m aware I don’t know much about you, but...”

Miso took a deep breath before continuing.

“You act like a person who knows the world will end tomorrow or something.”

* * *

Too much, huh. That was the thought circulating in Maru’s brain as he unlocked his bike. She wasn’t wrong. He always thought about his next move. He was trying his best in studying. Not to the point of getting nosebleeds. He tried that three weeks ago before realizing he definitely wasn’t cut out for that amount of studying.

People say that anything is possible if you try hard enough. That studying was one of those things as well. Being good at studying wasn’t a product of talent, but hard work. Maru only figured out the truth to this statement as he grew older. What he was told was just something the adults made up for the kids.

The kids who are good at studying worked hard. The kids who didn’t were just lazy. It was a really easy way to measure kids. It was like handing a bunch of kids a basketball for the first time and telling them to score. Sure, some would make it. The rest wouldn’t. It was obvious. Of course everyone would expect most kids to fail. But as soon as that basketball changed into a pencil, that all went away.

You need to be able to dunk too!

There’s no way you can’t do this!

That’s what the adults always said. Maru said it often as well.

“Never realized that I just couldn’t do it.”

If only he had money or power. Then he’d be able to let his kids do what they really wanted.

Ah. That’s when Maru realized.

[You act like a person who knows the world will end tomorrow or something.]

He was still thinking of his future family. Of his future wife and daughter. Maru got on his bike. He was thinking of the present, but his eyes were dead set on the future. He just didn’t care about his current situation in life because he was so concerned with something so far away. That was the only reason why he didn’t feel any strong emotions towards the club...

‘I was just too focused on something else.’

His mouth was turning dry. This was the reason why he felt so empty despite having productive days. Why he felt so cold and unfulfilled despite accomplishing things one by one. Why he was so nervous.

“What do I want to do?”

The question came at him yet again, stronger than ever. Dream. That word... Maru started pedalling. He needed to talk with someone.

* * *

Maru took a shower the first thing after coming back. He stepped out to the market nearby to pick up some snacks. Onion chips and shrimp chips. As he killed some time watching TV after coming back, his sister arrived home. She came over to him as soon as she saw the chips.

“Can I have some?”

Maru shook his head.

“Sorry, these are for someone else.”

“Someone else?”

His sister stood up annoyedly, and stopped away with ‘fine, be that way’ under her breath. Another two hours passed. The clock was nearing 8 now. Mom came back, had her dinner, and went straight to bed. He could hear her tired breaths from the other room. More time passed.

His sister came out of his room with a yawn after using the computer. She stared at his snacks with a devious look for a few seconds before going back to her room. The weekend drama finished, and the clock pointed at ten. Mom came back out to the kitchen.

“Don’t sleep too late.”

“Don’t worry.”

“What are the snacks for, by the way? TV?”

“No, they’re for drinking.”

“...Just go to sleep.”

“Ok.”

Maru changed the channel after mom went back. Another hour passed. The door opened, and a man enters with a deep sigh. It was dad.

“Dad.”

“Ah, yeah. Maru.”

“You’re back now?”

“Yes, I am. You were watching TV?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“I was waiting for you.”

“Me?”

Dad’s eyes widened in surprise. Maru took off dad’s factory coat for him.

“Here, wash up first.”

“S-sure.”

Dad stepped into the bathroom with a surprised look. Maru took out a few beers and two bottles of soju from the fridge. Along with two cups and two shot glasses. Dad looked even more confused after coming out. Probably because he noticed two glasses.

“Dad.”

“Yeah.”

“Please teach me about alcohol.”

“What?”

“You told me last time to ask you to teach me how to drink.”

“Y-yeah.”

Dad sat down in surprise. To think his son would come to him like this all of the sudden... Maru opened the bottle of soju and started pouring. He poured only half a shot for his dad.

“It’s late, so I’ll just give you half.”

“...Sure.”

Dad grabbed the soju bottle with a smile and poured Maru half a glass as well.

“Thank you.”

After a small clink, the two of them took their first shot together. Maru opened his mouth after pouring the second shot.

“I had something I wanted to ask you, dad.”